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DIGITAL MISSION:

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR
MINISTRY ONLINE

Bryce Ashlin-Mayo



TYNDALE ACADEMIC PRESS

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PREFACE

Truly, we are not in Kansas anymore.

If ever a book were made for a moment in time, it is “Digital Mission.” Bryce Ashlin-Mayo walks the yellow brick road with us to our new reality, and expertly unveils how to handle the tin man, scarecrow, cowardly lion, and toto that will always be with us (and inside us).

One of the looming questions in a pandemic world in and out of lockdown is the one exposed and explored here with such pastor sensitivity and theological sophistication: How do we keep our people in a missional posture when the default setting is online?

This resource will show how to make the Internet your Front Door, and help you transition from a Sunday church to a 24/7, Church From Anywhere (CFA) in a Work From Anywhere (WEA) world.

Leonard Sweet

Best-selling author, professor, and founder of preachthestory.com

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Thank you to “Team Bryce.” You know who you are. This book wouldn’t exist without you, your encouragement, and your prayers. Thank you for cheering me on.

I have been blessed with an amazing village! I am truly thankful.

My posture with this book is to serve Jesus and his church. I trust you will sense this in every word and phrase.

Whether in person or online, Jesus is building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail!

PART ONE :

INTRODUCTION

“An analysis of the history of technology shows that technological change is exponential, contrary to the common-sense “intuitive linear” view. So we won’t experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century — it will be more like 20,000 years of progress (at today’s rate).”

~ Ray Kurzweil¹

We are in the midst of a digital eruption. Digital technology has done more than interrupt or disrupt our everyday lives: it has erupted and completely transformed the landscape around us. S.I.M. technology (Social media, Internet technology and Mobile technology) along with its younger sibling G.R.A.I.N. (Genetics, Robotics, Artificial Intelligence and Nanotechnology) are reshaping our world so fast that we rarely take the time to stop and take note of what is happening and how we are adapting (or not adapting) to the new digital landscape.

This book is designed to help you to stop, observe, and adapt thoughtfully and purposefully. The following pages will attempt to answer the questions: What are the impacts of digital technology? What are the possibilities that they open for the church? What are the potential problems and risk factors? How do congregational leaders plan effective online ministry initiatives that will be faithful theologically to the nature of the church and the mission of God? How do churches move beyond simply transferring ministries online?

Five years ago, Paul Taylor offered an important critique of the global business community. He stated: “90% of CEOs believe

¹ Ray Kurzweil. “The Law of Accelerating Returns,” *Kurzweil: Accelerating Intelligence*, March 7, 2001, <https://www.kurzweilai.net/the-law-of-accelerating-returns>

the digital economy will impact their industry, but less than 15% are executing a digital strategy.”² Most businesses have made strategic adjustments over the past years. However, many congregations do not have a digital strategy. Although ministry will increasingly migrate online, few church leaders are thoughtfully and strategically exploring the possibilities and options. Even fewer still, are doing so with a reflective posture. Yet we cannot escape the reality that the digital eruption is upon us and is impacting every part of society including how people understand and practice their faith in their personal lives, within the church, and in pursuit of God’s mission.

Digital Drowning Does Not Look Like Drowning

The global pandemic of COVID-19 in early 2020 shoved the world into the digital deep end of the online engagement pool. Overnight, school classes moved fully online, employees abandoned offices to work from home using their laptops, and online shopping exploded in popularity. Congregations were forced to react by rapidly moving online as physical gathering restrictions came into effect. We were violently pushed into the digital deep end when most of us were only accustomed to the shallow end of the digital pool.

I have fond memories of taking my kids to their beginner swimming lessons. I watched them playing games like “motor-boat” as they blew bubbles to gain comfort in the water or “ring around the rosie” as they learned to hold their breath below the surface. They grew increasingly confident in the pool. Eventually using water wings and flutter boards, they progressed to swimming across the width of the pool on their own. At that point they were allowed in the “prestigious” deep end.

The metaphor of swimming in a pool is helpful for thinking about our introduction into the digital waters. Over the past decades we progressed from radio, to TV, to mobile phones, to satellite TV, to dial up internet, to Wi-Fi, and, eventually, to

² Paul Taylor, “Don’t Be A Dodo: Adapt To The Digital Economy,” *Forbes*, August 27, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2015/08/27/dont-be-a-dodo-adapt-to-the-digital-economy>

social media and virtual reality. Like learning how to swim, we progressed from blowing digital motorboat bubbles to putting on water-wings. We were just beginning to use the digital flutter boards when the pandemic struck. Many of us were thrust into the digital deep end without the skills or confidence to swim.

Some church leaders and pastors panicked. They feared that their ministries would drown in a prolonged pandemic and hoped to return to “normal” as soon as possible. Drowning seldom corresponds to our popular conceptions³ of flaying arms and panicked screams. Those are signs of what can be called swimming distress. Drowning usually has a different appearance; the victim quietly and quickly disappears below the surface. These descriptions of distress and drowning correspond to the sudden immersion of many churches into the digital deep end.

There were some church leaders who expressed their distress by flaying their hands, shouting, and reaching out desperately in different directions. They tried things, moved ministries online, and attempted a panicked innovation in attempts to keep their church afloat while waiting for rescue. As a result, they ended up exhausted and disillusioned when their methodologies of ministry failed to make the digital transition. In many ways, they made the beginner’s mistake. They practiced ministry transliteration by simply changing to digital platforms and presuming that the methodology that was somewhat effective in face-to-face context would be equally or even more effective digitally. Although digital translation (adapting to online culture and context) would have been more difficult initially, the process would have saved a lot of frustration. Digital ministry requires us to consider new forms and methodologies of teaching, preaching, and pastoral care. Church leaders in distress that attempted ministry transliteration inevitably discovered that attendance and engagement declined leading to disappointment and discouragement.⁴

3 Mario Vittone. “Drowning Doesn’t Look Like Drowning,” Bayview Mackinac Race, January 2017, <http://porthuronmackinac.com/pdf/SailingSafetySeries-02-Drowning.pdf>

4 Barna Group. “What Research Has Revealed About the New Sunday Morning.” <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning/>

The second group corresponds to those who quietly disappear under the surface of the water. Congregational leaders in this category responded like most people when drowning; they went numb, panicked, and sank by succumbing in digital defeat. The thought of learning new digital platforms, changing methodologies, and engaging with people mediated by a screen was an overwhelming challenge. These churches and leaders currently are in the greatest danger as our world shifts increasingly online. In comparison with those in visible ministry distress who usually receive most attention, the pastors in the greatest danger of drowning do not splash around or vocalize their angst. They are just quietly and desperately grasping for air while sinking.

Digital Mission is designed to provide digital ministry “swimming” lessons that will provide some practical tools and offer a lifeline for church leaders who feel like they are in danger of drowning. I trust this book contains a positive perspective on the challenges of our time and points you toward innovative tools for congregational ministry and mission. We are still in the infancy stages of the digital eruption and we will need to constantly adapt to grow and thrive.

I invite the readers to put on their lifejackets and join me in the deep end where together we will learn to swim with confidence and enjoyment. However, before we jump into the water, I want to help you understand the pool you are entering (technology and its effects). I have often been drawn to Marshall McLuhan’s comment: “We don’t know who discovered water, but we know it wasn’t a fish.”⁵ We need to become more than naive users of digital technology. We must step back, gain some perspective, and recognize that the digital waters are affecting us. They are changing how we move and act. We need to have some understanding of its possibilities and challenges before we enter the pool.

5 This quote is commonly attributed to Marshall McLuhan.

Confronting Digital Dizziness and Disdain

The digital shift was a sudden and a fast pivot for most church leaders and members of their congregations. The term “pivot” has become the key word for 2020. Almost every aspect of life pivoted digitally during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pivoting can become a way of life in a constantly changing environment. Many people have become dizzy and disoriented because of changes forced on them and the need to be constantly pivoting to adapt. As a result, digital pivoting has grown into digital disdain among a sector of the population.

It is not uncommon for people to view online ministry with reluctance, skepticism, or even disdain. You should view these negative reactions as predictable. I want to counter resistance to online ministry and assist you to approach it with a hopeful posture. There are both perils and possibilities in the use of digital technology as pastoral leaders guide their congregations to deepen their relationship with God and engage more fully in the life and mission of the Church. I propose that you will need to address three common initial arguments against digital ministry (including its theological viability and practical effectiveness).

First, sceptics and late adapters often maintain that online ministry simply does not work. Their position is not unlike that of educators who once stubbornly refused to consider teaching any online courses. Online ministry critics lack empirical evidence and seldom have thought through the possible ways that digital technology could extend their reach. They reject the thought of effective and faithful ministry in digital space out of hand because it is different and, thus, seen with suspicion and skepticism.⁶ I want to affirm that there is legitimate space for articulating critiques of online ministry. We will explore many of these concerns in this book. However, we need to recognize that many people have an automatic reaction to reject what is new and different. You should ask yourself if you share this

⁶ Pam Smith notes that most critiques of technology are emotional in nature rather than well thought-out. Pam Smith, *Online Mission and Ministry: A Theological and Practical Guide* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2015), 13.

bias. It can be a blinder to possibility and opportunity for your congregation.

Second, there is the refrain that we once tried something online and it did not work. This position is shortsighted and problematic. Once again, I draw a comparison to the field of education. There are teachers who maintain that online teaching does not work because they had some negative experiences at the outset. The truth is that too often they began with an initial assumption that a virtual classroom would be the same as the physical classroom. As a result, the experience for students and teachers was doomed for failure as students struggled with engagement and teachers felt ineffective. In the same way that the teacher's pedagogy needs to change for the online experience, so must a pastor's approach to ministry be adjusted. What is new is hard! We need to be aware from the outset that it will be important to learn new practices and reshape old patterns so that we can joyfully embrace the full potential of digital ministry. I am not minimizing the challenges and problems we will meet along the way. But we should not allow an unsettling initial experience to blind us from the long-term potential of digital technology for ministry and mission.

Finally, we often hear that virtual ministry is not "real" and, accordingly, it should be regarded as "fake" or "counterfeit" in some manner. Digital space might be virtual, but that does not mean it is fraudulent, unreal, or intangible. When you shop, work, study, speak with family, or even find friendship online, these experiences may be digital, but they are also very real. The critique that community online is fake and inherently flawed (usually based on anecdotal stories or negative user experiences) overlooks the fact that our face-to-face experiences of community and relationships often are less than ideal and leave us wanting something different and better.

An Honest Assessment

We need to be honest with ourselves. Although we might be initially exhausted by the shift online, we cannot settle into a

reactive position of wanting to go back to the way things were before the pandemic, the internet, and mobile devices. There is no going back. Furthermore, we need to face the truth that the church in North America is not in good shape. Many congregations and denominations are in decline. We struggle with being voices for compassion and justice (often being known for what we are against rather than what we are for). We are in the midst of a massive discipleship crisis (not making disciples who in turn form even more disciples). We are not growing numerically through evangelism and there are declining resources for international mission.⁷ We are, by all accounts, in trouble. Serious trouble.

I want to be clear. I am not suggesting that digital ministry is the solution to this. Far from it. However, we cannot allow ourselves to do what people often do when things get difficult - simultaneously look backwards with rose coloured glasses and forward with debilitating fear. Our world is shifting, and our previous ministry models have lost effectiveness. We should not be lured back to old models of ministry in a world that no longer exists. Rather, the calling is to enter our new emerging world with the never changing good news of Jesus in a way that is effective in making disciples, building communities of faith, and engaging in the mission of God.

A Thoughtful Embrace

As we discuss the call to digital mission, we must be on guard against western culture's inclination toward quick fixes and pragmatic embrace. If you are reading this book from the evangelical tradition, you will recognize that this is our tendency and temptation. "Because we can, we do." We were early to jump on to the use of video projection, stage production, and broadcast technology. But evangelical Christians are not known for their critical reflection on what these mediums may do to the

⁷ There is much empirical evidence to support this. For an example see: Rick Hiemstra, "Not Christian Anymore," *Faith Today*, Jan 8, 2020, <https://www.faithtoday.ca/Magazines/2020-Jan-Feb/Not-Christian-anymore>

message of the gospel, our witness, or Christian community as we use them.

Conversely, I want to repeat that there are also church leaders who need to be careful of their inclination to reject new ideas without authentic knowledge and understanding. At this point, I want to address all those who are tempted to dismiss anything digital as antithetical to their ecclesiology. I would ask you to evaluate the effectiveness of your church's initiatives for discipleship and mission over the last decade. I also want to pose the question: Is there something flawed in your ecclesiology and missiology if your congregants live more and more of their lives online but their church refuses to enter this space? Several hundred years ago, the Church adapted to the printed book and now we cannot imagine the church without printed Bibles and resources. The same is true of digital technology. A rejection based on preferences for a past time and hesitations about technology may be short-sighted and counter productive.

The Digital Ministry Map

Digital Mission: A Practical Guide for Ministry Online is designed as a theological and methodological exploration of online ministry with the specific goal of aiding the reader in creating an implementable online ministry strategy for a church or ministry. The book's starting point is to form an understanding of the nature of technology and how it works. I will offer a theological perspective that allows us to develop a faith-based approach to technology as well as a reflective posture to evaluate how it affects us. The second part of this volume builds on the foundation laid in part one. We will consider ecclesiology and missiology (the church gathered, scattered, and organized to bear witness in a wounded world). I conclude the book, in part three, by actualizing our theoretical and theological reflections through the development of a contextual, practical, and implementable ministry strategy that serves (rather than usurps) the mission and vision of a local congregation.

Before moving to the first chapter, I want to define the scope of the book and introduce myself as the author and guide for this journey. Although I have studied digital technology and its impact on ministry for the past decade, I would not describe myself as an “expert” in digital technology and ministry. There are no experts in this field, just people who are further along in the journey. Anyone claiming to be an expert in digital technology and the church is selling you digital snake oil on Craig’s List with a Hotmail account. Things are changing so fast digitally, being an expert is “virtually” impossible.

Second, I want to make clear that I recognize an inherent challenge in writing a book like this. In a rapidly changing environment, there is a risk that anything in print will become dated and irrelevant the moment it is published. Although I have written the chapters to be as timeless as possible, I will at times risk the timeless for the timely.⁸ Therefore, although this book will be highly practical, it will stay away from being platform specific. For example, I will discuss video conferencing, how to use it well, and its implications for discipleship and community formation, but will refrain from giving details on specific programs and platforms.

Third, I hope to bridge the denominational divide. I believe strongly in the “whole church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world.”⁹ Therefore, although my tradition is evangelical protestant, I will endeavor to embrace all my fellow labourers in God’s kingdom. I understand that this can be a difficult task when you explore theology, but I trust I will be able to paint the beauty of God’s mission on a broad canvas.

Fourth, one of the characteristics of digital technology is its democratizing nature. It gives equal voice and opportunity to all users. Furthermore, the barriers for entry are low although levels

8 I gleaned the concept of great writing being timely and timeless from Mark Buchanan in 2020 writing seminar hosted by Ambrose University.

9 This stems from the *Lausanne Covenant* created in 1974 as an ecumenical organization committed to world evangelism. <https://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant#cov>

of production will be different. Mega-churches might be able to produce a more polished livestream, but the relational connection of the small church pastor has never been more applicable. For the most part, the ability to effectively engage in ministry online is not separated by the traditional divide between large and small churches or between urban and rural churches (there are obvious exceptions for this in contexts where internet access is limited, or where low income limits digital participation).¹⁰ Consequently, I trust that all churches will find helpful guidance and application in this book.

Finally, this book will be Canadian specific but not exclusively Canadian. Although written in the context of the Canadian church, the digital mission field knows no boundaries and I trust this book will do the same. In fact, if you are one of our American cousins living below our shared border, I want to tell you that the Canadian church is probably ten years ahead of you (as the UK is about ten years ahead of us) into a post-Christian reality. Therefore, books from Canadian voices are vital both in Canada and for audiences among our neighbours to the south of our common border.

Checking Your Digital Mission Bearings

I ask you to pause at this point in your reading. Where do you locate your congregation on the spectrum between an exclusively analogue church and an exclusively digital church? I suggest that you make note of the point where you initially place yourself and conduct regular assessments as you work through the material presented. As you progress through the chapters, I hope that you will move towards a hopeful engagement in God's mission in the emerging digital waters, but do so with a critical and reflective edge. There may be a few readers who will adopt an exclusively

¹⁰ This is the impetus of the movement to make digital connectivity a human right, giving every human equal accessibility to all information and connection.

Frank La Rue. "Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression," *United Nations General Assembly*, August 10, 2011, <https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2011/06/united-nations-report-internet-access-is-a-human-right.html>

digital posture for their ministry. However, most pastoral leaders will feel more comfortable with a hybrid approach. There is no “one-size-fits-all” digital strategy. Each congregation will require discernment and wisdom to adopt a fruitful and meaningful approach to their unique context.

Jump into Digital Mission

I remember lifejacket day in swimming lessons. This was point in the schedule when each young novice swimmer was issued a lifejacket and was told to go to the deep end. I recall this day vividly not because I loved wearing the life jacket. In fact, I found it to be extremely uncomfortable. However, I had the feeling of confidence as I entered for the first time into the deep end of the pool. Like all elementary kids, I looked up to older teenagers that inhabited this part of the pool with an enviable confidence. Lifejacket day provided the opportunity to swim with them in the deep end. It was as exhilarating as it was empowering.

This is the experience and feeling I hope you will have from reading this book. I hope you will jump into the digital deep end with confidence. I trust it will help you understand the water you are entering, learn some skills to minister effectively in the deep end, and create an implementable strategy to empower your church or ministry.

Let's jump in!