

Great Commission Research Journal

Volume 14
Issue 2 2022 Knox Fellowship Awards for
Research on Evangelism

Article 5

10-1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Teasdale, M. R. (2022). Forming Saints in a Digital Context. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 14(2), 65-84. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol14/iss2/5>

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Forming Saints in a Digital Context

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Abstract

Biblical and scholarly sources agree on the importance of forming Christians to seek after holy living to make them more effective evangelists, such that the ministries of evangelism and spiritual formation are intertwined. They also agree that one of the primary roles of the church is to provide for this formation. However, the practices for doing this have been complicated by the heavy move toward digital ministry because of COVID-19. Congregations can continue this formational work even in highly digital contexts by helping Christians tell their story through lifelogging, providing rituals and disciplines to sanctify time and physical spaces, and equipping Christians for evangelistic mission.

I was raised to believe that evangelism was defined as bringing someone to assent intellectually to a series of propositional truths about Jesus and certain scriptural teachings. In my home congregation, Bible memorization, beginning in first grade Sunday school and continuing through high school, factored heavily into preparing us for this. It was most fully manifested in our confirmation class, which entailed a careful exposition of the tract “The Four Spiritual Laws” by our youth pastor. Our final exam in the class, which we had to pass to be confirmed, entailed reciting the entirety of the tract from memory, including the laws

themselves and the supporting Bible verses for each one. I'm proud to say that I passed and was confirmed at the age of fourteen.

As fastidious as our youth pastor was in making certain that we knew the Four Spiritual Laws, one thing he forgot to do was to ask if we had all been baptized, a requirement for confirmation in The United Methodist Church. My parents, who lived in rural Washington State when I was born, had approached the pastor of the church where they had been married to see if he would perform the baptism. He refused on the grounds that they were not members (my mother was raised a Baptist and the church was Episcopalian, so the idea of joining was a non-starter). So, my parents took me to a nearby field and prayed over me. As my mother explained to me years later, they had dedicated me to God, figured that was good enough, and forgot about baptism. My sister came along a little over a year later and they did the same thing.

Returning to my teenage years: A year after I was confirmed, my sister was going through confirmation. This time, the senior pastor visited the class and asked if everyone had been baptized. She said no, and he replied that they would need to baptize her during the confirmation service. She asked why, since they had confirmed her older brother the previous year and *he* was not baptized.

And so it was that at the age of fifteen, a year after I was confirmed, I was baptized at Mt. Oak UMC in Mitchelville, Maryland. In the United Methodist Church, this is considered a significant breach of sacramental theology because baptism and confirmation are understood as sequential in coming to faith. Infant baptism represents the grace of God welcomed on the infant's behalf through the faith of the family and congregation. They promise to raise the child in this faith so that, in time, the child can confirm that faith by publicly professing acceptance of the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Based on this theology, baptism can occur before or simultaneously with confirmation, but never after it since there is technically no faith to confirm prior to baptism.

My story may be a bit unique among Methodists, but the logic related to evangelism is not. Many Christians would agree with my youth pastor: Evangelism is defined solely as bringing the unchurched to a cognitive understanding and assent to certain Christian teachings. Once you have said "Yes" to Jesus, you are as formed as you need to be. You need to learn a bit more, adding some Bible verses and doctrines to your knowledge bank so you can articulate what you believe. You also may need to clean up your morality a bit, but that's it. After all, you've taken the biggest step by professing Christ, which guarantees your place in heaven. What more is needed other than to send you back out to share your faith with others?

This was certainly the thinking of my youth pastor. I had already publicly confessed Christ and I was memorizing what he saw as the core doctrines of the faith so I could explain them to my friends. What did baptism or any other form of formation matter? I was already secure for eternity, and I was being prepared to help others receive that assurance. This was enough.

Except, it is not. Jesus was clear that he was calling people not just to eternal glory, but to become his disciples who are baptized and who obey all he taught (Matthew 28:20) leading to a life of holiness (Matthew 5:48). This means that evangelism must entail both the invitation to follow Jesus and formational work to guide those being evangelized into a life of holiness.

One implication of this is to avoid sequencing formation after invitation. Jesus demonstrated this in how he called the disciples to follow him and accepted them as his companions and messengers even though they often lacked faith in who he was and the message he taught (Matthew 8:26, 14:31, 16:8, 17:20, 28:17). He continued to form them both in the basics of the gospel message and in holy living throughout his earthly ministry.

Evangelism and Formation in Holiness

Scholars of evangelism have been sounding the call for formation and evangelism to be linked for some time. The late William Abraham contended in *The Logic of Evangelism* that evangelism is initiating people into the Kingdom of God. This entailed forming people in six ways: 1) communally by having the people of God come alongside a person to form them, 2) intellectually through the teaching of the faith, 3) morally through instilling in them the ability to judge wisely between good and evil, 4) experientially through the process of conversion, 5) vocationally through helping them discern how to participate in the *missio Dei*, especially by helping them recognize how the Holy Spirit was moving in their lives to empower them for mission, and 6) spiritually by teaching them to commune with God through the spiritual disciplines (Abraham, 1989). While Abraham was insistent that evangelism only properly described the initiation of people into the Kingdom, Kim Reisman pointed out in her reflection on his work that this initiation was so wide-ranging that it functionally blurred the lines between the initial call to faith and discipleship formation (Reisman, 2019).

Gordon T. Smith, in *Called to Be Saints*, declared:

Evangelism is about fostering and cultivating the opportunities for a person to meet Jesus...It is not about persuading them of certain truths or laws, or even about believing that Jesus has done something—that if

they “believe” it will lead to their “salvation.” It is rather about meeting Christ Jesus in person and in real time (Smith, 2014).

Having met Jesus, Smith contends that we must continue to be formed by “fostering the capacity, the orientation, the discipline of living in union with Christ” (Smith, 2014, p.58) until we reach spiritual maturity. We demonstrate this maturity by being wise, doing good work, loving others, and being happy (Smith, 2014). Again, while the initial work of evangelism is technically separate from formation, Smith blurs the boundaries between the two because the goal is not conversion, but leading people to maturity as they relate to Jesus.

Rick Richardson, whose book *Reimagining Evangelism* presents evangelism as a relational journey with others rather than as a single, high-pressure sales pitch, agrees with this.

Our model of conversion has pushed us to draw lines in order to figure out who’s in and who’s out, and we look for a one-time event, a decision, that distinguishes people on the outside from those on the inside. I don’t know about you, but for me this constant attempt to figure out who has become a Christian and who’s in and who’s out has been a very frustrating and fruitless experience. The new model, a model based on the image of a journey, sees all of us moving either toward the goal or away from the goal. If the goal is to be a wholehearted follower of Jesus, then we are at different points along the way. But the crucial question is whether we are moving toward the center and beginning to follow in the footsteps of the Leader (Richardson, 2006, p. 18).

Beth Seversen in her book *Not Done Yet* provides empirical evidence for the wisdom of avoiding hard lines between evangelism and discipleship formation. Having collected and analyzed the data from churches that are successfully both attracting and retaining young adults, she writes, “Many young adults are retained at church *before* they are evangelized, and others are retained *simultaneously* as they are being evangelized” (Seversen, 2020, p. 152).

She even observes that these churches go as far as developing young adults as leaders before the young adults become Christians. They do this for two reasons: First, it shows that the church loves young adults enough to invest in them. Second, it allows young adults to claim ownership of the church’s ministries. This provides the young adults greater reason to remain integrated with the Christian community and, for some of them, to

convert to the Christian faith if they have not already (Seversen, 2020).

The integration of evangelism and discipleship formation is also present in the ministry of Saint Paul. Acts 24:25 records that while he was imprisoned in Caesarea, “Paul talked [to Governor Felix] about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come” (NIV). In his discourse, Paul moves seamlessly between topics meant to encourage Felix to decide to follow Christ and topics about how Felix could be formed as a Christian disciple. Beyond this, Paul’s missionary journeys and letters provide a mixture of presenting the gospel message for people to receive and exhortations for them to be formed in the image of Christ in their knowledge, character, ethics, and relationships. Consider how many times Paul pauses in his letters to express his prayers and desires for the recipients to grasp and then grow in the gospel.

All of this reinforces what we saw in Jesus’ ministry with the disciples: Evangelism and discipleship are not a linear sequence but are intermingled. We simultaneously are calling people to decide to follow Jesus and to enter a process of sanctification. While these activities may be technically or heuristically separated, they naturally occur alongside each other on the frontlines of ministry. Consequently, it seems God was far less concerned with the order of my baptism and confirmation than The United Methodist Church would have been!

Forming Evangelists in the Church

A necessary corollary to this is that the effectiveness of evangelism is more dependent on the character of the evangelist than the practices the evangelist deploys. This helps explain why Jesus never stops forming his disciples. As his messengers, the lives they lead will speak as loudly as their message. For example, when Jesus sends out the Twelve, he tells them, “As you enter the home, give it *your* greeting. If the home is deserving, let *your* peace rest on it; if it is not, let *your* peace return to you” (Matthew 10:12-13 NIV, italics added). It is the character of peace the disciples bring with them that adorns their message.

The importance of the evangelist’s character is further supported by psychological research into the factors that help people accept feedback on their behavior, such as during an annual performance evaluation. Psychologists have determined that “the Source [i.e., the person providing the feedback] is the face of the feedback and therefore is inherently entangled with the recipient’s perception and experience of the feedback event...[T]he feedback source may be the most important factor in whether the recipient accepts the feedback” (Gregory & Levy, 2015, p. 47). The implication of this is clear: our best strategy for effective evangelism is to

focus on forming Christians as holy disciples.

This goes a step beyond the current ubiquitous call for evangelists to be “authentic.” The call to authenticity is to avoid the trap of Christians thinking they must have all the answers or have a polished, professional presentation in order to share the gospel with others. The unchurched are far less concerned about these niceties than they are with interacting with a real person in a genuine way, even if that person is fallible (Richardson, 2006).

Given that the evangelist is the “face of the message,” we need to ask: What is the character of the Christian who is being authentic? We all know people who loudly proclaim their Christian faith, but are authentically unpleasant, misanthropic, and rude. The need is for Christians who are not just authentic, but who are authentically seeking holiness. Christians would share the gospel through word, deed, and lifestyle, as well as demonstrate it in their being (Robert, 2022).

This call to holiness requires individual Christians to be intentional about their formation as disciples of Jesus Christ. It also requires a greater role for the church because it is within the church that Christians are formed in holiness.

Paul was clear that God intended the church to bring people into spiritual maturity:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13, NIV).

Whether we follow Alan Hirsch in reading this in terms of APEST (the five ministry roles of Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Shepherd, and Teacher) or not, the overall point is clear: Jesus works through the church to form people as his disciples who are part of his mission. This has been borne out in Christian history and scholarship.

Some of the best historical examples are John and Charles Wesley. They found that it was impossible for most people to seek after holiness apart from being an active member of a community of believers who were dedicated to growing in grace. They observed trenchantly, “‘Holy solitaries’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness” (Wesley et. al., 1739). This conviction led

especially John to become one of the most successful small group organizers in evangelical history. A great many small group ministry structures today utilize a version of the structures he built for drawing people into Christian community and formation.

Two of the scholars we have already considered, William Abraham and Gordon Smith, affirm the importance of the church's role in discipleship formation. For Abraham, the church was essential for establishing the canon of divine revelation that disclosed a faithful and accurate rendering of how people ought to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. In addition, the church provided a wide array of tools to immerse people in that canon so they could be formed in Christ's image (Abraham, 1989). These tools overlap with the four broad activities Smith contends congregations must offer to form people in holiness: liturgical worship, teaching and learning, missional outreach, and spiritual direction and pastoral care (Smith, 2014).

James Wilhoit, in his book *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, states that "spiritual formation takes place best in and through community" (Wilhoit, 2008). To this end, he lays out a curriculum for spiritual formation in community that entails four aspects: receiving, remembering, responding, and relating. We receive both the news that we are broken sinners and the good news that God's grace comes through Jesus to heal us. We remember by being constantly called back to our need for God's grace so that we are not tempted to begin believing in our self-sufficiency or in the power of anything other than Christ to heal us. We respond by sharing the grace we have received with others through acts of service. We relate by being vulnerable and open to others in the Christian community (Wilhoit, 2008). He then provides practical ways that local churches can offer this fourfold curriculum.

There are many other historical examples and scholars that could be cited. In an attempted synthesis, I propose the following three broad areas of activity the church needs to provide to form Christians in holiness so they can be effective evangelists:

1. Immersion in the Christian story in such a way that Christians can articulate their personal stories as part of the full salvation narrative found in Scripture.
2. Rituals and disciplines that help Christians recognize, receive, and grow in God's grace both personally and corporately.
3. Equipping Christians to share the grace of God with others in the world.

I have developed these three areas with an eye toward their practicability.

It should be relatively easy for local congregations to develop ministries that fit into each. Indeed, the texts we have reviewed are full of practical suggestions on this score, as is a small mountain of publications, blogs, and YouTube videos that deal with spiritual formation. However, with the advent of COVID-19 and the ensuing quarantines, many of these practices were suddenly rendered impossible because physically gathering was no longer an option. In its place, nearly every aspect of Christian ministry shifted to a digital format. This raises the question: Can the church form people in holiness in a digital context? Can it help shape digital saints?

Digital Saints

The impact of the shift to digital ministry was an earthquake for most congregations, especially more traditional congregations that understood their role primarily around gathering in a particular way to carry out particular practices. A cottage industry sprang up nearly overnight to study this impact and to offer thoughts on how to operate in this new situation—a situation that now seems unlikely to recede. Even with the current capacity of congregations to gather in person while following certain protocols, the forced shift to digital ministry has left a permanent impression on how Christian communities are likely to operate from this point forward. Moreover, the ever-present threat of new virus variants means that the potential for having in-person gatherings restricted again is a real possibility.

Publications and reports that have sought to address this new digital reality for churches have broadly fallen into two categories. The first category has focused on cataloging how congregations have responded, some congregations trying to replicate the in-person experience online and some reimagining their ministries entirely to take advantage of the new digital platform. The second category has sought to help congregations make the change from replication to reimagination.

This latter category of resources is similar to the resources on digital pedagogy. Those of us who teach could just try to replicate the in-person classroom or we could do a deep dive into what our course objectives are and learn the new tools and possibilities for achieving those objectives using a digital platform. These resources are likewise helping congregations reflect on the nature of the church and introducing congregations to the capabilities that a digital environment offers for their ministries.

What I have not seen is a resource that asks the question that brings together the question of formation and digital ministry. Is it possible for congregations to help form saints in a digital environment? I believe that it is, with an important caveat.

The caveat is that we need to avoid bifurcating how we think about digital and in-person experiences. In earlier scholarship, this separation has been allowed based on the extent to which individuals were comfortable relating theology to technology. Phil Meadows suggested three categories: 1) “digital alien” for those who were most critical of how digital activity could threaten “authentic Christian discipleship and community,” 2) “digital pioneer” for those willing to adopt digital tools insofar as they could be used for Christian ends, and 3) “digital native” for those who accept that discipleship formation occurs equally digitally and in-person (Meadows, 2012). While Meadows’ categories are helpful reminders of the spectrum of responses people in the church have toward digital technology, they are premised on the notion that there is a separation between “authentic” Christian ministry done in-person and digital ministry. The church must recognize and address the fact that for a wide swath of people outside of their congregations, there is no longer a separation between “real life” and “digital life.” There is simply real life, which includes and values both a person’s in-person and digital activities. Accordingly, the church must be a “digital native” while not ignoring the ethical mandate to reflect on the effects of digital technology on Christian community per the “digital alien” nor the entrepreneurial spirit of the “digital pioneer.”

Ending this bifurcation is more than just making a mental shift, it is acknowledging the way that technology has already moved. The internet is no longer confined only to computers, phones, and tablets. It is an “internet of things” that allow our ovens, washing machines, dryers, thermostats, cars, and any number of other devices to be digitally connected (Meadows, 2012). Even our bodies can be digitally enhanced through prosthetics and devices that improve our hearing or sight (Meadows, 2012). Just as the internet itself is reaching out to have an impact on the physical world, so our ministries must entail forming people holistically, including digitally and in person (Beck et. al., 2021). This should be good news to many congregations. It means that they do not need to abandon their in-person ministry. Indeed, without it, their digital ministry will not be sufficient. By the same token, they must account for the digital ramifications of their in-person ministries.

In what follows, I would like to offer a modest proposal for how a congregation can form Christians in holiness so they can be more effective evangelists. Using both digital and in-person ministries that take the impact of the digital on people’s lives seriously, especially when the digital predominates (such as during lockdowns), I believe congregations can offer ministries that fulfill the three areas I proposed earlier. Along with

ministries that address these three areas, I would add a fourth item to consider how congregations can be held accountable for staying faithful in this work.

The ways that a congregation can fulfill the three areas needed to form Christians in holiness are:

1. Immersion in the Christian story of salvation in a way that people can find their personal stories in it through prompting people to create and share a **lifelog of their digital activities**.
2. Rituals and disciplines that help people recognize, receive, and grow in God's grace by **marking the passage of time and creating sacred space**.
3. Equipping Christians to share the grace of God in the world by helping them **re-discern their spiritual gifts and providing them opportunities to share those gifts**.
4. For the congregation to hold itself accountable, I propose **establishing new metrics that measure whether the congregation is being effective in its work of forming people in holiness**.

Immersion in the Christian Story through Lifelogging

I borrow the idea of "lifelogging" from Doug Estes. In his book *SimChurch*, Estes describes the practice of lifelogging as "the capture, storage, and distribution of everyday experiences and information for objects and people" (Estes, 2009). This is a practice common on the internet, where, for example, companies deploy algorithms to track what sites we have visited so they can target specific ads to our browsers. Our digital life is "logged" by their tracking software to make this possible. Another example is how people "log" their lives through their posts on their various social media accounts, sharing updates about their activities, meals, places they have traveled, people they have met, and general likes and dislikes.

Estes suggests that Christians should commandeer this lifelogging process because "in contrast to the real world, the virtual world typically allows the average person to demonstrate their faithfulness in a much more consistent way, a way that is demonstrable to others" (Estes, 2009). This lifelog is visible to others in a variety of ways. In the case of social media, for example, other people can read, watch, and/or listen to everything that the Christian chooses to post, giving the Christian's social media followers immediate evidence as to whether the Christian's digital presence demonstrates holiness. Since these posts often include references to a person's activities, social media also allows people to assess

if the Christian is demonstrating holiness in how they physically interact with the world.

And, while not as visible to a broader audience, the history of what people have searched on the internet and the web pages they have visited is saved by their internet service provider (ISP). In the United States, the Electronic Communications Transactional Records Act of 1996 mandates that an ISP must save all internet activity of their customers going back at least ninety days. This remains even if someone deletes their browser history on their personal computer. Even if this is never specifically tapped for others to see, it is a definitive electronic marker for whether a Christian is pursuing holiness through digital technology.

By being intentional about being gracious, sharing about our faith appropriately in online forums, engaging lovingly with others rather than giving way to the torrent of outrage so commonly found in social media and comments, and being careful about what sites we actually go to on the internet, we can create a lifelog that provides empirical evidence that we are leading holy lives. This will stand out because it is so easy to explore sin in the digital world, and our intentionality to be lights, rather than to skulk in the darkness, will demonstrate authentic holiness in our character.

To maintain such holiness in our lifelogs is no small feat, requiring a character that demonstrates the fruits of the Spirit (Galatian 5:22-23) in a way that flows into our digital activities—something that can be hard to do given the relative anonymity and sense of disconnectedness that the internet can provide us. A local congregation can help Christians with formation related to their lifelogs in two ways: First, through teaching the basics of how to engage with the digital world. Especially for young people, one of the struggles is simply to discern what good and evil look like on the internet since all of it is depicted on the same screen. Training people in theological ethics related to digital engagement is crucial and practical, and it should start at an early age. This is an act of immersing people into the Christian story in a way that fits with our new context (Dotzman, 2020).

A second way would be to offer regular accountability (which could be conducted in-person or online) through small group gatherings. In these gatherings, group members would share their lifelogs with each other by reviewing each other's social media posts and web histories. Just as it is best for us to share our verbal testimonies in church as well as sharing with the unchurched, so it is important to invite other Christians to see how we are comporting ourselves online. We need to be vulnerable to one another, letting even the secret sins become visible, both to avoid sin and to improve our ability to share our faith digitally.

These accountability groups would not only help Christians maintain

holiness individually, but they would also allow Christians to demonstrate how they are a loving community. By reviewing what each other was posting on social media and searching for on the internet, group members would be able to see if any of their number was facing struggles mentally, emotionally, financially, or in any other way. This would be especially important during quarantines and lockdowns when in-person opportunities for meeting are curtailed while the potential for damage to mental health, relationships, and job security all increase. Having a community that cares enough to recognize these challenges and then step in to “carry each other’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2, NIV) would not only strengthen each individual but provide an example to the larger world of how a Christian community meets the needs of the whole person. While it would be important to keep much of the information shared in this group confidential, group members could and should at least share publicly how the group had been a source of ongoing love and support for them. This would be a witness to how seeking after holiness is not just about pursuing personal moral perfection but loving one’s neighbor.

Rituals and Traditions to Create Sacred Time and Space

Caring for people holistically leads us to the next item: providing rituals to mark time and space as sacred. One of the effects of the isolation caused by spending days being alone with our screens is feeling like we have entered a time warp. Many of us experienced this, especially after the quarantines in 2020. All the traditional cultural markers of the seasons passing – the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, the festive holiday parties, the summer vacations, and going back to school – just evaporated away, replaced by unchanging glowing rectangles in front of us. Especially for those of us in basement offices with no window even to see the sunlight, time became a complete blur. When we reemerged after twelve or more months, we felt a bit like Rip Van Winkle waking up from his hundred-year nap. We knew time had passed, but somehow that seemed inconceivable because of the long days of everything seeming to stay the same.

Historically, churches have been a central cultural actor in marking the passage of time. Christmas and Easter services are the best-known examples of this, but the church has a rich calendar that is forged around the gospel story—Advent for the Incarnation, Christmas for the Nativity, Lent for the earthly ministry of Christ, Holy Week for the Passion of Christ, Easter for the Resurrection, Pentecost for the commissioning of the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. The church has an entire logic and set of rituals that mark time by calling people to remember salvation history.

In the same way, the church has rituals that mark and sanctify physical

space. By constructing church buildings, hallowing cemeteries, and establishing camps and retreat centers, Christians mark out geographic locations that were recognized as places where human life and the Kingdom of Heaven connect by encouraging us to reflect on God being present with us and respond in faith and obedience. The rituals around both sacred times and spaces anchor the human sense that we are part of something bigger, that our lives are ordered even when our daily activities have become monotonous and mundane.

When people feel cut off from sacred time and space because their ability to connect with other Christians in person has been limited, the church needs to step in and help them recognize that the Holy Trinity is not restricted by human movement. One way it can do this is by providing new rituals and practices that help them reclaim sacred time and space even if they are at home. In doing this, the church can provide them with a practical means for bringing order and formation to their lives again. This would be a blessing both to those who are already Christians as they strive after holiness and to those who are not Christians but still yearn for a sense of order in their lives.

This would not be an unprecedented move by the church. When the circuit riders entered the “Wild West” in the late nineteenth century, one of the first things they did was to establish ritual times and places so that the frontiersmen, cowboys, prospectors, and other people who thought they had left Christianity behind could recognize the sacred again (Teasdale, 2014). Sometimes this meant commandeering a saloon for an impromptu hymn-sing and preaching service. Sometimes it meant hastily constructing a sod building to serve as a church. Almost always it meant setting up a rhythm of weekly worship and annual events on Christian holy days.

The church now faces a new digital frontier with the same post-Christian context the Wild West had to offer. Congregations can help Christians navigate this new frontier by giving them ways to remember that time and space can still be made holy, even if the space is within their personal dwelling places. How a congregation does this should be consistent with the congregation’s theology. An Eastern Orthodox congregation might provide icons and candles to set up in a room, a Roman Catholic congregation might provide a crucifix. Protestants might borrow from the account of how God commanded Moses to consecrate and dedicate the tabernacle altar (Exodus 40:10, Leviticus 8:11, Numbers 7) by providing oil and prayer to consecrate a specific room (or even part of a room) as a place to engage in personal devotions and participate in regular digital worship services. The congregation can remind its members that God is present there because God can and will sanctify any space yielded

to Him. Likewise, the congregation can offer morning and evening prayers that can be read, listened to online, or participated in spontaneously together with other Christians via zoom, Advent or Lenten workbooks for children to use, worshipful music to play during a time the Christian should center their thoughts on Christ, or other ways of sanctifying time. These could be available both to Christians in the congregation and those outside the congregation who need to have a sense that their time is not being lost, but redeemed.

The goal of providing sacred time and space for Christians in their dwelling places is to help them grow in their spiritual discipline. The idea is not to tame the sacred by shrinking it to being one more household item but to transfigure the mundane times and spaces that Christians inhabit. These sacred times and spaces provide regular reminders to enter God's presence with prayer, Scripture, worship, and song, both individually and corporately. The digital connections sustained by the congregation help Christians strive after holiness in their daily lives by making their homes holy places and their days holy times.

This kind of mixed digital and physical way of forming people in holiness also accorded well with the work that many congregations felt called to provide their members early in the quarantines. According to a survey conducted of churches affiliated with Exponential, the two top priorities for congregational leaders during the opening days of the pandemic were "weekend services" and "church membership care" (MacDonald et. al., 2020). In at least one instance, this was replicated outside the United States. In tracking Avonsleigh Baptist Church in Auckland, New Zealand throughout the pandemic, Lynne Maree Taylor found that the congregational leaders initially put their top priority on connecting with existing members in order to promote their spiritual, mental, social, and physical well-being (Taylor, 2021).

More than just providing a foundation for personal growth in holiness as well as stability for mental health, this sort of ministry opens the door for congregations to be an evangelistic witness to others. According to Taylor, the pattern that emerged in her case study of a congregation that was innovative digitally during the pandemic was one of experimentation leading to amplification and connection (Taylor, 2021). As the congregation experimented with digital tools to provide ministries to care for existing members, it developed new platforms that amplified those ministries such that they could connect to a much larger audience of people. The result was the initial move to help provide stability and spiritual growth for their members becoming a means for the congregation to present the gospel to far more people.

Launch People in Mission

Having established ministries that help form Christians as those who are authentically seeking after holiness and providing them with tools to demonstrate this with their lifelogs and rituals, the last step is for congregations to launch Christians on evangelistic mission. This includes both helping them recognize where they are best equipped to be in mission and creating opportunities for that mission.

The Bible is clear that God has provided gifts to his church (Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4:7-13, Hebrews 2:4). These gifts are bestowed on individual Christians for the common good of the church and the advancement of its participation in Christ's commission to make disciples. As with most congregational activities during the quarantines, it may have seemed that the venues for deploying these gifts had disappeared. The usual ways of leading, serving, administrating, teaching, and making use of these gifts were no longer available in person. A congregation needs to help its members understand that while the settings and situations for using these gifts may have shifted, the gifts are still there, and the call of Christ to use them to bless others remains.

The first step in this would be to make certain that the members of the congregation understood what their gifts are. The best way to do this would be to teach about the gifts in the congregation using the digital means available for this. The digital platform could even be leveraged to provide interactive elements, such as a simple spiritual gift assessment quiz that congregation members could take online. This could be built online by the congregation to complement the teaching. An example of an online quiz I developed specifically to aid teaching about different styles of evangelism based on Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim's discussion of the gift of evangelism can be accessed here:

<https://markteasdale.net/index.php/quiz/whats-your-evangelism-style/>.

Having helped its members discern their gifts, the congregation can then provide new ideas for how these gifts can be used. For some, this will include getting back to in-person engagement to help with essential human needs. As we have seen, even in the most stringent of lockdowns, people still needed to eat and use toilet paper! Those with a gift of serving or hospitality can reach out through pantries or deliveries. As mentioned above, we also saw the mental and emotional toll that isolation had on people. Those with the gift of encouragement can send cards or make calls to let others know they are not alone, and that someone remembers and cares for them. These kinds of personal activities cannot and should not be ignored just because digital activities consume so much of our lives.

For others, it may mean expanding their digital footprint. Those who

are called to preach and teach might find themselves more involved with blogging, social media, or videos. Consider the growth of evangelism on the TikTok platform. As one example, York Moore, President and CEO of the Coalition for Christian Outreach, started a new TikTok channel in July 2021 (even though he was already on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). By December 2021, he had 143,000 followers and 1.7 million likes on his messages that lay out a very plain call to repent in preparation for God's judgment. Dr. James Foster, a church planter from the AME denomination in Evanston, IL with whom I have had the opportunity to work, had 125,000 followers in December with posts that included singing, brief snippets of sermons, and inspirational and motivational messages meant to help especially young Black men who are struggling. Several additional examples of ways to evangelize specifically through social media are presented by Trisney Bocala-Wiedemann based on input she received from 375 students, ages 15 to 24. The students were responding to a survey that sought to "identify how Adventists can utilize social media platforms to engage more effectively with their audiences in order to build stronger digital spiritual communities that attract youth to the gospel" (Bocala-Wiedemann, 2022).

Many Christians may simply be unaware that the gifts with which the Holy Spirit has empowered them are still viable and actionable during the pandemic and in digital settings. By creating opportunities to rediscover those gifts and to deploy them either physically or digitally, the congregation can launch Christians to provide a welcome and needed witness in the world. And, by grounding this witness in the work of the Holy Spirit within each Christian's life, engaging in this witness will further form Christians as disciples of Jesus Christ.

More importantly, this witness and formation need not come to an end during lockdowns. The same creativity that allows Christians to determine the needs people have and the ways that they can meet those needs by deploying their gifts can continue. Even if the need for toilet paper slows because it is much more plentiful, new needs will arise (like for baby formula). Even if TikTok wanes as the preferred social media platform, a new one will take its place. The important thing is to increase the capacity of Christians to love their neighbors by using their unique gifts. This invites both the Christian and those to whom they minister more fully into the life of Christ.

Congregational Metrics

Finally, how can the congregation keep itself accountable for forming its members and launching them for evangelistic mission?

The best way the congregation can do this is to change its metrics. The old adage is true, “what gets measured gets done.” By measuring something, we demonstrate that we value it because we are creating a record through which we can hold ourselves accountable for operating in accordance with our values.

There are plenty of ideas for new church metrics that move beyond counting members, attenders, and dollars. In his book, Wilhoit offered several questions congregational leaders could use to consider whether they were forming people to receive, remember, respond, and relate (Wilhoit, 2008). In my book, *Participating in Abundant Life*, I have an appendix that includes three score cards that congregations can use to track whether their ministries are prompting their members to receive and share the abundant life of Christ, both inside and outside of the church (Teasdale, 2022). They do this by looking at how the church is using its resources, including the activities in which its leaders are most engaged, where it is spending its money, how it is using its facilities, and what partnerships it is forming with other organizations. Regardless of the exact form these new metrics take, the important thing is that they are created and deployed.

To make these metrics more effective, they should not only track congregational activities but also how individual members of a congregation are growing in holiness and engaging in missional activities. One way to do this is to link the data collected and shared in the lifelogs of individual members to the metrics used to determine whether a congregation is being effective in its work to form Christians in holiness and to evangelize those who are not yet Christians. Even if there are no lifelogs being kept, the congregation could provide scorecards their members could use to record how they are using their time, money, energy, and decision-making to seek after holiness and be missionally active (see Teasdale, 2022 for an example).

Ideally, the data from the individual member’s scorecards would be aggregated, offering the congregation a way to assess not only how intentionally it is creating opportunities for members to be formed and launched, but to assess the impact that its members are having as the church scattered in the world. The congregation could then be encouraged with stories of how they are collectively growing as an evangelistic witness to the larger community, demonstrating the holy lives into which they are being formed.

A congregation could use a website or app to provide a platform where members fill out this information. Much like journaling or even like Ignatius of Loyola’s Prayer of Examen, Christians could move through the

online scorecard at the end of each day or week to reflect on how they had lived out their faith. Over many weeks and months, Christians could chart their progress, seeing how they had been formed and where they had engaged in evangelistic practices. This data could be optionally sent to a central congregational hub or to a small group for assessment, accountability, and storytelling. Indeed, there are already some tools like this, harnessing the digital to help track missional activities of their members and creating statistics from this for the congregation as a whole, taking in both physical and digital activities. One example is the “Bless Every Home” app available in the Apple App Store. This app allows users to create accounts and track their progress in evangelizing all the people within a two-mile radius of their homes. Pastors can register their congregations with this app so that the individual evangelistic efforts of the members can be collected to provide an overall picture of the evangelistic work of the congregation.

Conclusion

My youth pastor meant well. He loved us and worked hard on our behalf. Indeed, he was the one who planted the idea for me to enter the ordained ministry. I am deeply grateful for his ministry in my life. At the same time, his understanding of evangelism was stunted and that led to an overall stunting of how he sought to form us as Christians. As he saw it, the church’s primary role was that of a gatekeeper who carefully guarded and passed down the truths of the faith, only allowing those who could demonstrate an equal level of care for those truths to join its ranks. It wanted to welcome people to know the truth, but it was wary of letting them too far in prior to vetting them.

Both the biblical witness and current evangelism scholarship argue for a much more holistic understanding of evangelism that requires us not just to know the truth, but to care about the formation of the evangelists. Not only must we be authentic, but we must authentically be seeking after holiness so that the message we proclaim will be credible.

The fact that our lives now entail a digital presence provides Christians a greater opportunity to demonstrate this holy life. The church must step forward to help Christians find new formation practices so they can take hold of this opportunity. They can do this by providing the support and accountability for Christians to have their personal stories interweave with the Christian story through lifelogging, by offering rituals that anchor people in holiness by giving them a way to recognize holy space and time so they are not lost in the time warp of digital activity, and by reminding people of their gifts and helping them find new opportunities to serve

others with those gifts. The congregations can further add to this witness and sustain their corporate holiness by adopting new metrics that measure its use of resources to promote this formation and mission.

This is not the first time that the church has been called upon to evangelize and disciple people on the frontier. Moving onto a frontier is admittedly disorienting and requires changes, but the promise of Scripture is that we follow an unchanging God whose call to make disciples remains constant in all contexts. By seeking to be formed in the holiness Christ makes available for us, we will be well prepared to enter this new digital frontier boldly to form saints for Christ and his Kingdom.

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