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Digital Monastic Communities at Sumter Chapel, Americus, Georgia

Drew Anderson

In October 2019, we launched a new church, Sumter Chapel, here in Americus, a small town in South Georgia, with a core group of 30 people. Five months later, when we had grown to about 50, the pandemic hit our area. We had achieved all the numeric goals that were set and that could be expected of a new church in an area like ours. God had managed to gather people from different ethnicities, different socioeconomic classes, families and singles, old and young. But then we were suddenly scattered.

Before people could even truly connect.

Before the church had really even formed.

Before we even could get small groups and shared leadership in place.

So, we did what everyone else did – pivoted. But we knew our pivot would not look like many churches, mostly because, when we started out, we were already not a typical church model. We had inherited an older church building but rearranged it to be able to sit around tables for conversation on Sunday mornings. We responded at prayer stations, including the Lord's Table. We preferred simplicity in our gathering and authentic relationships over produced worship settings. Our pivot had to match that reality. And we had to use technology to do so because of the stay-at-home order.

We immediately started an Examen prayer time on Facebook Live. Between 15 and 30 people attended each night for about 30 minutes. I posed reflection questions and people responded by posting comments that I would read aloud. That grew into starting an Instagram Live version as well, led by someone else on our team. These times allowed people to reflect upon their day, their emotions, where God was in the midst of it all, and what they were looking toward on the following day. It was uniquely

powerful how connected we became.

Then we realized there could be more. This daily connection – the daily fellowship of the believers like we read about in Acts 2 could be accomplished via technology – if we simply leaned into it. We have since then been encouraging people to use any app they could to create these sorts of daily connections with one another – Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Marco Polo, Google Duo (soon we will be creating our own app). We quickly realized that the greatest hurdle for the church during this season was not how to offer an online weekly gathering, but to connect people on a daily basis to each other to share what God has been doing in their life.

This has become one of our main focuses in a way we never expected. Our desire is to maintain and create small “digital monastic communities” that meet both via technology and in-person. Presently we have started three of these communities with 8-25 members and hope to create another three this year. Because our culture is different than Rome in the 100s and 200s, it is not likely that we can completely recreate an Acts 2 experience; the ability to gather in-person every day in some way, especially for meals, would require communal living that would disrupt most people’s lives. The only way to do that would be for people to move to a monastery or an intentional living community – but most would not be able to or want to do so. Even moving into the same neighborhood would not change the incompatibility of people’s schedules and the difficulty of daily gatherings.

Therefore, we have been using technology to connect to one another in a consistent daily faith community – like a traditional monastic community. We then have weekly gatherings to physically connect with those same people. The leaders of our digital monastic communities all prefer smaller weekly gatherings, similar to Micro Churches or Missional Communities, over what people typically think of as church. We (the leaders of these communities) have started a network of these smaller gatherings during this year, one of the members of which is not connected to Sumter Chapel. So then, the people I see each week on Sunday at the church building, I also see or interact with every day on my phone. And then the third level of gathering we are creating is seasonal – based upon the Christian calendar and similar to the Jewish festivals. These will be times of larger gatherings for all the communities of the network which may be for celebrations, missional efforts, or other purposes. We will designate 3-4 times a year as the times that we bring together all those connected daily on the network’s app and weekly in-person small groups in order to celebrate on a large scale what God is doing!

None of this was in the original vision God gave us.

None of it is a carbon copy of another ministry.

We have simply navigated this season and watched the ways God was already at work speaking to people and working in people's lives. Then we reflected upon how that might not merely be a short-term solution to get through the pandemic but might actually be God shifting our church "just in time." And when I say, "just in time," it's because we were already seeing the ineffectiveness of the current models to meet the next generation where they are. Most of Generation Z are digital natives, meaning they "live" online just as much as they live in-person. The digital world and the physical world are connected to them. So why would the church not meet them there?

Initially the idea of a daily digital community came out of my own personal experience using the app Marco Polo with a few friends. At the beginning of the quarantine, one of them suggested the three of us use the app for a group video chat. Two of us had never used it, but one had. And so, we tried it.

What proceeded for the next eight months was the formation of deep friendships formed in the context of sharing about our relationships with God simply thru leaving video messages for each other each day (sometimes multiple times a day, sometimes going days in-between). But the consistency of that video chat relationship, based in our collective relationship with God, has been transformative. The depth of our friendship, but also the depth of our relationships with God has been amazing. And it also provided us a space to process what we were going through together, to share deeply what was going on in our lives, to discern the direction God has wanted us to go, and to pray for one another about important things.

The three of us had only known each other for a month and spent about four days together at a conference right before COVID hit. We did not expect that a daily video chat app would take a brand-new friendship and turn it into a discipleship group. And yet it did, and we had not even restarted the in-person meetings weekly, nor had we started the seasonal gatherings.

So, we are expectant that God can do the same thing in more of these communities, that he can take small groups of people and use daily interaction through digital means to create deep faith communities – like we typically see in monastic settings – but do it in people's lives as they continue living where and how they already are.

Digital monastic missionaries is what we envision: members of digital monastic communities who are living fully present as missionaries in their everyday life – with their families, in schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities.

We believe this can provide a way forward for the church that goes

beyond simply maintaining the status quo. It calls us back to deep relationships with one another and with the God we read about in Acts.

We believe that this can be a needed reformation of the church – members who are no longer dependent on the weekly in-person large gathering but rather upon a daily walk with Jesus in the company of others.

We believe that God can use this to pour out His Spirit in fresh and new ways upon His people, to encourage people to live boldly where they are because of the support they are receiving, and to bring His Kingdom to our 21st century world using technology.

We believe the networks of digital natives today are roughly equivalent to the Roman roads upon which the message of the Gospel spread in Acts. So maybe the Church today, by embracing these modern Roman roads, can at least partially recover what was true of the Church in Acts – deep, transformative, world-changing faith communities.

About the Author

Drew and his wife, Sarah, and their two sons, currently live in Americus, GA, where Drew leads a new faith community named Sumter Chapel. In the last 5 years, they've helped to start a multiethnic fresh expression of church and are equipping others to start small expressions of church across South Georgia and beyond.

SUMTER CHAPEL

A M E R I C U S , G E O R G I A

Year founded: 2019

Denomination or Network: Wesleyan Church

Weekly Attendance: 50

Location: Suburban, 2.5 hours south of Atlanta

Website: Sumterchapel.com