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Building the Bridge and Crossing It: Using Digital Media to Connect Churches With Their Local Community

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:

BUILDING THE BRIDGE AND CROSSING IT: USING DIGITAL MINISTRY TO CONNECT
CHURCHES WITH THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITY



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY
PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY:

ANDREW BLAIR FARLEY

PROJECT FACULTY:

GREGG BORROR

PORTLAND, OREGON

APRIL 2023



CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This certifies that the doctoral Project Portfolio of

Andrew Blair Farley

has been approved by
the Evaluation Committee on March 9, 2023
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church, and Culture.

Evaluation Committee:

Primary Project Faculty: Gregg Borrer, DMin

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Lead Mentor: Leonard I. Sweet, PhD

Evaluation Committee Referee: Clifford Berger, DMin

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Dedication

This project is dedicated first and foremost to Christie Farley my wife and Sally Farley my daughter. Both have been an endless well of support and encouragement to keep going, even when the hours were long. Without their love and support I would not be where I am today. This project is also dedicated to my dad, Jim Farley, who instilled a deep love of technology in me, and who bought me my first computer. Finally, this project is dedicated to my mom, Sharon Farley, who showed me by her example, that education is something to work hard for and that being a lifelong learner is always a worthy pursuit.

Acknowledgments

Launching into an online doctoral program in the middle of a pandemic was no small feat. I am forever grateful for the support of the entire academic community at George Fox University for all their dedication and effort that made this transition effortless. Heather Rainey and Jen McNab both made sure that all the details were handled, and the questions were always answered. Loren Kerns and Cliff Berger both trained and coached me to success in a new methodology for research that will change how I “discover, design and deliver” forever. Thank you.

To my entire cohort which shall forever be known not just members of the Tribe of Issachar, and Semioticians, but as “Covidians,” I say thank you. You all pushed me to think and grow in our nearly daily interactions reading and thinking together.

To my Project Team, what can I say but thank you. Terry Crist, Jeremy DeWeerd, Scott Jones, and Donna Pisani, you adopted me into your circle and provided both perspective and challenge as we all worked together to figure out which tab that document was on. Our time spent together shaped the trajectory of my project and I am grateful for all your input. Your friendship is one of the best parts of the last three years.

To my Project Faculty Mentor, Gregg Borrer, you have truly been a source of wisdom and inspiration. Your pastoral heart has guided us through a lot of moments of questioning and confusion. You have been a calm and steady hand and have led our little team so well. Your academic rigor has pushed us to dig deep and to keep pushing our thinking outside of what is easy, into what will really make a difference in the world. Thank you.

Finally, to Leonard Sweet, our beloved lead mentor. When I first read *Soul Tsunami* almost 20 years, I never dreamed that one day I would have the opportunity to join you on the adventure of a lifetime. Your wisdom and generosity have helped shape my thinking and your curiosity is infectious. Thank you for helping me see the story, and to know that it is best to trust the story. I am proud to be part of your tribe.

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List of Abbreviations

NPO - The basic frame of the 'Collaborative Design for Ministry and Nonprofit Contexts' process begins with the identification and refining of a Need, Problem, or Opportunity (NPO)

Research Method

This Doctoral Project utilized a blended research and design methodology called 'Collaborative Design for Ministry and Nonprofit Contexts'. In Collaborative Design, practitioners work with stakeholder representatives to address a Need, Problem, or Opportunity (NPO) in their context. Using a combination of bibliographic resources, local knowledge derived from stakeholder Workshops, and an iterative process of continuous adjustment using 'just enough' feedback information at each juncture of development, practitioners produce an application-oriented Project that seeks to effect Christ-centered change.

Abstract

This project is designed to address the NPO statement "Churches need strategies to both engage in and measure the effectiveness of digital ministry and discipleship expressions that reflect the unique character and context of their physical gatherings." During the discovery phase of this project, it was found that many churches want to use digital ministry methods that enhance their in-person ministry and not as a replacement for it. I have found this to be true both in my research and as a pastor and pioneer in the field of church communications. The project outlined includes a website to act as a hub for insights and research into digital ministry, a methodology for launching digital cohorts for deeper learning, and highly customizable church engagements for one-on-one assessment and coaching. Through engagement with the three components of this project, churches will be able to create unique ways to reach their community directly and engage with people leveraging digital technology.

Introduction

The project presented in the following pages is the result of three years of a dedicated learning process guided by a desire to produce a finished product that will meet a real need. Digital forms of connection and communication have become commonplace, and yet many churches struggle to find ways to meaningfully engage in the digital spaces. As a result of this simple finding, the solution has become clear: churches need strategies to both engage in and measure the effectiveness of digital ministry and discipleship expressions that reflect the unique character and context of their physical gatherings. One of the key learnings throughout the research process is just how unique and particular each church is, and thus the need for collaborative and customizable solutions which can leverage best practices, shared learning spaces, and individualized coaching to maximize the effectiveness of ministry within digital technology.

The Journey through Discover-Design-Deliver

THE BACKDROP

The world changed in March of 2020. In a matter of days, the threat of a global pandemic from an unknown strain of the SARS virus caused health officials everywhere to declare a state of emergency and institute strict quarantine protocols. The news was filled with images of people dying in hospitals from an untreatable respiratory illness. The only way to stay safe was to stay home. My family joined with those around the world, and we hunkered down, learning how to work and go to school remotely.

Restrictions of public gatherings meant that churches had to figure out quickly how to stay connected through means other than being physically present with others. This was a profound shift for organizations whose specialty was bringing people into close quarters to be together for worship services. In an instant we were cut off from each other, with only a digital lifeline of connection to keep us together. Churches learned how to livestream, gather online in groups, and leverage the power of video conferencing technology to stay connected. No longer were churches wondering if they SHOULD try to connect digitally, now they were wondering HOW they could connect digitally.

It was this wave of digital transformation that informed the beginning of the discover process. In the most isolated days of the pandemic, people were looking for a bridge that would connect them from their isolation into community. Churches were uniquely positioned to fill that role and did so heroically in many ways. As the restrictions of the pandemic began to recede, churches were now faced with the questions about how they continue to engage in digital expressions of church.

Some churches were quick to want to resume in-person gathering and go “back to normal.” Other churches recognized the power of the digital transformation but were not sure how to justify the ongoing costs or celebrate the wins in digital spaces. Yet other churches saw the internet and live streaming as a brand-new way to build a global audience.

DISCOVER

Launching into this process of discovery, I was engaged as an Experience Pastor with direct oversight of the week-to-week planning and execution of our weekend services. We had made the transition to streaming services and were experiencing very high engagement in the early days of the pandemic. The church where I serve is in the coastal region of Los Angeles, known as the South Bay, and we are specifically located with campuses in Manhattan Beach and Torrance, California. Our metrics demonstrated health and vitality as we measured attendance, growth, engagement and, commitment to our mission. A unique feature of our mission is a distinct focus on what it means for us to minister in a largely de-churched and un-churched area with around 80% of people in our region having little to no particular religious affiliation.

As I convened the initial discovery sessions with our team to discuss what the future of digital ministry might look like in our context it was clear that enthusiasm was high, and knowledge was low. The models that most looked to for “best practices” in digital ministry were large churches or people looking to sell a hardware or software solution. Another finding that became clear during the discovery phase was the lack of clear markers to measure success in digital ministry. There was a clear struggle to understand how to capture and assimilate all the data that was available in a meaningful way. Finally, it became clear that a strong connection between the distinctive mission and methods of the church were critical to long term digital ministry success. Those giving input into the process of discovery clearly understood the vision for their church and the local context in which that vision was carried out. As the vision was translated into the digital space, it became less clear. There was significant concern that a ministry focused on a geographic area, or a local audience would fail in the digital ministry space. In other words, just because a church could have people engaged from another state, or another country, was that really a win for the church?

One-on-one interviews continued to clarify the importance of a local focus to digital ministry. Churches who have a clear sense of mission and purpose and a well understood audience would be able to see digital ministry as a compliment to their core purposes and not as a distraction from it.

The discovery process truly functioned as a means to try out several different ideas about how the issue of digital ministry could be developed in churches with varying contexts and goals. From the outset it seemed as if the goal would be to find a “one size fits all” solution that could be deployed in a wide range of churches, and it became apparent that something different would be needed to help churches engage in digital ministry and retain their unique distinctives.

DESIGN

During the design phase, the rubber began to quickly meet the road in terms of fleshing out how the idea of a solution could be developed into an actual working solution. During the design workshop and one-on-one follow up sessions the stakeholders continued to see the value in designing a solution which would be relevant to a wide range of churches and provide flexibility to implement in ways that would fit the unique character of the church.

Another key factor that became critical in the design phase was the speed with which solutions could be developed, tested, modified, tested, and launched successfully. The rapid pace of development in the digital ministry space demands a highly robust and responsive capability to maintain relevance in a quickly changing environment.

One idea which was discussed in the design phase included a trade book format, which for many would be a wonderful solution, but the time involved in the production of a book could also be a hindrance in the rapid response desired. A book also would not tend to lend itself to customized solutions, but rather to broad principles that each reader would be required to digest and apply their ministry context.

Another concept that was rose to the surface in the design phase was a digital coaching program. There was the possibility to design a solution for coaching that was structured like an online or e-course which had content for people to work through at their own pace. Another possible design for coaching was a one-on-one coaching engagement, or even a small group coaching experience. This added the benefit of being more customizable and applicable, but still required further testing to determine the benefit of this solution.

The third concept that was pitched was that of an assessment tool designed to help churches measure the effectiveness of their digital ministry efforts. This tool would be built and standardized for churches to be able to assess the level of spiritual development and to compare those who were engaged primarily in-person, or primarily online to determine if there were any significant differences in each form of ministry.

Feedback during the design phase was crucial to bringing the MVP into sharp focus. The comments received based on the low-resolution prototypes indicated that while the initial concepts were all part of a workable solution, that the final solution needed to truly offer scale and flexibility to address the needs of a wide range of churches, all with unique needs and varying resources to implement solutions. Out of this design phase the solution that emerged was a digital hub for sharing insights and resources, cohort groups, and assessment and coaching. This three-part solution offered an easy point of entry for those interested in digital ministry with the shared content which could easily allow a church to begin the journey of digital ministry without a significant investment of time or money. The second level of digital cohort groups will provide an opportunity for practitioners to gather in small groups and learn together through a structured process of reading, interacting, and collaboration. Finally for those churches who are looking to gain the most customized solution, there would be an opportunity to develop a highly customized assessment and coaching plan to walk them through a long-term plan to develop their digital ministry with a clear focus on integration of their local mission and how digital ministry can impact their local community and enhance the reach of their church.

DELIVER

The delivery phase brought the ideas from concept to ready to launch ministry. A plan for the three segments of the project was developed and built during this phase of the project. The foundation

for the delivery is a digital hub website that has been built and tested. Content has been loaded and additional partners are being sought to grow the content on the site. The curriculum and schedule for the launch of a beta digital cohorts is ready to move into implementation. The assessment and coaching phase of the solution will be a longer-range plan with hopes that the insights and resources area will help establish though leadership, and the digital cohorts will build additional credibility in the digital ministry space to increase the value of the assessment and coaching as the plan rolls out over the coming two years.

Feedback will be critical throughout the rollout of the project. There are natural points throughout people's engagement with the digital hub to gain insights and feedback into how the project is impacting their church and their digital ministry. Surveys will be used to assess the effectiveness of the content offered on the digital hub for those who are accessing it. Members of the digital cohorts will have the opportunity to evaluate their experience, and to provide feedback on the impact of their learning on their digital ministry. The assessment and coaching engagements will include regular feedback throughout the course of the engagement to make sure that goals for each engagement are being met throughout and that the church is receiving maximum benefit from their investment.

The long-term objective of this project is to create a thriving hub that serves churches across a broad spectrum well and encourages a wide range of digital ministries with a focus on how those digital ministries connect back into the local church and the unique qualities of that ministry.

Evaluation of the Discover-Design-Deliver Experience

Looking back on this process there have been numerous challenges to be overcome along the way. The project began during the worst pandemic in a hundred years which created a tremendous amount of challenge. Churches were particularly hard hit by the pandemic, beginning with the restrictions that prevented regular physical gatherings, through the uneven approach to reopening, and an underlying polarization between the politics of the virus and the health implications of the virus. Many saw the pandemic as ushering in a new age of digital connectivity, and others saw it as the prime example of why digital ministry was the wrong way to go.

Finding solutions to help churches embrace digital ministry is a difficult task across a wide spectrum. Each church has such unique qualities, that there is no one solution that will work across the board. In addition to the unique qualities of each church, there are broad theological differences, political differences, socio-economic difference, and even age differences that make any approach to digital ministry difficult.

The major shortcoming of this project is the ability of the solution to scale easily to reach a large group of churches. To truly implement this solution for more than a few dozen churches at any time would require a multiplication of coaches and resources to expand service offerings. This would require a level of investment not contemplated for this project thus far. This solution will continue to be primarily driven through a small group of people in each cohort and not a mass market approach.

This project has outlined and developed a solution that will work well in the near term, but innovation will be required for long term success. The pace of technology and the development of new tools and technologies will require ongoing assessment and ideation to keep on the cutting edge.

The key takeaway from the research journey was how distinct the local church is and how critical it is to embrace that uniqueness in digital ministry. The temptation many churches face is using digital tools in a way that simply creates a one-way platform and does not embrace the truly connected nature of digital ministry. While this is highlighted in the project, it bears repeating here: building an audience and growing disciples are not the same thing. Streaming church services in high definition and getting lots of viewership can be a good thing but connecting people in meaningful ways that promote growth and discipleship is better. When a church can unlock their unique ability to understand the needs of their community and leverage digital ministry to connect people both digitally and build a bridge to in-person gatherings as well, then the goals of this project will be fully realized.

Looking Ahead to Next Steps

Considering the next steps, it is clear that much work remains to be done to see a successful project launch and realize growth. The bones of the project are solid, and the next steps really involve adding additional meat to the bones. Generation and acquisition of additional content to make the insights + resources pages be truly comprehensive will be a critical success factor in the near term in order to demonstrate a robust and growing library. The first impression of the project will be the quality and usefulness of this content.

Digital cohort groups will provide the most direct support for churches looking to launch and sustain digital ministry, and the experience of each cohort group will help shape future groups to be even more effective. A rigorous and systematized review and feedback process will need to be developed to truly engage in evaluation. There is a danger that cohort groups could suffer from confirmation bias without a thorough examination with each group that is completed.

Finally, the hope is to engage in a long-term relationship with several churches to offer customized coaching and assessment within two years of launching this project. The approach outlined in this project is distinct from many other coaching programs in that the goal is to enhance local community connection and remain focused on using digital ministry to enhance the current church mission and not provide a new audience or an updated vision.

Summary

The journey to arrive at this moment in time has been a thrill. The very nature of our training in this program has proven time and time again, that each step along the journey is just another milestone completed. The journey continues on after evaluation, examination, and assessment of the next right step in light of the best information available.

Having conducted more traditional statistical research in the past, this method of discover, design, deliver along with the game storming framework to provide new way to develop solutions was a learning journey to be sure. I have benefited greatly from the process of learning and implementing this paradigm into my life and ministry. This format of discovery is very human and creates a very safe environment to try and fail and try again. Each step on the journey is just another opportunity to learn, refine and create something else to learn about.

My dream is that churches would capture a vision for creating digital ministry that is focused on local contexts and build bridges into the community. I believe that churches can see digital ministry as an enhancement to their mission and not a threat to in-person ministry. I am hopeful that through this project that churches will be able to discover that the brief bursts of time people gather in-person on a campus can be sustained through digital ministry thought-out the week and that the goal of digital ministry is not just to create an on-ramp to a physical gathering, but rather is a viable way for people to connect and grow in their discipleship.

As I look to the future of my own ministry and impact, I dream of being able to serve as a catalyst to this vision. I have spent my entire adult life working as a pastor with the goal of building up the local church. That call on my life has not changed, and this project has helped me see how I can help churches realize their full potential in this new digital world to accomplish the timeless goal of being a community of people who support and love each other and develop followers of Jesus.

Doctoral Project

Introduction

This paper represents an attempt to document the project “Building the Bridge and Crossing It: Using Digital Ministry to Connect Churches with their Local Community.” The ultimate outcome of this project is a set of tools and strategies to help churches develop and grow digital ministry with particular emphasis on reaching their local community by means of relevant research, collaboration in cohort groups, and/or personalized assessment and coaching.

Development of this project has included building a robust website which is ready to launch. The website includes a section for the insights and resources, information and sign-ups for the cohort experience groups, as well as assessment and coaching offerings. To memorialize this digital project, this paper will include screenshots of the website to show the basic elements of the site. Screenshots of the pitch deck that has been used to explain the project to those who have offered feedback will be included. This paper will also highlight the syllabus for the launch of the beta cohort group which will be used to refine planning for and gather feedback for future cohort offerings. Finally, the outline for future assessment and coaching engagements are detailed to demonstrate the menu of offering which have been researched and developed to assist churches.

Presentation of Project

The project as presented has three distinct facets: insights and resources, cohort experience, and assessment and coaching. All these pieces will be held together and presented through the website, but the website itself is not the project. The three levels of engagement provide the means for a church to grow and develop digital ministry. The website will be presented a unique piece of the plan as it both supports the cohorts experience and the assessment and coaching and is also the primary way for visitors to access the insights and resources. Each of these facets will be presented as a unique part of the overall project. It is important, however, to keep in mind while considering this project that these three distinct pieces work together to form a cohesive strategy to offer people at three different levels of engagement an opportunity to engage with digital ministry in a way that benefit their church. This relationship is much like a funnel, in which the entry level will accommodate the most people as they visit the site to view the content. Some who view the content will further engage in the cohort experience. Yet a smaller number of people will then pursue personalized assessment and coaching.

The interesting thing to note about this project is that there is an inverse relationship between the level of investment required, from both the church and the team.

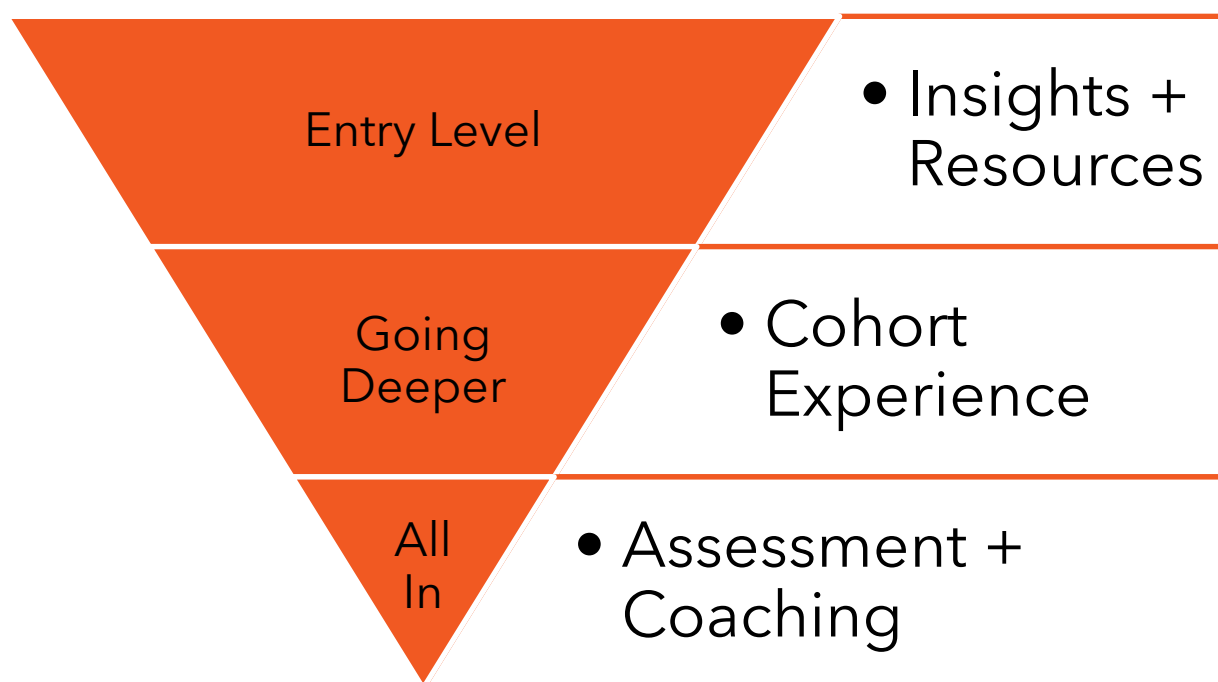


FIGURE 1: LEVEL OF INVESTMENT

Website

The foundation of this project is the website that has been developed and is ready to launch. The development and testing of this website represent a significant amount of time and effort currently invested in the overall project.

Goal

The over-arching goal of the website is to provide a hub where those who are interested in digital ministry can find insights and resources, connect with cohort groups, and engage in customized assessment and coaching.

Design Aesthetic

The project centers around digital tools for ministry. This presents a challenge for the overall design aesthetic for the website and overall brand feel, as using “techy” images can become dated quickly. The use of church imagery also portrays a false visual metaphor that would reinforce the primacy of physical church buildings as the place where “real” ministry happens.

After several conversations with trusted designers, the metaphor image of a bridge came out to visually capture the idea of connecting. In this case the goal is connecting churches with resources, but in a broader sense the goal is connecting churches to their community. The bridge seemed like a fitting representation of connection. As such the site is filled with images of bridges to reinforce this visual concept. The use of these images also allowed for a range of colors and patterns as well

as natural landscapes to be incorporated into the site to present an overall visually pleasing and yet simple and easy to navigate site.

Site Mechanics

The website has been designed and built using the open-source content management system called WordPress and is hosted on a publicly available web server. This content management system, hosting platform and the various plugins enable the functionality required to launch and develop into the central hub that has been envisioned for the project. The content management system has been enhanced with the Elementor platform to allow for visual site development and page coding. To make this website publicly available, a suitable name was selected and registered. The website is accessible at the URL <http://discoverdigital.church>.

Additional considerations for the site included the ability to create a payment option as well as membership content. Currently the Paid Membership Pro plugin for WordPress has been installed to allow for the sale of membership to the site and enable those in the Cohort to have access to content not available to the public. This plugin also allows for connection to several forum options include bbPress, Discord, and several other options for maximum flexibility to beta test several options for how cohort group members will be able to communicate and share learning throughout the experiences.

Home Page

The home page of the site presents a high level overview of discoverdigital.church over one page. For this paper the page will be presented as multiple screenshots describing each section of the overall page.

MENU BAR AND HEADLINE

There is a consistent menu bar on the top of the page which allows site visitors to jump to each page of content available throughout the site. This title bar remains the same across all pages. The main body of content on the page begins with a compelling headline to begin to set the site visitor on the orientation of the site, which is to keep a focus on local connection using digital ministry as opposed to building an online church or global audience.



FIGURE 2: HOMEPAGE MENU BAR AND HEADLINE

FOCUS AREAS

Following the opening image and headline text there are boxes which explain the three main areas of the site and offer the visitor an opportunity to click directly on them and jump to those pages.

Leverage Best-Practices, Shared Learning And Research To Launch And Grow Your Digital Ministry

Focus Areas



Insights + Resources

Here at DiscoverDigital.church we offer you resources from around the web to connect you with the latest insights and best practices. Think of us as a "one stop shop" to learn what is happening in the world of digital ministry.

[Learn More](#)


Cohort Experience

Explore digital ministry alongside fellow practitioners. Each cohort community will be lead by an experienced guide who will facilitate the shared learning process.

[Learn More](#)


Assessment + Coaching

Don't just hope that your digital strategy is working, measure the effectiveness of your strategy using our tools. We can offer both assessment and follow-up coaching for personalized ministry planning.


[Learn More](#)

FIGURE 3: ORIENTATION STATEMENT AND CONTENT LINKS

DISTINCTIVES


Directly below the three boxes there are a few additional statements to help orient the visitor to some of the distinctive features of this site. Since there are so many sites on the internet which are focused on helping churches use the internet to build a more global audience, or to move from physical to digital ministry, it is important to continue to reinforce the unique approach of this overall project to connect people in a local community with the church using digital ministry.

A Distinct Approach



Focus On Your Local Community

Our research has shown that most Pastors want digital ministry to enhance the work that they are doing both in-person and in their local community. We also believe that digital ministry will enhance connection in-person, so our goal is to help you build and grow a ministry that reflects your unique character as a church and the location in which you minister.



Practitioners In The Trenches

We are lead by a Pastor with over 25 years of experience working in both large and small churches. He has directed the digital and communications efforts and seen a significant amount of change in those years. In the realm of digital technology he is a firm believer that it is more important to hold onto strategic preparedness and not strategic planning, because technology often moves faster than our ability to plan. All of our cohorts are designed to bring together the best practices in shared learning from people who are doing the heavy lifting every day!

FIGURE 4: DISTINCTIVES

HIGHLIGHTS FROM INSIGHTS PAGE

The next section includes several articles highlighted from the Insights + Resources page. These are meant to show current content and give another opportunity for the site visitor to begin to engage with the content directly from the home page.

Our Latest Insights



Using Social Media To Reach Your Local Community

Social media can be a powerful tool for churches to connect with their local community, but it is not as easy as just jumping on and making a post. There are some tips and tricks to get the best results.

[Read More](#)



Using Facebook Events To Invite Your Community

There are events and activities happening at your church all the time. Do you ever feel like people drive by every day and have no idea what is happening in the walls of your campus? Sure... we can put things in the bulletin, send it out in email and even ask people to invite their friends. Some will, and many will get busy with life and not remember to do it. Well, social media can provide you the tools you need to get the word out!

[Read More](#)



Book Recommendation: From Social Media To Social Ministry

If you work in ministry and are involved with social media for your church, this book is a MUST READ. Nona Jones has a background

[Read More](#)

FIGURE 5: FEATURED POSTS FROM INSIGHTS + RESOURCES PAGE

FOOTER BAR

There is also a consistent footer bar present on the home page, as well as all other pages on the site. This footer includes links to the pages on the site and an option to sign up for a newsletter offering which will be sent out to those who express interest.

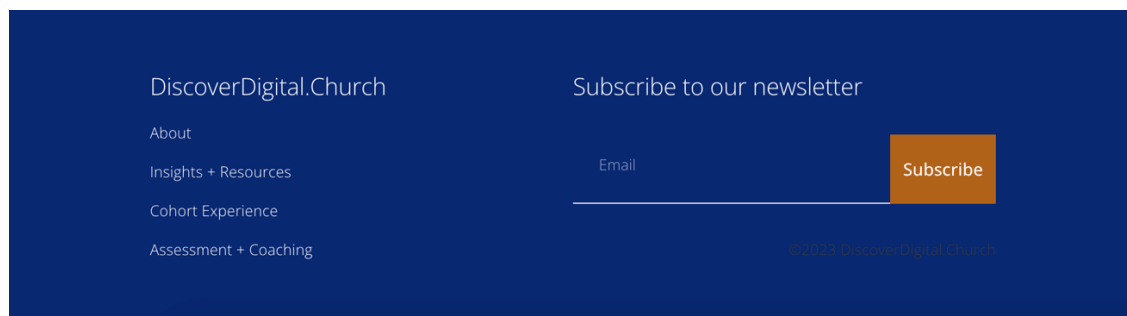


FIGURE 6: FOOTER BAR (CONSISTENT ON ALL PAGES)

About Page

This page is designed to provide an overview of the project as well as to introduce the team involved in cohorts and coaching. As additional people are brought on board to write content, coach or mentor cohorts, or assist in assessment and evaluation, they will be added to the page.

HEADER

The opening of the page is another large image with an orienting statement along with the same consistent menu bar across all pages.



FIGURE 7: ABOUT PAGE MENU BAR AND HEADLINE

INTRODUCTION

This paragraph provides the background to the website and gives some of the “why” behind the content they see on the rest of the site.

It Started With A "Black Swan"

Over the course of the global pandemic that hit the world in 2020, the church had to shift to a new way of connecting. Many churches were able to figure out how to use live-stream video technology to offer online services. Small groups navigated using video conferencing tech to keep meeting despite the need for physical distancing.

As the restrictions around gathering together receded into memory, many churches shifted their focus back to gathering together in person. So much of the learning about how to use digital technology was no longer a focus for churches looking to get back to “normal.”

During this time of massive change, the team at Discover Digital sought to understand how churches church lean into the digital future. What we learned was that most churches want to find ways to use digital technology to reach their community in meaningful ways that build a bridge into their local church.

FIGURE 8: ABOUT PAGE INTRODUCTION

APPROACH

This section describes the approach taken to help churches utilize the tools and strategies of digital ministry to reach their local community.

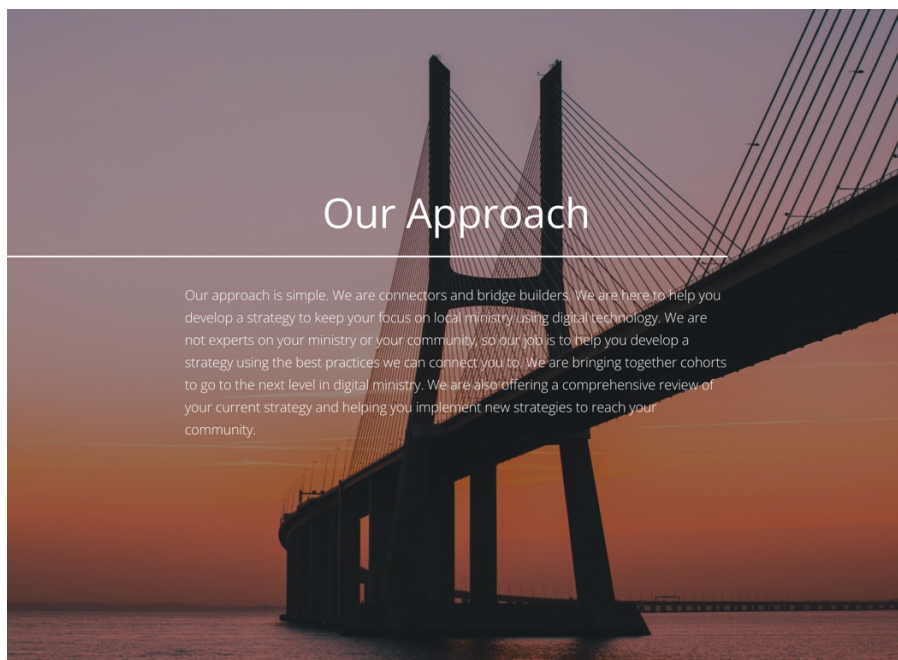


FIGURE 9: APPROACH

VALUES

In this section the viewer is given a brief summary of the values held by the team.

Our Values



Local Focus

Keep your digital ministry focused on your local community and not a global audience.



Community

Technology is always changing and there are no "right" answers, just all of us together working to find solutions.



Evaluation

We believe anything worth doing is worth measuring effectiveness and so we have developed tools to help you capture your results!

FIGURE 10: VALUES

TEAM MEMBERS

This section will include the photo and bios for all the team members who will contribute content or expertise to help churches in their digital ministry.

Our Bridge Builders



BLAIR FARLEY
CHIEF BRIDGE BUILDER

Blair has over 25 years of ministry experience working at two of the largest churches in America. He has vast experience in digital technology, church communications and leading people to effective collaboration. Blair is currently completing his doctoral degree in Semiotics, Church and Culture at Portland Seminary, and if you give him a few minutes of your time, he will tell you all about what semiotics are.

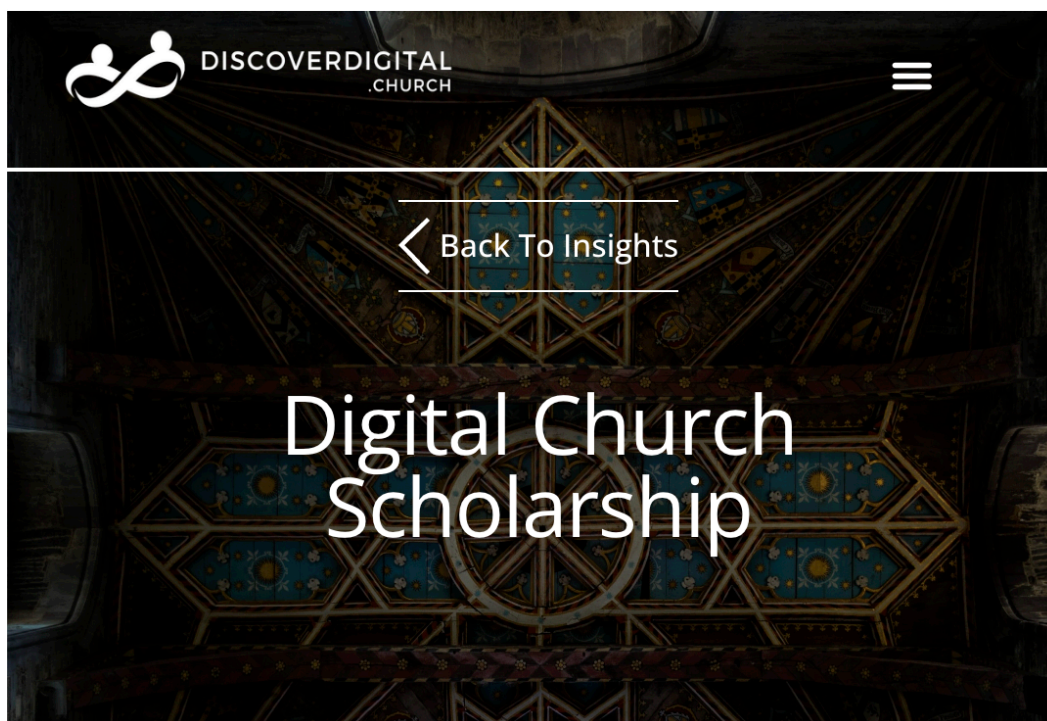
FIGURE 11: TEAM MEMBERS

Insights and Resources

This section of the website is what might traditionally be called a Blog. That terminology has not been used on this site to differentiate from content that comes from a more personal point of view. The content on this page is intended to include articles, book reviews, tips, and interviews. Included for the initial feedback and beta launch of the site are four posts.

SCHOLARLY CONTENT

Intended to be a place to share content of a scholarly nature. These articles would reference research, trends, and thinking that goes beyond basic content found on many websites.



While technology moves fast and the landscape of how we can connect online is changing rapidly, the longer view is that there has been a major shift towards digital technology for over 50 years. While the modern internet as we know it today was still in its infancy in the early 1990's, there were movements towards technological connections much earlier.

The church has looked to this new technology to try and find a way to utilize this new way of connecting people since the early days of computing. While this site is primarily focused on the emerging ways that churches can leverage digital ministry, it is helpful sometimes to pause and reflect on where we have been and use that to inform the direction we might be headed in the future.

[Heidi Campbell](#) is Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University where she teaches in Telecommunications and Media Studies. She is one of the most prolific researchers in the area of digital religion. Her work has been an invaluable source of inspiration for countless academics who seek to know more about how digital technology and the church intersect.

Much of her work is published in journals which require academic credentials to access, but there is at least one paper she has written that is publicly available for review. The article linked below is from 2016, so as you read the content remember that you are reading work done before the global pandemic and shift that many churches made to digital worship for the duration of the quarantine times.

Read "**Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies**" at the link below.

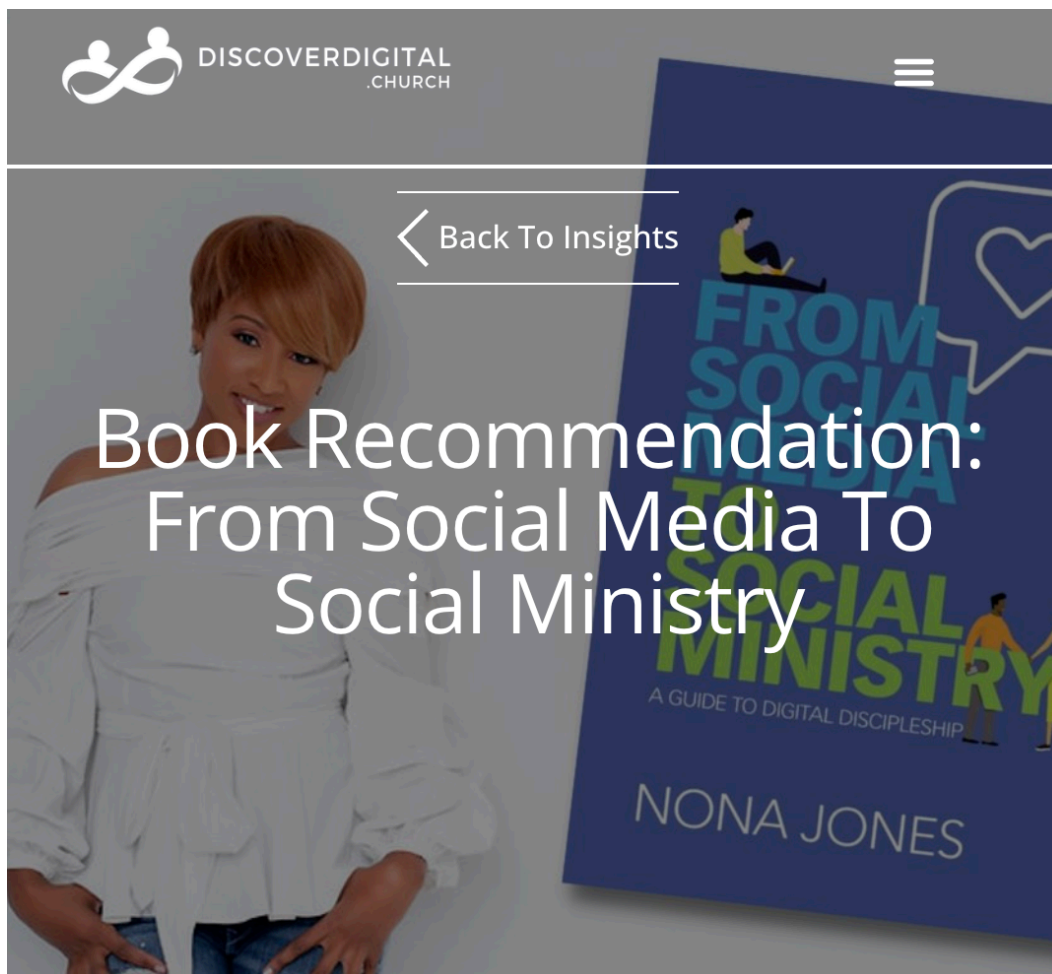
[Link to Article](#)

Heidi A. Campbell & Alessandra Vitullo (2016) Assessing changes in the study of religious communities in digital religion studies, Church, Communication and Culture, 1:1, 73-89, DOI: [10.1080/23753234.2016.1181301](https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2016.1181301)

FIGURE 12: SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

BOOK REVIEW

This article is a basic book review and recommendation. This book is one of the featured books that will be read as part of the beta cohort curriculum.



If you work in ministry and are involved with social media for your church, this book is a **MUST READ**. Nona Jones has a background in ministry and the support of Facebook to outline the how and why of Social Ministry. Here is one particularly impactful quote:

While a social media plan primarily focuses on sharing content to get likes, comments, and shares, a social ministry strategy focuses on building relationships and facilitating connections between and among people so that discipleship can happen. Relationships are the foundation for discipleship. And we don't build relationships on the weekends during the ninety-minute services we watch together, even if we are together in a building. More than a place to just connect with friends and family, social media is a digital mission field of opportunity for those who are willing to go. *Jones, Nona. From Social Media to Social Ministry (p. 25). Zondervan.*

At our core, God created us for relationships, and those can take on many different forms. Social media and the social networks it has created is simply a new way to do something that God created us to do... CONNECT. Our church buildings have served as a primary point of connection for a lot of our history, but not all of it. In fact, the church started out in homes and public places. The identity of the early followers of Jesus was their love for and connection with each other.

Take the time to read this book from cover to cover and dream of new ways that we can use the tools of social media to help people get connected and stay connected throughout the week.

To order this book [CLICK HERE](#)

FIGURE 13: BOOK REVIEW

BEST PRACTICES ARTICLES

This article represents both practical advice and review of best practices. Articles of this nature will be immediately helpful to many churches, without any further coaching. Articles of this nature will also be helpful in attracting visitors to the site by posting them online in groups where people are already going to look for advice and tips. This will generate additional traffic for the site and lead to greater exposure.



There are events and activities happening at your church all the time. Do you ever feel like people drive by every day and have no idea what is happening in the walls of your campus? Sure... we can put things in the bulletin, send it out in email and

even ask people to invite their friends. Some will, and many will get busy with life and not remember to do it. Well, social media can provide you the tools you need to get the word out!

Here are some tips for using Facebook to promote an event at your church.

Create a Facebook event

Create a Facebook event for your church event and invite members of your congregation to attend. This will allow members to RSVP and invite friends, which can help increase attendance. Make sure that you regularly post to and follow the church social media accounts.

Use a catchy title and good description

Use a title that is clear and attention-grabbing and make sure to include all the relevant details in the event description. This one is critical because churches are known for using jargon that may not be familiar to people. For instance, many churches might have a brand name for a worship night like, Flood. Now that makes sense to people who are part of your church, it might be totally frightening to someone who is invited on Facebook to attend a Flood! Lead with Night of Worship or some other clear name and then use your description to add any additional branding.

Use images and videos

They say a picture is worth 1,000 words and a video is made up of thousands of pictures, so make sure that you use high-quality images and videos to promote your event. This can help make your event more engaging and increase interest. Whenever it is possible, try to have photographers and videographers at your events to capture those moments for future use. Images of your church and your spaces is always preferred over generic stock photography.

Share the event on your church's Facebook page

Share the event on your church's Facebook page and make sure to tag any relevant people or organizations that may be interested in attending. The goal of social media is to create some buzz around what you think will impact people, so don't be afraid to tag other accounts.

Use Facebook Groups

Share the event in any relevant Facebook groups, such as your church's group or local community groups. Many communities have Facebook groups for neighborhoods, moms' groups, clubs, etc. Join those groups as appropriate and then use them as additional places to share your events directly with the community.

Utilize Facebook Live

Live stream the event on Facebook Live if people can join the event while it is in progress. For instance, if you host an afternoon and evening carnival for families, go live on Facebook a few times throughout the event and show what is happening and offer people the chance to come down and join you. This kind of "real time" engagement can be a powerful way to get an immediate response.

Utilize Facebook ads

Organic reach (meaning when people see your content without having to pay for views) is the ideal, but many times we can use boosted posts and ads to enhance our reach into the community. Utilize Facebook ads to reach a larger audience by targeting specific demographics, interests and locations.

Use Facebook analytics

There are tons of metrics that Facebook will provide you to understand who is engaging with your content, and who is your audience. You can use Facebook analytics to track the engagement and reach of your event promotion. Use this data to optimize your promotion strategy and make adjustments as needed.

FIGURE 14: BEST PRACTICES ARTICLE

COACHING ARTICLE

The final article on the website is a coaching article. The goal is to help shape thinking about using digital ministry to have local impact.



Social media can be a powerful tool for churches to connect with their local community, but it is not as easy as just jumping on and making a post. There are some tips and tricks to get the best results.

Here are some tips for developing a social media strategy for your church:

Define your goals

Each channel of communication that you use should have a clear purpose. Many churches use social media as a way to communicate with their congregation and don't see social media as a way to reach out to people in the community. A starting point for this might be to create a Facebook Group for your church members and attenders to join and then use this as your way to communicate to them directly. That frees up your main social media feed to be used to reach out to people who may not already be connected with your church.⁵

Identify your target audience

Once you decide to use the power of social media to reach your community, now you get to learn the ropes on creating an "Audience Profile" to begin to narrow down the possible people who will begin to see your content in their feed. In most urban areas, there are tens of thousands if not more who might be eligible to see your post, but you can begin to filter down by things like geography, gender, interests, and more to shrink your possible audience. You might think that is counter-intuitive but trust me... this is a strategy that works!

Choose the right platforms

Different social media platforms have different audiences and features. For example, Facebook is great for connecting with Boomers and GenX, Instagram is better suited for reaching Millennials, and SnapChat and TikTok are best for GenZ. Don't be overwhelmed by these options! Embrace the differences of these platforms and just do what you can on the platform which will have the best reach for your audience.

Create engaging content

Create and share content that is interesting and engaging to your audience AND that fits the ethos of the social media platform you are posting the content on. Not all content works on all platforms, so don't make the mistake of posting the same thing on all the platforms and hope that it works. Content creation takes time, planning and effort, so make sure you have a pipeline in place to make content a regular part of your workflow.

Encourage engagement

Social media is a two-way platform designed for communication and not just blasting out information. The best social media strategy will always include content that gives people a chance to respond, ask questions, offer a different thought or challenge the content. Don't be afraid of this! Answer questions and respond in a timely way. Don't delete comments unless they are blatant trolling or misinformation. Instead engage in a loving way and create space for interaction both online and perhaps in person.

Utilize paid promotion

Paid promotion is a great way to increase your audience reach. The days of using social media as a "free" way to communicate are largely gone, and so while you can gain traction and have organic reach with your audience, sometimes you need to pay to boost or take out an ad. Here is the good news: it does not take a lot of money

to reach a lot of people on social media. It is still one of the most cost-effective means of advertising out there.

Measure and adjust

Don't just make content and hope that it is working. Find ways to keep track of your progress and adjust your strategy as needed. Use social media analytics tools to track your engagement and reach.

FIGURE 15: COACHING ARTICLE

Cohort Experience

This page contains the basic information about the cohort experience that will be offered. The goal of this page is to introduce the site visitor to the concept that these cohort groups are designed to facilitate learning through collaboration. As the digital world moves fast, there will be fewer and fewer “experts” and more people who simply learn by doing. Through the cohorts these groups will be able to learn together and discover what works best in their unique ministry context.



Our Cohort Experience Will Drive Your Digital Ministry To Then Next Level

Your church is unique and so there is no simple formula that will work to create a digital ministry plan that will work for your specific needs. In our Cohort Experience you will join with other digital ministry practitioners in conversation and learning to develop a plan that will work for your church to reach your local community. Our goal is to help build the bridge between the valuable digital ministry the world needs and the practical ministry you can offer in your specific context. All of our Cohort Experiences will include the components below.



Practical Learning

Your Cohort Coach will guide the cohort through reading and discussion of books and articles that are on the cutting edge of digital ministry. The goal is to spark conversation and find new ideas together as a group.

FIGURE 16: UPPER HALF OF COHORT PAGE

Consistent Connection

Once you join a cohort there will be a schedule of times that we will meet online for discussion and connection. You will also have access to several one-on-one sessions with your coach throughout the duration of the cohort.



Strategic Preparation

Each participant will have the opportunity to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their current digital ministry plan and then create a new plan that will be informed by our learning together. Participants will then share their plan with the cohort for affirmation and attenuation. Working together will make us all better!

Cohort Experience Details

- Each cohort experience will last for 3 months
- During the cohort experience the group will meet 6 times and you will also have 2 individual sessions with the coach for a total of 8 meetings. Group meetings will last 90 minutes and individual sessions will be 45 minutes.
- Cohort groups will have a private platform to connect and share learning and interact with content during the times between meetings.
- Cohort graduates will be placed in a private online community exclusive to those who have completed a cohort.
- Total investment for the cohort experience will be \$750.



FIGURE 17: LOWER HALF OF COHORT PAGE

Assessment and Coaching

The final page of the website is designed to generate interest in customized assessment and coaching. This offering would utilize the same guiding principle of finding ways to help churches develop and grow digital ministry that specifically is focused on the unique character and ministry offerings of the church.

These kinds of engagements will likely be the result of a longer process of discovery to structure the menu of offerings to meet the needs the church. Each assessment and coaching engagement would begin with a discovery session and then a contract and scope would be agreed upon before the work begins. This page is not intended to share all of the offerings possible, but rather to initiate a conversation.

Ready To Maximize Your Digital Ministry?

Take your digital ministry efforts to the next level through an Assessment + Coaching engagement with DiscoverDigital.church. Beyond the insights we can offer, and the Cohort Experience is a truly personalized approach to helping your church assess your current digital ministry efforts, and chart a course towards a more engaged digital community. Our core principle at DiscoverDigital.church is to help you grow your ministry and develop disciple using digital ministry technology. If you want to build a platform online, or create a new digital church, then we may not be the right coaches for you. If you are ready to assess and grow your digital ministry, then we would love to get together with you and write a customized plan.

All of our assessment and coaching offerings include a baseline assessment of your current digital footprint, evaluation of your social media presence, website, and any other digital ministry offering you may have. We will spend time then in our unique process of "Gamestorming" sessions to define your goals and write an effective and executable plan with measurable goals. We will then coach you through execution to final evaluation of results.

FILL OUT YOUR DETAILS BELOW TO GET CONNECTED AND WE WILL GET THE PROCESS STARTED.

Name Phone

Email Church Name

How can we help your church?

[Request A Consultation](#)

DiscoverDigital.Church

About

Insights + Resources

Cohort Experience

Assessment + Coaching

Subscribe to our newsletter

Email

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[Join Our Newsletter](#)

FIGURE 18: ASSESSMENTS AND COACHING PAGE (WITH FOOTER)

Cohort Experience

Introduction

Throughout the course of the development of this project, one consistent element has continued to rise to the surface as one of the most effective ways to help churches develop and grow digital ministry with a focus on their local context. That element has been the gathering of small groups of church practitioners into cohort groups to facilitate their growth and learning.

One of the key reasons why this approach has been so well received among those who have provided input and feedback into the initial design and development phases of the project is because these groups can scale easily to meet the needs of churches large and small.

The ability to customize the content around the members of the cohort provide flexibility to ensure that the goals set at the beginning of the cohort experience can be met by the end. The cohort learning model provides the group members with direct interaction with each other across different styles of worship or church governance to offer a space space to experiment and develop a philosophy for the digital ministry, and not just cobble together a plan based on something overheard at a conference or read online.

Structure

Cohorts will be limited to ten participants per group. Each cohort experience will last approximately 3 months, with a total of eight sessions for throughout. Once the registration has closed and the cohort group is formed, there will be an agreed upon schedule for the eight sessions, with every desire that everyone would participate fully in all the sessions.

The cohort group will meet all together for six of the sessions. The coach will meet individually with each member of the cohort two times. One individual session will occur at the beginning of the time, prior to the first group meeting. This will give the coach an opportunity to get to know the group a bit before launching into the cohort sessions together. The coach will be using this opening session to identify strengths and weaknesses of each group member and beginning to plan how to help each of them reach their goals for the cohort.

During each cohort experience the group will be responsible to read and discuss two books. For the beta group they will read *From Social Media to Social Ministry* by Nona Jones and *Digital Mission* by Bryce Ashlin-Mayo. Both books have been incredibly helpful in the development of this project and will facilitate great interaction and conversation with the cohort group. The goal in these reading assignments is to bring about a “mindset orientation” and to be able to discuss the points that create agreement and those points which may also create tension or even outright disagreement. The cohort will have access to a private forum to post their reactions and to respond to the posts of their cohort group members. It will be expected that each cohort member will participate in these online discussions.

While the term “expert” is a loaded title for anyone in the world of fast-moving digital technology and church ministry, there are certainly people who have valuable experience that members of the cohort can benefit from. As such, each cohort group will have one session to learn and discuss digital ministry with an expert panel member. Throughout the development of this project several of the people who have participated in the design and development phases have expressed interest in participation as mentors to a cohort group. The goal would be to identify the mentor in advance of the registration window for each session so that they can promote their participation to their social media followers, and to generate excitement for joining the cohort.

The major component towards the success of the cohort will be the digital ministry plan that each participant will write throughout the course of the meetings. This project will be introduced in the first session and then highlighted throughout with extra emphasis on writing and refining this plan towards the end of the time together. In Session 5 each member of the cohort will present an Executive Summary of their plan to gain feedback from the group, and the second individual session will also be for feedback from the coach.

Investment

The cohort experience will require a financial commitment from each participant of \$750. Research into similar types of cohort groups place this price point at the lower end of the scale, with many groups of this type costing well into the thousands of dollars. The beta period will provide an opportunity to gain feedback on the value proposition for those in the cohort and to determine if the investment level needs to be increased or decreased.

Benefit Upon Conclusion

All graduates of the cohort experience will be placed into a private community to maintain connection with their cohort and other graduates. During the beta launch phase this will be done through a private Facebook group, but over time this might transition to a different platform based on the feedback from those who complete the cohort experience.

Cohort groups may choose to continue to meet with the coach for monthly meetings for an additional three to nine months. These meetings would provide reinforcement of previous discussions and would be developed around the unique needs of each group.

Beta Cohort Experience Plan



FIGURE 19: BETA COHORT EXPERIENCE PLAN

Assessment and Coaching

Introduction

Assessment and coaching are the bottom end of our funnel with the highest level of investment required. This portion of the project is where the amount of time invested will have a huge outcome for the church who is willing to go “all in” on the digital ministry. The following are how assessment and coaching agreements would be structured, and the tools that would be used to create a comprehensive plan customized for a church.

Discovery

When a church expresses an interest in moving into an assessment and coaching relationship, the first step will be a discovery session. The goal of this session will be to understand the history and culture of the church to provide insight into how digital ministry can be used to connect to their local community. During discovery there will be an opportunity to engage in a high level gap analysis to determine what they perceive to be “missing” and what they would hope to accomplish through the engagement. Finally, Discovery would offer an opportunity to assess the level of commitment the church is willing to invest in terms of time and resources to growing and sustaining their digital ministry, along with a conversation about budget and timeline so that a proposal and scope can be designed for the church.

Assessment

During the assessment phase the team will conduct a thorough analysis pulling from a toolbox of standard tools. These include:

- **Community Analysis:** Through a partnership with The Joshua Survey team, we will offer a customized analysis of the demographics of the local community. The goal of this survey will be to help determine the target audience and set clear goals for how digital ministry can be tailored to reach that audience.
- **Communication and Social Media Analysis:** This will be a comprehensive review of all current usage of social media and other forms of digital communication.
 - **Social Media:** Review will include identify and review the metrics for all church wide accounts as well as any sub-accounts for individual ministries or teams.
 - **Website:** Review will include analysis of web traffic and source of traffic. We will further review the web design and site structure to identify ways to streamline and increase engagement.
 - **Email:** Review will include a look at all methods of sending and following up with emails
 - **Other Communication Sources:** Review will include texting, app, as well as television/radio.
- **Congregational Survey:** Through a partnership with the Gloo platform we will offer the Barna Church Pulse Assessment for church attenders. This can be customized with

additional survey questions in addition to the standard questions which are tested against the baseline results of all churches who have conducted the survey. This will provide rich data to assess the spiritual growth and health of the congregation and can establish a baseline reading to assess the growth and health of those who engage in the church through digital ministry compared with those who participate only in-person.

All of this data will be compiled into a comprehensive report which will be presented to the church. This report will also inform the next steps in the coaching portion of the engagement.

Coaching

The coaching portion of the engagement will begin once the assessment phase has concluded. To launch the coaching time, the team will engage with the church in a “Game storming” session to create a plan for digital ministry, informed by the current state and guided by the desired end state. Each engagement will require a unique approach to the “Game storming” session, so exercises will be chosen and customized to meet the needs of each situation. Generally speaking, these will be open sessions designed to engage the team to find solutions by moving through various phases of iteration, utilizing the Discover, Design, Deliver Framework.

The final coaching plan for the development of digital ministry will include SMART goals to measure success factors.

Additional Considerations

Length of engagement for assessment and coaching will vary based on the needs of each church, but generally the goal would be a six month to one year timeframe to allow time to assess, implement and reassess. The cost of the assessment and coaching would also vary by the needs of each church.

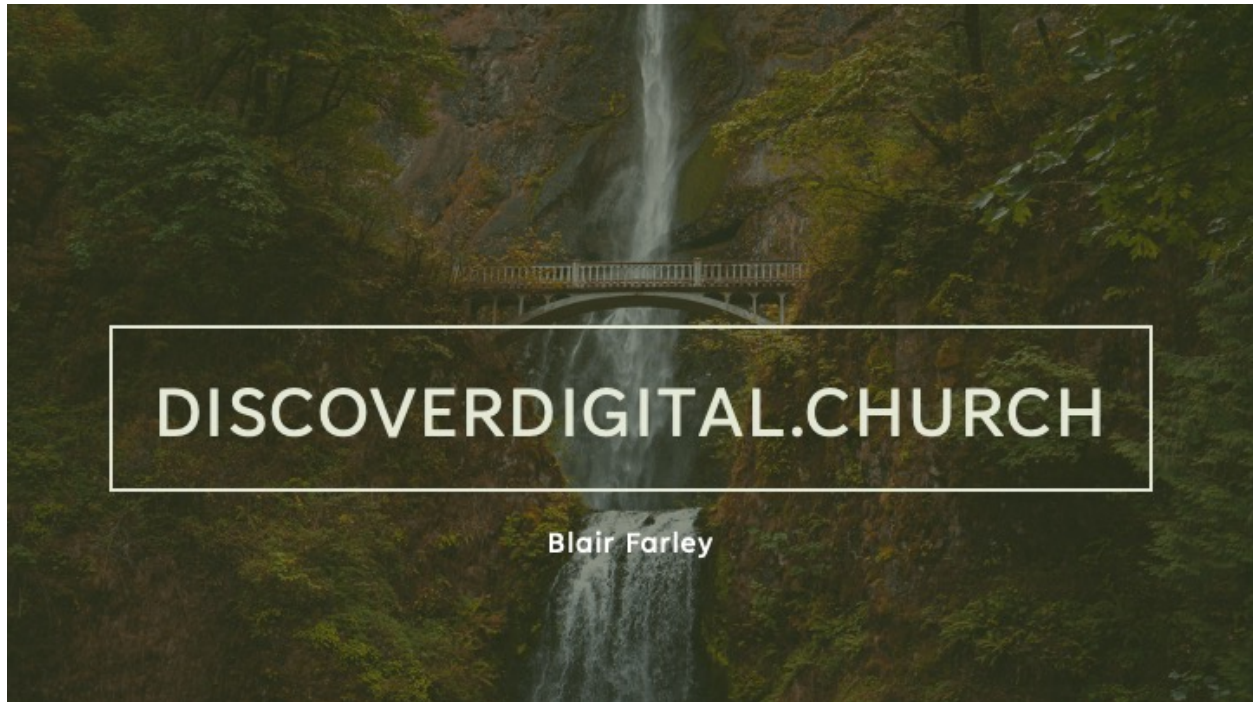
Assessment

It is critical at this phase of development to identify the benchmarks by which this project can move from idea to beta test to final production. In order to assess the current project, there are four benchmarks that should guide.

- Effective: Will the solutions formulated for the project help church develop and grow their digital ministry?
- Compelling: Will people engage with the content, join the cohort and/or pursue assessment and coaching opportunities?
- Excellent: Does the website and content generated to support the project present a visually compelling, professional product, and does it represent good digital strategy?

- Unique: Does the focus on local ministry and discipleship using digital ministry stand as a unique factor in this project?

To gauge these benchmarks, a presentation was created to orient the commenters on the project as well as ask them to respond to the benchmark questions.



ABOUT

DiscoverDigital.church is a new project developed as part of my Doctoral Research through Portland Seminary at George Fox University. The goal is to provide churches strategies to engage and measure the effectiveness of digital ministry and discipleship that reflect the unique character and context of their local context.



PROBLEM

LACK OF LOCAL FOCUS

Many churches are overwhelmed with the global nature of digital ministry. It is easy to get distracted and lose focus on what makes them unique as a church.

EVER CHANGING LANDSCAPE

The tools of digital ministry are ever changing, and so in the time it takes to write a book, the digital world has moved on. This is a fluid world which requires rapid response.

METRICS ARE CONFUSING

Stewardship of limited ministry resources require a careful assessment of outcomes to justify the investment. Digital ministry using the mainstream platforms offer an overwhelming amount of data, but it can be difficult to make sense of that torrent of data and align the data provided with real-world results.

SOLUTION

INSIGHTS AND RESOURCES

DiscoverDigital.church will build a resource library of current insights and best practices in one easy to access location.

COHORT EXPERIENCES

Gather practitioners from across a broad range of churches together in smaller communities to meet digitally and learn together. There will be structured discussions and time to share plans together.

ASSESSMENT AND COACHING

For those churches that are looking to get a more personalized and customized digital ministry plan there is assessment and coaching. Assessment will include a deep dive into baseline digital ministry and then a plan to implement and measure the success of.





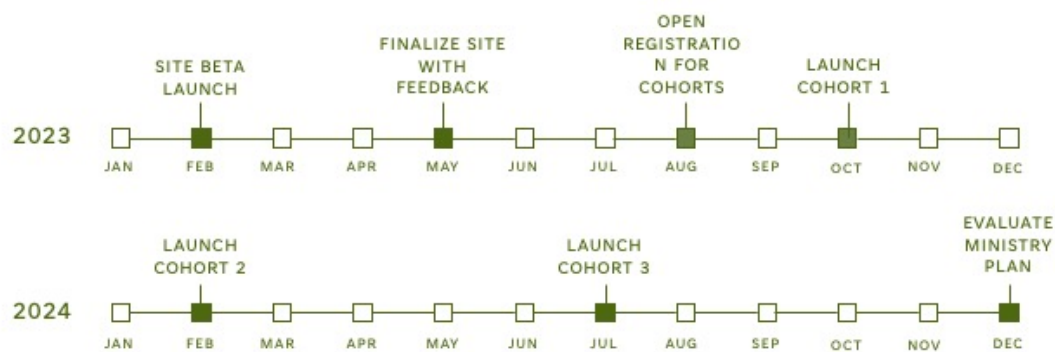
OUTCOMES

Digital Ministry plan designed to build your church

Increased discipleship using proven digital technology

Effective outreach to your community

LAUNCH TIMELINE



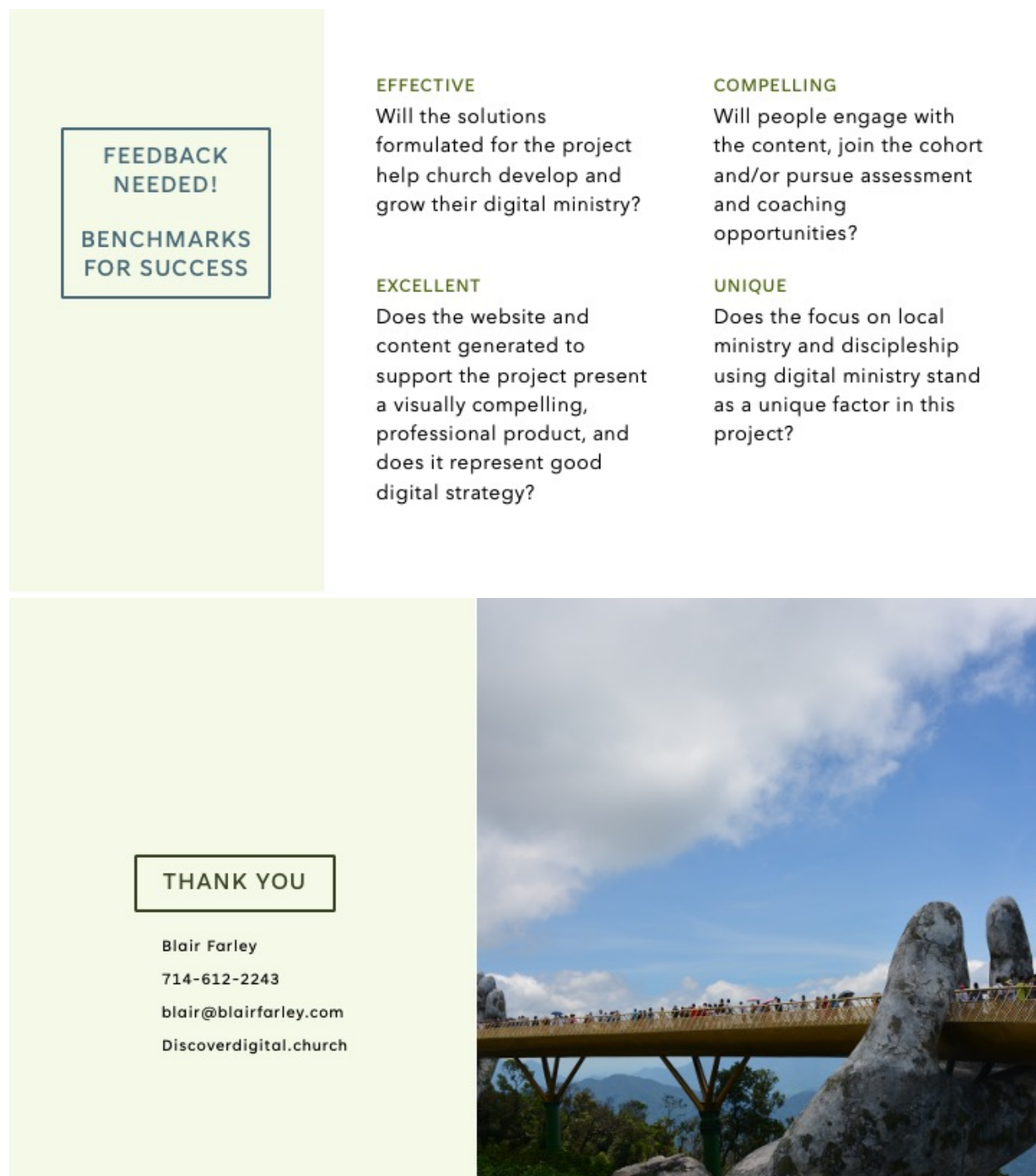


FIGURE 20: PITCH DECK FOR FEEDBACK

The overall comments about the project were supportive and encouraging. Here are some comments received:

- "This project will be a huge benefit for churches post pandemic as resources are not what they used to be. I will read the articles for sure, and I will consider being in a cohort" - Communications Pastor
- "I know we post on social media, but never really thought about it as an opportunity for ministry. I just always thought that we used it as another way to make announcements. I'm looking forward to jumping into this more." - Executive Pastor
- "Love your website. I think that you could explain about assessment more, but I love the look and feel of the site for sure!" - Communications Director
- "Thanks for asking my thoughts. Our church does streaming services, but not much more than that right now. I think your project will help churches like mine to think more about digital ministry" - Lead Pastor

Overall, the project has progressed well against the benchmarks. The website is compelling visually and makes a focused effort to ensure that the distinctive features of the project are highlighted. The three facets of the project are clear and easily accessible. At any level of engagement from insights and resources all the way to assessment and coaching, there are tools for churches to develop and grow their digital ministry and facilitate the growth of disciples in their communities. The ability for churches to engage in self-assessment is somewhat lacking and could be a further development. The current model relies heavily on coaching and direct input.

As a project still under development there is room for much continued growth of the insight and resources page. For that to be a compelling offering it will require much more content. The key task is to identify additional writers who will contribute content so that there are more than 100 hundred articles at launch and a rhythm of publication that updates and adds new content weekly. Prior to generating revenue from cohort groups or consulting, the website will be populated by articles that are sourced from authors willing to contribute at no-charge, in exchange for links and promotion back to their additional content. As the project begins to generate revenue it will be possible to begin offering content creators payment for content generated. To recruit additional content writers, we will post calls for submissions on several well-known social media groups for church digital ministry, as well as building a page on the site with information for prospective contributors.

Future goals for the project outlined in the Project Launch Plan will include a clear timeline for the initial beta launch of cohort groups, and content with feedback being provided on these elements of content and not on the overall aim of the project.

Project Launch Plan

Doctoral Project Description

Churches need strategies to engage and measure the effectiveness of digital ministry and discipleship expressions that reflect the unique character and context of their physical gatherings. To meet this need, “Building the Bridge: Using Digital Ministry to Connect Churches with their Community” has been developed. The project has three distinct facets: insights and resources, cohort experience, and assessment and coaching. The insights and resources facet of the project will consist of blog style articles, best practices, book recommendations, and leading voices. These resources will provide a self-service opportunity for growth in digital ministry. Cohort Experiences will offer a small group of people to learn and grow together with a coach and leading expert to guide the experience. Finally, assessment and coaching will be offered as a highly customized solution to help churches looking for even more ways to invest in their digital ministry.

Audience

The audience for this project will be church staff or volunteers who are engaged in the development of a vision for digital ministry or support the execution of digital ministry. In most cases, this will be a Communications Director, Executive Pastor, or a more specialized role. A feature of the website developed as part of this project is insights and resources, which are blog style posts. These pieces of content will be posted on various social media groups aimed at Church Communications as a tool to generate traffic for the website. Further reach to this audience will be through ministry contacts gathered over my 25 years of pastoral ministry, to announce the launch of this new opportunity for growth and development. Investment of funds would further allow paid marketing on various web and social media platforms to reach the target audience.

Development Plan

The goal for this project is to begin the launch process immediately to maintain the momentum built during the past six months of project development. As such the first target date would be February 2023. During this month the work completed on the project will be submitted to the faculty of Portland Seminary at George Fox University for review. During this same time frame, efforts will continue to build the content library for the website by reaching out to guest bloggers and through the ongoing generation of content.

The next project milestone will be in May of 2023. Following feedback recommendations from the seminary faculty and advisors, the website will be updated and revised as needed to be ready for a public launch. The public launch will consist of reaching out to church communications networks and advising them of the new site. Additional marketing plans can support further details of the website launch.

August of 2023 would mark the opening of registration for the beta digital cohort group. This first group would be made aware that they were the first through the process in order to provide necessary feedback to improve the project for future cohort groups.

The beta digital cohort would begin meeting in October of 2023 and run through December 2023. This is a strategic time to invite people into this learning process after the fall launch for most churches, and will provide a solid foundation for new digital ministry initiative flowing into Christmas 2023.

Feedback on the beta digital cohort would be conducted in January of 2024. This feedback will lead to refining and adjusting the cohort curriculum for the next group to launch.

The next digital cohort group would be slated to run from February 2024 through April of 2024. This is times to coincide with the lead up to Easter for most churches which is a busy time when additional energy into digital ministry can be implemented quickly.

With two digital cohorts complete, the goal now will be to develop the final phase of the project and identify a church to begin an assessment and coaching engagement. This would be best positioned to begin in July of 2024. This time frame will also see the launch of digital cohort number three.

While this project has the potential to run into perpetuity this current launch plan will be concluded in December of 2024 at the completion of the second year of operation. Feedback will be solicited from those who have engaged with discoverdigital.church in any way throughout the launch years. New goals and an updated plan will delineate the end of the first cycle and the launch of the next ministry cycle.

Feb 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit Project for Final Review • Continue Web Content Development
May 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make Final Changes Based on Feedback • Launch Beta Site to Public
Aug 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open Registration for Fall Cohort
Oct 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch Beta Cohort • Cohort ending in December 2023
January 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate Feedback and Make Adjustments
Feb 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch Cohort Group 2 • Cohort Ending in April 2024
Jul 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure and Launch First Assessment and Coaching Contract • Launch Cohort Group 3
Dec 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess Two Year Ministry Plan and Set Goals for 2025 and beyond

FIGURE 21: LAUNCH TIMELINE

Development Process

Further plan development over the next two years will include utilizing feedback gathered from website visitors, cohort members and assessment and coaching client churches. Feedback on the website will be solicited from site visitors who leave their email address via web survey form. Cohort groups will all be offered an assessment for feedback at the end of each session. The following benchmarks will be used to measure success.

- Quality Benchmarks
 - Website Quality: The hub website will be considered Good or better on a 5-point Likert Scale from Very Poor, to Very Good by at least 75% of those who rate the site.
 - Cohort Quality: Post-cohort experience rating from participants would identify the experience as valuable on a measure of indicators using a 5-point Likert Scale.
 - Assessment and Coaching Quality: Monthly feedback will be solicited throughout the engagement with any churches. Success would be defined as a good or better rating on questions which would measure the value and effectiveness of the service.
- Success Benchmarks
 - Website Success: Track website visits and retain people on the site for greater than 5 minutes.
 - Cohort Success: Launch 1 cohort with 6 participants within 3 months launch of the hub.
 - Assessment and Coaching Success: Secure one church for an assessment and coaching engagement by July 2024.

Appendix A— Milestone 1 The NPO Charter

Personal Research Manifesto

I want the church to be effective in the digital era and believe that when churches embrace digital communication more people will be connected and grow through relational discipleship.

NPO Statement

Churches are not equipped with digital strategies to engage in relational connections for digital evangelism and discipleship to build community online, beyond merely streaming services.

NPO Scope and Constraints

By the end of this doctorate program, a comprehensive program will exist to equip churches with strategies and tools that will enable them to launch an effective digital ministry. The scope of the program will include a book, online course, and digital community for online ministry, and it is difficult to determine exact costs. Additional clarity on the scope and constraints as well as costs will be evaluated and incorporated as the process progresses.

NPO Context

My NPO ministry context includes churches who are interested in leveraging their unique characteristics in an online ministry. These churches will likely be located throughout the USA. Churches who will be interested in implementing the program will likely be growing churches looking to expand their influence and offer additional outreach to their community. Churches with leaders in Generation X or younger will be the target audience. Although the goal is to keep the cost of implementation low, the likelihood is that more affluent churches will be most interested in the program.

Root Causes

There are several root causes for my NPO. First, online ministry is a new and evolving paradigm and there is no current standard model for how it should function. As such, there are many approaches, but no broadly accepted conventions for this new kind of ministry. Second, online ministry challenges the historical ecclesiology of the church by suggesting that virtual gathering can replace physical gathering. This opens the door for conversations about how sacraments are administered, and how accountability is offered. For many churches, online ministry is considered a poor substitute for “real” church services, gathered in a physical location. Finally, online ministry requires new definitions of success to go beyond just attendance or giving but can evaluate and measure community building.

Discovery Workshop Stakeholders

The participants in my discovery workshop were Pastors, Directors, and Coordinators from worship, outreach, care, and family ministries as well as several executive leaders.

One-on-One Interviews

The participants in my interviews were an Online Campus Pastor, Lead Pastor, and Digital Ministry Consultant.

3-5 Key Biblical Texts

During my project, I will explore a few biblical concepts from these key texts. Luke 8:4-8 talks about sowing seeds in many soils and this scripture encourages me to see online ministry as new soil for the Gospel. Ephesians 2:10 is a reminder that God planned good things for us long ago: online ministry is not new to God! Colossians 2:5 is a reminder that Paul's relationship with those he ministered to was often from a great distance. Finally, I am guided by the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 where the foundation of reaching into the whole world is our charge.

Academic Resources

Within my NPO study, I will lean on the work of scholars like Dr. Leonard Sweet, Dr. Bryce Ashlin-Mayo, and similar academicians who have studied the cultural shift towards post-modern thinking within the church. I will also look to those practitioners of online ministry and digital thinkers who have developed components of online ministry but still lack a holistic framework for online ministry. I will further research the historical development of new models of church ministry, such as multisite ministry and television ministry, as well as look to understand how the model of church gatherings has shifted during times of persecution.

Appendix B– Milestone 2 NPO Topic Expertise Essay

INTRODUCTION

"We are caught between an old world which is decreasingly able to sustain us intellectually and spiritually, maybe even materially, and a new world that has not yet been born. Given the character of the forces of change, we may be stuck for decades in this ungainly posture. You who are young today may not live to see its resolution."¹ - Martin Gurri

The words of Martin Gurri describe the liminal nature of the transformation happening in our world today. The ages of enlightenment and industry have given birth to the information age. There is a monumental transition towards a digital future where many of our basic human interactions happen through the mediation of a screen, computer, or device. The raw computing power of the common phone or tablet far exceeds what was possible in computers the size of rooms or buildings a generation ago. However, the power of the device is not the primary issue for us to consider, rather it is the utility of the devices to offer connection.

It is now common for people in USAmerica to communicate for work, shop for goods, reserve travel, find a mate, conduct financial business, and more all through the use of websites and other digital means of communication. What was considered advanced just a few years ago is now commonplace.

The global pandemic of 2020-21 that shut the world down accelerated the transition to more digital connections as many workers were forced to work from home, utilizing video conferencing and other digital connectivity, which allowed many knowledge-based businesses to remain "open" even during a time of global shutdown. The church was also affected by this sudden transition to digital.

As this paper will explore in great detail, there had been a shift towards digital connection for churches prior to the pandemic of 2020-21, but the necessity of adopting digital as a primary means of connection represented uncharted territory. While many churches were able to quickly adapt to offer streaming video services, many have struggled with how to go beyond this basic offering of a digital service, and to consider what tools and strategies are needed in order to offer the core functions of evangelism and discipleship in a digital format. The following pages will explore both the essential functions of evangelism and discipleship in a robust church, as well as the rich history of the various methods of churches providing content outside of the context of the four walls of a physical building or set location.

Churches cannot ignore the importance of understanding digital culture. The world is at the beginning of this new era of digital connection and information, and embracing the possibilities of

¹ Martin Gurri, *The Revolt of The Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium*, 2nd edition. (Stripe Press, 2018).

what this technology has to offer will help birth a new form of digital ecclesiology, empowered by tools and strategies that will help the church not just gather in buildings and physical locations for evangelism and discipleship, but rather to embrace ways of advancing the mission of the church in an increasingly digital world.

Section 1: Biblical and Theological Foundations

The Church on Mission

In the simplest of terms, the narrative arc of the Christian faith is a story of God's creation of humanity to be in relationship with Him, and with each other. This narrative then focuses on the mission of Jesus on earth to establish a means for humanity to reconnect with God after the introduction of sin into the world. Jesus accomplishes the work of salvation and commissions those who follow him to further act as ambassadors of his mission to reach all of humanity with the Good News of salvation through the establishment of the church.

The goal of this section is not to examine the full arc of this narrative, but to focus instead on the key scriptures that will build a foundation of the nature of the New Testament Church as well as the goal of the church. This dive into scripture will first examine Jesus' marching orders for the church in Matthew 28 which is described by Professor Leonard Sweet as, "This ambitious strategic plan, the most lofty assignment in history, was spoken to a tiny, pathetic, and impoverished band of followers who had no idea what to do next: Go into all the world and makes disciples of every culture."² The discussion of Acts 2:42-45 will establish a working definition of the church where it will be demonstrated that the primary form of gathering was in homes.³ Hebrews 10:24-25 will give further definition to the relationship of those who gather together and the critical importance of accountability.

Textual Discussions

THE GREAT COMMISSION

Few words in scripture are quoted as readily as Matthew 28:18-20. It is a scripture that is often found on the walls of churches as a slogan or a mission statement. Indeed as noted by Fuller, "These words are the cornerstone to any mission alignment."⁴ Perhaps it is an oversimplification to believe that all of the teachings of Jesus would reduce into one neatly packaged mission statement. Indeed, even the authors of the New Testament differed from one another in their understanding of

² Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, New edition. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 119.

³ Harley T. Atkinson and Joel Comiskey, "Lessons from the Early House Church for Today's Cell Groups," *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 75-87.

⁴ David Fuller, "Mission Statement Alignment: Guiding Ministries toward a Strategic Culture Focused on the Great Commission," *Doctoral Dissertations and Projects* (September 1, 2014): 12, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/935>.

mission.⁵ In fact, Jesus himself used various metaphors and parables to describe the broad mission of the Kingdom of God.⁶ Currently, mission statements are used by organizations to “provide motivation, general direction, an image of the company’s character, and a tone or set of attitude, through which actions are guided.”⁷ While the concept of a modern mission statement was not likely the aim of Jesus when he spoke the words recorded in Matthew, we can use them as a “foundation on which other intended actions are built.”⁸

Jesus begins by calling together his disciples after his resurrection.⁹ This group of 11 people gathered with a posture of worship or “outward expressions of adoration.”¹⁰ Some among them also had a moment of doubt, characterized more by their sense of “hesitation or indecision, rather than unbelief.”¹¹

Jesus begins his conversation with his disciples by rooting his instructions in authority. He says, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth.” (Matt. 28:18 NLT). In the same moment he both alludes to Daniel 7:13-14,¹² as well as reinforcing the “resurrection is the ultimate validation of Jesus’ divine authority.”¹³ Once his authority is clear he gives the disciples their marching orders. Jesus charges them “to go and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19 NLT). This is an active call to “continually reproduce themselves for as long as Christ desires.”¹⁴ The means to accomplish the mission of making disciples is through baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th Anniversary edition. (ORBIS, 2011), 15.

⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁷ R. Duane Ireland and Michael A. Hitt, “Mission Statements: Importance, Challenge, and Recommendations for Development,” *Business Horizons* 35, no. 3 (May 1, 1992): 35.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Matthew 28:16

¹⁰ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Hendrickson, 1994), 1775.

¹¹ John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Lexham Press, 2012).

¹² Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 1993).

¹³ Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible*.

¹⁴ Mookgo S. Kgatle, “Globalisation of Missions: An Exegesis on the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20),” *In die Skriflig* 52, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 2.

and teaching the disciples to now obey the commands he had given to them. Khatle defines discipleship as "Discipleship involves diligent teaching of the gospel and practices that promotes a lifestyle of becoming ever more like Jesus Christ. Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend - it must transcend all comprehension. It is a life of strict adherence to and obedience to Christ and his commandments."¹⁵ One final note on Jesus' charge to his disciples. The call is global in scale. Jesus has shifted from simply focusing on his Jewish audience to defining a mission to πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (all the nations).

THE EARLY CHURCH

After the Resurrection of Jesus, the focus of the New Testament shifts to the spread of the gospel. Jesus says to his followers in Acts 1:8, "And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (NLT). To be sure, the book of Acts is not intended to be a "comprehensive history or assessment of the ministry of all the apostles or the church in Jerusalem, or of all other Christians, or of all other churches."¹⁶ Instead, Acts 2:42-47 presents the first description of the essential features of this community of believers. They devoted themselves to four things: to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to shared meals, and to prayer. The results of their community were evident to all as Acts 2:43-47 "describes their life together as one of spiritual and material sharing among all."¹⁷

While much can be said to break down each component of this scripture, for the purpose of this project it is important to consider the term translated as "fellowship" in most english translations of Acts 2:42. The word in the original greek is "κοινωνία" (and is transliterated in english to "koinonia") which is used 20 times in the Bible, with "fellowship" being the translation 12 times.¹⁸ This word has been so thoroughly misused by the church, that the mere mention of the word conjures up images of potluck dinners and the cheesy sentimentality of a by-gone era of the church. The concept of fellowship, however, is full of rich meaning. While the word "koinonia" is used only once in the book of Acts, there is a "notion of sharing or togetherness which is inherent in it is evident in other ways."¹⁹ Throughout this scripture and consistently throughout the remainder of the New Testament we see

¹⁵ Ibid., 6-7.

¹⁶ Christoph Stenschke, "MISSION IN THE BOOK OF ACTS: MISSION OF THE CHURCH," *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological and Contextual Hermeneutics* 103, no. 0 (2010): 2.

¹⁷ Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible*.

¹⁸ James Strong, *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon, Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* (Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1995).

¹⁹ John T. Squires, "Acts," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Editors Rogerson (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 1221.

that they gather together (2:46), meet daily (2:46), have all things in common (2:44), and gather both in the temple and in homes (2:46). This was a community who truly shared their lives in a significant way. This new community was a “movement of immense vitality.”²⁰ This was not just a movement driven by requirements or law but rather, as Bicknell suggests, “It was the unpremeditated impulse of those who were so filled with the spirit of fellowship that they literally loved one another as truly as themselves.”²¹

The picture that emerges from this early gathering of believers is a unique mix of urgency, compassion, devotion, and community.

MOTIVATE ONE ANOTHER

Hebrews 10:24-25 serves both as a clear encouragement for Christians and is also prototypical of many of the “one another” verses throughout the New Testament. The author of Hebrews says, “Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:24-25 NLT). The phrase translated into English 76 times as “one another” (and used 100 times total) is from the original Greek word “ἀλλήλων” which is transliterated to English as the word “allelon.”²² This term suggests a unique relationship among those who are followers of Christ and “is interactive with each person contributing to the welfare of the other through a variety of connections, behaviors, attitudes, and actions.”²³ These attitudes and actions represent a social synergy in which the participation of all the members of the community create a “net result that everyone benefits holistically from the interaction.”²⁴ The specific instruction is to motivate one another to acts of love and good works.

Critical to understanding the connection between the “allelon” in verse 24 and meeting together in verse 25 is the understanding that there is a direct relationship between assembly together and fellowship that produces accountability. When the believers gather together, they share together their victories and struggles. Pfeiffer and Harrison note that, “When zeal flags and faith weakens,

²⁰ E. J. Bicknell, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *A New Commentary on Holy Scripture: Including the Apocrypha*, ed. Charles Gore, Henry Leighton Goudge, and Alfred Editors Guillaume, vol. 3 (The Macmillan Company, 1942), 336.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Strong, *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon*.

²³ Stephen D. Lowe and Mary E. Lowe, “Allelon: Reciprocal Commands and Christian Development1,” *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 281-298.

²⁴ Ibid.

the desire to fellowship with other believers weakens also.”²⁵ There is a notable trend away from gathering together in local churches as noted by researcher George Barna. His research looked at a group of 20 million “revolutionaries” who were less interested in attending church, and more interested in being the church.²⁶ While there may be many different forms and expressions of the gatherings discussed in verse 25, it is critical that believers do not neglect meeting together.

Synthesis of Themes, Values, and Commitments

The concept of a New Testament church is a difficult one to summarize in just a few scriptures. It requires a complete look at the whole of scripture to truly begin to grasp the fullness of the church, its mission, and essential functions. Estes notes that, “there are at least 96 different metaphors for the church in the Bible. There’s not a definition for church, really, but metaphors abound.”²⁷ The selection of scriptures reviewed, however, attempt to bring definition to the basic characteristics of the mission of the church as it relates to gathering and discipleship.

We can see that even from the days just after the Resurrection that the believers embodied a unique movement designed to expand both numerically and in devotion. The early believers, even before names like Christian or followers of “The Way,” were dedicated to Jesus and to each other. They shared what they had together and cared for each other in a self-sacrificial way. They took seriously the command from Jesus to go and teach in a practical way. They understood the critical importance of mutual submission and accountability. They were motivated by their love for “one another” both individually and as a community.

Over 2,000 years later, the church is still called to these basic practices. The church is called to evangelism and discipleship. Followers of Jesus are still called to devotion and fellowship as well as gathering together to encourage and support one another. Throughout every era of church history there has been a process of redefining how to accomplish the primary mission of the church seen through the filter of these scriptures. Today the challenge is how to refine and continue the mission of the church in an online environment utilizing digital tools for evangelism and discipleship to truly bring church online.

²⁵ *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Moody Press, 1962).

²⁶ “A Faith Revolution Is Redefining ‘Church,’ According to New Study,” *Barna Group*, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/research/a-faith-revolution-is-redefining-church-according-to-new-study/>.

²⁷ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Zondervan, 2009).

Section 2: Topic History and Key Voices

History of Evangelism and Discipleship

A close examination of the history of the church shows several different distinct moments in time as it relates to the methodologies for evangelism and discipleship. This section will address these various periods of history to provide context and point to future trends, without attempting to be a full review of church history.

THE HOUSE CHURCH MODEL

Following the early church's history in the book of Acts and beyond, we see a community of people devoted to Christ and devoted to one another. The book of Acts goes on to paint a picture of a decentralized network of local churches which operated with complete autonomy, in relationship with one another.²⁸ As the Gospel spread throughout the world, these early churches represented very different areas and were diverse in their languages, religious background and culture.²⁹

Throughout the Greco-Roman world existed associations or societies that were local groups meeting together for fellowship and community.³⁰ The early church adopted this pattern of association, often meeting weekly for communal dining, prayer, singing, and teaching.³¹ This form of house-based ministry was the dominant form of gathering for over 300 years until basilicas became the focus of gathering.³² House churches did not have set agendas or rigid practices. Instead, they were places of laughter and relationship-centered around a shared dedication to following Jesus in community.³³

²⁸ Loveday Alexander, "Mapping Early Christianity: Acts and the Shape of Early Church History," *Interpretation* 57, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 163-175.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Valeriy A. Alikin, "THE ORIGIN OF THE WEEKLY GATHERING IN THE EARLY CHURCH," in *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries (Brill, 2010), 17-78, accessed March 27, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w76wv6.6>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Atkinson and Comiskey, "Lessons from the Early House Church for Today's Cell Groups."

³³ Ibid.

Much of the growth of the early church, Kreider notes, “was not organized, the product of a mission program; it simply happened.”³⁴ The early church focused on the practice of their actions and behaviors. They emphasized catechesis as a method of teaching and formation.³⁵ As Kreider described in “The Patient Ferment of the Early Church,” this process of discipleship was slow, methodical, and intentional.

The House Church era comes to a close with the embrace of Christianity by Constantine in 333 and the subsequent growth of the church’s formal structures of leadership and practices. We see further changes to the model of evangelism and discipleship in the fifth century as Augustine becomes more focused on “exempla,” meaning an approach more focused on force and impatience, as opposed to the earlier formulation of “habitus,” developed slowly and patiently, as a missional approach.³⁶ Just a few hundred years from the time of Christ, the church begins to look very different from the organic house church model of the early days of the book of Acts. While growth was a natural by-product of their zeal for the Lord, it was not a primary driver of their gathering, however, much of our current understanding of the mission of the church is more defined by the “Church Growth Movement” and not the house church model.

THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

The modern church growth movement began in 1970 with the publication of “Understanding Church Growth” by Donald A. McGavran. In this foundational work referred to as the “Magna Carta of the church growth movement,”³⁷ the author lays out his case to emphasize church growth. McGavran says, “In mission today many tasks must be carried on together; yet the multiplicity of good activities must contribute to, and not crowd out, maximum reconciliation of men and women to God in the church of Jesus Christ. God desires people to be saved, and he, therefore, commands those of his household to go and ‘make disciples of all nations.’ Fulfilling this command is the supreme purpose that should guide the entire mission, establish its priorities, and coordinate all its activities.”³⁸

³⁴ Alan Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Young-Gi Hong, “Models of the Church Growth Movement,” *Transformation* 21, no. 2 (April 1, 2004): 101-113.

³⁸ Donald A. McGavran and C. Peter Wagner, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd Revised edition. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990).

Many others, like Win Arn, Eddie Gibbs, Lyle Schaller, Elmer Towns, and Tom Ranier, followed along after McGavran and developed the church growth theories in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁹ The focus of this movement is on the effective implementation of the Great Commission to “make disciples of all nations”⁴⁰ They sought to accomplish this goal by prioritizing numerical growth of the church, concentrate on responsive groups, focus on reaching homogenous groups, utilize secular disciplines to conduct research and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴¹

The church growth model was applied quickly by a group of churches that have come to be known by the name “megachurches.” Examples of megachurches include Willow Creek Community Church, Saddleback Church, NorthPoint Community Church, Southeast Christian Church, Rock Church, and many more. These churches often are characterized not only by attendance but also the charismatic and strong leadership.⁴² Many of these churches have also established their own practices and codified them into models for other churches to employ. For many years, Willow Creek, Saddleback, and NorthPoint have hosted conferences, offered workshops, and published books to train other churches to utilize their service planning methods, preaching, worship, evangelism, and discipleship strategies to enhance their growth.

While many of these megachurches have been effective at numerical growth in church services and large events, many of these same churches neglect the role of discipleship.⁴³ The megachurch response to a need for greater discipleship is often to develop a new program, curriculum, or ministry to create a structured environment for growth in discipleship. Programs like the Alpha Course or Starting Point have become the answer to discipleship. In their ongoing pursuit of continued growth many megachurches have embraced new means of reaching people who have not gathered in the buildings or on their campuses through the use of television and radio ministries.

³⁹ Hong, “Models of the Church Growth Movement.”

⁴⁰ Matt. 28:18-20

⁴¹ Hong, “Models of the Church Growth Movement.”

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Malan Nel and W. J. (Kobus) Schoeman, “Rediscovering ‘disciplemaking’ and the Role of Faith-Sharing,” *HTS Teologiese Studies* 75, no. 4 (December 1, 2019), accessed March 27, 2021, <https://go-gale-com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&issn=02599422&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA577599359&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs>.

CHURCH BROADCAST AND ONLINE

The 1934 Communications Act passed the U.S. Congress created the system of broadcast licensing for radio and television stations. Included in this law was an obligation for “public interest” broadcasting. From 1934 through 1960, many churches and faith organizations were granted free airtime, and in some cases, the stations even paid production costs.⁴⁴ This changed in 1960 as the Federal Communications Commission ruled that broadcasters could sell airtime and also count that sold time as “public interest.” Through this change in rules, the share of paid religious broadcasting rose from 53% before 1960 to 92% in 1977.⁴⁵

Religious broadcasting ranged from simply broadcast church services and evangelistic gatherings to religious programming on dedicated networks. No matter the form of broadcast ministry, they all tended to share some common features: prayer hotlines, fundraising appeals, and direct evangelistic appeal.⁴⁶ While television and radio broadcasting holds the potential for mass distribution of content, the model is geared toward consumption and not participation. The focus of the ministry is often the preacher or evangelist speaking to a gathered group of people, and the television audience is being invited to watch along. Bobby Gruenwald, Innovations Pastor at Life.Church states one of the factors that differentiates his online ministry approach from the television model: “we don’t take shots of the crowd, which in a television ministry content is what you always do, because in television you want to show people that you’re a big church and lots of people care.”⁴⁷

The broadcast model of ministry has quickly given way to internet-based ministry, often referred to as “online church.” These digital expressions of ministry have significantly expanded as the bandwidth required for high-quality content has increased, the software and hardware tools have become more user friendly, and more day-to-day interactions have also moved to the online environment.

Early efforts at online church utilized the nascent tools available to offer basic video streaming and other digital content. While much could be said about the various advances in technology that have empowered the growth and development of the current forms of online church, the technology is changing at such a pace that any discussion of tools is sure to be out of date nearly as quickly as it

⁴⁴ William Fore, “The Unknown History of Televangelism – Religion Online,” November 1, 2006, accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-unknown-history-of-televangelism/>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tim Hutchings, “Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church,” *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 8 (December 1, 2011): 1118-1135.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

is written. The form of online church, however, is of particular interest. The historical roots of online church only date back 20 years, and already there have been several significant shifts in form as technology has allowed for greater interactivity.

The current state of online church is one of replication of offline experiences in an online environment.⁴⁸ Much of the focus that churches have placed on planning their online church experience has been around platform selection, costs, and service modifications needed to support the online environment.⁴⁹ The church's challenge is how to move from what Ashlin-Mayo calls "digital transliteration" into "digital translation," where the focus is on developing methods of evangelism and discipleship designed for the digital space.⁵⁰

Key Voices

The world is an increasingly interconnected place where people are interacting via smartphones and other internet-connected devices. A recent study by Pew Research, conducted in early 2021, found that 85% of US Americans go online at least once a day, and further that 31% of those report being online "almost constantly."⁵¹ The rapid growth of the internet and the expanding tools available to those creating digital content for online consumption are evolving quickly. As churches develop methods of moving online or creating online expressions, there are several groups of key voices to consider.

RESEARCHERS AND ACADEMICS

Any thorough analysis of the key voices in the online church space must begin with those academics and researchers using the tools of academia to advance the collective understanding of the online church space. While not all look specifically at the areas of evangelism and discipleship, all impact our general knowledge of the current state of church online.

Dr. Heidi Campbell has quickly emerged as one of the leading scholars in online religious studies. She is currently serving as a Professor of Communication at Texas A&M in Religious Studies and publishing nine books and over 100 journal articles on the area of her expertise in digital media,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Heidi A Campbell, ed., *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online* (Digital Religion Publications An Imprint of the Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Cultural Studies, 2020).

⁵⁰ Bryce Ashlin-Mayo and Leonard Sweet, *DIGITAL MISSION:: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR MINISTRY ONLINE*, n.d.

⁵¹ Andrew Perrin and Sara Ataske, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Say They Are 'Almost Constantly' Online," *Pew Research Center*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/26/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-say-they-are-almost-constantly-online/>.

culture, and religion. Her research has focused on "Internet Studies," which she describes as "an umbrella term to encompass a diverse gathering of academics and researchers flocking to investigate the effect of the Internet on a variety of spheres of everyday life."⁵²

While some researchers are finding that current generations are no longer involved in the church, believing it not to be relevant or necessary to their lives,⁵³ Dr. Campbell has found that despite predictions of the diminishing influence of religion, that in fact, it is an increasingly important influence in global public life.⁵⁴ She believes that online social networks are virtual and have expression in real-world offline connections as churches work to link their online expressions to their real-world religious structures and practices.⁵⁵ She is keenly interested in the role of digital creatives seeking to implement technology and the influence of digital culture on religious culture.⁵⁶

2020 introduced the word quarantine into our daily vocabulary, which presented significant challenges for churches worldwide, as physical gatherings were not allowed, and many churches moved their services online. Dr. Campbell saw an opportunity for real-time collaboration among scholars and published a collection of essays, called "The Distanced Church," which sought to provide "a range of shared and diverse reflections about what it is like to do and think through church online during this time of quarantine and social distancing."⁵⁷

Dr. Tim Hutchings, Assistant Professor of Religious Ethics at the University of Nottingham, is another key voice in the academic space. He is a sociologist of digital religion and is interested in the relationship between religion, media, and culture, focusing on Christianity's digital forms. He has researched online worship, digital evangelism, spiritual formation, and online community.

⁵² Heidi Campbell, "Making Space for Religion in Internet Studies," *The Information Society* 21, no. 4 (September 1, 2005): 309-315.

⁵³ Daniel Cox and Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, "Millennials Are Leaving Religion And Not Coming Back," *FiveThirtyEight*, December 12, 2019, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/>.

⁵⁴ Campbell, "Making Space for Religion in Internet Studies."

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Heidi A Campbell, "Framing the Human-Technology Relationship: How Religious Digital Creatives Engage Posthuman Narratives," *Social Compass* 63, no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 302-318.

⁵⁷ Campbell, *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*.

Dr. Hutchings various studies have found that an experience of immersion in a virtual environment is possible and “can lead to powerful emotional commitment and experiences of sacred space”⁵⁸ His studies have also found a consistent pattern of online practices replicating offline forms, and that this notion of a connection between online and offline forms can lead to a more hierarchical structure online even though early studies of the internet believed it was not well suited for hierarchical authority and instead would thrive with grassroots networks.⁵⁹

The issue of online community is of particular importance to Dr. Hutchings as well. His work on the development of online community is particularly helpful in this investigation of how to develop greater online connections. He found a dualistic view of online community: on the one hand, it is viewed as possible and positive. On the other hand, it is considered a lesser form of community without face-to-face and local interaction. From his background in sociology, Dr. Hutchings helps to unpack some of the cultural trends surrounding community and how the increase in online community is part of a larger societal trend.⁶⁰

Campbell and Hutchings represent a breadth of academic research into the various aspects of church online. They come as scholars to generate specific research to add to the collective knowledge of church online.

To fully understand the nature of online community and the development of relationships online, it is necessary to look beyond research, specifically looking at church or ministry contexts. Research into online communities has found that it is vital to understand community members’ social norms to develop programs that enhance member commitment to the community.⁶¹ Additional research points to the importance of finding ways for members of online communities to connect with one another and begin to learn more about each other.⁶² Further research is being conducted on whether online social networks can decrease loneliness in young adults, with early findings showing

⁵⁸ Tim Hutchings, “Creating Church Online: A Case-Study Approach to Religious Experience,” *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no. 3 (2007): 243-260.

⁵⁹ Hutchings, “Contemporary Religious Community and the Online Church.”

⁶⁰ Tim Hutchings, “Real Virtual Community,” *Word & World* 35, no. 2 (2015): 151-161.

⁶¹ Edward Shih-Tse Wang and Lily Shui-Lien Chen, “Forming Relationship Commitments to Online Communities: The Role of Social Motivations,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, no. 2 (March 1, 2012): 570-575.

⁶² Neil Terry, “Organizing an Online Community,” *Allied Academies International Conference. Academy of Educational Leadership. Proceedings; Arden* 6, no. 2 (2001): 8-10.

that these kinds of interactions can help reduce loneliness.⁶³ Finally, there is a thread of research related to the types of content that users will post online in community forums or social networks. One study, in particular, looked at the organizing structure of communication genres and related that to clusters of participants.⁶⁴

The research and scholarship are all pointing in the same direction: our culture is moving more online, and the tools to communicate and develop relationships online are changing rapidly. Campbell and Hutchings provide a strong foundation for understanding the online church. Other researchers point to online community's value to enhance learning, improve business, and provide more significant human connection online. This is a rapidly changing area of research, and it is challenging to isolate just a few key voices to focus on without missing some of the nuances of this growing body of scholarship.

MINISTRY PRACTITIONERS

Churches have been exploring ways to engage with digital tools since the earliest days of the public internet. The global coronavirus pandemic in 2020 led to the closure of many church buildings in the interest of public health. This sudden shift in dynamics gave rise to a boom in online church services with varied experiences, from a pastor speaking into a webcam to full video production.⁶⁵ Several ministry practitioners have had significant influence in the development of online church as both a concept and a practical reality.

Jay Kranda is currently serving as the Online Campus Pastor at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. He oversees "Saddleback Online," which is the online digital expression of Saddleback Church. The church currently tracks 20,000 people who view their service for 30 minutes or more and 900 Online Groups, and 1,300 Home Groups. During the global pandemic, all Saddleback church physical locations around the world were closed for safety, and people were invited to participate in services online. Pastor Kranda shared in an interview that the pandemic's shift resulted in a changed thought process about what an "Online Campus" meant, which led to a shift in their thinking about the goal of being online. Their team is now seeing the online ministry as more of an ecosystem in which digital tools are used to encourage people to participate in the stated ministry

⁶³ Michelle Hood, Peter A. Creed, and Bianca J. Mills, "Loneliness and Online Friendships in Emerging Adults," *Personality and Individual Differences* 133, Examining Personality and Individual Differences in Cyberspace (October 15, 2018): 96-102.

⁶⁴ Christine Moser, Dale Ganley, and Peter Groenewegen, "Communicative Genres as Organising Structures in Online Communities - of Team Players and Storytellers," *Information Systems Journal* 23, no. 6 (2013): 551-567.

⁶⁵ Steven Melendez, "Churches Are Closed, but Religion Has a New Home on the Internet," *Fast Company*, last modified June 15, 2020, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90516325/churches-are-closed-but-religion-has-a-new-home-on-the-internet>.

goals of Saddleback Church fully. Instead of thinking of their digital expressions as a distinct campus, they have begun to view their online presence as something that binds all of those who participate in the church's life and ministry.⁶⁶ Pastor Kranda is also an avid blogger and has developed content to coach and train other church leaders concerning online church. His role as a thought leader in the online church space is supported by his success as a Pastor in this same space. His series of blogs on "Digital Ministry, Culture & Church" offers profound insight into practical ways to think about and leverage digital ministry.⁶⁷

Nils Smith is a prolific strategist in the online church space. He is currently serving as the Chief Strategist for Social Media + Innovation at Dunham+Company, a well-respected church consulting firm. He is also the founder of several companies that offer apps, app development, social media management, and cryptocurrency strategies to churches. Before his consulting roles, he served for more than a decade in full-time ministry as a Communications Pastor. He is passionate about helping churches maximize technology and social media to achieve their goals.⁶⁸ Mr. Smith uses his experience as a pastor and consultant to offer practical tips through his blog, podcast, and social media presence. During a recent interview, the churches who embrace the format of online vs. broadcast will find greater success in reaching an online audience. He also sees a coming future in which churches see themselves as "cloud-based" with physical campuses. In one example of a church, he is currently consulting with, they have had people from around the world attending their church and view a trip to a physical campus as a "pilgrimage" of sorts.⁶⁹ His experience and insight provide clarity for those engaging in online church.

Several other notable voices in the practitioner space deserve to be mentioned briefly.

- Nona Jones is currently the Faith Communities Director for Facebook and has written a book on digital engagement specifically for churches called "From Social Media to Social Ministry."⁷⁰ She is a global thought-leader in the implementation of Facebook groups to build online communities.

⁶⁶ Jay Kranda, "Discussion about Church Online - Expert Panel Interview," interview by Blair Farley, November 9, 2020.

⁶⁷ Jay Kranda, "Digital Ministry, Culture, & Your Church," *Online Offline*, <https://www.jaykranda.com/blog/2021/3/1/01-digital-ministry-culture-amp-your-church>.

⁶⁸ Nils Smith, "Nils Smith," <https://www.nilssmith.com/>.

⁶⁹ Nils Smith, "Trends in Online Church - Expert Panel Interview," interview by Blair Farley, November 13, 2020.

⁷⁰ Nona Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry: A Guide to Digital Discipleship* (Zondervan, 2020).

- Bobby Gruenwald is a pastor at Life.Church in Oklahoma. In his role, he oversees the digital outreach efforts of the church. Currently, they are offering the YouVersion Bible app, the Church Online Platform for digital church services with enhanced engagement tools, and the Open Network, which distributes all of the service content for multiple churches. They provide all of these services and content free of charge to churches worldwide. Bobby is a frequent speaker and guest on podcasts, where he discusses how technology can impact online church.
- Myron Pierce is the pastor of Every Inner City and the author of "Digital Ministry."⁷¹ His experience in inner-city church planting, along with his background in digital marketing, provide a unique insight into how the church can leverage digital tools to minister to people.

The future of online church and digital ministry more broadly will be shaped by these and other practitioners. While those acknowledged in this section represent the cutting edge of thinking and practice in the area of online church, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of others who are working each week to reach people for Jesus using the online tools. These practitioners are both the content creators working on the front lines, innovating new ways to leverage digital technology. Ultimately, they are also the recipients of this work to develop tools and strategies for online evangelism and discipleship.

FUTURISTS

The most critical voices for this project are those futurists who dare to consider the future that has not yet been written and describe what it might look like. The futurist's role is a semiotic one in which they are not reading a crystal ball to predict the future; and instead, they are reading the signs of the times and then knowing what to do with that information. These futurists can see beyond themselves what God is doing in the world, and the church then connects those dots. They expect the unexpected and are prepared for strong reactions to what they see coming. These voices are all concerned with the church's future, and their voices serve as a map for where online church can go in the coming years.

The first among this group is Dr. Leonard I. Sweet of George Fox University. Dr. Sweet is a prolific writer and thinker on semiotics and the church, having written over 200 articles and 1,300 published sermons, and more than 60 books. His writings provide a roadmap to semiotic thinking and understanding the church moving into the future. "SoulTsunami"⁷² released in 1999, and now

⁷¹ Myron Pierce, *Digital Ministry: Pastoring In A Pandemic*, 2020.

⁷² Leonard Sweet, *Soultsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Zondervan, 2009).

"Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith Through a Volcanic Future"⁷³ released in 2019 are insightful dives into where the church is, and the challenges and opportunities will be faced in the future. In his books "Real Church in a Social Network World"⁷⁴ and "Viral: How Social Networking is Poised to Ignite Revival,"⁷⁵ Dr. Sweet has also explored the world of social media and created a framework for understanding the shift from print culture to digital culture and the implications for churches.

Douglas Estes is a noted scholar and author of several books on the impact of digital technology on the church. His first book, "Sim Church,"⁷⁶ published in 2009, imagined a digital future in which the church could become an online entity. Some of the future that he envisioned in 2009 have become practical reality today for online churches. His latest work on the church's future and technology is called "Braving the Future," published in 2018. This book explores eight technologies that will shape the future: virtual reality, autonomous machines, gene editing, artificial intelligence, brain-computer interfaces, intelligent robots, nanotechnology, and cybernetics. His writing aims to look at these technologies through the lens of Scripture and faith with an appreciation for science to encourage engagement with technology. His review of technology provides a framework that extends far beyond the current tools utilized in online church delivery, which is currently limited to web-based video streaming and chat functionality.

Pastor Jay Kim is a voice of critique to the online church model. In his book "Analog Church,"⁷⁷ co-authored with Scot McKnight, he offers perspective on why the church's future needs to look less digital and more physical. While his ideas do not support the growth or expansion of online church, his thesis does provide a well-reasoned and well-researched argument that must be considered in looking towards the future of online church.

Finally, Alan Hirsch is a noted thinker and author concerning the future of the church and the future of evangelism and discipleship. In addition to his books and blogs, he is also a faculty member at Wheaton College, Asbury Seminary, Fuller Seminary, and George Fox University. Hirsch has written several notable works looking to the future of evangelism and discipleship as the church continues to move beyond the Church Growth Movement of the '70s and '80s and embrace a more missional

⁷³ Leonard Sweet and Mark Chironna, *Rings of Fire: Walking in Faith through a Volcanic Future* (NavPress, 2019).

⁷⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Real Church in a Social Network World: From Facebook to Face-to-Face Faith* (WaterBrook, 2011).

⁷⁵ Leonard Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival* (WaterBrook, 2012).

⁷⁶ Estes, *SimChurch*.

⁷⁷ Jay Y. Kim and Scot McKnight, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2020).

and postmodern approach to ministry. In "The Forgotten Ways,"⁷⁸ Hirsch makes a clear call for an "exponentially explosive, spiritually vibrant, Jesus movement, in any time and context."⁷⁹ While Hirsch is not looking specifically to the online church space as he ponders the church's future, his words can provide a solid anchor towards thinking about evangelism and discipleship in a fresh way for the church's future.

While none of the futurists mentioned in this section would claim to predict the future, they all provide elements of a roadmap for the direction of the church in the exploration of online church. From academics and scholars to practitioners and then futurists, there are many ideas of navigating the integration of new and developing digital technologies into the online church of the future. These voices provide a firm foundation, along with the historical perspectives, to anchor future research and thinking about the delivery of tools and strategies for online evangelism and discipleship and the future of online church.

⁷⁸ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*, 2nd edition. (Brazos Press, 2016).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Section 3: Synthesis and Conclusion

Synthesis

After a thorough review of scripture, it is clear that God intended for his people to gather together. The earliest examples of the community of faith mentioned in the book of Acts paint a picture of a unique gathering of the followers of Jesus. They ate together, shared everything in common and were devoted to the teachings of Jesus and the Apostle. Looking further through the scriptures we see a clear pattern of believers of Jesus acting in the interest of fellow believers to provide encouragement, accountability, opportunities for continued growth, and support through difficult times. Over thousands of years of history, the followers of Jesus have modeled these early days of the gathering of believers in shared spaces.

There are several issues that the church today must wrestle with:

1. How does the church respond in times of persecution or opposition? As the church of today hearkens back to the church in Acts and the first several hundred years of church history, there must also be a recognition that this was a time of persecution and opposition. While the believers found favor with many, they were also under intense opposition from the government and religious authorities. As the world becomes less homogenized and inclined towards Christianity, the church of the future may look more like the church of the past. This change from the church being at the center of the community to the edges of society may necessitate a different form of gathering from what has become the norm of many Western churches who have owned land, built facilities and enjoyed the status of being landmarks in the community.
2. How does the church respond to digital expressions as a primary means of gathering? For thousands of years, churches have relied on gathering in homes, shared spaces and physical buildings to meet, worship together, and learn together. As the research has shown, there is a hesitancy on the part of many church leaders to see digital gatherings as valuable experiences or even a valid way for believers to carry out the essential functions of the church.
3. How can the church utilize the tools of digital technology to provide robust systems of evangelism and discipleship without sacrificing the historical roots of ecclesiology?

While the literature is clear in agreement of the basic functions of the church, the research is lacking into the effectiveness of online churches. While broadcast models of church have been in existence since the earliest days of broadcast television, there is no clear definition of “success” for these ministries beyond their ability to attract an audience and provide enough funding to cover the costs of the ministries. More study is needed to define a rubric for effective online church including possible metrics to track that would provide both objective and subjective measures of success.

Online churches which are made possible through the use of internet-based technologies are in their infancy still. Many of the key voices referenced recognize that the ability to move a broadcast of a service from the television to the internet is only one piece of the puzzle of truly offering a digital expression of church that can be fully experienced online. There is very little data available on effective strategies for evangelism and discipleship in an online environment. It is clear that the church is still operating in a very experimental phase of growth and development, which leaves room for a lot of exploration.

A significant factor to consider throughout this project are the resources available to churches to develop church online. While there is no clear baseline investment necessary for a church to offer digital services and expressions of discipleship and evangelism, this is not an area where there will be no cost or requirement for staff or volunteer time. Further research during the project can establish the scope of investment a church will need to make for an effective outcome. Some of the hard costs will be related to the creation of the content, distribution of content, platform usage and advertising. Further there will be an investment of time and energy from the team responsible to develop the online church experience.

Finally, more research is needed on the development of new metaphors to adequately describe the online experience of church. Current practice and language are limited, and too often parallels are drawn between physical church gatherings and the online equivalent. In this ever-evolving area of ministry, it will be necessary to define new metaphors to capture the spirit of online church.

Conclusion

The gathering of believers together for common purpose is nothing new. During his ministry on earth, Jesus gathered his disciples together for meals and in more formal settings for teaching. After Jesus returned to heaven, his disciples continued to meet together in homes and public places to continue in the practices of evangelism and discipleship.

The rise of digital technology has provided a whole new frontier for the church to continue its centuries old mission of reaching people for Jesus and teaching them to obey all that he commanded. Truly the internet is a place where the Great Commission can be expressed.

The scripture is clear on our command to gather together in common purpose, to support one another and grow together. The online environment provides an exciting new platform for this mission. The tools needed to maximize the use of this platform are also in their early stages of development. The key voices are clear that ministry can happen outside the four walls of a church building and transcends time and location.

Appendix C—Milestone 3 Design Workshop Report

NPO Statement

Churches need strategies to explore and engage in digital expressions of ministry that reflect the unique character and context of the physical expressions of ministry.

NPO Scope and Constraints

By the end of this doctorate program, a comprehensive program will exist to equip churches with strategies and tools that will enable them to engage in effective digital expressions of ministry that will reflect the unique character of the physical expression of the church. The scope of the project will include an assessment, book, online course, and digital support community. It is difficult to determine exact costs to implement. The project will be constrained from becoming another “digital how-to guide.” Additional clarity on the scope and constraints as well as costs will be evaluated and incorporated as the process progresses.

NPO Context

My NPO ministry context includes churches who are interested in leveraging their unique characteristics in an online expression. These churches will likely be located throughout the USA. Churches who will be interested in implementing the program will likely be growing churches looking to expand their influence and offer additional outreach to their community. Churches with leaders in Generation X or younger will be the target audience. Although the goal is to keep the cost of implementation low, the likelihood is that more affluent churches will be most interested in the program.

Root Causes

There are several root causes for my NPO. First, digital expressions are a rapidly developing paradigm without clear method to define success. As such, there are many different approaches, but no broadly accepted conventions for this launching, maintaining, and evaluating these digital expressions. Second, because the historical ecclesiology of the church has been defined by physical expressions, there are challenges to implementing digital expressions that reflect the unique character of the church and offer solutions for how a church can balance the needs for physical expression and digital expression. Finally, churches will require new thinking about both evangelism and discipleship in both physical and digital expressions as well as the proper context for the sacraments such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Three Big Ideas

Three ideas which surfaced:

- Digital Coaching Program
- Trade Book on Digital Expressions
- Digital Expression Impact Study

Definition of 'Done'

A church can launch, manage, and evaluate a digital expression of their physical expression, that leads those who engage to become devoted followers of Jesus.

3 Concept Pitches

Digital Coaching Program

- Big Idea: To offer a unique coaching experience for churches looking to increase the effectiveness or launch a new digital expression.
- Audience: This would be a program designed for church leaders and pastors who are currently offering digital expression or are looking to add digital expressions to their ministry.
- NPO: This program is addressing the need of churches for strategies for digital expression through a personalized approach of coaching.
- Benefit: The user would receive specific and clear guidance within their context. I would benefit from direct influence over churches to continue to refine methods.
- Approach: This program could incorporate elements like a baseline assessment and follow up with face-to-face coaching calls and a defined curriculum for the duration.
- Risks: Those involved in the program may find it difficult to implement the needed changes based on time, budget, or difficult decision-making loops.
- Assumptions/Hypothesis to Test: What would be needed to get a church to sign-up for this coaching program?
- Benchmark for Success: One indicator of success would be a church having a clear plan for digital expression. Another indicator of success would be measurable growth in discipleship.
- Other Approaches: There are coaching models offering digital ministry coaching, but most focus on livestream services and not the call to digital expressions that lead to discipleship.

Trade Book on Digital Expressions

- **Big Idea:** To write an accessible book for churches looking to increase the effectiveness or launch a new digital expression.
- **Audience:** This would be a book designed for church leaders and pastors who are currently offering digital expression or are looking to add digital expressions to their ministry.
- **NPO:** This book is addressing the need of churches for strategies for digital expression through a deep dive in the background in digital expressions and core principles to implement.
- **Benefit:** The user would receive broad concepts to tailor to their context. I would benefit from having a platform tool to speak and engage on the topic.
- **Approach:** The book would need to go beyond convincing churches to use digital expressions but would lean on practical strategies to implement.
- **Risks:** The broad requirements of publishing a book would make application of the book more challenging for the reader to navigate how to translate to their context.
- **Assumptions/Hypothesis to Test:** Could a trade book accomplish the goals set out to solve in the NPO?
- **Benchmark for Success:** One indicator of success would be a church having a clear plan for digital expression. Another indicator of success would be measurable growth in discipleship.
- **Other Approaches:** There many other books on digital ministry and live streaming, but very little on the model of digital expression that reflects physical expression.

Digital Expression Impact Study

- **Big Idea:** To develop a survey tool to determine how those who participate in online expressions see growth in their discipleship with Jesus and in spiritual practices.
- **Audience:** This study would be designed to implement in local churches to measure their effectiveness at digital expressions or to establish a baseline before launching.
- **NPO:** This study would add to the research base clear data on how effective a church can be in digital expression vs. physical expression.
- **Benefit:** The user would receive data within their context. I would benefit from further study of how digital expressions can develop in the future as we move towards the "metaverse."
- **Approach:** This study would be a survey tool used in churches to assess overall health in discipleship for those both in physical and digital expressions and identify areas where change could be implemented.
- **Risks:** This is a data collection solution which will require building infrastructure to be able to obtain and analyze the data and report conclusions.
- **Assumptions/Hypothesis to Test:** Would churches be interested in an assessment of the spiritual health and growth potential of their church?
- **Benchmark for Success:** One indicator of success would be a church having a clear plan for digital expression. Another indicator of success would be measurable growth in discipleship.

- Other Approaches: There are many church survey tools available but there is a gap in the area of comparing digital to physical expressions.

Design Workshop Stakeholders

The participants in my discovery workshop were Pastors, Directors, and Coordinators from multiple ministry teams as well as several executive church leaders.

One-on-One Interviews

The participants in my interviews were and Social Media Expert, Lead Pastor, and Communications Director.

Annotated Bibliography

Campbell, Heidi A., and Giulia Evolvi. "Contextualizing Current Digital Religion Research on Emerging Technologies." *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 5-17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.149>

In this article the authors provide an overall assessment of the current practices being used across a spectrum of religious contexts to build a bridge between digital and physical religious expressions. One of the authors is a leading scholar in the field of Digital Church and building online community. This paper will assist in developing a greater understanding of the wide range of digital expressions currently in use and help to formulate ideas for future tools and strategies to employ in an effort to build the digital to physical bridge.

Isetti, Giulia. "'Online You Will Never Get the Same Experience, Never': Minority Perspectives on (Digital) Religious Practice and Embodiment during the COVID-19 Outbreak." *Religions* 13, no. 4 (April 2022): 286. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040286>

The author of this study uses a case study approach to add to the research data on the impact of digital expressions of worship. The author is a researcher in the digital religion space and seeks to understand the reasons why during the COVID restrictions that people with access to digital tools did not use them to engage in religious practice. This study will help enlighten this projects goal of trying to bring alignment to digital and physical expressions.

Lagerkvist, Amanda. "Existential Media: Toward a Theorization of Digital Thrownness." *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 96-110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816649921>

This article is a gold mine of thinking about the human existence within a digital world, drawing on the thinking of Heidegger and his concept of being thrown. The author poses the question, "What does it mean to be a human being in the digital age?" The outcome of the NPO is to further refine that question to wonder, "What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus in the digital age?"

Niemandt, Cornelius J. P., "Rooted in Christ, Grounded in Neighbourhoods – A Theology of Place." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40, no. 1 (2019).
<http://dx.doi.org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1997>

This article presents some current concepts on the importance of place in Christian community. As an outcome of the design phase in the wake of the COVID pandemic there is an increasingly clear need for gathered community. This article will provide an anchor in the literature to mediate the strong gravitation towards embracing digital simply because it is new.

Shirley, Chris. "Overcoming Digital Distance: The Challenge of Developing Relational Disciples in the Internet Age." *Christian Education Journal* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 376-90

This author is seeking to provide a deep dive into the scriptural basis for discipleship and the how digital tools for scriptural discipleship may have advantages and disadvantages. This information will be valuable in developing the various possible project proposals by offering insight into biblical underpinnings or potential dangers of digital tools in discipleship.

APPENDICES

DESIGN WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

The Design Workshop was held online March 18, 2022, at 10:00 AM. The meeting was held online. The agenda for the day was a structured conversation with a freer flowing conversation and the use of minimal pre-scripted activities. We opened with a broad review of the current NPO and set the rules for the brainstorming session to keep constraint on the possible outcomes. Each participant was asked to begin by describing an ideal digital future for the church and then each other participant got to weigh in with one reason that the idea excited them and one thing that the idea scared them. Participants in the workshop included several executive pastors, a communications director, lead pastor and digital media expert.

On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being very unproductive and 5 being very productive, I would rate this conversation as a 4 at productive. The participants were willing to dig in and propose solutions. The key from going to "very productive" would be more time to engage over several sessions and not try to conduct the entire brainstorm design process in one session.

DESIGN WORKSHOP DOCUMENTATION

Following are the raw notes from the session. To better facilitate the conversation in a more engaged and guided manner, in my role as facilitator learner, emphasis was placed on being "in the moment" for the conversation which yielded a very fruitful discussion. The emphasis was on capturing the main ideas from the flow of the conversation.

Discussion:

- Do churches even need to do digital ministry? Assumption in this NPO is that they do need to.
- Strategies are hard to define across a broad range of church types and resources
- What works for some churches might not work for others
- After talking with the team about the research discussed from the Lit Review pointed to the problematic nature of digital becoming a TV ministry for churches that would require a lot of resource to sustain and become a self-feeding machine with little to show for results.
- In-Person Church pushing back on Digital Attendance. Do we even want people to believe that they are part of our church if they never attend a physical campus or meeting?
- Location and context are important to factor into conversation about church online vs. in person
- Many people are working on strategies and tools. Tools are complex to build and maintain but should be leveraged using best fit tech of the day (i.e., YouTube, Facebook, etc.) not building church specific platforms.
- Techie (early adopter enthusiastic) vs. Traditional (slow adopter) role in defining success of online strategy may be problematic. The techie may see success in terms of activity while Traditional may continue to view success only in physical presence.
- How could this NPO be shifted to more of a way to quantify or compare digital success?
- Define discipleship? Define meaningful community? Define evangelism?

Why are we discussing this now?

- COVID moved most churches online for a season of time and now they are not sure how to proceed
- Early adopters are pushing for a more digital expression for all churches... creates some FOMO
- It seems like an easy way to grow the church
- Attendance is on the decline and digital seems like an answer to the problem of how to stem the tide of decline.
- Fear of becoming irrelevant to a younger generation who are digital natives
- Effective is squishy for digital. While it is easy to measure stats, it is hard to quantify what they mean.
- Budget allocation for digital is required and so churches are looking for ways to justify spending more time, money, and resources on digital ministry.

Statements:

- Online is not going away. The church must learn how to incorporate it

- Online ministry needs better clarity. What are the borders and overlaps for online ministry? Does a church replicate itself online or find unique ways to utilize the online space? Think of the Venn Diagram... unique areas vs. overlap areas. Are those clearly defined?
- Just because you can does not mean you should. Perhaps not all churches are meant to have digital expression.
- Physical presence is non-negotiable. It is hard wired into our humanity.
- Building disciples is the goal, not building an audience.
- Each church has a unique fingerprint (brand) that operates under the larger call to the Great Commission and the Greatest Commandment.

PROPOSED REVISED: Churches need tools and strategies to understand and engage in digital ministry that will reflect and express the unique character of the gathered experience.

HOW MIGHT WE DO THIS?

- Secret Shopper Comparison of Digital vs. In Person
- Book on topic of digital strategies for churches
- Digital Coaching to build online ministry
- Study to determine DNA of church and measure online effectiveness (Brand Study)
- Church Satisfaction Survey (are people growing and sharing the gospel) to compare online attenders with in-person attenders
- Digital Ministry Impact Study - Does online ministry work? What does working mean? How much investment of time and money are needed to make it effective?
- Seminar on brand development and digital ministry development

ONE-PAGE POST-WORKSHOP MESSAGE TO STAKEHOLDERS

Thank you for your participation in our conversation about the future of the church! Your voice has added insight into the complex issues facing many churches who are trying to find ways to leverage digital technology to further the work of evangelism and discipleship. As a result of our conversation the current NPO now reads, "Churches need strategies to explore and engage in digital expressions of ministry that reflect the unique character and context of the physical expressions of ministry." The three big ideas that will be further designed are Digital Coaching Program, Trade Book on Digital Expressions, and a Digital Expression Impact Study. As we discussed, the nature of digital tools and ministry are always changing, but when we can see that a church can launch, manage, and evaluate a digital expression of their physical expression, that leads those who engage to become devoted followers of Jesus, we will have moved towards success! A huge insight from our conversation revolved around using the idea of digital expressions

as opposed to digital ministry to describe the use of digital tools for evangelism and discipleship. This was a key learning and something I am continuing to study and research.

If you have any additional feedback or comments, I would love to hear from you. Your participation in this process has helped me in my study and will have an impact on the church as I continue to further develop the ideas we discussed. Thank you for your time!

One-on-One Interview Documentation

Conversation 1: Communications Consultant

- Churches see digital as a lower cost way to have a big impact, but they are not realizing that the market has raised the price for digital reach.
- The social media space is crowded with misinformation, and it is hard to be heard among the clutter and noise.
- The church brand is the key. Does the church really know who they are at their core and are they finding ways to leverage that brand online? If online feels like a different church then that is a problem.
- Churches should spend more time on the why and not the how of digital. Anyone can make a Facebook ad, but is there a compelling reason to do it?

Conversation 2: Lead Pastor

- Covid changed everything about how the church functions. Attendance is no longer a given in-person.
- People are feeling more freedom to access the church in a way that best works for them on a week-by-week basis.
- Since regathering the church has focused more on experiences to build community and encourage conversation and less time has been spent on trying to build attendance numbers too quickly. People like that church feels a bit smaller and more personal. People like to be seen and interacted with more now than before pandemic.
- Budgets continue to be tight and staff resources are stretched thin and online ministry has proven to be expensive to maintain alongside in-person ministry. So much of what a gathered church does requires different kinds of teams and resources than online church did.

Conversation 3: Social Media Expert

- Social media is moving fast and is a hot potato right now.
- Polarization online has been a huge problem for the church. People are so willing to share so much about their lives online without thinking about how their extreme views on either

end of the polarization impact how other people think about them, and they don't really seem to care.

- That is impacting the ability of churches to keep engaged community that crosses political lines. Small groups and ministry have seen divides over political issues not because of in-person conflict, but online.
- Managing perception goes against the biblical concept of transparency and accountability.
- Huge fan of the tools social media provides for connection but yearns for a more thoughtful place for conversation and discussion. Hopes the church can reclaim that role in the future.

Appendix D—Milestone 4 Design Research Report

Prototype Summary and Findings

Research conducted in previous phases of the Design Process have surfaced three possible concepts to prototype and conduct additional research on to determine which would become the Most Valuable Prototype.

Prototype 1

- **Prototype Description:** Design a coaching program overview for church leaders who are looking to increase the effectiveness of their digital expression or to launch a new digital expression.
- **NPO:** This program is addressing the need of churches for strategies for digital expression through a personalized approach of coaching.
- **Research Question:** Would the outline of the coaching program along with price points for the service (See Appendix A) be viable way to help churches?
- **Assessment Benchmark:** Based on the content of the coaching program at the price point would a church be willing to invest the time and financial resources?
- **Participant Description:** Interviews with Pastors and Church Leaders who would be decision makers on this kind of project from a pool of churches.
- **Learning Summary:** This prototype was well received by those were interviewed. They appreciated the personalized approach that would come from a direct coaching program. Several conversations centered on both the price and investment of time and resources that would be necessary to implement recommendations. In the wake of the COVID pandemic there was a strong sense that churches would be willing to invest in a project with measurable results, while being cautious to not overcommit staff resources to implement these kinds of strategies. There remains a strong preference among church leaders to work hard to regather people into physical campuses and not diversify into digital expressions. Some leaders also mentioned the idea of “Consultant Fatigue” as a result of so many different groups offering competing coaching and consulting services. This was mentioned as a possible barrier to offering this type of service to churches as the sales process may take more time than the actual coaching program.
- **Important Discovery:** Several leaders suggested the idea of learning cohorts which could be grouped together to both perhaps lower cost and also include a pool of people to work together and bounce ideas around.

Prototype 2

- **Prototype Description:** Outline Trade Book designed for churches to launch digital expressions or increase the effectiveness of their current expressions. (See Appendix B).
- **NPO:** This book is addressing the need of churches for strategies for digital expression through a personalized approach of coaching.
- **Research Question:** Would the outline of the proposed book (See Appendix B) be viable way to help churches?

- **Assessment Benchmark:** Would a trade book provide the kind of content and tools needed for churches of different sizes and thinking styles offer real solutions to actually assess and implement digital strategies?
- **Participant Description:** Interviews with Pastors and Church Leaders who would be readers of this kind of book from a pool of churches.
- **Learning Summary:** This prototype received the least traction in conversation with participants. While there was a sense of the value of a conversation around the theology and practice for digital expressions, the idea of a book as a vehicle for specific roadmap to implementation seemed out of reach. Several noted the delay time in writing, editing, and publishing a book as a reason to believe that information meant to be actionable by a church may be stale or outdated as digital technology moves faster than print publishing allows. Another factor for lack of enthusiasm for this prototype was the differences in churches making the target audience difficult to define and hit. Several participants noted that those responsible for implementing digital strategies are usually younger and often are looking for a specific answer to a question and would be more likely to use TikTok or YouTube for research and not a lengthy book. Finally, there was a bit of helpful conversation about perhaps considering making this a digital publication, website, or other online tool.
- **Important Discovery:** Based on the suggestion to consider converting this from a trade book to a digital project seem like striking gold to me. What better way to reach a digital culture about digital expressions using digital resources and not print media. This opens a whole new set of possibilities for creating content streams on multiple platforms.

Prototype 3

- **Prototype Description:** Create a survey tool that would measure in a quantitative and qualitative study how those who participate in online expressions experience growth in their discipleship with Jesus and in spiritual practices. In order for this to remain a low resolution prototype this was developed as a series of goals for the survey without creating a final survey instrument (See Appendix C).
- **NPO:** This will measure the effectiveness of current and new digital expressions for churches to ensure that their strategies are in alignment with their mission and are offering a clear return on investment.
- **Research Question:** Would this kind of study be useful for churches?
- **Assessment Benchmark:** Can churches be identified that would be willing to participate in this kind of research project?
- **Participant Description:** Interviews with Pastors and Church Leaders who would be decision makers on this kind of project in pool of churches.
- **Learning Summary:** This prototype generated the most conversation amount the participants. The overall idea of measuring spiritual growth or spiritual health is one that seems to be of interest to church leaders based on the conversations I had for this project. There was some excitement about using in-person attenders as a control group for those who participate in digital expressions. The one area of concern that surfaced for this

particular prototype is that it is often not easy for some people to categorize themselves as in-person vs. online attenders of the church unless there is a physical distance from the campus. While this may be a model that some larger churches are pursuing, the majority of churches seems to be keeping their target set on more local expressions of ministry and using digital expressions as supplement for local (meaning in-person) ministry. While a spiritual health survey would be useful for church leaders, there was less excitement over using a tool like this to assess resourcing needs for digital expressions.

- Important Discovery: The important discovery for this tool was that it would likely not work as a stand-alone project, but could easily be a tool developed to be used in conjunction with both prototype 1 or 2.

Background Research Essay on the Emerging Solutions

The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the World and the Church

The SARS-CoV2 Pandemic which began in 2019 and rocketed around the globe in early 2020 led to massive transition in the daily pattern of life for everyone in USAmerica. This was truly a moment where there was no single sector of life that did not experience disruption in some form or fashion.⁸⁰ Workplaces were closed down and remote work for those who were able became an overnight reality. Schools sent teachers and students home to begin an experiment in nationwide remote education. The medical system had to weather a storm that few were prepared for and were responsible to care for gravely ill people with little to no idea of the cause for this illness or the most effective course of treatment. Supply chains were disrupted and the “Just in Time” method of logistics ground to a halt. Most experienced shortages and product rationing. The government health officials suddenly were thrust into the spotlight and were given broad powers to regulate every aspect of our society without input from the people and businesses that they were impacting. Truly, this is a national and indeed a global trauma that will cast a shadow for generations to come.⁸¹

Churches were not exempt from the impacts of the pandemic. While the initial waves of pandemic began to hit churches in March of 2020, there are still lingering effects of the pandemic more than two years later. Churches were faced with an immediate decision of how to respond to the mandates and health orders to halt in-person gatherings. While many complied in the early days of

⁸⁰ Myounggu Kang et al., “COVID-19 Impact on City and Region: What’s next after Lockdown?,” *International Journal of Urban Sciences* 24, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12265934.2020.1803107>.

⁸¹ Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, “Being Human in the Time of Covid-19,” *Hervormde Theologiese Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020), <http://dx.doi.org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6029>.

the pandemic, there was quickly a divergence. This uneven approach to the pandemic continues through as churches report both experiencing decreased attendance and giving in some churches, while others report increases in attendance and giving.⁸² In much the same way that education was forced into an online model, many churches who opted to not gather in-person quickly adopted some form of digital connection to maintain a virtual “gathering.” Pastors and worship leaders often led services from their homes or backyards. Gradually as the disease seemed to be on the decline in-person gathering for smaller groups meant that some were able to bring smaller teams together for filming and producing services, while still not gathering in-person. The final stage for most churches has been to regather in-person and to continue to offer some form of a “live stream” for those who are still not comfortable returning to church.

At our recent cohort Advance trip to study with Dr. Sweet he noted that we were officially the Covidian Cohort. We began and ended our time under his mentorship through the entire season of the pandemic. It is no doubt that my initial research and NPO work centered around what seemed like a genuine desire of the church to embrace digital expressions as a new way to expand their reach. However, as the waves of pandemic restrictions eased, excitement for leveraging digital expressions has also fallen by the wayside. Many churches have once again become more focused on gathering people in person. There may be many reasons for this reversion to previous models, and while this would be an interesting area of research it is not the primary focus of this project. Physically gathered expressions of church support and sustain a model of church that has worked for centuries but ignores the present reality of the very real trend towards greater digital expressions. Researchers are now beginning to study the broad effect that adoption of the concept of a metaverse will have on every sector of our society.⁸³ The church cannot simply ignore the trend towards digital expressions simply because of a bias towards in-person experiences based on historical patterns. There must be a continued move to adopt and adapt digital and technological tools embrace the reality of digital life in the future.

Embracing the NPO

Two years of research, reflection, and conversation have refined the current need, problem, opportunity (NPO) statement to state: “Churches need strategies to explore and engage in digital

⁸² Mark Wingfield, “Most Comprehensive Study yet of COVID’s Impact on Churches Finds Uneven Results,” Baptist News Global, November 12, 2021, <https://baptistnews.com/article/most-comprehensive-study-yet-of-covids-impact-on-churches-finds-uneven-results/>.

⁸³ Yogesh K. Dwivedi et al., “Metaverse beyond the Hype: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Emerging Challenges, Opportunities, and Agenda for Research, Practice and Policy,” *International Journal of Information Management* 66 (October 1, 2022): 102542, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2022.102542>.

expressions of ministry that reflect the unique character and context of the physical expressions of ministry.”

The goal of the design phase of the project portfolio has been to strengthen and further refine the understanding of the solutions that can be brought to the issue stated in the NPO. While the initial fervor of the pandemic has receded and churches have moved back towards “business as usual,” there is still a need for strategies to explore and engage in digital expressions of ministry. Throughout the discovery and design phases of this project it has become clear that there are already solutions available to help teams simply deploy online or hybrid worship environment that leverage best practices. One such resource is “Both/And” by Jason Moore ⁸⁴ where the author lays out a series of different models of online worship experiences. He has also led a campaign of seminars and coaching sessions with churches primarily in the United Methodist church community to coach and train local church leaders on how to implement strategies for online worship. There is clearly a desire for some churches to embrace the hybrid nature of worship in-person and through digital expression.

Fully embracing this NPO will mean exploring how a church can truly see digital expressions as a new method of fulfilling the “Great Commission” found in Matthew: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”⁸⁵ While hybrid options and online streaming are viable solutions at the present moment, now is the moment for the church to embrace a more digital future that embraces digital expressions.

The second part of the NPO continues to increase in importance. If a fully digital church was possible, then there would be no need for local churches any longer. Everything could be centralized and managed through technology. In fact, many church leaders have seen the internet as a way to build massive audiences for content and leveraging that content for good. Pastor Miles McPherson from Rock Church in San Diego, CA has utilized digital video distribution over social media platforms like Facebook as a means to distribute evangelistic messages to spiritual seekers and has tracked more than 1.8 million salvations online over his years in ministry.⁸⁶ While these numbers are impressive, there is a missing component of locality and connection to others in more traditional church gatherings lurking behind the digital outreach and evangelism.

⁸⁴ Jason Moore, *Both/And: Maximizing Hybrid Worship Experiences for In-Person and Online Engagement*, 1st edition (Invite Press, 2022).

⁸⁵ Matt. 28:19-20

⁸⁶ “Miles McPherson – A Pastor with a Mission,” accessed August 17, 2022, <https://milesmcpherson.com/>.

The end result is the need for further exploration of how the church can both embrace digital expressions to reach an increasingly digital world, while still holding the value of local and incarnational gatherings.

Assessing the Prototypes

The goal of this project is not simply to create an academic work to meet the requirements of a degree program, but instead to develop a real-world solution to a problem that churches face. The design phase has been utilized to test out the possible solutions found during the discovery phase by using low resolution prototypes to determine if these solutions were viable or if they needed further refinement before moving into the final phase of the project.

The first prototype seeks to address the NPO through the use of a coaching model. As envisioned in the early design phase, this would be a one-on-one coaching experience in which a coach would work directly with a church to offer a series of best practices and to help the church align their vision and resources toward the embrace of digital expressions. Since the primary methodology of one-on-one coaching would be employed this possible solution provides the greatest flexibility in meeting the needs of an individual church and helping them to contextualize their ministry into a new kind of digital expression. The drawback to this approach is the solution is based around the skill of the coach to be able to apply not just a set of skills or principles, but rather a more therapeutic relationship which yields the desired coaching results.⁸⁷

The second prototypes focus is on a mass market solution through the publication of a trade book. If the first prototype is the most personal and based in specific context, then this approach is the opposite! The use of a print based medium to communicate the message of digital connection and engagement is a most impersonal and "one size fits all" approach.

The final prototype considered was a survey tool that would be valuable in providing a church with a set of specific and measurable criteria to determine the effectiveness of their current digital expressions, and to test for the impact of future impact. One possible methodology to accomplish this goal would be to use the Meta Theory of Spiritual Change proposed by Porter, Sandage, Wang, and Hill⁸⁸ to develop an assessment tool that would be given at an interval to track spiritual development. This prototype provides the most empirical approach to understanding spiritual growth and development, while at the same time giving a glimpse into how that change might vary

⁸⁷ Peter Bluckert, "Critical Factors in Executive Coaching - the Coaching Relationship," *Industrial and Commercial Training* 37, no. 6/7 (2005): 336-40, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00197850510626785>.

⁸⁸ Steven L Porter et al., "Measuring the Spiritual, Character, and Moral Formation of Seminarians: In Search of a Meta-Theory of Spiritual Change," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 12, no. 1 (2019): 5-24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790918797481>.

between those who gather in-person vs. those who gather for a digital experience. While this type of research could provide helpful data to the broad field of understanding, it may lack impact for individual churches. The approach also falls short on NPO goal of providing strategies for churches.

The Post-Pandemic Church

As the waves of the pandemic begin to recede, many pastors are scrambling to figure out how to lead their churches in the post-pandemic season. There are several major factors to consider in ongoing research into digital expressions. One obvious trend is the overall decline in church attendance and giving. A recent survey conducted by The Unstuck Group found that the average in-person attendance over the previous 12 months dropped by 28%, and on average general fund giving was down less than a percent from the previous year. At the same time, the total number of giving units declined by 9% year-over-year. This decline has increased since the beginning of the pandemic. Carey Nieuwhof noted on this blog, "Crisis is an accelerator. It can accelerate your decline, but it can also accelerate your progress."⁸⁹ As he goes on to suggest in this blog post, the answer to reaching the post-2019 culture is to embrace hybrid models and to think digital first. He states, "If online remains an afterthought in your future, you won't have much of a future."⁹⁰

The design phase of this project has been a valuable tool to uncover how each of the proposed prototypes can work to accomplish the stated goal of developing strategies to explore and engage in digital expressions of ministry that reflect the unique character and context of the physical expressions of ministry.

MVP (Most Valuable Prototype)

The most valuable prototype is a blending of several concepts from each of the prototypes presented. In order to resource churches with strategies and to explore and engage in digital expressions of ministry that reflect the unique character and context of the physical expressions of ministry the best approach will be an online hub of gathered information and expertise that covers a span of different approaches and thinking about online and digital expressions. This online space may include links to other resources, content created specifically for this hub as well as a online cohorts seeking to launch digital expressions. The goal of this site is not to present subject matter expertise, but rather to learn together and bring as many approaches together in one place in a "living" format. The development of an online assessment tool to measure spiritual growth for online or digital expressions is another facet of what could be incorporated into this digital hub.

⁸⁹ Carey Nieuwhof, "2019 Is Dead: Why Every Leader Should Stop Trying to Go Back To the Way It Was.," CareyNieuwhof.com, September 25, 2021, <https://careynieuwhof.com/2019-is-dead-why-every-leader-should-stop-trying-to-go-back-to-the-way-it-was/>.

⁹⁰ Nieuwhof.

This concept of a hub of learning and collaboration provides the strategies and resources in a relevant format and offers the opportunity for churches to engage at many different levels from just looking for resources all the way to group coaching and assessment

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