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Discipleship in a Digital Age: Leveraging Multimodality and Digital Networks

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

DISCIPLESHIP IN A DIGITAL AGE:
LEVERAGING MULTIMODALITY AND DIGITAL NETWORKS

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BY

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Table of Contents

LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM.....	1
Evolution of Communication.....	3
Cognitive and Psychological Impact.....	8
Literacy Rates in the United States.....	12
Department of Education (DOE) Findings.....	13
2012 Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC).....	16
Pew Research Survey.....	18
Survey Summary.....	19
Impact of Communication Extends to the Church.....	19
Decline of Christian Affiliation.....	20
Reduction of Traditional Christian Behavior Patterns.....	21
Rise of Self-defined Christian Worldview.....	23
An Optimistic View Forward.....	24
SECTION 2: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS.....	26
Alternative Communities for Non-practicing Christians.....	26
Communities Created in Response to Disillusion with the Church.....	27
Communities Created to Strengthen the Organized Church.....	28
Discipleship Movements Built Around Scripture.....	30
Learning Scripture Through Oral Stories.....	32
Biblical Literacy Facilitated Through Mobile Applications.....	36
Multimodal Methods Found Across Social Platforms.....	39
Summary.....	43
SECTION 3: THESIS.....	44
The Value in Looking Outward Before Looking Inward.....	45
Missional Ecclesiology Overview.....	48
Theology of Missional Ecclesiology.....	49
The Implications for the Institutional Church.....	52
Missional Ecclesiology and Digital Spaces.....	56
Multimodality and Learning.....	58
Impact of Secondary Orality.....	60
Age of Automation.....	62
Pastoral Considerations.....	63
Shifting the Educational Model.....	66
Social Movements for Good.....	68
The Power of Momentum.....	70
The Mass Protest Approach: Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward.....	72
The Cumulative Effect of Structure and Mass Protest: Otpor and The Removal of Milosevic.....	73

Application for the Church.....	76
Software Development and Content Designed to Create Interaction.....	76
Hook Model: The Four Phases.....	78
Berger’s STEPPS Attributes	81
YouVersion: A Case Study in Habit Formation and Social Influence	82
Discipleship Through Horizontal Networks	84
SECTION 4: ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION.....	86
Unified DNA.....	86
Goal 1: Know	87
Goal 2: Grow.....	89
Goal 3: Show.....	89
SECTION 5: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION	91
Goals and Strategies	91
Audience	92
Artifact Scope and Content.....	93
Budget.....	93
Promotion.....	94
Standards of Publication	95
Action Plan.....	95
SECTION 6: POSTSCRIPT	96
APPENDIX A: ARTIFACT	99
BIBLIOGRAPHY	108

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 — Average Numeracy Scores of Adults Ages 16 to 65 by Country	17
Figure 2 — Religious Composition by Generational Cohort.....	21
Figure 3 — Building a Structure for Discipleship Through Horizontal Networks	46
Figure 4 — Home Page.....	100
Figure 5 — Home Page, cont.	101
Figure 6 — Guide to Learning a Story page	102
Figure 7 — Open Groups Listing	103
Figure 8 — Story Sets Listing.....	104
Figure 9 — Advent Story Set.....	105
Figure 10 — Week 1 of Advent	106
Figure 11 — Week 1 of Advent, cont.....	107

ABSTRACT

Advancements in communication technology, particularly since the Internet Age, have impacted culture in several fundamental ways. Cognitive and psychological changes have changed how people seek and understand knowledge. The development of horizontal networks made of both space of places, physical locations, and space of flows, Internet locations,¹ has reshaped academic, social, and political spheres. The rise in entertainment to transfer information has shifted society's focus to one of experience and service in everyday life. These changes have impacted the institutional church through a reduction of individuals self-identifying as Christian and in behaviors traditionally considered Christian.

In response, the church has the opportunity to redefine how the church builds daily community through horizontal networks informed by an understanding of missional ecclesiology. By applying the lessons learned from multimodality and higher education, decentralized social movements, and habit-forming software development, a collaborative extension of the church can be developed. An outward focused extension shifts from a top down, organized structure to a bottom up, decentralized movement. Leveraging story and multiple modes to develop content becomes critical for the church as a method for sharing the story of the bible with Christians and equip them to share the story of their faith naturally in everyday life.

Section one evaluates the history of communication and its impact on cognition, literacy, and the decline of biblical literacy. Section two reviews several categories of

¹ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 171, Kindle.

solutions, including smaller alternative communities, scripture-focused discipleship movements, bible mobile applications, and multimodal methods found across social networks. Section three builds a framework for creating a partnership with Church Online pastors working to fill a recognized discipleship void. Section four provides an overview of Spoken.Bible (<https://spoken.bible>), a platform to facilitate discipleship leveraging the strengths of horizontal networks. Section five outlines a time frame and specifications for this platform.

SECTION 1:

THE PROBLEM

The telegraph introduced a kind of public conversation whose form had startling characteristics: Its language was the language of headlines — sensational, fragmented, impersonal. News took the forms of slogans, to be noted with excitement, to be forgotten with dispatch. Its language was also entirely discontinuous. One message had no connection to that which preceded or followed it. Each “headline” stood alone as its own context. The receiver of the news had to provide a meaning if he could. The sender was under no obligation to do so. And because of all this, the world as depicted by the telegraph began to appear unmanageable, even undecipherable. The line-by-line, sequential, continuous form of the printed page slowly began to lose its resonance as a metaphor of how knowledge was to be acquired and how the world was to be understood. “Knowing” the facts took on a new meaning, for it did not imply that one understood implications, background, or connections. Telegraphic discourse permitted no time for historical perspectives and gave no priority to the qualitative. To the telegraph, intelligence meant knowing of lots of things, not knowing about them.²

Neil Postman could not have known how communication and media technologies would look today. His discourse on the progression of technology and its impact on the relationship between information and action;³ however, is as relevant today, if not more so, than it was over thirty years ago. Advancements in communication technology, particularly since the Internet Age, have impacted culture in several fundamental ways. First, they have impacted both cognitive and psychological behavior across generations, particularly those from Generation Y and younger. Second, the advent of horizontal networks made of both space of places, physical locations, and space of flows, Internet

² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), chap. 5, Kindle.

³ Ibid.

locations,⁴ has reshaped academic, social, and political spheres. Third, continuing advancements are moving beyond entertainment towards pro-actively integrating information into everyday activities.

As a result of these changes, the American Protestant church is experiencing significant shifts in what it means to be the church, as individual communities and as a corporate body. First, the church is seeing an increase in the number of individuals leaving the church yet still identifying as Christian.⁵ Second, among self-processing Christians the church is seeing a decrease in biblical literacy and a rise of custom belief systems designed to fit a person's worldview.⁶ Lastly, the percentage of individuals who consider themselves Christian is continuing to shrink. It is this dissertation's assertion that these three concerning trends are partially a result of changes in how information is assimilated, the resulting increase in aliteracy⁷ and oral/aural⁸ learners, and an increase in online one-dimensional shared affinity-based connections⁹ paired with a reduction in face-to-face social interaction.

⁴ Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 62, Kindle.

⁵ Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades," *Gallup*, April 18, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>.

⁶ "Christianity is No Longer America's Default Faith," Barna Group, January 28, 2009, <https://www.barna.com/research/christianity-is-no-longer-americans-default-faith/#.VIMdiKSFPmI>.

⁷ Aliteracy is defined by being able to read but being uninterested in doing so. Much of the world is still illiterate (unable to read); however, aliteracy is now common in developed nations. The terms post-literate and secondary orality are also used to describe this concept.

⁸ Oral and aural learning are two sides of the same conversation. Oral represents the spoken word while aural represents hearing or listening to the spoken word (or sound).

⁹ People have moved to increased connections online. In so doing, they've self-selected the groups they choose to affiliate with. These groups primarily consist of people who share the same beliefs and/or interests.

The church is wrestling with these changes and multiple solutions are being implemented in different communities across the country. As culture shifts towards entertainment-driven multimodal learning and developing broad yet shallow knowledge, the church has been slow to respond. Today, individuals are using social networks to interact with affinity groups where connections share one or more interests. Meanwhile, they are becoming less able to interact with those around them in meaningful and thought forming ways, particularly those with varying opinions or beliefs. To respond to these changes, the church's primary response has been to livestream their Sunday worship services to reach those who would never step foot inside a church building. Other responses range from shifting Sunday worship services to more intimate, informal gatherings focused on discipleship to smartphone applications that gamify scripture reading to virtual worship and discipleship that blends models.¹⁰

Evolution of Communication

In order to understand the impact of communication advancement, it is helpful to survey how the forms of human conversations¹¹ have evolved and how they have dictated the type of content and ideas that can be expressed. In a primarily oral tradition, which spanned much of human history, ideas were passed through stories and proverbs. Truth was defined by how the lesson could be applied to personal actions and relationships. Mnemonics to aid in memory are a core component of oral tradition to aid in memory and

¹⁰ Reggie McNeal, *Kingdom Come: Why We Must Give Up Our Obsession with Fixing the Church--and What We Should Do Instead* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2015), 76, Kindle.

¹¹ Postman, chap. 1. Conversation here refers to all techniques and technologies that allow a culture to exchange messages, not just the action of speech.

retelling. As writing became more prevalent, it changed how truth is transmitted. Neil Postman explains that writing “created a new conception of knowledge, as well as a new sense of intelligence, of audience and of posterity”.¹² Writing allowed for continuity of thought and criticism, a means to examine thought for meaning, error, and where it is leading.¹³

Transition from oral tradition to textual literacy signaled a significant shift in the understanding of knowledge and truth. Further still, the advent of the printing press expanded writing’s reach allowing knowledge to spread at faster rates and over farther geographical regions. It is within this setting, and those before it, that much of the conception of knowledge was developed, including those of Christian thought and theology. Communication technology did not significantly change again for four hundred years until the mid-1800’s when the telegraph was invented. With the advent of the telegraph, communication and knowledge again evolved to allow for “news of the day”¹⁴ that was almost instantaneously transmitted vast distances. The telegraph changed the paradigm of news content – that which was within a person’s actionable control and that which was outside of their sphere of experience. Here, the shift in personal relevance of news to actionable irrelevancy began to occur more quickly and news became a commodity.¹⁵

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., chap. 5.

¹⁵ Ibid., chap. 1.

One hundred years after the telegraph sped up the transmission of news across the globe, the television once again changed the landscape of language processing. Where oral tradition focused on auditory and memory retention and typography focused on visual and thought development, television engages viewers in conversation through visual imagery.¹⁶ In television, viewers found conversation based on the principles of no prerequisite information (every program must be complete and independent), no perplexity (nothing to be remembered or applied), and no exposition (storytelling over reasoned discourse), in other words, knowledge based on bits of unrelated entertainment.¹⁷ The development of conversation as entertainment moved society further along the path of information without actionable relevance and a wealth of information with no discernible connection.

Society is now roughly thirty years¹⁸ into the next stage of communication development, that of the Internet Age. In a sense, Internet as a means of communication can be divided into two periods. First, the Age of Information in which the global transmission of digital information in various forms occurred. In this stage, transmission of data was the goal as a means to expand knowledge. This period quickly moved into what could be defined as the Connection or Social Networking age¹⁹ where information

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., chap. 10.

¹⁸ Barry M. Leiner, Vinton G. Cerf, David D. Clark, Robert E. Kahn, Leonard Kleinrock, Daniel C. Lynch, Jon Postel, Larry G. Roberts, Stephen Wolff, "Brief History of the Internet – Introduction," Internet Society, accessed November 25, 2019, <https://www.internetsociety.org/internet/history-internet/brief-history-internet/>. ARPANET came online in 1969, email was developed in 1971, and the first WWW web page was published in 1991. On October 24, 1995, the term Internet was defined by the FNC (Federal Networking Council).

¹⁹ While there is not an official Connection or Social Networking Age, there are distinguishing characteristics that are clear as a before and after. For the development of cultural understanding, this

was organized between individuals and filtered according to accordant beliefs. This connection brought social structure from the physical world into the digital space. However, online social structure is less hierarchical and more participatory than those found in physical space.²⁰ Where “information and news was held by a few and distributed to millions” through the Age of Television, the Internet Age reversed this paradigm and now “information is held by millions and distributed to a few.”²¹ In addition, the introduction of social networks has continued to evolve to change the nature of how people groups divide and self-group. People are no longer divided along either geographical lines, into roughly two hundred national territories, or into main religious groups. Instead, people have divided into thousands (or even millions) of niche subgroups.²²

The millions of people now accessible through and interacting with digital social networks make up a significant portion of both the global and, more specifically, the American population.²³ It is through this medium, and the utilization of its strengths, that the church has an opportunity to stop, and potentially reverse, the declining trend of those

development must be distinguished as yet another turning point in furthering knowledge as entertainment while also allowing this information to be filtered according to an individual’s beliefs.

²⁰ Castells, x & 15.

²¹ Erik Qualman, *Socialnomics: How Social Media Transforms the Way We Live and Do Business*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), chap. 1: Newspapers and Magazines Diminish in Power, Kindle.

²² Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, “Main Findings: Teens, Technology, and Human Potential in 2020,” Pew Research Center, February 29, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2012/02/29/main-findings-teens-technology-and-human-potential-in-2020/>.

²³ When evaluating the impact of digital missions, there is a higher likelihood of engaging with populations outside of the United States in day-to-day activities when compared to local missions work in the church. However, this dissertation focuses on leveraging horizontal networks for their strengths, namely the blending of physical and digital. As such, while international reach is nice, the focus here is on the potential within the United States.

that consider themselves Christian by focusing on increasing biblical engagement through discipleship²⁴ relationships that equip people to learn and share their faith in contextually relevant ways. As of January 2019, of a worldwide population of 7.676 billion people, 57% of them (4.388 billion) are online. There are 5.112 billion unique mobile users, or just over 67% of the worldwide population. There are 3.484 billion active social media users (45% of the population) and 3.256 billion of those users are active mobile social media users (42% of the worldwide population).²⁵

In addition to online access, overall social network access has grown. When drilling down to the United States, 73% of adults use YouTube, 69% use Facebook, 37% use Instagram, and 28% use Pinterest. Of these users, 74% of Facebook users, 63% of Instagram users, and 51% of YouTube users are online daily. Major social media networks show significant reciprocity across the top five platforms.²⁶ The importance of understanding both the extent of and usage of these social networks helps to inform the changes impacting society and the potential opportunities for the church.

²⁴ Discipleship for this dissertation is defined as an interpersonal relationship focused on transferring a knowledge of scripture, its guidance on living in relationship with God and humanity, and on participating in God's mission on earth. Applied discipleship consists of knowing (head), growing (heart), and showing (hands) the personal change on one's life when they choose to accept Christ as their Savior.

²⁵ Dave Chaffey, "Global Social Media Research Summary 2019," Smart Insights, last modified February 12, 2019, <http://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/>.

²⁶ Andrew Perrin and Monica Anderson, "Share of U.S. Adults Using Social Media, including Facebook, is Mostly Unchanged Since 2018," Pew Research Center, April 10, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/10/share-of-u-s-adults-using-social-media-including-facebook-is-mostly-unchanged-since-2018/>.

Cognitive and Psychological Impact

As society has adapted to be more automated and entertainment driven, culture has seen definitive changes in cognitive and psychological behavior. Although Generation Y and younger show the greatest impact, older generations are not exempt from the changes created. Teachers, professors, and employers are recognizing the following changes as a result. They are seeing that breadth and depth of knowledge has been replaced by random access to bits of information accessed online as needed. Skill fade increases in direct proportion to the increase in automation. Individuals are less likely to encounter differing beliefs and values and, when faced with varying information, are less likely to be able to determine truth. The ability to hold real-time conversation, empathize with others and experience solitude has diminished while immediate gratification, sharing as a means of thinking, and multi-tasking has increased.

Academia has found similar changes in how students, from elementary through college, are accumulating knowledge. Cognitively, they are assimilating data in “quick-fix information nuggets”²⁷ that have left students unable to see the continuum of facts and concepts that allow for articulating and debating a point-of-view. Students are relying on the web as an information prosthetic assuming that the web will provide information as they need it and facts do not need to be learned, particularly in relation to the whole.²⁸ Julia Frankenstein notes that “the more we rely on technology to find our way, the less

²⁷ Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, “Millennials Will Benefit and Suffer Due to Their Hyperconnected Lives,” Pew Research Center, February 29, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2012/02/29/millennials-will-benefit-and-suffer-due-to-their-hyperconnected-lives/>.

²⁸ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 222, Kindle.

we build up our cognitive maps.”²⁹ This reduction reduces critical analysis of issues and challenging of information that is necessary to focus on harder problems and innovation advancements.³⁰

Career fields where automation has assumed the role of planning and analysis functions have experienced increased skill fade, the diminishing ability to interpret and react to fast-changing situations.³¹ Reaction times have slowed, skills have eroded, and the ability to perceive a situation has dulled.³² This reduction in cognitive function is a result of automation complacency and automation bias. As automation improves, individuals believe the machine will work and their attention drifts elsewhere while simultaneously trusting that the information machines provide is accurate, even when observation shows otherwise.³³ Automation has short-circuited the “ability to translate information into knowledge and knowledge into know-how.”³⁴ Outside of the work force, strides in automation have shown similar *effects*. Google has seen “a dumbing down effect” in both its search engine and GPS navigation usage.³⁵

The Internet has expanded the information landscape by providing real-time and immediate access to worldwide information. Used intentionally, personal worldview can

²⁹ Julia Frankenstein, “Is GPS All in Our Heads?” *New York Times*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/is-gps-all-in-our-head.html>.

³⁰ Anderson and Rainie, “Millennials Will Benefit and Suffer Due to Their Hyperconnected Lives.”

³¹ Nicholas Carr, *The Glass Cage: How Our Computers Are Changing Us*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 58, Kindle.

³² *Ibid.*, 64.

³³ *Ibid.*, 67 & 76.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

be expanded. However, research shows that when people can choose, they choose to see and exchange ideas with people with whom they agree.³⁶ Instead of widening exposure, they are narrowing it to ideas they already know and are less willing to share opinions if they believe others in their network will disagree.³⁷ They are driven, by both the internal desire to be accepted and through software automation's algorithms, to conform, "replacing (their) own intentions with those of others, without even realizing the swap has occurred."³⁸ The result of this narrowing exposure among ever-widening amounts of information is that they are more likely to encounter information driven by emotional appeal and that is "simplistic, nonsubstantive, nonhistorical, and noncontextual."³⁹ One's measure of truth becomes the emotional appeal found in the information.⁴⁰

As automation and entertainment have driven people to interact more with and through screens, several related psychological changes have occurred. The capacity for real time⁴¹ conversation and solitude has diminished. The feeling of being always connected has left people with "little patience for talk that demands sustained attention"⁴² impacting both conversation and reflection, even for a few minutes. Conversation carries with it lessons on asking questions, what answers mean, building narrative to facts that

³⁶ Turkle, 293.

³⁷ Ibid., 310.

³⁸ Carr, 208.

³⁹ Postman, chap. 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Referring to both face-to-face conversation and conversation aided by audio/video technology, such as telephone or live video conference.

⁴² Turkle, 38.

make sense, and how to engage in solitude.⁴³ People have inadvertently replaced solitude with a belief that time on the net is time with oneself. Conversation opens a person to vulnerability and imperfection and, in turn, to seeing cause and effect of their actions and the development of empathy through body language, expression, tone, and conveyed emotion encountered only in person. Online conversation enables one to slow down and edit the message being relayed so that one can “present the self he wants to be.”⁴⁴ This move from conversation to connection has resulted in a “40 percent decline in the markers for empathy among college students, most of it within the past ten years.”⁴⁵

Constant connection has psychologically impacted people in other ways. The consistent quick interactions screens provide has created an expectation of instant gratification and a lack of patience resulting in short attention spans and shallow choices.⁴⁶ The drive to create connection through sharing creates a unique sense that one must share a thought or feeling in order to think or feel it. Instead of “I think, therefore I am”, the saying has become “I share, therefore I am.”⁴⁷ The desire to be authentic while showing one’s best self in an always connected environment leads to feelings of depression and social anxiety.⁴⁸ In addition, the ability to filter and aggregate the content one sees to only those things one agrees with (eliminating unpleasant or complex

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Anderson and Rainie, “Millennials Will Benefit and Suffer Due to Their Hyperconnected Lives.”

⁴⁷ Turkle, 61-62.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 24-25.

information) has resulted in a rise of mental illnesses related to disassociation and alienation.⁴⁹ Lastly, the necessity to be connected compels a person to multitask, interruption is seen as another connection not as interruption, reducing one's ability to maintain presence⁵⁰ and reducing depth of conversation to those of little controversy or consequence.⁵¹

Literacy Rates in the United States

This need for constant connection has also impacted literacy levels and the amount of time people spend reading. There have been several studies done in the last fifteen years on the state of book reading and literacy⁵² in the United States. Depending on the study, Americans are either regular, active readers and are faring better now than in past decades or American reading skills have significantly deteriorated and the rise of multimodality has impacted society to its detriment. An answer somewhere in the middle of those two is most likely; however, the more formal surveys that are based on evaluation versus self-reporting lean toward a more negative view and an increase in utilizing other modes for learning. While many people can read, they chose not to. When they do read, they retain and comprehend less.

⁴⁹ Anderson and Rainie, "Millennials Will Benefit and Suffer Due to Their Hyperconnected Lives."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Turkle, 21.

⁵² There is a distinction between the act of reading and the act of comprehension. According to the U.S. Department of Education there are four levels of literacy based on one's ability to read and comprehend various texts. The act of reading does not necessarily equate to the ability to comprehend what is read and the surveys available today review literacy from various points along this spectrum.

Department of Education (DOE) Findings

The DOE has completed two national literacy surveys in the last twenty-five years, one in 1992 and another in 2003. The 2003 survey divided literacy into two distinct categories. First, it evaluated an individual's ability to read prose, documents, and quantitative materials. Second, it identified an individual's ability to engage with these three types of written information. This scale consisted of:

- Below basic – While the lowest category, it does not consist of only non-literate individuals. It consists of those who can locate information in short prose, follow directions in simple documents, and perform simple math when the information is “very concrete and familiar.” Sample tasks include things like searching a short text to determine medical prescriptions, signing a form, or filling in a bank deposit slip.
- Basic – This category includes those who can perform everyday literacy activities, including understanding short texts and documents, as well as, solving simple one-step math problems. Sample tasks include finding information in a pamphlet, using a TV guide, and comparing ticket prices.
- Intermediate – This category includes those who can “perform more moderately challenging literacy activities.” These abilities include reading more dense text, making inferences, identifying cause and effect, and solving math problems where the operation necessary is not identified. Sample tasks include consulting reference materials to find a key piece of information, finding a location on a map, or calculating a bulk order of supplies. This is the level most people would

consider the start of literacy if asked to define what literacy is – someone can read a book, summarize it, determine intent, and provide a plot summary.

- Proficient – This category is the highest category and includes individuals who can perform “more complex and challenging literacy activities.” Abilities include reading longer, abstract text that require one to synthesize information and make complex inferences, integrate multiple pieces into a synthesized analysis, and use information to solve multi-step math problems. Sample tasks include comparing differing viewpoints in similar texts, interpreting a table of information containing multiple pieces of data, and comparing the cost of different materials based on quantity and cost per item.⁵³

The survey evaluated individuals and assigned them one of these four levels in the areas of prose, document, and quantitative skills. The bible is primarily prose; therefore, this section focuses on those survey results. Overall, fifty-seven percent of adults (ages 16 and older) could perform at an intermediate or proficient level. Only thirteen percent could engage the text at a proficient level, a two-point reduction from the previous survey in 1992,⁵⁴ while the other forty-four percent at an intermediate level can engage with the text to read and summarize it. This leaves the remaining forty-three percent of the American population, who struggle to read and comprehend basic texts.

The numbers in the 2003 survey show Americans are maintaining a ratio of one in two individuals who can read and comprehend reasonably well. However, when this data

⁵³ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, *National Assessment of Adult Literacy: A First Look at America's Adults in the 21st Century*, NCES 2006-470:2.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 3.

is broken down by demographics, a stark contrast occurs among groups. For individuals who rank at an *intermediate* or *higher level*, these contrasts include:

- Gender
 - Women: 60%
 - Men: 56%
- Ethnicity — Minorities are more likely to have lower literacy abilities.
 - Caucasian: 68%
 - African American: 43%
 - Hispanic: 27%⁵⁵
- Age — Each age group falls within a ten-point range; however, there has been a decline in literacy of lower age groups compared to the 1992 survey.
 - Sixteen to eighteen: 53%
 - Nineteen to twenty-four: 60%
 - Twenty-five to thirty-nine: 63%
 - Forty to forty-nine: 62%
 - Fifty to sixty-four: 59%⁵⁶
- Educational Attainment — As one would expect, the more education an individual has, the more literate they become.
 - In high school: 49%
 - High school graduates: 48%
 - Some college: 70%

⁵⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 11.

- Four-year degree: 84%
- Graduate level degree: 89%⁵⁷

2012 Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

In addition to the DOE surveys completed in 1992 and 2003, an international survey was completed by PIAAC of twenty-two countries with similar results in 2012. The most startling data in this survey was that the United States performed measurably lower than the PIAAC international averages in many categories.⁵⁸ In addition to literacy and numeracy scores similar to those found by the DOE in 2003, this research also looked at the differences in averages based on educational attainment. These comparisons help identify where along the pendulum these differences are more pronounced.⁵⁹ The following table provides a visual of how the United States compared. U.S respondents scored lower than every country for those who did not complete high school and those who completed high school but did not have some secondary school. Those who completed high school still scored lower than many countries non-completion counterparts. Those with an associate degree scored lower than all but two countries and scored comparable to three. When looking at the data, the scores for those with an associate degree were close to many countries' high school averages.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, *Adult Education Attainment and Assessment Scores: A Cross-National Comparison*, by Saida Mamedova, Didah Sparks, and Kathleen Mulvaney Hoyer, NCES 2018-007, September 2017.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 2.

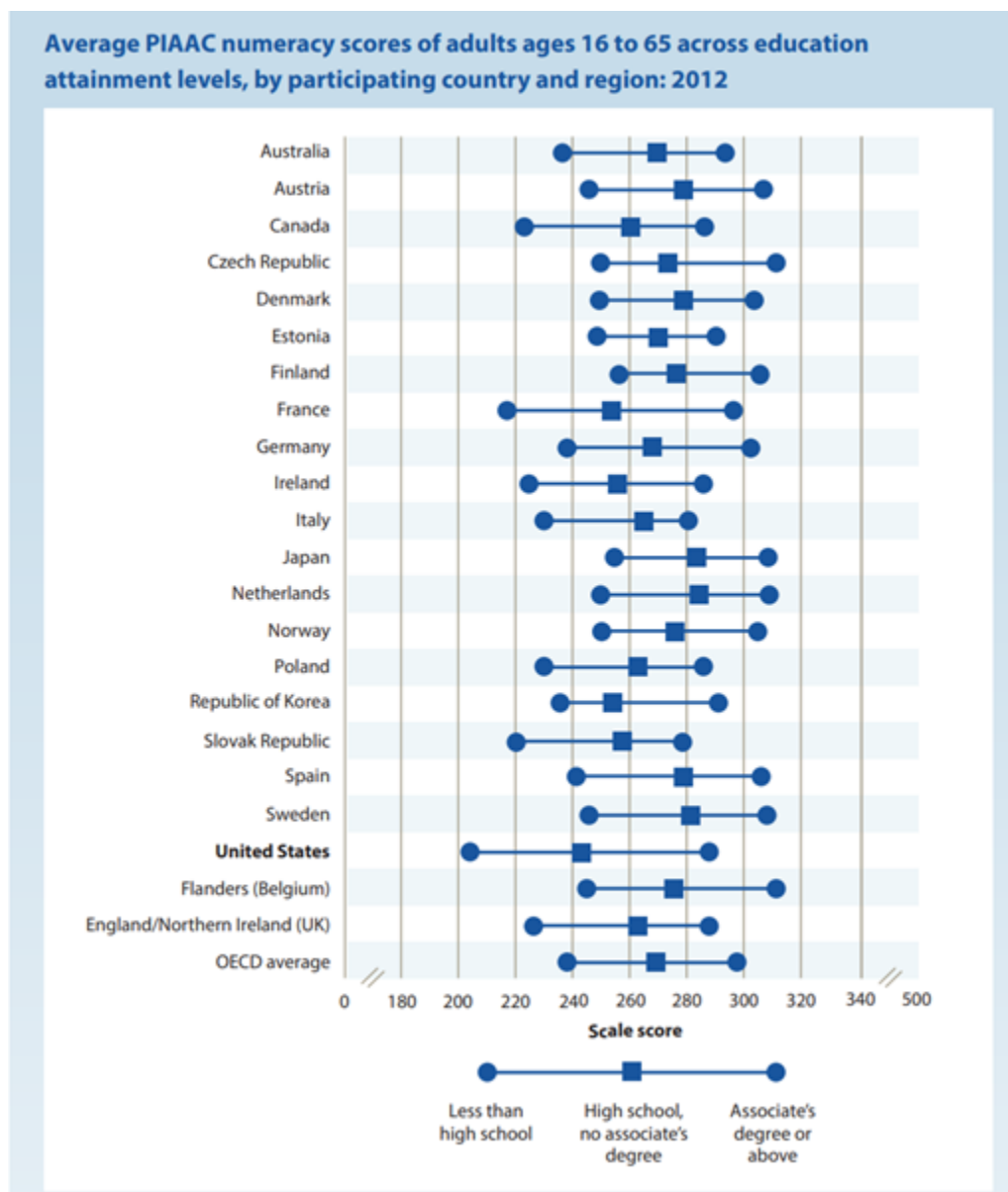


Figure 1 — Average Numeracy Scores of Adults Ages 16 to 65 by Country⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Ibid., 6.

Pew Research Survey

While the DOE and PIAAC paint a stark picture, the Pew Research Survey completed in 2016 shows a rosier outlook in regard to self-reported book reading.⁶¹ For those ages sixteen to twenty-nine, forty-three percent read daily, twenty-four percent read once a week, fifteen percent read once a month, thirteen percent read less often, and only four percent never read. For those thirty and over, forty percent read daily, eighteen percent read once a week, fifteen percent read monthly, eighteen percent read less often, and eight percent never read.⁶² The survey found that as the ages of cohorts increased, individuals reduced the time spent reading.

A similar Pew Research Survey completed in 2014 asked respondents to self-identify the number of books read a year and these results are also more optimistic. According to this survey, seventy-six percent of all adults have read at least one book in the last year. As one might expect based on the previous survey data, the younger an adult is and the higher his educational attainment is the more one reads. There was a ten-percentage-point swing from youngest age group to oldest and a twenty-four-percentage-point swing between high school or less and college graduate levels. Women were also thirteen percent more likely to have a read a book (sixty-nine percent male and eighty-two percent female).⁶³

⁶¹ Book reading included print, e-book, and audiobook.

⁶² Kathryn Zickuhr and Lee Rainie, "Younger Americans' Reading Habits and Technology Use," Pew Research Center, September 10, 2014, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/09/10/younger-americans-reading-habits-and-technology-use/>.

⁶³ Kathryn Zickuhr and Lee Rainie. "A Snapshot of Reading in America in 2013," Pew Research Center, January 16, 2014, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/01/16/a-snapshot-of-reading-in-america-in-2013/>.

The Pew data has remained relatively consistent since the 2014 report. The 2015 report showed that only seventy-two percent of adults read at least one book in the last year. That is a four-point drop from the previous year.⁶⁴ The 2019 report showed seventy-three percent of adults read at least one book in the last year.⁶⁵

Survey Summary

When looking at the various surveys performed over the last few years, it is difficult to walk away with a precise understanding of how well and how much Americans read. The surveys do show that America's measurable literacy rate is lower than other countries and only half of the over sixteen population have literacy skills high enough to read, comprehend, and synthesize what they read. In addition, those who do read don't read as many books or as frequently as one might anticipate. This reality extends to the reading, or lack thereof, of the bible.

Impact of Communication Extends to the Church

The impact of these cognitive and psychological changes is not limited to academic, social, and political spheres. These changes extend to the church. This impact includes a decline in individuals who associate as Christian, a reduction in the behaviors historically measured as healthy Christian outcomes, and an increase in self-defined Christian worldviews based on personal feeling and truth.

⁶⁴ Lee Rainie and Andrew Perrin, "Slightly Fewer Americans are Reading Print Books, New Survey Finds," Pew Research Center, October 19, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/19/slightly-fewer-americans-are-reading-print-books-new-survey-finds/>.

⁶⁵ Andrew Perrin, "Who Doesn't Read Books in America?" Pew Research Center, September 26, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/26/who-doesnt-read-books-in-america/>.

Pew Research, Barna, and others provide a plethora of statistics that conclude the historical view of Christianity (and, more specifically, the institutional church) is facing an exodus of regular attenders, yet there is still a large percentage of the United States that would say they are Christian. These reports also paint a dim picture regarding a reduced understanding of key biblical theological principles. It is easy to look at these reports and draw the conclusion the church is dying. However, a more optimistic description may be the church is metamorphosing to closer reflect a culture that values story, personal impact, individual belief, global responsibility, and relationship over formalized structure, systematic theology, and absolutes.

Decline of Christian Affiliation

Based on age distribution, the United States will continue to see a decrease in those affiliating as Christian in years to come as older generations reduce in number. This outcome can be extrapolated from multiple Pew research polls conducted between 2007 and 2019⁶⁶. First, Pew Research Center identified the percentage of individuals who considered themselves Christian, Non-Christian Faith, Unaffiliated, or Nothing in Particular across six generational cohorts. The younger a generation is, the less likely an individual is to be Christian and the more likely they are to be Unaffiliated or Nothing in Particular. Over the course of the last twelve years, the share of adults who consider

⁶⁶ “Religious Landscape Study: Adults in the Greatest Generation,” Pew Research Center, June 4 – September 30, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/generational-cohort/>.

themselves to be Christians has reduced from 78% to 65% while those religiously unaffiliated has grown from 16% to 26%.⁶⁷

Large generation gap in American religion

In 2018/2019, % of U.S. adults who identify as ...



*Figure 2 — Religious Composition by Generational Cohort*⁶⁸

Barna shows similar trends in its 2014 book, *Churchless*. These surveys paint a picture that Christianity in the U.S. is changing. While American adults may self-identify as Christian, their beliefs and practices are more secular in nature.⁶⁹ And the younger someone is, the more likely they are to qualify as post-Christian.

Reduction of Traditional Christian Behavior Patterns

Even with the decline in those the church might consider Christian, there is still a significant percentage of U.S. adults who self-identify as such. While the generational changes in faith affiliation are concerning, the underlying condition is one of a reduction in activities that the church has traditionally used as measures for success and a loss of a biblical worldview as a result of diminishing biblical literacy. According to the Religion in Everyday Life report (built using the 2014 Religious Landscape Study), 30% of adults

⁶⁷ “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Barna Group, *Churchless: Understanding Today’s Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*, ed. George Barna and David Kinnaman (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014), 16, Kindle.

are highly religious and 70% are not. Highly religious are those who say they pray daily *and* attend religious services at least once a week.⁷⁰ Only 31% of U.S. adults attend services at least once a week and 54% attend a few times a year or less.⁷¹ As in the previous results, younger individuals make up a disproportionate number of those less likely to attend. Even among those who affiliate as Christian, only 58% of Evangelicals and 33% of Mainline Protestants attend church weekly.⁷²

Looking at other habits that churches consider indicators of Christian faith show even more disproportionate results. Only 45% of adults read the bible once a month or more. Of those who affiliate Evangelical Protestant, 63% read the bible at least once a week and only 12% read monthly. Mainline Protestants report 30% weekly reading and 13% monthly. A full 18% of Evangelicals and 44% of Mainline Protestants don't read the bible at all.⁷³ The numbers are even lower when it comes to prayer, scripture study or religious education groups.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ "Religion in Everyday Life," Pew Research Center, April 12, 2016, <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/04/12/religion-in-everyday-life/>.

⁷¹ "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace."

⁷² "Religious Landscape Study: Attendance at Religious Services," Pew Research Center, June 4 – September 30, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/attendance-at-religious-services/>.

⁷³ "Religious Landscape Study: Frequency of Reading Scripture," Pew Research Center, June 4 – September 30, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-reading-scripture/>.

⁷⁴ "Religious Landscape Study: Frequency of Participation in Prayer, Scripture Study, or Religious Education Groups," Pew Research Center, June 4 – September 30, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-participation-in-prayer-scripture-study-or-religious-education-groups/>.

Rise of Self-defined Christian Worldview

A biblical worldview is foundational to how you approach faith and engage with the church community at large. The State of Theology data set provides statistics on 47 questions from their 2016 survey and 43 questions from their 2014 survey regarding theological statements associated with a biblical worldview. There is some overlap between the two but many new questions in the 2016 statements.⁷⁵ Their key findings provide valuable insight into the emerging trend of self-identified Christians defining their own religious belief system by customizing a combination of beliefs to fit an existing personal worldview.⁷⁶ Some of these key findings include:

- 46% agree or somewhat agree that God accepts the worship of all religions.
- 55% agree or somewhat agree that only the belief in Jesus as Savior receives eternal salvation.
- 60% agree or somewhat agree that God is the author of scripture.
- 45% agree or somewhat agree that science discredits Christianity. (More importantly 43% of those who agree God is the author of scripture also agree that science discredits Christianity.)
- 50% of individuals agree that individual's must contribute effort for their own salvation.
- 52% agree or somewhat agree that good deeds help in earning a place a heaven.

⁷⁵ "The State of Theology: Data Explorer," The State of Theology, Ligonier Ministries, accessed June 25, 2018, <https://thestateoftheology.com/data-explorer/>.

⁷⁶ "Christianity is No Longer America's Default Faith," Barna Group, January 28, 2009, <https://www.barna.com/research/christianity-is-no-longer-americans-default-faith/#.VIMdiKSFPmI>.

- 83% agree or somewhat agree that a person takes the first step in seeking God and only then will God provide grace.
- 61% disagree that “even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation.”⁷⁷

An Optimistic View Forward

While these surveys paint a declining Christian worldview, overall the news is still promising. According to Barna’s *The State of the Church 2018* report, 78% of adults in the United States affiliate as Christian and may have the desire for a deeper relationship with Christ; however, a full 64% of those are not actively practicing⁷⁸. This news may indicate not just a shift in affinity but also a shift in how Christian behavior is measured. As culture has changed, the church has maintained its metrics of attendance, baptisms, tithing, and volunteering as the litmus test for health. There are now two primary changes in how individuals, particularly younger individuals, interact with the world around them that churches will need to account for in new ways of measuring success.

First, one of millennials (and younger) greatest core values is that of service.⁷⁹ The implications for this are two-fold for the church. As Reggie McNeal puts it, “demonstration now trumps proclamation as a way of securing a hearing for the gospel.”⁸⁰ They also want to “experience God in their everyday lives” through action not

⁷⁷ “The State of Theology: Key Findings.”

⁷⁸ Barna Group, *Barna Trends 2018: What’s New and What’s Next at the Intersection of Faith and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 210.

⁷⁹ McNeal, 44.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 76.

through institutional observance.⁸¹ Corporate worship is no longer seen as the primary location for encountering God. He can be experienced anywhere, in any setting, with any myriad of other individuals present.

The second greatest obstacle is the theological systems of the church that separate denominations, laity from pastors, and those with certain spiritual gifts from others. Essentially, Christian disagreement on who is authorized to do what, how things should be done, and who is *most right* is damaging the ability of Christians to display and share their faith.⁸² Corporate witness has become one of disagreement and being known for what the church is against, rather than what it is for.

⁸¹ Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000), 111, Kindle.

⁸² McNeal, 75.

SECTION 2:

OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

In an effort to overcome these obstacles, there are multiple organizations actively focused on bible engagement, changing the paradigm to an active, twenty-four/seven community, and building a united ecumenical view of the church. These solutions range from alternative communities designed to engage non-practicing Christians, discipleship movements built around scripture, biblical literacy/engagement movements powered by mobile applications, and multimodal methods found across social platforms.

Alternative Communities for Non-practicing Christians

As the ‘Christian but not practicing’ population grows, those leaving the church are beginning to share their own experiences, and communities are gathering together based on shared affinities. These organizations seek to solve two issues. First, they seek to foster communal living with individuals focused on neighborhood outreach, frequent gatherings, and self-sustainment, many referring to the original design for the church found in Acts. Second, they seek to return to a focus on Sola scriptura, often removing tradition as a source of authority. Some form out of frustration with the organized church, like Unchurched and the Refuge. Others form as extensions of the organized church, to facilitate connection by trying new structures, like KC Underground and Church Anywhere.

Communities Created in Response to Disillusion with the Church

Unchurched is a group led by Richard Jacobson, a previous full-time pastor, that eschews the institutional church and seeks to create communities where God can be found that are defined by unity and accord. In his book, *Unchurched*, he sees “Christianity as more of a movement than a religion”⁸³ where an informal church community lived in mutual reciprocity drew others. The Facebook Unchurched group grew to almost 5,000 members before moving to a private, monetized platform at the end of 2018.⁸⁴ Much of the conversation revolved around disillusion with the church structure, desire for organic community, and strengthening personal relationships with Christ.

While Jacobson has taken the route of organic community and home churches to recover the original church, Kathy Escobar choose to stay within the institutional church when faced with a crisis of faith and discontentment with the church’s response. Instead she founded the Refuge, a Christian community and mission center in Colorado. Her desire is to help others make sense of their faith when “foundations turn to sand.”⁸⁵ Through her experience of helping others, she has defined several stages those experiencing “spiritual shifting” may navigate. These phases include fusing, shifting, returning, unraveling, severing, and rebuilding.⁸⁶ Fusing is the phase in which she sees

⁸³ Richard Jacobson, *Unchurched: Christianity without Churchianity* (N.p.: Unchurched Books, 2016), 113, Kindle.

⁸⁴ Unchurched, Facebook, accessed May 18, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/unchurched/>.

⁸⁵ Kathy Escobar, *Faithshift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe is Coming Apart* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014), 18, Kindle.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

practicing Christians in the church. It is the phase where people come to faith; learn “theology, spiritual knowledge, and group expectations”;⁸⁷ and where participating and serving occur. The remaining phases do not always occur and are started when an individual begins to question their beliefs, but not necessarily reject faith.⁸⁸ Shifting is always the next phase where an individual loses certainty. For some this means continuing through the phases and leaving the church. For others it means returning after a season of uncertainty. Refuge’s goal is to be a place where people feel comfortable moving through all the stages of faith.

Communities Created to Strengthen the Organized Church

KC Underground is a ministry led by Rob Wagner whose vision is to “create a network of reproducing disciples, leaders, micro-churches, and congregations that will saturate Kansas City with the good news of justice and beauty.”⁸⁹ Their goal is to create micro-churches in every neighborhood in the Kansas City area. As neighborhoods form micro-churches, they will open a hub that will serve the micro-churches in that area for worship, leadership, children’s ministry, training, and act as a gathering place for the collective congregation.⁹⁰ Essentially, KC Underground is maintaining the structure found in the organized church, with a focus on small groups first and central building

⁸⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁸⁹ “The Vision,” Kansas City Underground, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.kcunderground.org/underground-vision>.

⁹⁰ “Questions Asked About the KC Underground,” Kansas City Underground, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.kcunderground.org/questions/>.

second, thus flipping their focus. The focus is on building neighborhood spiritual families that follow a rhythm of “2-2-2.”⁹¹ This encourages the micro-church to meet:

- Twice a month to focus up — eating, praying, studying scripture and planning for missions
- Twice a month to focus out — serving their neighborhood through parties encouraging new people to come to the table and connect with the micro-church
- Twice a month to focus in — at their local hub for collective worship

A second similar idea can be found at First Capital Christian Church under their Church Anywhere micro-campus model. First Capital is located in a rural area of Indiana’s Harrison County. Its physical campus has 800 members while its Church Online campus, which coordinates Church Anywhere, regularly serves almost 2,000 people a month. Church Anywhere is designed to run much like a church service with two worship songs, a fifteen-minute sermon, and then thirty minutes of small group type discussion. Church Anywhere first launched in local prisons and then started campuses in schools, nursing homes, homeless shelters, and foster care centers. Each campus is run by a volunteer who works with Tyler Sansom, the Church Online campus pastor, for leadership training and assistance to ensure the spiritual needs of their campus are met. The most unique aspects of Church Anywhere are that there is no expectation for members to come to their main campus, Tyler is seen as their campus pastor yet few will ever meet him in person, and members have their spiritual needs met by locally trained volunteer spiritual leaders.⁹²

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Tyler Sansom and Kaye Golden, “Strategies for Building Community for Online Small Groups,” Panel, Church IT Network 2019, Leawood, KS, October 22, 2019.

All four of these organizations have chosen to implement small local communities differently as a means for reaching the unchurched and non-practicing Christians in communal and biblical engagement, the uniting theme among them is “a desire to create change for something bigger than what they are”⁹³ by utilizing personal, face-to-face connections. Unchurched, KC Underground, and Church Anywhere all focus on the house church or micro-church model; however, their level of organized structure and leadership varies. Unchurched is the loosest with no organized structure or leadership, simply focused on being a voice for change and connection among the Christian community. KC Underground and Church Anywhere both maintain a strong structure, training for leadership to ensure enculturation prior to releasing leaders for multiplication purposes, and regular contact with leaders for accountability and growth.

Discipleship Movements Built Around Scripture

While the organizations above have chosen to focus on building micro-church communities to create disciples that are in community and regularly engaged with scripture, there are several organizations that have chosen to approach discipleship from the opposite direction. Instead, they focus on creating content that drives biblical engagement to facilitate discipleship formation. These organizations can be grouped into two categories. Both groups focus on discipleship content solely based around working through scripture, answering a short list of consistent questions regarding the week’s passages, meeting consistently, and multiplying regularly. However, the medium of the

⁹³ Derrick Feldmann, *Social Movements for Good: How Companies and Causes Create Viral Change* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), xvii, Kindle.

discipleship content varies between the two groups. One group focuses on reading scripture together. The other focuses on learning the scriptures through oral stories.

Reading Scripture Together. Discovery Bible Study is an example of groups that have been formed to read the bible together as a means of discipleship formation. Discovery is more a framework than a bible study for creating an intentional once a week discipleship gathering. Discovery can be used with any passages of scripture.

Its framework consists of connecting the group to prayer, discovering God through reading scripture together, staying accountable to each other, empowering participants to facilitate the study themselves, and multiplying groups by encouraging the creation of new groups versus adding people to an existing group. Connect and Discover are the two components of a weekly study group. Empower and Multiply are the two principles the groups are governed by. A consistent set of questions are asked at every bible study. Connect questions are designed to facilitate worship and intercession. Discover questions are designed to “reshape a person’s worldview — their beliefs about God, about humanity, and about how we should live.”⁹⁴ Keep Accountable questions are designed to celebrate and encourage obeying Jesus. These questions are:⁹⁵

Connect Questions.

1. How did God show up in your life this week?
2. What are you thankful for?

⁹⁴ *How to Launch a Discovery Bible Study: A Guide* (Anaheim, CA: Novo Mission), https://gallery.mailchimp.com/1b9db7cc806d7872a056ae190/files/67ca802a-928d-4af8-9c57-fd984f14e743/dbs_guide_190207.pdf.

⁹⁵ These questions may vary slightly by group but the idea behind them remains consistent. For a second set of questions, see *Discovering Church Planting: Field Testing Guide*, ver. 4.2, (TX: 2008), http://www.murraymoerman.com/2mission/disciple/DBS_Discovering_Church_Planting.pdf.

3. What is causing stress in your life right now?

Discover Questions.

1. What does the passage say?
2. What does this tell us about God?
3. What does this tell us about people?
4. If this is God speaking, what will you do about it? Alternatively, if I believed this was true, how would my life be different?

Accountability Question.

1. Were there any lessons you applied or shared?⁹⁶

Discovery Bible Study is the framework KC Underground has built their ‘two up’ monthly meetings around for their micro-churches. The different solutions organizations are implementing to build community and discipleship are not operating in solos. Many organizations are using multiple solutions mentioned in section two of this dissertation to create a unique community focused on personal discipleship. Rooted is a similar bible study method built around 10-week studies consisting of independent readings five days a week followed by weekly meetings. Church Anywhere uses this discipleship curriculum to create consistency among their micro-churches.

Learning Scripture Through Oral Stories

The second type of discipleship movement is one that closely resembles Discovery Bible Study but instead of reading scripture, their focus is on hearing and learning to retell scripture. This group consists of organizations like Story Runners,

⁹⁶ *How to Launch a Discovery Bible Study.*

BibleTelling, and Network of Biblical Storytellers. StoryRunners' mission is focused overseas reaching oral people groups with the gospel. BibleTelling is focused on illiterate people groups in the US, primarily prisons and ESL populations, to teach English literacy through bible stories. Network of Biblical Storytellers International (NBSI), founded by Dr. Thomas Boomershine, is focused on the "study, internalization, and performance of the ancient oral tradition of Scripture."⁹⁷ While all three organizations use bible stories to facilitate discipleship, they differ in their methods and their desired outcomes.

StoryRunners sole mission is to help "unreached language groups hear the gospel in a format they understand: oral bible storytelling."⁹⁸ To support this mission, they train US-based missionaries in the art of storytelling via the Orlando School of Storying. This is a one week school where participants learn 'the Promise,' a forty-story bible story set, used to share the gospel chronologically that contains stories from "Creation to the Return of Christ"⁹⁹ designed as one continuous narrative.¹⁰⁰ This process is referred to as 'chronological bible storying.'¹⁰¹ In addition, participants learn how to use the stories in one-on-one and group evangelism, to develop bible stories following their five-step method, and about available international ministry opportunities for partnering with local speakers to create story sets for the focus language.

⁹⁷ "About", Network of Biblical Storytellers International, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.nbsint.org/about/>.

⁹⁸ "Home," StoryRunners, Cru, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.storyrunners.org/>.

⁹⁹ "About StoryRunners," StoryRunners, Cru, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.storyrunners.org/about/>.

¹⁰⁰ "Making Disciples of Oral Learners" (paper produced at the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization hosted by the Lausanne committee for World Evangelization, Pattaya, Thailand, September 25 – October 5, 20014): 33, https://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP54_IG25.pdf.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 10.

While StoryRunners mission is focused overseas, their training and focus on story groups to local church outcome are like the model used in Discovery Bible Study. Story groups are structured to spend time in prayer, hear and learn the story (versus read), and discuss the story through the same Discover and Accountability questions found above. The primary difference between the two methods is that in addition to hearing the story, a key outcome for each participant in a story group is to learn the story so that participants can tell it to others, thus internalizing and owning the content. This enables story groups to be a mechanism for teaching participants how to evangelize, disciple others, and organically plant churches as they go and share the stories.¹⁰² Because one of the outcomes is for participants to learn and be able to retell the stories, there is a significant emphasis on developing, testing, and refining each story so that it meets four criteria when retold. Each story is “Biblically accurate, easily learned and retold, appropriate to culture, and sounds natural to the hearer.”¹⁰³

BibleTelling is another oral story movement whose focus is on the United States using bible stories as a framework for teaching literacy to the illiterate, English to ESL students, and “sharing the story of God for discipleship.”¹⁰⁴ BibleTelling was started by John Walsh and currently contains a network of Christian storytellers whose focus is to craft bible stories to communicate “large portions of God’s truth in a memorable way.”¹⁰⁵ Their focus is on crafting stories that embody the essence of the written scripture,

¹⁰² “School of Storying,” StoryRunners, Cru, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.storyrunners.org/school-of-storying/>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ “About Us,” BibleTelling, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.bibletelling.org/about-us/>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

internalizes the flow without word-for-word memorization, and telling the story to others. Their resources include books on how to use BibleTelling in small groups, prisons, ESL, and with children. In addition, they offer small local conferences for churches to learn BibleTelling and trips to Israel where roughly one hundred bible stories are shared where they occurred.¹⁰⁶

NBSI focuses on memorization of long narratives of Scripture based on the ancient tradition of the Bible being shared in faith communities as an oral performance and the narratives are designed to encourage scholarly debate and discovery. The three organizations mentioned here each approach biblical storytelling very differently; however, they all share one unique theme – their focus on story as a way to create and build over time a shared identity within their community. These organizations understand the power of narrative identity when it comes to individuals integrating their personal life experiences and integrating a shared narrative into an internalized, evolving story that provides a person purpose, values, and a sense of unity or belonging to a greater whole.

StoryRunners focuses on contextual storytelling, paraphrasing scripture and adjusting words for the receiving culture to transfer the original intent. This method includes outside review by biblical experts to ensure the story remains biblically accurate. BibleTellers focuses on a more dynamic retelling that leaves biblically accuracy up to the individual storyteller. NBSI focuses on word-for-word memorization of the story leaning

¹⁰⁶ “Church-Centered BibleTelling Seminars in Israel,” BibleTelling, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.bibletelling.org/israel/>.

more towards formal storytelling and keeping to the style of the original language as much as possible.¹⁰⁷

Biblical orality, as a movement for world evangelism, has been growing over the last fifteen years. The International Orality Network is now a global network of over 2,000 organizations “working together with the common goal of making God’s Word available to oral communicators in culturally appropriate ways that enable church planting movements everywhere.”¹⁰⁸ The three organizations mentioned here are but a small sampling of the many organizations now focused on using auditory modes of discipleship.

Biblical Literacy Facilitated Through Mobile Applications

A third group of organizations is focused on increasing biblical literacy by increasing engagement with the bible through mobile applications. These organizations primarily focus on creating content that is both easily consumable and habit forming through smart phone applications. Organizations in this group include Dwell, YouVersion, and Pray.com. In many ways, this group of organizations is like those shared in the discipleship focused programs section above. They have a shared mission of creating content that facilitates discipleship. Their primary difference is in the mode used and extent they create community around their content.

¹⁰⁷ Dr. Adam Bartholomew, “A Storyteller’s Guide to Using Biblical Translations,” The Biblical Storyteller, Network of Biblical Storytellers International, accessed March 1, 2020, https://www.nbsint.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/adams_art_on_translations_for_web.pdf.

¹⁰⁸ “About ION,” International Orality Network, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://orality.net/about/>.

Dwell is a smart phone application that “lets you listen to scripture the way that fits you.”¹⁰⁹ It contains daily listening plans, playlists by topic, curated stories and passages read by one of four voices with ambient music background tracks. Since its launch in 2018, it has catered to individuals for an annual price of \$29.99. Late 2019, Dwell also added a subscription option for churches to give application access to their entire congregation. Currently Dwell is only available in the English Standard Version. Some of its defining characteristics include being able to speed up or slow down the audio, a memory function to repeat a selection, and separate audio controls for the voice and music to create a customized listening environment. Of the four applications, reviewed in this section, it is the only one that does not include a community aspect within the app. However, its unique approach focusing on a visually appealing auditory bible makes it worthy of mention. It had such an appeal; it was the fourth most funded Kickstarter app of all time.¹¹⁰

YouVersion is another application that focuses on daily reading of the bible. YouVersion is free of charge and contains 2,018 bible versions available in 1,351 languages.¹¹¹ It has been designed with usability and habit formation in mind. First, to get users in the app every day, users are encouraged to sign up for one of hundreds of available reading plans. Reading plans are designed in chunks and sequenced into bite-size pieces to make it easier to complete a day’s reading in a short period of time.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ “Home,” Dwell App, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://dwellapp.io/>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ “The Bible App,” YouVersion, Life.Church, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.youversion.com/the-bible-app/>.

¹¹² Nir Eyal, *Hooked: How to Build Habit-forming Products* (New York: Penguin Group, 2014), 24, Kindle.

Reading plans cover a wide variety of topics from new to faith to feelings to bible in a year and are written by a wide variety of authors, including ministries, churches, and popular writers. Notifications remind a user to read the day's reading or that they've fallen behind, providing helpful reminders to return to the app and build new daily reading habits. The community feature allows users to publicize reading progress, see what friends are reading and how they are engaging with the app, and share the verse of the day. Returning to the app is encouraged by a streak dashboard that includes consecutive days in the app, a count of perfect weeks, and number of times in the app for the year.

Pray.com is a new application¹¹³ that focuses on habits of faith, including daily prayer, listening, and meditation habits. The application requires a subscription to access any content.¹¹⁴ Once subscribed, launching the app provides a splash screen containing a short prayer that requires user interaction to move past. Once finished praying for the day, the app provides communities that encourage prayer interaction, audio stories adapted from the bible, bible bedtime stories that are calm and slower paced, guided meditation, book summaries, musical selections, and financial giving options. While similar in concept to Dwell from an audio bible perspective, there are several key differences. First, Pray.com is adapted, dramatized stories of the bible versus scripture read aloud. Two, Pray.com feels almost identical to the Calm app, the top-rated

¹¹³ "Discover Pray," Pray, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.pray.com/>. Pray.com launched in early 2019.

¹¹⁴ As of this writing, the app is still very buggy. While previewing the app, there were multiple issues with the app loading, notifications not clearing, attempting to manage a subscription resulted in a blank screen and the inability to unsubscribe once a person started a trial.

meditation and sleep app, which is focused on “mental fitness, relaxation, and sleep”¹¹⁵ using timed, guided meditation type exercises. In essence, Pray.com is a Christian version of Calm. Third, Pray.com sees communities, and its call to submit prayers and respond to them, as a core feature of its app, equal to the audio bible stories feature. Pray.com encourages churches to create communities where a congregation can submit prayers, pray for one another, and complete online giving.

YouVersion, Dwell, and Pray.com are just three examples of smart phone applications available to encourage Christians to spend more time reading or listening to the bible. There are numerous applications that are based on similar models. This category of discipleship and biblical engagement is actively focused on engaging people wherever they are, with technology that is always in their pocket. These applications all seek to leverage technology to increase biblical literacy by focusing on daily bible engagement through habit-formation tools, including daily reminders, community interaction and recognition, as well as, personal behavioral achievements.

Multimodal Methods Found Across Social Platforms

This last category of solutions consists of examples where churches, ministries, and individuals are leveraging multiple social platforms and multiple modes to increase biblical engagement and create an online community. This category includes communities built around specific ministries and people like She Reads Truth, That Christian Vlogger, and @aussiedave. It also includes several example churches that have

¹¹⁵ “Welcome to Calm,” Calm, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.calm.com/blog/about>.

embraced digital spaces and implemented their version of Church Online, each one defined by their church's mission and values.

She Reads Truth started in 2012 when a group of friends wanted to read the bible together and used a Twitter hashtag (#SheReadsTruth) to discuss their reading.¹¹⁶ It has since grown into a booming bible study ministry with branded bibles, printed/digital devotionals, and a mobile application. Within the application, users can purchase inexpensive daily reading plans consisting of scripture, devotionals, and online conversations. There are two defining characteristics of She Reads Truth that make it a valuable addition to this section. One, their focus on engaging with God's Word and with each other every day. Their website, mobile app, and social presence are designed with both reading and community involvement in mind. Anytime someone reads the bible or the devotional content, they are prompted to share their experience with the She Reads Truth community. Two, they place a high value on aesthetics. Their resources are designed to be pleasing to the eye, utilizing white space, beautiful images, and typography. They have adjusted their written content to address the visual preferences of a primarily oral culture. It has been streamlined where possible and divided into short, easy to consume sections.

That Christian Vlogger and @aussiedave are both individuals who focus on sharing the gospel, its history, and applicability through YouTube and Instagram. That Christian Vlogger is a twenty-something Seventh Day Adventist named Justin Khoe who

¹¹⁶ Aaron Earls, "She Reads Truth Bible Arrives with a Flurry for B&H," *Baptist Press, Southern Baptist Convention*, May 5, 2017, <http://www.bpnews.net/48817/she-reads-truth-bible-arrives-with-a-flurry-for-bh>.

considers himself a full-time digital missionary.¹¹⁷ He, and sometimes his wife, post weekly content teaching viewers how to study the bible, what the bible says about questions facing today's culture, and conversations with non-Christians about their beliefs. His YouTube channel has grown to more than 90,000 subscribers in over three years. When talking to him face-to-face, he says his channel primarily reaches men ages seventeen to twenty-nine who grew up in the church but are no longer active in their faith — a demographic the church is struggling to connect with under normal circumstances. Many are still interested in how Christ and the bible impact their daily lives. His viewers often reach out to him for advice and prayer and see him as their pastor.

@aussiedave, Dave Adamson, is the Online Church pastor at North Point Community Church.¹¹⁸ He runs an Instagram account that he originally started as a way to share his faith and “things he wants his daughters to know” with his teenage daughters who use Instagram to communicate with their friends. He utilizes his professional photography skills and frequent trips to Israel to feature locations and stories from the bible, often providing Jewish context and Hebrew words and phrases in his daily devotional posts. He has also recently started posting two-minute devotionals on YouTube¹¹⁹ to expand on his Instagram devotionals through more story-driven content.

¹¹⁷ Justin Khoe, <https://www.youtube.com/user/godhasgiventruly>.

At a dinner at the Grow with Video LIVE conference on September 12, 2018 in Las Vegas, Justin and I chatted about his background and goals. We've since talked quarterly about his changing ministry.

¹¹⁸ Dave Adamson (@aussiedave), <https://www.instagram.com/aussiedave/>.

Dave is a personal friend. This content has been shared during numerous conversations with him over the last 10 years.

¹¹⁹ Aussie Dave Adamson, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfH4d0Sd7zyQE7Y7VJH8mCQ>.

North Point Community Church also has an active Church Online campus. It is one of approximately 3,000 churches using the Church Online Platform (ChOP) to stream worship services on a weekly basis.¹²⁰ Church Online pastors have been leading weekly online worship services for almost fifteen years.¹²¹ Most Church Online campuses stream their weekly worship service live, to include worship music, the sermon, offering, and an invitational. In addition, the Church Online Platform provides live chat, interactive slides for expressing a desire to commit one's life to Christ, and private chat rooms for volunteers to pray one-on-one for attendees. Several Church Online pastors are utilizing other platforms to facilitate small groups and discipleship classes. At the October 2019 Church IT Network Conference, finding ways to facilitate community and discipleship was one of the main topics. Many Church Online pastors are feeling a void in this area and are seeking to change the way their Church Online engages with their online community. Pastors discussed using Zoom rooms, face-to-face meetups, and Facebook groups for small group facilitation. Jason Morris, the Global Innovations Pastor at Westside Family Church, runs one of the largest online community-focused initiatives. They provide digital face-to-face communities by utilizing WhatsApp and Zoom for personal discipleship and small group facilitation for people falling under his campus

¹²⁰ Received ChOP usage numbers from Clayton Fike, the Open Network Product Manager at Life.Church, in a private message dated November 8, 2019.

¹²¹ "Churches with an Internet Campus," Digital @ Leadership Network, last modified November 13, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081220040813/http://digital.leadnet.org/2007/10/churches-with-a.html>. Some of the longer running Church Onlines include Life.Church (April 2006), Seacoast Church (January 2007), Liquid Church (January 2009).

umbrella, including over 200 church plant pastors in Africa. His campus uses Discovery Bible Study methods for their discipleship groups.¹²²

Summary

While all four of these categories may appear different, they all share some specific characteristics. First, most of them do not associate with a specific denomination, instead they would consider themselves to be ecumenical. Second, their vision lies primarily in building a community around a simple, shared focus on scripture and its long-term development of a deepening, personal relationship with Christ. Third, each solution has determined which mode will be most effective for their audience and has embraced it, often relying on non-literary means to teach and understand scripture. Lastly, many of them (but not all) utilize a combination of physical places and digital spaces to build a community focused on knowing and growing in God's Word. Each one of these solutions has implemented lessons learned from the domains surveyed in Section Three below that allows the church to create a framework for discipleship through horizontal networks.

¹²² Jason and I talk monthly regarding Westside's Church Online strategy and growth model.

SECTION 3:

THESIS

Digital spaces are gaining interest among American churches¹²³ and organizations as one of the largest mission fields. Churches recognize that there is a need to engage in online community; however, the questions of why, how, and for what purpose are still largely unclear. Most churches have answered these questions with: for evangelism and engagement — through invitations to attend seeker-sensitive events; through content designed to engage their current attendees; and, ultimately, to grow their Sunday service attendance. This view of digital missions seeks to replicate a physical model of the institutional church in a digital space without taking into consideration the changes the mode may demand. In many ways, the digital mission field has more in common with the missional church movement than with the traditional church.¹²⁴ The historical model of what Alan Hirsch refers to as “outreach and in-drag” is not working to reach the digital demographic.¹²⁵ Instead, the digital mission field can be seen as people who consider themselves Christian and span a broad range of faith, from no community involvement to active institutional church attendance. A shift in demographic focus, from prioritization of evangelism to one of discipleship, focuses on the strength of affinity groups and

¹²³ Almost without exception, the members of online church and church communications Facebook groups are from the United States and Canada with a small percentage from Australia and England.

¹²⁴ Throughout this paper, the traditional church, institutional church, and physical church body are used in places where the characteristic is important for distinguishing the meaning of “the church” from individuals who incarnate the gospel and are living representatives of God’s mission.

¹²⁵ Alan Hirsch, Ed Stetzer, and Jeff Vanderstelt, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), sec. 1.2 A View From Above, A Missionary’s Take, Kindle.

online-to-offline connection found within horizontal networks. Section one of this dissertation outlined who the church is most positioned to reach online, those that self-identify as Christian but don't behave as the institutional church is used to (approximately 165 million people.)¹²⁶ Section one also addressed the cognitive and psychological changes that are at the root of many objections to the church, including a return to oral learning, a reduction in literacy, and a focus on experience and service. Many of these changes contrast with the existing model of church, one that is attractional, propositional, and colonial (APC)¹²⁷. This section provides one possible answer to how the church may engage using horizontal networks to blend physical connections and digital spaces for discipleship.

The Value in Looking Outward Before Looking Inward

In this section, several domains and their responses to the challenges addressed above will be surveyed. By evaluating the successes found in these domains, a structure to build upon is created. These domains include: missional ecclesiology; higher education and a focus on multimodality; political social movements and transfer of DNA among decentralized groups; and habit-forming software development and shareability of content.

¹²⁶ "U.S. and World Population Clock," United States Census Bureau, accessed December 23, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/popclock/>. Based on the U.S. Census population clock of 330,200,000 of individuals over 18 in the U.S. and Barna Trends' previously identified numbers of 78% of adults affiliate as Christian with 64% not actively practicing.

¹²⁷ Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 18, Kindle.

- Missional ecclesiology provides a view of the church that compliments the institutional church. It views God as active throughout the world and invites His people to join in *where they are* as they go about daily life.
- The understanding of multimodality and its impact on learning, primarily in higher education, calls attention to society's shifting preference to an oral learning style and a need to utilize multiple modes to transfer knowledge.
- Social network movements shed light on momentum-driven decentralized mobilization that operates out of a shared DNA over a sustained period.
- The characteristics of habit-forming software development and sharable content outline the priority of developing digital solutions with user experience and relevancy in mind.

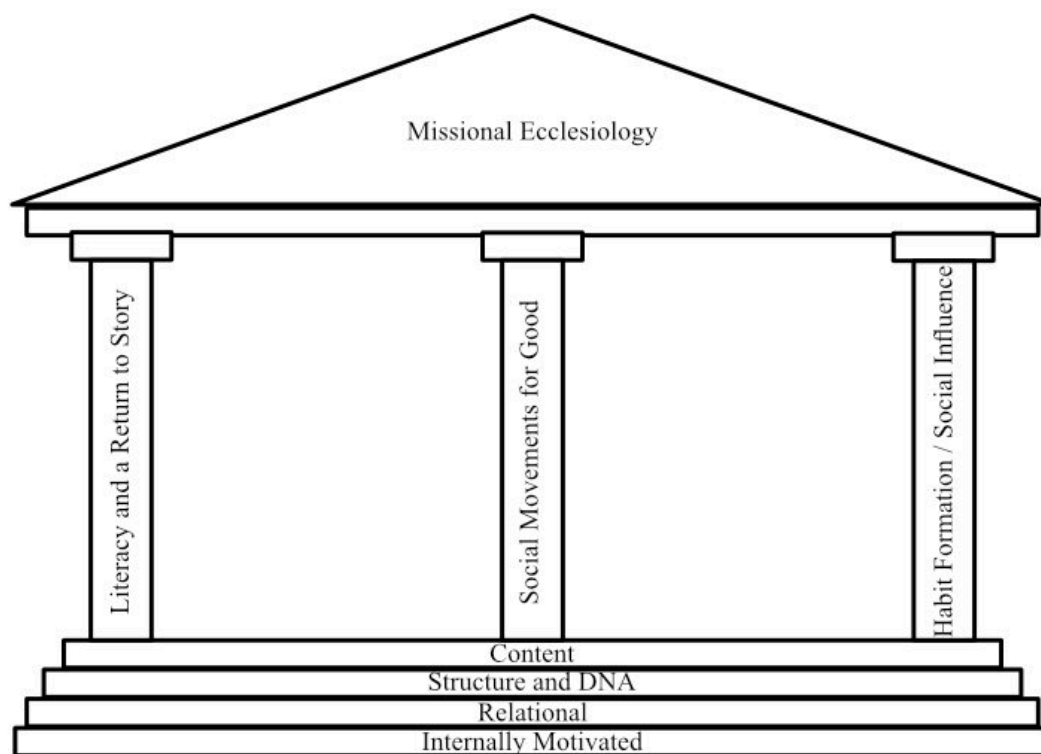


Figure 3 — Building a Structure for Discipleship Through Horizontal Networks

From the blending of these domains' successes, comes a potential answer to these shifts. An answer that facilitates the following outcomes:

- Missional ecclesiology places digital missions in a proper relationship to the institutional church. It is not opposed to the church but an extension and living out of the church.
- Embracing multimodality prioritizes oral learners with a shift from written bible study and one-way preaching built on linear, sequential, abstract thought to a participatory style that is situationally relevant and personally experienced.
- Fostering a decentralized structure with defined guidelines and procedures increases participation and ownership among Christians. The result is an increased focus on long term spiritual development over immediate gratification for building a personal Christian worldview that internalizes the DNA of the church and creates ready responses to what one believes, why one believes, and how that belief impacts one's actions.
- Shifting to a one-on-one and one-to-few discipleship model as the primary means of learning the bible and its application to one's life encourages sharing one's faith with others and extending the discipleship model to those in one's relational circles, regardless of mode. In turn, fostering a DNA of discipleship and evangelism as individuals feel equipped to engage with others.
- Utilization of horizontal networks, made up of spaces of places (institutional churches, small groups, and informal gatherings) and spaces of flows (mobile application, website, and virtual meet ups), to equip and send people out into the

world leverages both the benefits of *always on* connectedness of the Internet and the relational aspect of face-to-face shared space.

Missional Ecclesiology Overview

Missional ecclesiology can be defined as the body of believers participating in the redeeming mission of God within and among the world. This is starkly contrasted with the definition of the institutional church. The institution known as the church is defined as a church building and its attendees are focused largely around growing Sunday morning attendance, omni-directional teaching, a hierarchy of laity versus pastorate, and growth through volunteering, bible study, and tithing.¹²⁸

Missional ecclesiology at its core considers church a verb, “a *way of being* in the world”.¹²⁹ Individuals, as believers, are invited to participate in God’s mission within the world and in so doing become the incarnational mission of Christ going out into the world. The act of daily living becomes a sharing of the gospel as one actively engages with those around them. The activity of being the church does not have a definitive building or place. Instead, people (and wherever they are by association) are the church. To understand more about what this distinction means, it is important to understand the theological framework behind *being the church* versus *attending the church*.

¹²⁸ McNeal, Introduction, Kindle.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 8.

Theology of Missional Ecclesiology

The theology of missional ecclesiology is formulated differently among various resources; however, Reggie McNeal's division is sufficient to cover their shared foundation. In *Kingdom Come*, he divides them "into three broad categories: God's mission, church expression, and personal Kingdom engagement".¹³⁰

God's Mission. God's mission (*missio Dei*) as classically defined is "God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and Son sending the Spirit" to fulfill "God's redemptive reign over all creation and history."¹³¹

This mission could then be expanded to say "Father, Son, and Spirit sending the church into the world."¹³² As such, the church's primary function is to be missional (to be sent). "The church should define itself in terms of mission – to take the gospel to and incarnate the gospel within a specific context."¹³³

Throughout the bible, the reader finds God (as the Father, Son, and Spirit) who calls and sends (one or more) people to participate "in the purposes of God for the

¹³⁰ Ibid., 87.

¹³¹ Graham Hill and Michael Frost, *Salt, Light, and a City: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 153, Kindle.

¹³² David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

¹³³ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), xi, quoted in Graham Hill and Michael Frost, *Salt, Light, and a City: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 153, Kindle. I purchased this book, the 2013 version was all I could find, to read after coming across this quote. Unfortunately, they have done away with the preface this was found in. This was such a defining statement to me that I did not want to leave it out.

redemption of the whole creation.”¹³⁴ The church is called to participate in God’s mission. He simply invites people to join what he is already doing in the world.¹³⁵

Church Expression. When the church is positioned properly, the *missio Dei* and Christ are at the center of the church.¹³⁶ Hill and Frost summarize the expressions of missional church as four *notae missionis* that include “missional foundations, ecclesiology, contrast and outlook”. These four marks inform the practices of the church.¹³⁷ First, the foundations of the church show a commitment to the gospel and to the “reliability and authority of the Christian scriptures”.¹³⁸ The church views itself as missional and determines its structure, systems, and offices in light of this sent status.¹³⁹ The church engages the specific cultural context it has been sent to as a “contrast society”. The missional church engages the surrounding society where God is already at work in a way that improves society as the church works among society yet acts as a distinct body.¹⁴⁰ One of the key themes expressed in various works can be rooted in Niebuhr’s definition of the problem of engaging modern culture. In simple terms, overcoming the objection of culture to monotheism and that religion remain in its sphere separate from that of politics, business, and daily life.¹⁴¹

¹³⁴ Hill and Frost, 156.

¹³⁵ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 67.

¹³⁶ Hill and Frost, 155.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 164.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 165.

¹⁴¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Reprint ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 9.

Missional churches see all of life and the society it finds itself in as God's mission field and does not consider its society to be made up of these different spheres. God's mission can be seen in all of life's interactions.¹⁴²

Personal Kingdom Engagement. This third category could also be classified as the priesthood of all believers. Throughout scripture God calls His people to "be a blessing" (Genesis 12:1-2 [NIV]). To those who obey and keep His covenant, they will be considered His "treasured possession... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:3-6). As we come to him, we are "being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood... a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that *we* may declare the praises of him who called *us*." (1 Peter 2:4-5, 9) Christ "has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (Revelation 1:6). In *the Forgotten Ways*, this priesthood of all believers is tied into what is defined as an APEST culture. That is, the church fully engaged in the five-fold ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd (pastor), and teacher.¹⁴³ The invitation to engage in God's mission is an invitation to all believers to fully engage the broader world in "reclaiming and restoring the whole creation."¹⁴⁴

Personal responsibility given to all believers sits in stark contrast to the current primary structure of a pastor having responsibility over his flock to inspire them to act for their personal growth and wholeness.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Hill and Frost, 165.

¹⁴³ Hirsch, Stetzer, and Vanderstelt, *Introduction: A Sneak Peak*.

¹⁴⁴ James V. Brownson, Inagrace Dietterich, Barry A. Harvey, and Charles C. West, *StormFront: The Good News of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 31.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

The Implications for the Institutional Church

On the surface, missional ecclesiology appears to condemn and separate itself from the institutional church. However, this apparent criticism should not be used to tear down church structure. Instead, it is a rally cry calling the church to examine how it arrived where it is, where culture and tradition have steered its course, and encourages a return to a simplified view of the church as a who, not a what.¹⁴⁶ “We have practiced church this way for so long that we don’t even question these things anymore.”¹⁴⁷ Reevaluating who the church is and its role in God’s mission as the medium changes allows the expression¹⁴⁸ of church to be evaluated on outcome versus tradition when moving forward. Both KC Underground and Church Anywhere were founded on this principle. Missional ecclesiology and the idea of ‘both/and not either/or’ are ingrained in the DNA they build into their leaders.

Graham Hill and Michael Frost dedicate a portion of *Salt, Light, and a City* tracing the legacy of Constantinianism and Christendom and its impact on “theological paradigms, ecclesial expressions, and missional approaches”.¹⁴⁹ The institutional church developed out of a culture where church and state were integrated and a hierarchical division among clergy and between clergy and laity created several far-reaching consequences. Those consequences include:

¹⁴⁶ McNeal, 95.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 64.

¹⁴⁸ The behaviors and actions that are considered Christian today.

¹⁴⁹ Hill and Frost, 170.

- the repurposing of the priesthood of all believers to the priesthood of clergy,¹⁵⁰
- the reduction of the five-fold ministry to one of primarily shepherding and teaching,¹⁵¹
- the ministry to and in society being shifted to the ministry within the existing church,
- the contribution of a small group regarding worship, leading, and caring for the church,¹⁵²
- the resulting unrealistic expectations placed on leaders for the care and responsibility of spiritual growth of the church,¹⁵³
- an inconsistent application of the gospel message among the church,¹⁵⁴
- a focus on the 28% of the U.S. population that already engages in Christian behaviors, consequently not engaging the other 72% (or, more specifically, the 50% that affiliate as Christian but don't engage in Christian behaviors)¹⁵⁵ of the population.¹⁵⁶

The great news is that the institutional church has the ability to address these consequences by reintegrating God's mission into its church expression and empowering its people to personal Kingdom engagement. Unfortunately, the institutional church has

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 219.

¹⁵¹ Hirsh, sec. 2.8 APEST Culture: Almost a Silver Bullet.

¹⁵² Hill and Frost, 219.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ McNeal, 75.

¹⁵⁵ *Barna Trends 2018*, 210.

¹⁵⁶ Hirsch, sec. 1.1 A View from the Edge, Phase 2: Becoming a Church-Planting Church.

been slow to consider if the traditional theology, structure, and approach is still working. There are two primary reasons that have caused the institutional church to maintain the status quo.

The first reason is primarily found in those who make a living through the church and those who have spent considerable time supporting the institutional church. As Hirsch suggests, those within the institutional church are so vested in the current system they have lost the objectivity to see the situation and, consequently, have lost the ability to change it.¹⁵⁷ To echo Upton Sinclair's sentiment, when an individual's salary depends on keeping the status quo and not understanding the current situation, it is extremely difficult to have the capacity to see needed change.¹⁵⁸

The second reason is that the institutional church has positioned itself to attract those within their same cultural reference. They are not prepared to reach across cultural barriers to engage individuals who are more than one degree away from "meaningful engagement with the gospel", or located at an m0¹⁵⁹ on the cultural distance scale.¹⁶⁰ With many churches now participating in the seeker-sensitive church model, there has been less diversity in the individuals engaged in and attracted to the institutional church.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., Preface: Looking Forward Backward.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Hirsch, sec. 1.2 A View from Above, Christendom-Schmissendom. Ralph Winter, a missiologist, defined the cultural distance scale that goes from m0 – m4. Each number indicates a significant cultural barrier to engaging with the gospel. These can be things such as language, race, history, religion, and worldview. Today the church is focused on those most like them, m0 on the scale. In order to engage those found in a digital space, churches will need to intentionally bridge or backfill knowledge to connect with people at m1 or greater. The more cultural barriers that exist, the more content must be designed with no prerequisite knowledge involved.

¹⁶⁰ Hirsch, sec. 1.2 A View from Above, A Missionary's Take.

Church services and ministries are designed around family ministry¹⁶¹ and mirror culture's focus on consumerism, privatized faith, and individualism.¹⁶² Said another way, the church has attracted people using a prescribed model of church that has perpetuated a need to consistently improve upon the spiritual goods available within the church building or risk losing an individual to the church down the street who meets their needs better. This leads to competition between churches for the same 28% of the population to provide for the organizational needs (versus the spiritual needs) of the institutional church.¹⁶³

How then does the church reach the other 72%, both those that have no affiliated faith and those that affiliate as Christian but rate themselves low on Christian habits? The answer to this question becomes more complicated in a culture now dominated by what Lesslie Newbigin defines as “paganism born out of the rejection of Christianity” “whose public life is ruled by beliefs which are false.” Today’s culture “is far tougher and more resistant to the Gospel” than any “missionary frontier of our time.”¹⁶⁴ The answer, this paper contends, is found in adjusting the current view of digital missions from:

- From evangelism to discipleship, from streaming Sunday worship service to building relationships and fostering two-way conversations

¹⁶¹ Ibid., sec. 1.1 Phase 2: Becoming a Church-Planting Church.

¹⁶² Hill and Frost, 123.

¹⁶³ McNeal, 178; Hirsch, sec. 1.1 Phase 2: Becoming a Church-Planting Church.

¹⁶⁴ Hirsch, sec. 1.1 Confessions of a Frustrated Missionary.

- From a short-sighted focus on number of people watching and hands raised to people learning in relationship with others and sharing what they learn both inside and outside the body of Christ
- From people relying on ministry of paid leadership to people feeling sent and equipped to participate in God's mission in their everyday lives¹⁶⁵

Missional Ecclesiology and Digital Spaces

Missional Ecclesiology has a significant impact on how technology is used across digital spaces. The theological framework that determines how the church is viewed (as a people sent or as a building to gather in) determines how a church uses social media, their website, and other platforms for establishing horizontal networks. In addition, understanding who the audience the church is sent to serve influences the types of content and what platforms are used for engaging the community.

Three specific use cases for utilizing technology to engage in sharing the gospel can be seen through parachurch ministries, institutional churches, and individuals called to serve the digital space. On an ecumenical scale, parachurch ministries, like Compassion International and Convoy of Hope, are excellent examples of how social media and the Internet can join in God's mission through collaboration for social welfare initiatives. When an institutional church, like Churchhome and Church Anywhere, shifts its focus from bringing people to the building for Sunday worship to sending its people into the community, the church can use digital platforms as a resource throughout the

¹⁶⁵ Verlon Fosner, "Missional or Mission-ish?" Fresh Expressions, April 17, 2017, <http://freshexpressionsus.org/2017/04/17/missional-mission-ish/>.

week for discipleship and coordinating service opportunities in the local community.¹⁶⁶

Lastly, individuals who are called to serve a specific people group or niche, like

@aussiedave and That Christian Vlogger, can create communities where “conversations, storytelling, inquiry, debate, dialogue, and truth-telling” can occur “to challenge (the) then-prevailing notions about God, faith, ethics, relationships, and religious business-as-usual.”¹⁶⁷

The 50% of the U.S. that the church can connect with in a digital missional church model fall primarily within Generation X and below. The result is that content created for digital spaces should lean toward oral, aural, and visual learning with heavier focus on visual media.¹⁶⁸ Content should also be short enough to watch in five minutes or less, preferably less than three when it contains interviews or commentary.¹⁶⁹ In addition, engaging on platforms designed for visual media should be prioritized and the primary audience should be considered mostly Christians. Lastly, external audience (evangelistic) content should be designed to be relevant to those who do not know Christ and internal (discipleship) content designed for the development and sending of those who are already familiar with the gospel.

¹⁶⁶ McNeal, 99.

¹⁶⁷ Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), chap. 2.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., chap. 3.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., chap. 21.

Multimodality and Learning

The national research on literacy, both comprehension and reading frequency, prompt the question, “How is society learning and transferring meaning?” The study of learning is expanding its understanding of knowledge transfer, which has historically focused solely on traditional, institutional learning found in classrooms. The study of learning now includes various modes of learning found across numerous contextual environments.

One of the most comprehensive and simple to understand explanations of learning is laid out by Jeff Bezemer and Gunther Kress in their book *Multimodality, Learning and Communication: A Social Semiotic Frame*. Here they define social semiotic theory as: “All of the means for making meaning.”¹⁷⁰ Means are the resources, methods, actions or system that are used to transfer knowledge. Social semiotic theory expands the previous study of learning from means that can be classified as canonical (or institutional) like formal education, apprenticeship programs, and structured lecture and adds societal, informal means like cultural norms, media, and interpersonal relationships.¹⁷¹ It also expands the understanding of modes, the way something is experienced, expressed, or done. As expected, modes include aural, linguistic, and textual modes but additional modes not typically considered are added, including physical, spatial, and visual modes

¹⁷⁰ Jeff Bezemer and Gunther Kress, *Multimodality, Learning and Communication: A Social Semiotic Frame* (New York: Routledge, 2016), ix, Kindle.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 5-7.

are explicitly identified.¹⁷² Lastly, it includes the recognition that learning typically occurs in a combination of modes. Rarely, if ever, is a mode used in isolation.¹⁷³

Today, academic institutions are utilizing technology in response to the changing ways younger generations are learning. Many schools are utilizing blended classrooms, where “students come to class after the online work is done to discuss ideas, work on projects, and go over homework.”¹⁷⁴ Blended modes plays to the strengths of both mediums, disseminating information in short information nuggets¹⁷⁵ and engaging through presence allowing people to deepen their understanding of the world into an internalized framework.¹⁷⁶ In addition, educators are beginning to teach new skills necessary in today’s environment: “management of multiple information streams, emphasizing the skills of filtering, analyzing, and synthesizing information.”¹⁷⁷

One outcome of a rise in multimodality is that society as a whole is moving to an oral culture, one that Walter Ong would call ‘secondary orality.’ Even those who are literate in the present multimodal culture will have characteristics of oral cultures, including thought process and decision-making.¹⁷⁸ One result of this change is the decline in biblical literacy and the shift in culture away from a worldview based on the word of God due to the church’s heavy dependence on reading for knowledge transfer. This

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷⁴ Turkle, 228.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 221.

¹⁷⁶ Carr, 232.

¹⁷⁷ Quitney and Rainie, “Millennials Will Benefit and Suffer Due to Their Hyperconnected Lives.”

¹⁷⁸ “Making Disciples of Oral Learners,” 6.

creates an environment where Christians are more confused when it comes to assimilating what they hear or read regarding their faith tradition and are on the defensive more frequently in their cultural interactions.¹⁷⁹

This environment is one that is frequently found in international missions. One successful response has been StoryRunners bible story set mentioned above. Their framework has seen consistent success because the stories are simple and reproducible; however, ministries using these stories are quick to stress that “simplicity does not mean simplistic or shallow.”¹⁸⁰ A significant effort goes in to selecting and developing stories that convey the biblical story accurately in a way that can be understood and received by the cultural worldview of the receiving group.¹⁸¹ International ministries focusing on bible orality do not consider their mission one of either/or. Instead, they see their ministry as one of both/and. They desire to see people discover literacy; however, they see a landscape where the bible shows them the way – examples of both “the written word of God and the spoken word of God” often work side-by-side.¹⁸²

Impact of Secondary Orality

Both Ong and McLuhan considered the medium of communication and its impact on how the message was transferred and received. Ong focused much of his work on the

¹⁷⁹ Mark Snowden, ed, *Orality in America* (N.p.: Mission America Coalition, 2016), 28.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸¹ “Making Disciples of Oral Learners,” 11.

¹⁸² Ibid., 11-12.

characteristics of thought process impacted by medium. McLuhan focused more on the effects a medium has on society and the ‘global village’.¹⁸³

Ong’s work “popularized the idea that knowledge is a product of language, and that the medium in which language is communicated ... makes us think along certain path-dependent lines.”¹⁸⁴ His research studied how literate and oral cultures make sense of and pass on knowledge. As this comparison unfolds, Ong shows that the electronic age has brought about a secondary orality that shares many characteristics with a primarily oral culture. Those characteristics include a strong group sense,¹⁸⁵ more concrete narrative versus abstract sequential thinking,¹⁸⁶ the focus on the present, and use of memorable formulas of speech to encourage remembrance.¹⁸⁷

In McLuhan’s work, one finds the focus on an interdependence with others due to the immediacy of information and the removal of geographic separation. In his words, “‘time’ has ceased, ‘space’ has vanished.”¹⁸⁸ The world has now become one large audience where a person is intimately involved with everybody else and feelings are no longer private. Ultimately, the collective owns responsibility for other’s actions. Individuals now receive data from others immediately and continuously which has changed the way information is processed. Processing has moved from serial

¹⁸³ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* (reprint) (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2001), 67.

¹⁸⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2002) xiv, Kindle.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 134.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 67.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 133.

¹⁸⁸ McLuhan, 63.

categorization to simple pattern recognition, from internalizing data into a framework of knowledge to replacing information consistently.¹⁸⁹ It's almost as if the hard drive of the mind is full and new information is rewriting the 1's and 0's repeatedly.

Age of Automation

While the characteristics of the Connection Age are still at the forefront, signs of an emerging Age of Automation, and what Pew Research has dubbed the Internet of Things, have begun. This age further propels society into secondary orality. In this Age, machines will take over more labor and procedural roles. According to Paul Saffo, devices will communicate “on our behalf ... with the physical and virtual worlds more than interacting with us.”¹⁹⁰ Devices will continue to advance, particularly in the area of voice and touch commands.¹⁹¹ Wearable sensors already provide a better understanding of health and routine by providing feedback to other systems.¹⁹² Devices take context into account to inform decisions and share information with other information systems.¹⁹³ As these devices integrate more into the fabric of daily lives, profiling and targeting

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Janna Anderson and Lee Rainie, “The Internet of Things Will Thrive by 2025,” Pew Research Center, May 14, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/05/14/internet-of-things/>.

¹⁹¹ Devices like the Amazon Echo and smart home devices are examples of this emerging technology.

¹⁹² Wearable fitness trackers, like the Fitbit and Apple Watch, automatically integrate with a scale and a fitness tracking app to see patterns in physical activity, sleep, and weight and can even notify a user of heart rate concerns.

¹⁹³ Programs like Focus and Tripmode automatically disable applications on devices when performing specific tasks. Rescuetime tracks application usage to inform productivity and syncs with client time tracking, to do lists, and invoicing programs. Paprika manages kitchen pantry inventory, schedules meals, and seamlessly builds grocery lists that are automatically sent to the grocery store for them to do the shopping and bring to an individual's car as their GPS notifies the store when they arrive or schedules delivery straight to one's home.

increases, as does concerns over privacy and the ability to control one's own life.

However, these concerns will be outweighed by the desire to be entertained and connected as devices simplify areas of daily life.¹⁹⁴ Devices already read books, create playlists automatically of preferred music genres, play podcasts, and allow dictation.¹⁹⁵ bible applications like YouVersion, Dwell, and Pray.com with audio content readily loaded are perfect examples of how individuals can aurally engage with scripture, now and in the future.

Pastoral Considerations

The increase of secondary orality also has an impact on pastors' sermon development in two ways. First, the demographics of pastors show that their combined education, age, and gender put them in a small percentage of the population. Second, the learning preference of the pastor drives how a sermon is prepared and what content that sermon will contain. In ministry vocations, it is probable that a pastor is male, older, Caucasian, and above average in educational attainment. Fifty percent of pastors are between fifty and sixty-four and twenty-eight percent are between thirty-five and forty-nine. Only seven percent are under thirty-five.¹⁹⁶ Of those surveyed, seventy percent have

¹⁹⁴ Anderson and Rainie, "The Internet of Things Will Thrive in 2025."

¹⁹⁵ The Apple Watch is already one such device that does all of these things. It monitors health, notifies the user if something is wrong, reads audio books, plays podcasts and music that it suggests based on previous content played, reads incoming messages, allows dictation of outgoing messages, does phone calls without requiring a phone, and controls a connected home automation system.

¹⁹⁶ Jennifer Shepard Payne, "The Influence of Secular and Theological Education on Pastors' Depression Intervention Decisions," *Journal of Religion and Health* 53, no. 5 (2014): 1398-1413, <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-013-9756-4>.

at least a bachelor's degree.¹⁹⁷ The majority of pastors are most likely highly literate and preach using communication methods that are based on linear and sequential thought consistent with print media.¹⁹⁸

Those who prepare sermons and other written material are commonly taught that they need to design their sermons to be comprehended by “a ten-year-old or an adult with a sixth-grade reading level.”¹⁹⁹ However, when a highly literate individual prepares material for someone with a sixth-grade reading level, they are unlikely to take learning style into account and likely to construct a sermon around linear, sequential, abstract thought instead of a more orally based learning style – that is, one that is more concrete based on situational knowledge, personally experienced, in the present, participatory, and often includes communal identification.²⁰⁰ It becomes a necessity to better understand and adapt the gospel message to the culture of secondary orality that defines society.

When considering the implications of an orally based learning style and the number of people likely to be in churches who prefer to learn using oral methods, it is easy to see how sermon content shifts from sequential, abstract one-way communication to simple, reproducible two-way conversation. Mark Snowden, author of *Orality in America*, estimates that sixty to seventy percent of Americans prefer to learn using oral methods.²⁰¹ Fortunately, churches are beginning to see the need for people to “hear,

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Avery Willis, *Truth That Sticks: How to Communicate in a Teflon World* (Carol Stream, IL: NavPress, 2010), 77, Kindle.

¹⁹⁹ Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 44, Kindle.

²⁰⁰ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 43-45.

²⁰¹ Snowden, 4.

understand, process, and remember it (the Gospel), and then be able to pass it on to others.”²⁰²

An additional consequence of one-way communication has been that many individuals have never been taught to share the gospel in a format that is simple and reproducible. They don’t know how to share it in ways that answer the questions being posed, leaving them feeling guilty or inadequate.²⁰³ The church has provided abstract doctrine that has left individuals looking for direction on how to believe and its impact on how to behave.²⁰⁴ In this era of connectedness, there is less focus on classification found in arguments of category (this is a sin) and more on a person’s personal truth based on his own experiences. The church at large doesn’t know how to define and communicate a Christian worldview where images do the bulk of the communication work. The church has failed to recognize that “images initially make us feel rather than think”²⁰⁵ and that communication now occurs in a world of grays based more on action than argument. Lastly, because the church has not taught a simple, comprehensive set of beliefs, Christian adults are “more likely to develop their own set of religious beliefs”,²⁰⁶ customizing a combination of beliefs to fit their worldview. This worldview is one shaped by the electronic age that brings more information faster and farther than in the past and based on the idea that truth is relative based on a person’s experience.

²⁰² Ibid., 5.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 82, Kindle.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 76.

²⁰⁶ “Christianity is No Longer America’s Default Faith.”

Shifting the Educational Model

Today's church education model is based on two primary methodologies. The first is that of socialization where members are immersed in relationships and social interaction is the primary medium for knowledge transfer. This tends to be the method used in the consumer-driven church model.²⁰⁷ The second method is more intentional and based on the cognitive transfer of information as facts through mediums like bible study classes.²⁰⁸ In practice, churches use a combination of the two models. Relationships and social interaction are used primarily to attract new people to the church and to build community while cognitive transfer is used for discipleship purposes.

In his dissertation, *Shift*, Bryce Ashlin-Mayo asks the question, "How does one preach for a contemporary social media culture in a way that is biblically rooted, theologically robust, and historically consistent, resulting in active attention, application, and life transformation?"²⁰⁹ In a world where people can align themselves with those who believe exactly like them, the social landscape becomes increasingly tribal, both participatory and communal.²¹⁰ The landscape is also uniquely positioned where

²⁰⁷ Jason Clark, "Via Media: The Necessity of Deeper Theological Reflection for the Genuine Renewal of Church in the Emerging Culture and Context" (Doctor of Ministry diss., George Fox Evangelical Seminary, 2006), 49, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/35>.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Bryce Ashlin-Mayo, "Shift: Expanding Preaching for a Social Media World" (Doctor of Ministry diss., George Fox Evangelical Seminary, 2013), vii, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/68>.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 31.

everyone is encouraged to tell their story. People are more inclined to participate in public communication as a feigned form of intimate communication.²¹¹

The social landscape also creates network mapping where the larger web formed by relationship to others provides “language, story, and shape”²¹² to help define one’s existence. This network provides a place where one can define his existence “in community with God and others.”²¹³ More recent church communication books, like Mark McDonald’s *Be Known for Something*,²¹⁴ are focusing on social media being leveraged for more than one-way communication and instead for its ability to facilitate two-way communication. The trend to leverage social media among churches has also surfaced the idea that Christians “have both individual responsibility and institutional opportunity”²¹⁵ to use the platform for sharing faith and engaging in culturally relevant conversations. Because of this, churches are beginning to ask the question, “How do we equip our people to share their faith?” The answer has primarily been found in creating sharable short sermon clips, bible verse art, and invites for attractional events.²¹⁶ The

²¹¹ Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (N.p.: Global Publications, 2000), 290-292.

²¹² Scott M. Ness, "The Faith Web: A Networking of the Body of Christ to Mitigate Relationship Voids and Strengthen the Faith Community" (Doctor of Ministry diss., George Fox Evangelical Seminary, 2014): 32, <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/79>.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Mark MacDonald, *Be Known for Something* (Houston: High Bridge Books, 2017).

²¹⁵ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 157, Kindle.

²¹⁶ My observations of the Facebook group “Church Communications,” currently just over 20,000 members, shows a trend focused on using content for marketing purposes. The day of this writing, their header includes the following copy: “Get Your Free Ticket to the 2018 Church Marketing Event of the Year – 35+ church marketing experts teach you their #1 secret to reaching more people with social media and digital marketing”. It’s important to note that the focus is on reaching more people not discipling more people.

APC church is still focused on creating an entertaining environment that is better than the church down the street designed to fill seats, on socialization to get them in, and once they are in, the church can focus on the cognitive.

An adapted model that seeks to be multimodal and bridges the gap for those that learn orally is starting to emerge. Dwell, Pray.com, and BibleTelling are oral representations of the bible. They range from reading the bible out loud to dramatic interpretations to accurate oral re-telling. When used with the discipleship model found in Discovery Bible Study, a method many churches are already using successfully, they buoy a model that allows the learner to gain contextual knowledge through personal experience, participation, and reproduction.

Social Movements for Good

While there is concern over loss of the connection between doing and knowing, conversation and connection, there are also positive advancements that are worth acknowledging in order to understand how technology has impacted the culture the church now seeks to reach. The Information Age has provided unprecedented autonomous access to information and people, effectively providing the tools to both “inform *ourselves and others* and mobilize to action *a community with a shared need*,”²¹⁷ empowering people to be better global citizens. When technology is used as a tool for positive exchange, its contribution can be seen in academic, social, and political spheres. In all three areas, the line is blurring between physical locations and Internet locations.

²¹⁷ Turkle, 293. Italics added for clarity of the message

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of the Connection Age is that of an increased sense of collaboration and community-mindedness. Today's society could be defined by the desire to make a difference and the belief in the collective power of a united group seen most clearly in social sharing.²¹⁸ Networked society has increased the ability to maintain connection with (as well as meet new) family and friends who are geographically separated, even if just momentarily. Global collaboration can "result in clarity of purpose and innovation," resulting in a project like Wikipedia.²¹⁹ There is a shift from distribution to circulation that has moved culture to a more participatory model, one which allows individuals to shape, share, reframe, and remix media content in ways the originator may not have anticipated.²²⁰ This has resulted in organizations focusing on the *spreadability* versus the *stickiness* of content empowering audience members to generate interest in particular organizations.²²¹

This same drive for community-mindedness and social sharing has been used to draw attention and organize social movements as agents of change. The flattening of communication made possible through social networks that are largely autonomous has given rise to recognizable instances of social movements that combine occupied physical

²¹⁸ Qualman, Foreword.

²¹⁹ Ibid., chap. 1: Not All Bloggers Are Bad.

²²⁰ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2.

²²¹ Ibid., 4. Spreadability refers to the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes. Stickiness broadly refers to the need to create content that attracts audience attention and engagement and focuses more on easiest way the business can put content in one location and make the audience come to it. These are, in essence, opposite sides of the same coin.

spaces organized by Internet spaces.²²² These movements start as emotion and are transformed by a unifying catalyst into action. Some notable social causes include, from the first two to set the stage for more: #sidibouzid (Tunisian revolution) and Iceland's Kitchenware Revolution, to a sampling of those that have followed: the Arab Uprising (Spring), #OccupyWallStreet, #BlackLivesMatter. While many of these movements aimed for political, corporate, or ideological reform, the impact of these movements (like those of social movements of the past) will not be found in immediate reform but in breaking the barriers of isolation, overcoming fear to join and share,²²³ as a means of drawing attention to a source of struggle²²⁴ towards the hope of future change.

The Power of Momentum

Social movement theory has clearly defined patterns and schools of thought. The two primary opposing schools of thought are the structured approach, developed by Saul Alinsky, and the mass (or momentum) protest approach, developed by Frances Fox Piven and her husband, Richard Cloward. While their approach to transforming the world varies, top down versus bottom up, both use the idea of "momentum-driven mass mobilization"²²⁵ to further change in the public sphere. Today, these two approaches have been adapted and combined to various degrees by people like Chambers, Sharp, and Marovic to impact change.

²²² Ibid., 10-11.

²²³ Castells, 44.

²²⁴ Ibid., 253.

²²⁵ Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Nation Books, 2016), Introduction, Kindle.

The Structured Approach: Saul Alinsky. Alinsky focused on “the slow, incremental building of community groups.”²²⁶ His book, *Rules for Radicals*, and his influence is felt in many organizations including USAction/Citizen Action, Association of Community Organizations for Reform (ACORN), National People’s Action (NPA), and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) (founded by Alinsky in the 1940’s).²²⁷ The underlying principles of his approach include building organizations that “focus on neighborhoods and on concrete, winnable goals”²²⁸ through “careful leadership development, and the creation of stable institutional bodies that could leverage the power of their members over time.”²²⁹ Time. Stability. These two distinctives are the clear differentiators for Alinsky. “Movements go in and out of existence.”²³⁰ They are unsustainable and sustainable change requires “incremental success over months and sometimes years.”²³¹

These two distinctives drive three norms for Alinskyite organizations. First, organizations identify and “partner with religious congregations and civic organizations at the local level”²³² to serve as nonpartisan bases. Second, organizations identify narrow,

²²⁶ M. Engler and P. Engler, 32.

²²⁷ “About Us,” Industrial Areas Foundation, accessed May 18, 2018, <http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/>.

²²⁸ David Moberg, “New Rules for Radicals: How George Goehl is Transforming Community Organizing,” In These Times, February 12, 2014, http://inthesetimes.com/article/16144/new_rules_for_radicals.

²²⁹ M. Engler and P. Engler, 32.

²³⁰ Edward T. Chambers, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice*, 1st ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 77, Kindle.

²³¹ Ibid., 78.

²³² Industrial Areas Foundation.

local issues within the community to “find a common ground for action”²³³ enabling small victories first that spur participants to more action. Third, organizations that are effective “are built with people who have direct and personal interest in their success”²³⁴ (are self-interested) versus those who are fueled by media or activists.²³⁵

By the early 1980s, Alinsky’s model was picked up by resource mobilization theorists and became the dominant approach in academic circles. They built on this approach by stressing that protest movements effect change and to be sustainable over time must have some form of organization pertaining to “leadership, administrative structure, incentives for participation, and a means for acquiring resources and support.”²³⁶

The Mass Protest Approach: Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward.

Where Alinsky’s approach was developed through his work in the IAF, Piven and Cloward’s approach²³⁷ is based on four case studies of protest movements: unemployed workers in the Great Depression, industrial strikes in the 1930s, the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 1960s and

²³³ Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 31, Kindle.

²³⁴ Nicholas von Hoffman, *Radical: A Portrait of Saul Alinsky* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 75, Kindle.

²³⁵ M. Engler and P. Engler, 38.

²³⁶ Doug McAdam and W. Richard Scott, “Organizations and Movements,” in *Social Movements and Organization Theory*, ed. Gerald F. Davis, Doug McAdam, W. Richard Scott, and Mayer N. Zald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 6, quoted in M. Engler and P. Engler, 44.

²³⁷ Much of Piven’s work was completed and written with her husband Richard Cloward. For clarity, some of what is contained in this paper can be attributed to both Piven and Cloward; however, Piven wrote additional independent works and receives primary attribution for the mass protest approach. Their research occurred in the late 1970’s and would run counter to current academic trends of the time, as noted under Alinsky.

1970s.²³⁸ Piven and Cloward's basic argument revolved around the idea that participants must be willing to "interrupt business as usual" and the disruptive power a group can cause.²³⁹ The key difference between Alinsky and Piven revolved around the need for an organizational structure to support change. In fact, Piven and Cloward's research would conclude that formal structures not only failed to create disruption, but formal structures would attempt to limit it.²⁴⁰ Further, organizations were focused on building and sustaining the formal organization based on the belief that these organizations could grow and become more powerful.²⁴¹

The Cumulative Effect of Structure and Mass Protest: Otpor and The Removal of Milosevic

Both Alinsky and Piven are correct. When looking at movements where change has occurred, strands of activity can be seen that fall under both forms of social movement approaches. Several examples can be found providing evidence that both structure and short-term protest are needed to provide the right environment for sustainable change. One such example is the removal of Milosevic from power in Serbia in the late 1990s and 2000.

Otpor was formed in October 1998, two years after the 1996 uprising in Serbia, with a goal of removing Slobodan Milosevic from power over Yugoslavia. One of

²³⁸ M. Engler and P. Engler, 45.

²³⁹ Ibid., 43.

²⁴⁰ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (1977; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 2012), chap. 1, Kindle.

²⁴¹ Ibid., Introduction.

Otpor's founding members was Ivan Marovic who participated in the 1996 revolts, which were primarily mass protests. The lessons learned from the 1996 mass protests combined with other founders' experiences in structure based approaches resulted in a distinctive organizational structure that was "disruptive yet highly strategic, decentralized yet carefully structured."²⁴² Otpor was developed as a hybrid taking the best of both approaches to create a "deliberate and disciplined approach to mass mobilization."²⁴³ The movement has several distinguishing characteristics, primarily:

- They had an easily recognizable brand – a clenched fist. It created a unified look with patriotic messaging that was easy to recreate.²⁴⁴
- Otpor used many small irreverent actions to create acts of defiance that could be categorized more as pranks than as acts of protest, but the cumulative effects of defiance added up to create public sympathy and slowly reduced the regime's legitimacy.²⁴⁵
- They had no significant public leadership. Instead they rotated the role of spokesperson.²⁴⁶
- Otpor was heavily decentralized to give autonomy to participants; however, defined strong guidelines and operating procedures. To do this, they used two tools:

²⁴² M. Engler and P. Engler, 63.

²⁴³ Ibid., 65.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 65-66.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 67-68.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 68.

- Frontloading to create “well-defined norms and practices” without direct oversight found in the structured approach.²⁴⁷
- Mass training to initiate and engage new participants by providing them skills over the course of a week. The week would conclude with participants planning and executing their own action resulting in local, independent chapters that operated much like the others (so not quite a mass protest approach either).²⁴⁸
- Lastly, Otpor strategically partnered with institutions that formed the “pillars of support” that create stability in political systems. In Otpor’s case, they included independent media, entertainment and popular music, intellectuals and university professors, and finally the military and police.²⁴⁹

These five characteristics resulted in the gradual growth of activists who gained support across the country in pivotal areas and culminated in Milosevic’s failed re-election against Vojislav Kostunica. However, the removal of the pillars of support over time and the mass demonstrations known as the Bulldozer Revolution were the final straw that forced his removal. Otpor was successful in its goal and its leaders have taken their model to others that are looking for a sustained organized movement that results in

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 71.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 75-76.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 91-94; Robert L. Helvey, *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals*, 1st ed. (Boston: Albert Einstein Institute, 2015), chap. 1, Kindle. The pillars of support were introduced by George Lakey and further defined by Robert Helvey in *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*. While power resides in the population’s acceptance and compliance to government, power is expressed through institutions.

locally organized, short term, yet ongoing efforts that take the best of both Alinsky and Piven's approaches.

Application for the Church

While the church is not a political social movement, there is something to be learned in how organized, yet decentralized movements accomplish political change. The five characteristics found within Otpor are all applicable to a church seeking to leverage horizontal networks for equipping and sending its people. The church has both the image of the cross and the bible as recognizable representations of faith. Both of which cross denominational lines, making them positive ecumenical choices. Instead of acts of defiance, small acts of service and natural conversations around faith in the right context plant seeds for long term impact. Frontloading simple and reproducible discipleship and evangelism practices while focusing on autonomy encourages natural growth over "outreach and in-drag."²⁵⁰ Partnering across denominations and ministries provide unity in action, at the same time increasing support around a united cause. The opportunity to implement all five characteristics across digital spaces is achievable by partnering with the growing number of Church Online pastors who are actively trying to solve the community and discipleship void for their own members.

Software Development and Content Designed to Create Interaction

The last domain to be surveyed and applied to horizontal networks in the church is the one that provides the medium that facilitates bringing the previous domains

²⁵⁰ Hirsch, Stetzer, and Vanderstelt, Section 1.2 A Missionary's Take.

together. Smartphones have become an integral part of daily life. Today, eighty-one percent of Americans own a smartphone.²⁵¹ Ownership now exceeds the number of people who have a desktop or laptop, seventy-four percent, or a tablet computer, fifty-two percent.²⁵² In fact, seventeen percent of Americans rely solely on their smartphone service provider for their Internet needs.²⁵³ As expected, the younger one is, the more likely they are to own a smartphone and use it as their primary source of connection. Of those younger than forty-nine, more than ninety-two percent own a smartphone.²⁵⁴ The church has more and easier access to individuals who are friendly towards the gospel than ever before. This access, when used intentionally, can facilitate a platform for discipleship among institutional church members outside of weekly services and for those with loose affinity to the church at large.

Seven in ten smartphone owners check their phones immediately upon waking up with 92% of those aged 18-35 checking immediately.²⁵⁵ They spend nearly half their waking hours, 42%, looking at a screen. (That's roughly six hours and forty-five minutes.)²⁵⁶ Over a single day an average person shares more than 16,000 words.²⁵⁷ This

²⁵¹ "Mobile Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, June 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Tyler Schmall, "Americans Spend Half of Waking Hours Staring at Screens, Study Finds," *SWNS Digital*, August 13, 2018, <https://www.swnsdigital.com/2018/08/americans-spend-half-of-waking-hours-staring-at-screens-study-finds/>.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Jonah Berger, *Contagious: Why Things Catch On* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 7, Kindle.

is no accident. Social applications and content have been designed to be habit forming and contagious. Nir Eyal's research and experience in influencing human behavior led to the development of the Hook Model, a four-phase habit-forming cycle designed to create user engagement and adoption of technology.²⁵⁸ The four phases of the Hook Model include Trigger, Action, Variable Reward, and Investment. These phases can be found in most popular social platforms and apps, including Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Wikipedia, Reddit, Quora, MyFitnessPal, Good Reads, and, even, YouVersion.

Hook Model: The Four Phases

Trigger. A trigger is the mechanism that puts a behavior into motion. They can be external or internal. External triggers include information on the action a user should take.²⁵⁹ External triggers can be classified as:

1. Paid triggers – advertising designed to acquire new users
2. Earned triggers – free media in the form of mentions and content
3. Relationship triggers – referrals from word of mouth and sharing product benefits
4. Owned triggers – an item that a user opts in to (emails, newsletters, installing an app, or signing up for an account)²⁶⁰

An internal trigger is one that typically forms through repeated exposure and becomes connected to a thought, an emotion, or a routine.²⁶¹ Common internal triggers

²⁵⁸ Eyal, 5.

²⁵⁹ Eyal, 40.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 41-44.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 46.

that lead to action can be negative, like boredom, stress, and loneliness or positive like excitement. The goal of a habit-forming product would be to form internal triggers that bring a user back to a platform repeatedly for a solution. To do this, designers must link products or ideas to environmental cues.²⁶²

Action. An action is the behavioral response to a trigger. The easier it is to perform the action and the more psychological motivation that is involved increases the likelihood of the action occurring. The Fogg Behavioral Model has defined the driving factor behind a behavior as B=MAT which shows that all three elements of motivation, ability, and trigger must be present for a behavior to take place. Dr. B.J. Fogg further breaks down each element in to subcomponents to help designers better design for behavior change to increase action.²⁶³ Motivation includes the “motivation to seek pleasure and avoid pain; to seek hope and avoid fear; and finally, to seek social acceptance and avoid rejection.²⁶⁴” The ability to perform a task is defined by its simplicity including factors like time, money, physical effort, brain cycles (mental effort and focus), social deviance, and non-routine.²⁶⁵

Variable Reward. The completion of an action leads to feedback, or a reward. Introducing variability increases the motivation to complete the action by interrupting cause-and-effect, reducing predictability, and keeping a user aware of the anticipation of

²⁶² Berger, 23.

²⁶³ Dr. BJ Fogg, “What Causes Behavior Change,” Fogg Behavior Model, accessed December 8, 2019, <http://behaviormodel.org/>.

²⁶⁴ Eyal, 62.

²⁶⁵ Fogg.

the reward.²⁶⁶ Variability directly feeds on the research that shows the brain reacts to the anticipation of an award not the reward itself.²⁶⁷ It is that anticipatory period that drives an individual to perform a behavior and when taken to extremes becomes the compulsory feeling behind addiction.

Rewards can fall into one of three categories: tribe, hunt, and self. Rewards based on tribe are social rewards. The drive to feel “accepted, attractive, important, and included”²⁶⁸ are strong motivators. They work “particularly well when people observe the behavior of people most like themselves or who are slightly more experienced.”²⁶⁹ The reward of the hunt fulfill the desire to acquire objects, whether physical or information-based.²⁷⁰ Lastly, the reward of the self is the motivation that a user has gained competency or completion of a task and is an intrinsically motivated reward.²⁷¹

Investment. Investment is the idea that the more a user invests time and effort into a task, the more value they will place in it.²⁷² This is the investment of long-term rewards versus the immediate gratification found in the variable rewards phase. The more personal information is contained (content and data), the more connections a user has (reputation and skill), the consistency of use in past behavior, or the more those around a

²⁶⁶ Eyal, 128.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 96.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 100.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 107.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 111.

²⁷² Ibid., 136.

person seem to value a behavior, the more the user is likely to value it.²⁷³ The culmination of investment brings a user full circle to the trigger phase again continuing the cycle.

Berger's STEPPS Attributes

While Eyal researched why platforms become habit forming, Jonah Berger looked at the attributes behind content that spreads and found six key attributes that must be present. These STEPPS include social currency, triggers, emotion, public, practical value, and stories.²⁷⁴ When the Hook Model is overlaid with the STEPPS attributes, individuals are driven to contribute and share content creating a perfect ecosystem for social movements to thrive. If a social platform is built to be habit forming, then the other side of the coin would be creating content designed for word-of-mouth transmission. These six steps can be summarized as:

1. Social currency – The desire to look good and feel knowledgeable among peers draws people to share content.²⁷⁵
2. Triggers – As in the hooked model, triggers are designed to bring an idea or product to top of mind at the point in time most likely to result in a purchase or other action.²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Ibid., 140-152.

²⁷⁴ Berger, 22-24.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 22.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 23.

3. Emotion – Content that leads to “a state of activation and readiness”²⁷⁷ is more likely to connect with people. Excitement, inspiration, and anger are more effective than happiness or sadness.
4. Public – Content that can be observed and imitated is more likely to be shared and talked about.²⁷⁸
5. Practical value – Creating content that shows knowledge and expertise that can easily be shared allows people to help others.²⁷⁹
6. Stories – Information is shared through stories that contain emotion and narrative.²⁸⁰

YouVersion: A Case Study in Habit Formation and Social Influence

When the Hook model and the six STEPPS are utilized together, it leads to a strong habit-forming ecosystem that can be used for good. One excellent example in the Christian space is the YouVersion bible app, previously touched on in the proposed solution section. YouVersion is the brainchild of Bobby Gruenewald and Terry Storch from the Life.Church Digerati team. While initially a napkin idea dreamed up in an airport,²⁸¹ the Digerati team has systematically applied both the Hook model and the six STEPPS at important points in the app’s development.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 108.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 24.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ A frequent story told to employees at Life.Church and heard multiple times while on staff between 2011 and 2014 from Terry Storch.

The primary focus of YouVersion is daily reading of the bible. However, its habit-forming design is what sets it apart from similar apps. Notifications are designed to shift from external triggers to internal triggers, as users achieve rewards for daily reading, highlighting, and sharing. The more a user engages with the app, the more investment they have and the long-term intrinsic motivation of reading the bible in its entirety and developing a habit of daily time with God is valued. Returning to the app was gamified by creating both a count of consecutive days in the app streak and a count of perfect weeks metric. YouVersion's focus on reading plans and shareability leverage the six attributes of Berger's STEPPS model. Its reading plans are designed to utilize emotion, stories, and practical value. Sharing was added to the app so that a user could read with their friends, show them reading progress, or share the verse of the day to utilize the attributes of social currency, public, and practical value.

While it is easy to see design based on models that drive habit-formation, what is more interesting is the data-driven design involved in developing features within the app. Internally, YouVersion measures the number of installs across devices, minutes in the app, number of reading plans started and finished, verses shared, notifications that cause action, time of day people read and their locations, along with many of other data points that provide a picture in to key drivers for usage and adoption. They test changes and review interactions to focus on what drives behavior, pivoting as needed to increase bible and community interaction. Annually, YouVersion shares these key stats with its user base to tell the story of life change and provides ways to get involved, showing another application of the STEPPS model. The 2019 stats tell a story of growing engagement based on data, including:

- More than 400 million total installs
- Philippians 4:6 as the most shared, bookmarked, and highlighted verse of the year
- The top verse by country in an interactive geo-map
- Engagement numbers for friendships, chapters read, audio listened to, interaction with the text, verses shared, images created, and reading plans completed²⁸²

Discipleship Through Horizontal Networks

Each domain surveyed above provides valuable insight into ways the church could adjust to reach the changing cultural landscape. Missional ecclesiology positions the church outward, calling both its leaders and members to find and engage in God's mission as they interact in their daily lives. Outward positioning breaks down the division of paid staff meeting the spiritual needs of members and members compartmentalizing their faith to Sunday services.²⁸³ Expanding the transfer of knowledge from primarily sermon lecture and reading to multiple modes, including but not limited to two-way conversation, video, audio, image, and experiential modes recognizes the shift in how Americans engage and assimilate information. This allows the church to utilize shorter, chunk-size content that teaches scripture in a more natural way that is easily retellable, culturally relevant, yet biblically accurate. Creating sharable content and utilizing existing habit-forming technology to transfer the DNA of the church enables a more decentralized structure where members own how they engage in God's mission and simultaneously equips them to deepen their personal relationships with Christ.

²⁸² "2019," YouVersion, accessed December 23, 2019, <https://www.youversion.com/share2019/>.

²⁸³ Fosner.

As Church Online pastors and others focused on digital spaces are discovering, the new mission field is not a country or a building, it is where spaces of places and spaces of flows collide to form horizontal networks and where connections formed offline cross over to online and vice versa. It is not a digital mission field in the sense of evangelistic missions but more of a tribe formed by an affinity of faith, both online and offline, available all hours, and providing the capacity to call to action that tribe around a single cause. There is still much to be done if the church is to leverage the best attributes of networked society while acknowledging the worst. Technology has allowed the sharing of information faster and farther. Through the lessons learned from the domains above, a potential answer can be found.

Church Online pastors are collaborative and are seeking ways to deepen the relationships within their tribes — with Christ, with each other, and with the communities its extended members live. While several seasoned Church Online pastors have acknowledged it's time to throw out the model of church streamed online and re imagine what it means to be the church in digital space, most of the institutional churches they report up to are not.²⁸⁴ However, they are willing to partner with solutions that fill the void that the current Church Online model creates and is the focus of Spoken.Bible. Spoken.Bible is an ecumenical platform designed to facilitate online-to-offline connection through one-on-one and one-to-few discipleship paths supported by a consistent DNA, one that builds both a desire to learn about Christ through internalizing His word and to share His word and its application with those in the world.

²⁸⁴ This has been a recurring conversation at the annual Church IT Network Conference the last three years.

SECTION 4:

ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community.

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Spoken.Bible provides discipleship opportunities utilizing horizontal networks via partnering with existing Church Online communities to build a network of blended, active, online discipleship groups. The goal of Spoken.Bible is to provide a platform for churches to create a blend of online and offline groups built around a unified DNA. The community is built around three revolving goals, summarized as Know, Grow, Show. First, know the bible, know how the application of the bible impacts your personal beliefs, and know how to participate in God's mission. Second, grow within community - online and offline, grow closer in your relationship to Christ, and grow in your ability to make an impact within God's mission. Third, show others how the bible relates to daily life, show a healthy community in Christ, and show faith in action through participation in God's mission.

Unified DNA

The DNA of Spoken.Bible is built upon a relationship with Jesus Christ and the story of His people found in both the Old and New Testament. An understanding of the bible as the unified story of God is most likely to be learned and shared through direct one-on-one and ongoing community relationships. As each story of the bible is learned, a piece of the overall DNA is internalized.

There is additional frontloading that would need to occur beyond learning *just* the story of God to round out Spoken.Bible's DNA. These items should be included if biblical storying as a form of discipleship is to become a healthy "movement." First, a structured and well-defined story set that provides norms and practices for storying needs to be identified. Second, training on how to teach, learn, and develop additional stories applicable to one's culture should be taught so that there is consistency and biblical accuracy for each story without requiring strong oversight for its transmission. Training also includes a focus on working across denominational lines, valuing various expressions of worship, and is rooted on building up Christian community not dwelling on the negative of Christian community.²⁸⁵

Goal 1: Know

Knowing the bible and its impact on a person's life and beliefs is the first goal of Spoken.Bible. This goal is achieved through learning short (two to three minutes in length) stories of the bible. These stories are designed to be biblically accurate, orally reproducible, naturally retold, and appropriate to the culture. (BONA-fide is StoryRunners framework for story development.)²⁸⁶

A new story is available each week on the website with resources for expanding the understanding of the story. The story is available in video, audio, and text version with resources designed so that they may be shared on social media. While an individual

²⁸⁵ Creating a positive environment for engaging with faith versus a place to come and bash organized religion needs to be a strong theme.

²⁸⁶ "School of Storying," StoryRunners, Cru, accessed December 8, 2019, <https://www.storyrunners.org/school-of-storying/>.

can learn the story on their own, the framework of Spoken.Bible prioritizes community engagement to learn and discuss the story for better recall and internalization. Weekly one hour Zoom small groups (up to 30 people per scheduled group) with breakout sessions for learning the story (one-on-one) and discussion questions (up to 8 people) are available.²⁸⁷ The goal of the weekly group is for participants to be able to retell the story to others by the end of the group, hear the story at least five times, and have answered the Discovery Bible Study questions found in Section Two for themselves. In phase two, each small group will have an associated asynchronous discussion group where participants can upload their version of the story (video or audio) for peer review and further discussion of the story.

In addition to the weekly story and group, past stories and pre-packaged monthly story sets will be available for churches and participants to use on their own. Social media platforms will point to the week's story with specific calls to action like retell the story, record it, and repost it for the group; recreate the story using emoticons; share answers to how the story applies personally; or find another story with a similar theme and share it. If done well, this leads to a reward in the form of social recognition, of gained competency for self, and of perceived practical value if the stories can be retold and have cultural application. It also leads to more investment in the form of time, data, and connections as individuals participate over time.

²⁸⁷ Zoom is the best option available today but does have one significant limitation, the necessity of a program download. Ideally, the group solution would not need a downloadable app to provide breakout room functionality across all devices.

Goal 2: Grow

Goal two is growing within community. Learning the story only creates lasting change if an individual applies the story to their life in a meaningful way. Each participant is given the homework of telling the story (poorly is okay) to five people throughout the course of the week, recording their version of the story, and uploading it to the group for peer review (planned in phase two) with reactions and questions that came out of the five re-tellings. A second, optional next step is for a participant to lead a story group where one teaches a group of peers the story and discusses it following the same structure of the online group, essentially creating a face-to-face community to build local relationships and local impact. Utilizing short, re-tellable stories paired with a handful of consistent questions makes it easy for anyone to recreate a story group in their own sphere of influence.

Goal 3: Show

As participants learn the stories of their faith and participate in local community, the third goal completes a full rotation of the cycle. One of the benefits of learning the stories of the bible and their relevancy to daily life is an ability to recall, naturally share, or act on a story when relevant interactions arise. For example, the story of Creation shows how God spoke the world into existence, created order out of chaos, gave life to all, that creation is good, and he will be God from the beginning to the end. When a person is questioning the chaos around them, it's a natural story to share. Or if someone is struggling with a background that others would condemn, the story of the woman at the well shows a Lord who loves, even when culture says not to, and calls someone to make

a difference anyway. A simple story told at the right time over a cup of coffee, a drive to lunch, or in passing can make a huge difference for someone. In addition, it allows the storyteller, and their local story group, to build healthy relationships with those around them through action and personal participation in sharing, providing for, and responding as appropriate.

SECTION 5:

ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

Goals and Strategies

- Spoken.Bible has three primary goals.
 - Facilitate small group interaction through digital face-to-face groups that meet regularly to learn bible stories and apply to members personal relationships
 - Provide bible story content for learning the approximate 500 stories of the bible
 - Create a framework for training and releasing new leaders to create digital and/or local groups that meet regularly
- Spoken.Bible is scheduled to launch a soft version December 2019 using the Advent story set. The 6-8 initial members will be current Church Online practitioners. At the end, practitioners will provide SWOT feedback for larger Alpha version launching February 2020.
- Success will be measured in four ways considering month over month growth a success.
 - Number of members who complete a full story set group.
 - % of members who complete a full story set group.
 - Number of members who upload personal version of story.
 - % of members who create and lead a digital and/or local group.
- Long-term maintenance of Spoken.Bible will require ten-twenty hours a week for facilitating small group sessions, adding new story content, marketing, and

website maintenance. As the membership grows, the site will require additional time; however, much of the time is handled by leaders facilitating groups and reviewing new story content.

Audience

- Spoken.Bible is initially designed to have two distinct market segments.
 - Church Online pastors seeking to pair a small group and discipleship structure to their weekly livestream but don't have the staff support to manage the additional infrastructure.
 - Individuals who want to know their bible better and feel equipped to talk about their faith with others.
- Ideally a member will have three outcomes after encountering Spoken.Bible.
 - Regularly participate in a story group to learn the week's story.
 - Share the week's story with 5 people to facilitate long term recall and synthesize application of story.
 - Lead a story group, preferably in person, to round out the four functions of church.²⁸⁸
- Members will use Spoken.Bible to engage with their bible utilizing oral and multimodal learning methods as one form of discipleship and to prepare them for evangelism in a conversational style.

²⁸⁸ Refers to Acts 2:42 and the four actions found there: devotion to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.

Artifact Scope and Content

- Phase one of Spoken.Bible will be a WordPress website supported by Zoom meeting and breakout rooms. Phase two will add a mobile app that provides content, one-on-one face chat, and asynchronous community.
- Content will be organized into biblical story sets consisting of five to twenty stories. Initially groups will be organized by biblical story set.
- WordPress and BuddyPress provide the technical platform for hosting videos, organizing them into story sets, and providing a group structure to interact and post asynchronous content. Zoom provides the face-to-face interaction platform that allows a large meeting room (up to 100 participants) for initial conversation and conclusion with breakout rooms for one-on-one and four-to-eight-person conversation groups.

Budget

- The first-year budget for technology and marketing support is \$2873.
 - Annual web hosting and domain fee:
 - Siteground hosting \$420/yr.
 - .Bible domain fee \$30/yr.
 - WordPress theme and plug-ins: Kleo theme \$60
 - Zoom.us: \$15/mth or \$180/yr.
 - Autopilot customer journey: \$48/yr.
 - Recording equipment: (iPhone, logi 922 webcam, AT2020 microphone, background screens) \$310

- Marketing: \$5/day or \$1825/yr. (ramp as growth allows)
- Ongoing personnel/administrative support can be done on own; however, allowing for cost of time, ongoing personnel cost would be 5-10 hours a week at \$30/hr. Variable cost of \$7,800-15,600/yr. Ongoing administrative support would be comparable with first year budget.
- The only specialty software required for professional quality videos is video editing software. Currently using InShot on iPhone and Filmora on Desktop.
- There are no outsourcing fees. All development, design, marketing, and video work can be completed on own.

Promotion

- There are two primary routes to market.
 - Partner with existing church online pastors and technology providers to provide small group and discipleship support. No significant investment on marketing necessary due to existing church online network connections.
 - Post regularly and advertise on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok targeting Christians looking to learn more about their bible, find intentional faith communities, and share their faith with others.
- There are two marketing avenues for Spoken.Bible.
 - Leveraging the existing Church Online Facebook group and the monthly Church Online masterminds to extend invitations to existing Church Online pastors. This is the cheapest and easiest as it's based on existing relationships.
 - Two sets of Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram ads. One, to target church pastors to create community throughout the week with their congregation.

Two, to target Christians looking to grow in their faith through online community bible study.

Standards of Publication

- Church Online has a solid solution for livestreaming church services. Providing a secondary website based on open source software and existing virtual meeting rooms allows rapid development and engagement with little development overhead and existing user interface familiarity.
- The primary standard of publication for this type of website, primarily a video and group-based site, requires quick load times, optimized video, easily navigable user interface, and mobile responsiveness (allowing Spoken.Bible to forgo a mobile app for the foreseeable future.)

Action Plan

- There are two components of the Track 02 Artifact to be developed:
 - WordPress website found at Spoken.Bible
 - Story set content, including audio, video, transcript and story set groupings
- The time line for these two components is:
 - Website: Launch December 15th, 2019.
 - Story set content: January 1, 2020 for the first 20 stories, broken down in to three story sets. After that, one story a week in 2020.
 - Open for Alpha groups February 1, 2020. No more than 3 groups of 12.
 - Open for Beta groups March 1, 2020. No more than 10 groups of 12.
 - Public launch April 1, 2020.

SECTION 6:

POSTSCRIPT

At the start of this program, I was searching for a solution on how the church, and specifically my Church Online clients, could better utilize social media, advertising, and other existing communication platforms to evangelize in one of the largest mission fields, digital space, that exists today. As my research progressed each semester, I was confronted with a reality that I didn't want to face. The methods we were using in physical space didn't effectively translate to digital space and, in fact, had the opposite and negative reaction most of the time.

Social platforms are built on algorithms that prioritize what you interact and relate to. A non-Christian is unlikely to organically see a streaming church service or an invitation, let alone act on it if they do. People come to church and to faith because of personal invitation and connections to people. This led me to pivot 180°. I abandoned the idea of social as the solution to “outreach and in drag,”²⁸⁹ the focus of 99% of Church Online at the time.

The second pivotal moment in my research came while attending StoryRunners School of Storying with my husband. As a person who doesn't read and prefers oral learning, his experience in the class was transformational and for the first time he found his faith was alive and he both wanted to learn more and share more. Spoken.Bible's modes for learning are a direct result of this transformation.

²⁸⁹ Hirsch, Stetzer, Vanderstelt, *The Forgotten*, sec. 1.2 A View From Above, A Missionary's Take, Kindle.

I realized that Church Online had an opportunity for re-envisioning (following Leonard Sweet's push to resign faith for our context) the life of the church due to its changing medium, many-to-many connections, and limitless borders. This led to the creation of a monthly Church Online mastermind group and a pivot towards creating an environment for discipleship over evangelism and allowing evangelism to be an overflow of healthy discipleship. Re-envisioning the role of Church Online is not an easy task for pastors that are accountable to a board focused on butts in physical seats and giving; however, these pastors are some of the most creative and entrepreneurial.

In an ideal world, Spoken.Bible would look more StoryRunners' church plant movement: small home groups with little oversight, well defined methods and story sets, and an emphasis on personal ability to share with connections. However, the U.S. church pastorate is mostly resistant to letting go of the reins. The middle ground I found Church Online pastors were both excited about and felt their leadership could support was a combination of their existing Church Online expressions (mostly Sunday services streamed live or simulated live and people encouraged to attend in person) and a collaborative effort for discipleship that no one church or denomination owned.

Moving forward, there are still several shortcomings to Spoken.Bible that need to be addressed. In phase 2, better asynchronous communication to allow easier interaction among participants. In addition, a better UI/UX experience or mobile app needs to be introduced to address that a majority watches video and interacts with their connections from mobile devices.²⁹⁰ Lastly, over time, a mechanism to report on and allow for a shift

²⁹⁰ "The State of Online Video," Limelight Networks, accessed December 29, 2019, <https://www.limelight.com/resources/white-paper/state-of-online-video-2019>.

in vision and metrics for Church Online partners to better account for distributed, external engagement needs to be built.

APPENDIX A:

SPOKEN.BIBLE STRUCTURE AND WEBPAGES

The Structure of Spoken.Bible, for Phase I includes:

- Home Page
 - StoryBrand marketing message
 - Guide to Learning a Story
 - How It Works
 - Join options: Free, individual monthly, Churches monthly waitlist
- Guide to Learning a Story: Individual, Groups, Learning Methods
- Open Story Groups
 - Shows all upcoming groups tied to stories
 - 3 groups per story, 1 story a week
- Story Sets
 - Story Set (Example: Advent)
 - Story (Example: Hope)
 - Story summary
 - Video
 - Transcript
 - Downloadable MP3 or Podcast link
 - Coming Soon: Group resources

SPOKEN BIBLE

[JOIN NOW](#)

Bite-size Bible stories to help your faith come alive and share with others.

Learn the stories of the Bible.
Watch your faith come alive.
Share Jesus' life-changing message with others.

[JOIN NOW](#)

[LEARN THE STORIES OF THE BIBLE](#) [GET FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS](#) [SHARE YOUR FAITH CONFIDENTLY](#)

Struggling to connect what's in the Bible to how you live in the world?

- ▶ Distractions keep you from reading your Bible regularly?
- ▶ Looking for answers to today's tough questions?
- ▶ Wish your faith felt more alive?
- ▶ Not sure how to live out your faith in daily life?
- ▶ Uncomfortable talking about your faith with others?

[JOIN NOW](#)

You can easily learn and share the stories of the Bible today!

Know the Bible

Learn over 75% of the Bible through short — two-minute — stories that are biblically accurate, orally reproducible, naturally told, and culturally appropriate.

Grow your faith

Experience a change in your daily life as the Bible comes to life through story. Find out how the Bible relates to your life and the world around you in a learning style over 80% of people today prefer.

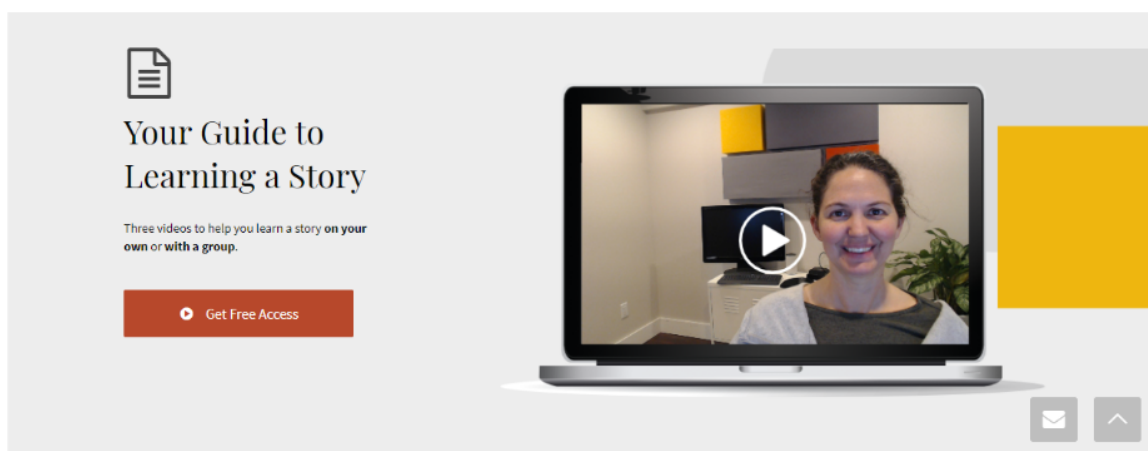
Show your faith

Recall the stories and share your faith with others in a way that feels natural and provides hope for tough situations and questions without feeling pushy or judgmental.

[JOIN NOW](#)

[View the stories from past weeks.](#)

Figure 4 — Home Page



How It Works



Attend a Story Group

Attend a weekly online story group and learn the story through guided conversation and discovery questions.



Share the Story

Share the story with 5 people and record your version to share with your online group for feedback.



Lead a Group

Start a group of 3-5 friends where you teach the story and become part of the growing Bible Story movement.

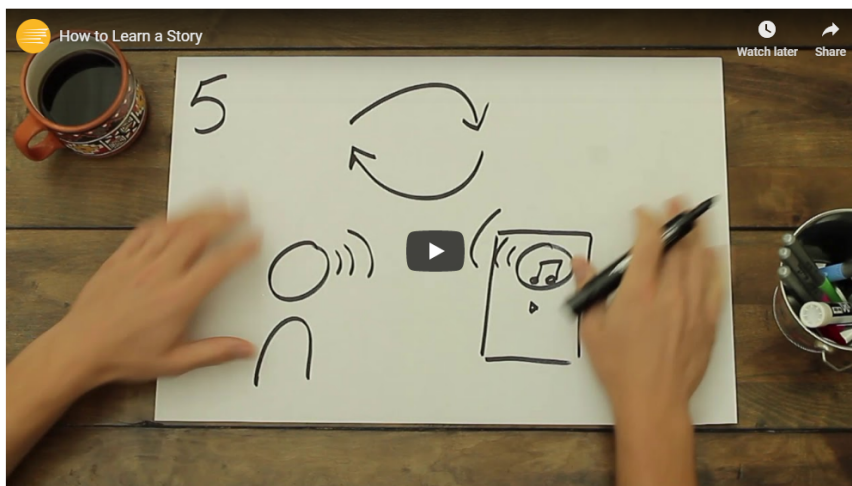
Figure 5 — Home Page, cont.


[JOIN NOW](#)

Your Guide to Learning a New Story

Whether you are learning a story on your own or in a group, there are seven steps to help you learn, remember, and retell the story. After you are finished watching the videos, pick a learning method get started with [your favorite story](#).

7 Steps to Learning a Story on Your Own



Learning Methods to Help You Retell the Story

There are multiple ways to help you learn the story. Some learning methods may work better for you than others. Some work really well when learning on your own. Others work better when you are in a group. Try each method to figure out which one helps you the most.

Speaking / Hearing methods

- **Chunks** — Retell the story chunk by chunk. Often this method is used to build the story progressively by listening to a portion of the story. Tell that portion (chunk). Listen to the next section. Retell the first chunk and add the next chunk. Continue the process until you've built the entire story. You can also omit listening to the story again, and simply build the story, chunk by chunk.
- **Popcorn** — In a group, a person tells a small bit of the story. Another person tells the next part & the process continues until the story is completely retold. The storyteller doesn't call on anyone, but just lets people volunteer. If the person skips part of the story, the storyteller makes sure that someone else tells the skipped part of the story the person continues.

Physical (Whole Body / Inanimate Objects) methods

- **Drama** — Act it out, being sure to represent all the characters and places.
- **Duck, Duck, Goose** — All the players, except the first person who is the first storyteller, sit in a circle. The storyteller walks around the circle, tapping each player on the head or shoulder, saying "duck" each time until he decides to tap someone and say "goose." The "goose" tells part of the story, and then becomes the new storyteller who will select the next person by walking around the circle. Repeat the process until the entire story is retold.
- **Hand Motions** — This is not the same as sign language in which every word or phrase is represented. Instead each hand motion represents a thought or an idea that will prompt you to remember a portion of the story.
- **Living Statues** — Strike a pose to represent an idea from the story. A sequence of poses will help you remember the entire story.
- **Things in my pocket/Things in the room/Props/Objects** — Use everyday items to represent the people and places in the story. As you retell the story, move the objects to represent the actions of the people in the locations of the story.

Visual methods

- **Storyboarding** — Divide a piece of paper into a grid, like a tic-tac-toe board. In each square, draw a picture of a scene of the story. Continue drawing pictures until you've represented the entire story pictorially. No words allowed! You want to focus on the action of the story, not the particular words. Tell your story from the storyboard and then without the storyboard.

SHARE THIS



Figure 6 — Guide to Learning a Story page

Open Story Groups

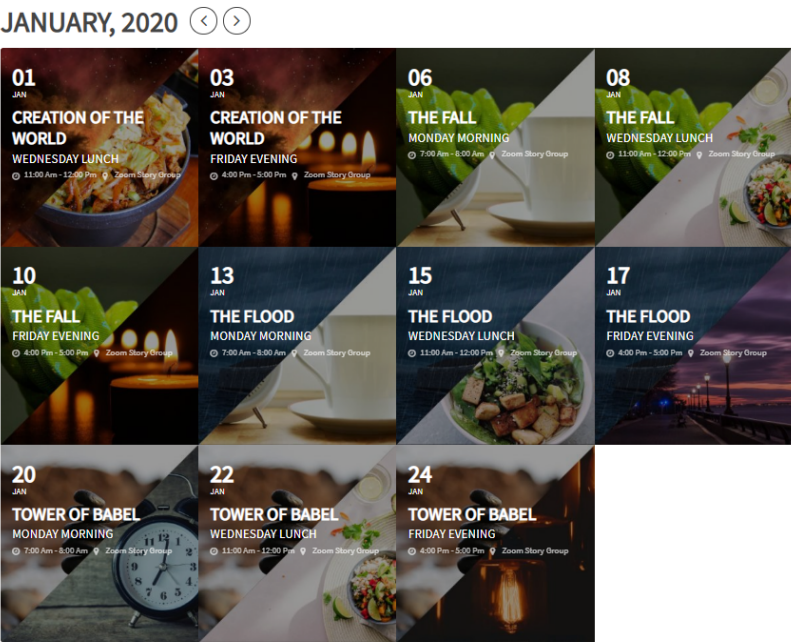


Figure 7 — Open Groups Listing


[JOIN NOW](#)

Story Sets

Every week a new story is added to the collection at Spoken.Bible. These stories are combined to make up a collection of stories around a specific theme, holiday, book of the Bible, or era of the Bible. The story sets available today are found below. Check back frequently, as new story sets are added regularly.



Start Here



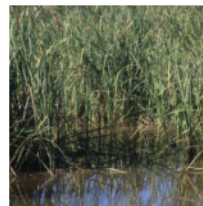
The Beginning



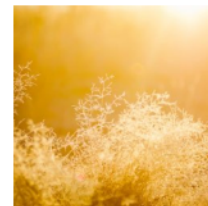
Abraham



Joseph



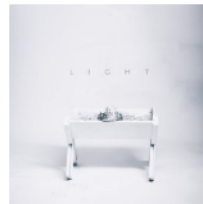
Moses — in Egypt



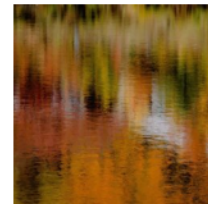
Moses — Out of Egypt



David



Advent (Jesus Birth)



Jesus — Early Ministry



Jesus — Galilean Ministry

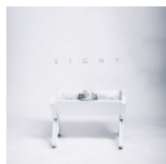


Jesus — Final Week



Jesus — Post-resurrection

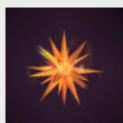
Figure 8 — Story Sets Listing


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Story Set: Advent

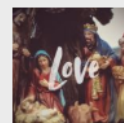
Advent is the period of four Sundays and weeks before Christmas and can fall as early as November 27 and as late as December 3. Advent means "Coming" in Latin. This is a the season in which Christians prepare for the celebration of Jesus coming into the world and use the four Sundays and weeks of Advent to prepare and remember the real meaning of Christmas. There are three meanings of "coming" that Christians describe in Advent. The first, and most thought of, happened about 2000 years ago when Jesus came into the world as a baby to live as a man and die for us. The second can happen now as Jesus wants to come into our lives now. And the third will happen in the future when Jesus comes back to the world as King and Judge, not a baby.

Advent: Hope (Week 1)



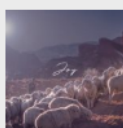
Our first Advent story focuses on the real source of Hope — Jesus, the Promised Savior of the world. Listen to the story from Matthew 21:1-12 to hear how hope moved wise men to follow the Star that will lead to the One who will shepherd Israel.

Advent: Love (Week 2)



Our second Advent story encourages us to remember the *agape* "Love" of God for mankind by sending His only begotten Son, Jesus. Listen to this story from Luke 1:5-25 to hear about the one who would prepare the way for Jesus, John the Baptist.

Advent: Joy (Week 3)



Our third Advent story talks about the announcement of Angel Gabriel to Mary and how it brought so much "joy" to her. In Luke 1:26-35, Mary rejoiced over God's salvation and for remembering God's promises to Abraham and his descendants. In the same way, let us exult that the Lord is indeed merciful and true to His promises.

Advent: Peace (Week 4)



After four weeks of excited anticipation, the One we all had been longing for is finally here! Our fourth Advent story celebrates the birth of Jesus and exhorts us to be thankful for the "Peace" that Jesus brought to all men. Listen to Luke 2:1-21 and hear about the great news of Jesus' birth. Rejoice for our Savior is born!



Upcoming Story Groups


If this Story Set has no upcoming events, join an active Story Group.

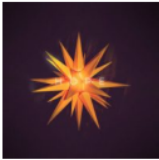
CURRENT MONTH

DECEMBER, 2019 < >

02 DEC ADVENT - HOPE MONDAY MORNING ⌚ 7:30 AM - 8:30 AM PST 📍 Zoom Story Group	04 DEC ADVENT - HOPE WEDNESDAY LUNCH ⌚ 11:30 AM - 12:30 PM PST 📍 Zoom Story Group	06 DEC ADVENT - HOPE FRIDAY EVENING ⌚ 4:30 PM - 5:30 PM PST 📍 Zoom Story Group	09 DEC ADVENT - LOVE MONDAY MORNING ⌚ 7:30 AM - 8:30 AM PST 📍 Zoom Story Group
11 DEC ADVENT - LOVE WEDNESDAY LUNCH	13 DEC ADVENT - LOVE FRIDAY EVENING	16 DEC ADVENT - JOY MONDAY MORNING	18 DEC ADVENT - JOY WEDNESDAY LUNCH

Figure 9 — Advent Story Set


[JOIN NOW](#)




Advent: Hope


// Week 1 of the Advent Story Set

Story Summary

Our first Advent story focuses on the real source of Hope — Jesus, the Promised Savior of the world. Listen to the story from Matthew 2:1-12 to hear how hope moved wise men to follow the Star that will lead to the One who will shepherd Israel.



Story is provided by StoryRunners, a Cru ministry.



Upcoming Story Groups

See all the Story Group events scheduled for this story's Story Set. If this story has no upcoming events, join an active Story Group.

CURRENT MONTH

DECEMBER, 2019

02
DEC

ADVENT - HOPE
MONDAY MORNING

7:00 AM - 8:00 AM PST
Zoom Story Group

04
DEC

ADVENT - HOPE
WEDNESDAY LUNCH

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM PST
Zoom Story Group

06
DEC

ADVENT - HOPE
FRIDAY EVENING

4:00 PM - 5:00 PM PST
Zoom Story Group

Figure 10 — Week 1 of Advent

Story Resources

Resources focused on Individual Learning

Listen / download audio



Subscribe using your favorite podcast app to automatically get the new story every week.

- [Apple Podcasts](#)
- [Spotify](#)
- [Anchor](#) (send an audio version back and get feedback / share with other members!)

Transcript of the Story

Many years had passed as the people were awaiting their promised savior. During this time, some wise men journeyed from a different country to Jerusalem where they were meeting with the King, King Herod, and they asked of him where they would find this promised savior. They had followed a star to come to worship him.

Upon hearing this news, King Herod and all of his people with him were deeply troubled and King Herod sought the advice of his religious leaders and they informed him that the savior was to be born in Bethlehem, the town of David. For the prophets of old had written that a leader would come out of Bethlehem that would shepherd the people of Israel. Now upon hearing this, King Herod called the wise men back to him and said to them to go find the promised savior in Bethlehem and, that when they did, they were to return to him so that he could also go and worship him.

When the wise men left, they once again saw the star and they followed it to Bethlehem where they found the promised savior. And upon finding him, they bowed down and worshiped him, and they gave their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And afterward, God warned them to not return back to King Herod, but to return home by a different route.

Resources focused on Group Learning

Coming Soon!

Downloadable Resource Pack including:

- 🔴 This week's video to make it easy for any group member to teach the story.
- 🔴 Audio MP3 to help the leader (and group members) learn the story on the go.
- 🔴 Weekly printable guide with discovery questions and 2-3 guided learning methods matched to the story.
- 🔴 Social media and announcement graphics.

JOIN WAITLIST

SHARE THIS



Figure 11 — Week 1 of Advent, cont.

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