



How Digital Discipleship Works

Jesus told his disciples, “Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt.28:19-20). We have been given the mission to carry the Gospel message to the entire world, and the digital age has made it possible to do so. We have almost every nation within our reach with the digital means for sharing the grace and hope of Jesus Christ.

It is estimated that half the world's population is online. That means that we currently have access to billions of people all over the world if we are online. People are searching Google for answers to life's problems. How does the information get posted to the internet? Google is not a genie with all the answers. Someone is creating content and posting it online. With people googling, we the church can provide answers to certain issues people face.

Understanding The Digital Ecosystem



Jesus sent the disciples out on foot into an environment they were already equipped for. They knew which trees were safe to eat of its fruit and could fish for their supper. Most of us today are not going out into the wilderness having to fend for ourselves. We don't have to know how to hunt or fish or defend ourselves against the dangers of wild animals or find shelter from the

elements while seeking to make disciples. While some missionary work may provide this training, there remains so few people who can survive under these primitive circumstances, that they may be awarded a million dollars on national TV for doing so on the television show "Survivor." Instead, we now have an entirely new way of reaching people with social media, and we need to be trained in order to take advantage of this system.

Many churches develop social media strategies that use only one or two aspects of social media. For example, a Facebook post may be used to promote events. Though this does have some benefit, that is not how it works. It is far better to develop an integrated social media program. For the ministry to fully benefit from its digital resources, it is helpful to think of social media as an ecosystem. Understanding social media as an integrated system is the key in the Digital Discipleship process.

Digital Discipleship is not done on a single platform. The integrated system is composed of creative content, distributors, engagers and curators within a network community and this all works together to get the message out. Truly shared evangelism thrives best in a digital ecosystem. Everything on social media is interconnected and interdependent. Digital discipleship is all about the conversations we have online.

For example, a church may post an event to Facebook to get people to attend. This approach may reach some people, but apart from an

integrated system, it is not enough to reach its fullest potential. By writing an inspirational blog about how God moved at an event last year, you begin to enter the ecosystem. If a Facebook livestream conversation about the event, including encouraging comments, is added, then the people joining the conversation are sharing in the spreading of that event.

Jesus told engaging stories, answered questions, offered hope, and developed disciples. We can use livestream worship, devotions, prayer, gathering posts, blogs, ads, videos and testimonies to have a way of reaching people much like Jesus did.

A wonderful example of tapping into the social media ecosystem started when a parishioner at Pendleton Center Church wrote a blog story about how God provided for their homeless ministry at a community fish fry. The blog was shared to Facebook where many people are looking for interesting content to read. A post was also made to Facebook and Instagram inviting people to come to a fish fry. During a Facebook livestream the church gave away a few tickets to their fish fry dinners and more people joined in. Research shows that Facebook livestream attracts 7 times more people than a pre-recorded video or a single post. People are looking for interaction. When people commented on the livestream, they had a chance of winning a ticket. Facebook algorithms let others who may have an interest in your event know about it by putting it into their newsfeed. Then the church also placed a few inexpensive Facebook ads, did eblasts and community mailings. The result was that more than 13,000 people read the blog and more fish dinners were sold than ever before! Think of it- more than 13,000 people reading about God!

You might say that great social media was helpful in getting people to come to an event. We can all benefit from that, but what does it have to do with Digital Discipleship? My answer, everything. Once people have become engaged in your social media platforms, the potential is unlimited to invite them to the church- be it online or in the building. This influence may take some time to grow, but it will be well worth the wait.

Each media platform can also be used to share information with another network and then point back to the originating network such as your website. Digital Discipleship is most effective when it begins with social media (where the people are) and drives traffic to your website. This compounding process will reach far more people than posting to your

website alone. If you have a Bible study on your website, you can use social media to channel those who are interested to your website so they may participate. Your website is your landing page.

When it comes to digital ministry, the secret is not having expensive equipment or using a specific platform. It's all about relationships. When you engage people in conversations, comment on photos, and chat in



groups, you are helping grow the ministry. This integrated system is one of reaching people. To do this, we need to write about topics people are searching for. In other words: topics with search traffic potential. You are invited to share- to write about an experience you have had with God, maybe

about how you came to faith, maybe about how God stepped into a situation- there are so many stories to tell! You are invited to share photos that lift up and inspire. You are invited to engage with others in the online community, and share with others so that more and more may know the good news of Jesus Christ!

The mission of The United Methodist Church is to “Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” When social media is utilized the way it was intended, we will discover that this new ecosystem’s waters are so full of fish that our nets will nearly break once we cast into the deep.

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