

# THINGS I LEARN FROM MY DIGITAL MINISTRY JOURNEY

*Philip Yan*

Pastors who embrace their leadership over the COVID-19 pandemic with courage are heroes – head on to tackle multiple challenges while fostering spiritual growth within the community. One of the many questions you may have is: how far in digital would a people-focused ministry go? Here is my journey towards digital transformation with a humble non-digital beginning.

## WATCHING A MOVIE 20 MINUTES LATE

Back in 2005, my wife and I engaged in young adults ministry for university students in a different approach. The focus was on a much smaller group size and on paying more attention to each individual. We would extend our care to their peers as well. After a while, we realized our conversations with these young people were "incomplete." Every time we met, we learned that certain things in their lives had moved on. It felt like watching a movie 20 minutes late – something was amiss in our connection. It dawned on us that not only were we not current in their culture, but the mode of communication among young people had also moved to digital space.

## EXPLORING WHAT WORKS FOR A DEEPER CONNECTION

We started to puzzle out what was missing. A discovery... the students were talking on MSN at night; after 11 pm was the best time. Signing up for a new platform is simple today. Back then, I had to look up a technical manual to get the connection. We would log on and say hi to our young friends. They were surprised to see us there, but eventually, they got accustomed to our presence in that space – after consistently showing up at 11 pm. We needed to turn on the app on our desktop computer, log in, then we could chat with them. (You may wonder about texting via cellphones? Texting did not become a common culture until six years later in 2011.)

## THE VERSATILITY OF MULTI-CHANNEL CONVERSATION

Later, I saw the number of people using MSN drastically decreased. Upon asking our young friends about the phenomenon, they surprised me with this question, "Have you heard of Facebook?"

What? Young people would swing from one platform to another just because of a newer and cooler option? I was shut out because Facebook restricted university students' access only...until late 2006. One student offered me a Facebook account from his two accounts at his university and business school. That was my first taste of engaging in multi-channel conversation

with multiple parties simultaneously. Young people would pop in from one channel to another, and there is no need to "complete" any exchange as we do in person.

## THE CALLING FOR OMNICHANNEL SPIRITUAL ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

I learned that we older folks need to be in steps with digital communication as the world keeps advancing and the culture keeps evolving. Suppose we want to serve the next generations. In that case, we need to show up at different touchpoints – meet them where they are, such as via the website, Facebook, private groups, Instagram, private message... to name a few. Here are some of the learnings I gather in my YA ministry journey:

- 1. The scatter coffee moment works just as fine online.** Remember how you build relationships with your colleagues – the impromptu conversation with a coffee in your hand, by the water cooler, or in the hallway? Similarly, our conversations at church could be around the coffee station or in the foyer before or after Sunday service. In the same token, the at-the-moment terse exchange on social media is a way of our showing interest in people. These scatter virtual 'coffee moments' are micro-engagements that may eventually lead to something meaningful when we interact with people on their digital platforms.
- 2. People want to know that somebody cares.** Private messages, comments on their posts, sharing helpful information, etc., are some of the best expressions in showing our care today. In real life, people are selective in opening themselves up to their pastor. In the digital realm, the connection makes it easy to see what the person cares about. It helps build a bridge to talk more.
- 3. The pitfalls of one-way communication.** A church website, sermon broadcast and social media announcement have their place as well as their limitations. For our 2005 YA group, I created a photo-rich website so that our young friends can share our gatherings with others (there's a member-only section). When Facebook became public use, we closed the website... because the communication via a website is one-way and passive. Broadcasting and announcing are useful for informing but lacking in direct engagement, two-way dialogue, and analytics to review the reach and adjust the manner of messaging.

- 4. Micro-engagements enrich the spiritual pathway.** Authentic sharing builds trust. When people share their faith journey and follow each other's life path, they may gain insights into different facets of a person's life. Engagement in small bites is conducive to connecting the community with encouragement. Accumulated meaningful micro-engagements become a fertile base in touching lives, as water is needed to nurture crops. Digital tools open windows to all kinds of micro-engagement opportunities in enriching growth in a faith community.
- 5. There's power in showing up.** There is indisputable value in the traditional ministry approach that focuses on creating invitations to participate. In biblical accounts, we notice that God shows up in ministering to his people in addition to calling and inviting. Once, we visited a student who was studying away from home. He insisted on paying for our dinner because we were in 'his hood.' Our visit turned out to be a wonderful bonding time. Similarly, in the digital space, we can do the same—show up for meaningful relationship building and work on earning trust. Showing up means we care.

## GOD WORKS OUT OF THE BOX

By now, you can see my digital transformation journey is not about upgrading digital technology. It is a deliberate walk to follow my ministry calling utilizing the tools that work for the purpose. In the Old Testament, I see God has His unusual ways to reveal himself beyond signs and wonders. For example, He designs a giant ark and has it built for a family and all kinds of animals, He carves out a portable tablet in the early stone age to declare His ten commandments, He architects the tabernacle as the temple on-the-go, He instructs a healthcare guide for best health practices in the wilderness. Being innovative is part of God's attributes. He uses cutting-edge technologies that suit the time in delivering His work.

## MINISTRY IS TO TOUCH THE HEART FIRST

Three things we rarely address in Christian ministry:



- 1. Innovation** - You read my above mentioned references to God's employing unusual ways to execute His plans. In human history, those were indeed innovative advancements at the time. God never hesitates to 'rock the boat.'

- 2. Experience** - God does not restrict our experiences only in form. His "design thinking" allows us to cultivate an intimate connection in worship, function, and creative cultural expressions - in today's language, it is the contemporary practice of experience design.
- 3. Minister to the heart** - In church, we talk a lot about teaching, learning, knowledge, and practice. Before a change takes its form, the heart is first moved. In the Bible, we learn that when God shows up, it is never about knowledge first. He would use a "small voice," "unexpected appearance," "the speaking animal," a "ladder to the heaven," "food delivery by birds", to name a few examples... to touch our hearts through an intimate experience.

## DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IS A NECESSARY COMMUNICATION TOOL, NOT THE END GOAL

The ever-evolving advancement in digital technology facilitates our learning about faith matters. I believe God wants to see us break through the old ways and innovate new ministry channels to engage the heart. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets" (Heb 1:1). Today, we are called to carry out God's mission in "many ways, many times" where the Church and people can efficiently connect for mutual edification.

The digital ministry framework can further enhance multiple pathways in ministries. It is a powerful tool to measure growth beyond physical attendance. It supports different frontend touchpoints with specialized applications and backend CRM, automation and AI.

Are you ready to go further in advancing your ministry and broaden your digital ministry framework?

*\* This article was first posted by the Flourishing Congregations Institute, Ambrose University. April 7, 2021*



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