



Church in a digital age



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Most Millennials are at home in the digital world. We have grown up with it. We are 'digital natives'.¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that a study by Barna Group reveals that a large proportion of Millennials who are practising Christians use the internet to explore their faith. The study showed that 59% of practising Christian Millennials say they have searched for spiritual content online. A huge 70% read Scripture online. What is interesting for churches is that over half (56%) of these engaged young adults have searched online for a place of worship, indicating that the internet is an important channel for reaching potential new members.²

Many churches are already using digital tools to increase awareness online – having church websites and social media pages is now quite normal. Social media can also be used to organise events, fundraising campaigns and do online Bible studies. It seems most churches promote their upcoming events and speakers using social media.³ Of course, the benefits of using the internet in this way include the ability to reach a broader range of people than would otherwise be available, creating more awareness of the church in online communities. It is also easy to keep church members informed about dates and times of events, what is happening in the church calendar and what celebrations are coming up. Questions that visitors or members may have about the church can be easily answered, and people can be notified with information rather than having to seek it out.

Churches can also encourage members to connect with each other and those outside the church

digitally, for example by setting up private group chats. Social media can be used to introduce people from disparate circles of life to a group, such as a youth group or house group. This can be an easy and non-threatening way to introduce someone to a church group before they make an appearance physically. On the other hand, social media can allow users to connect more with people they would only know from within a group context, and so can allow friendships within a church group to grow stronger. It can also offer a form of protection from negative comments, as members control who can be involved in group chat.

Problems with digital platforms

However, there are limitations to using digital tools both as a platform on which to market the church and to build relationships upon. Churches should be wary of the first impression they may make. The quality of online materials such as websites are important; as Millennials frequently encounter high volumes of information online, they are skilled at deciding quickly whether what they are exposed to is worth their time, and may be easily put off by kitsch or cheesy media.⁴ It is therefore important for the layout of digital content to be intuitively accessible, and easy to navigate around.⁵ So, a well presented, informative and engaging user interface is important for reaching Millennials, whereas one that is badly presented or difficult to use may leave a worse impression than not having one at all. Having said that, it is also important to think about what is being communicated by a church's absence online to a generation who are

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1. K Moran, 'Millennials as Digital Natives: Myths and Realities,' available at www.nngroup.com/articles/Millennials-digital-natives/

2. 'How Technology is Changing Millennial Faith,' Barna Group, www.barna.com/research/how-technology-is-changing-Millennial-faith/

3. According to one 2017 study, almost 85 per cent of churches use Facebook, though only 15 per cent use Twitter and Instagram. See '10 powerful statistics on Church Social Media Use,' <https://blog.capterra.com/church-statistics-social-media/>

4. 'Millennials adept at filtering out ads,' www.emarketer.com/Article/Millennials-Adept-Filtering-Ads/1012335

5. 'How Millennial Search Behaviour Impacts your Digital Strategy' www.targetmarketingmag.com/article/how-Millennial-search-behavior-impacts-your-digital-strategy/all/

6. N Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

7. S Turkle, 'The Flight From Conversation,' *The New York Times* 22 April 2012.

8. See www.digital-church.co.uk/online-church-are-we-robbing-people-of-a-god-designed-community/

so open with each other, and expect others to be open online too. To digital natives it is strange, almost a sign of untrustworthiness, to be digitally absent, almost as if an organisation is not making itself accessible, whereas presence and ease of access to information about a church can help Millennials feel positively about it.

Perhaps a more serious problem with social media usage to build relationships is that, although it is intended to connect people more closely, social media has sometimes been linked with rising levels of loneliness and isolation.⁶ Although there is opportunity to connect more frequently and with a broader scope of people, the worry is that those interactions are often shallow and result in a connection lacking the depth of one formed through face-to-face conversation and time spent together. Furthermore, people can feel compelled to answer messages and respond to tweets, which can consume a lot of time and detract from the interactions they are having with the people physically around them. As the generation currently burgeoning into adulthood and parenthood, Millennials are under a lot of scrutiny. We can perhaps see parallels between the stereotypes that Millennials are labelled with and the alleged problems with increasing digital presence in society. Many people believe that life online has decreased Millennials' tolerance of being involved in deep, vulnerable conversation and replaced it with a false sense of connectedness at distances we can control. We have a new way of 'being alone together' by being absorbed in online messaging rather than offline presence.⁷

Some churches therefore worry about encouraging more focus on social media, and want to resist a cultural transition toward making church activity increasingly digital. 'Online church' services are an example of the digitisation of church and are becoming increasingly popular, so that people can watch services online as they are happening. They may also record services, Bible studies and other events and upload them to YouTube or Facebook so that others can watch them later. One concern is that the ability to view church services online may encourage people to be less committed to actually coming to church on a Sunday. The convenience of simply being able to turn on the computer rather than leave the house may dissuade people from being physically present in church. This brings us back to the problem of online tools being linked with isolation and loneliness. Even if online participants have the chance to post comments and ask questions, they may not get the same level of interaction with other members of the church. Just as one can be physically present but seemingly absent because one's attention is on the internet, one can be digitally present but perceived as absent to other members of the community who are physically there. This leads churches to question whether by providing online experiences of church

they are depriving young people of the community that is needed to grow a strong church.⁸

However, I think that the fear of this happening should not eclipse a church's willingness to provide for those who are constrained from coming to church. Of course, the primary aim of this is greater inclusivity – making services available online

Millennials will be attracted to authentic communities and opportunities for spiritual growth

means that those who are not able to be physically present with a church on a Sunday still have the chance to listen and engage with weekly teaching and worship. For these, the chance to listen to the sermon is something they could not otherwise have. As Bailey-Ross points out, polarised views about the impact of the digital world on our social abilities are often expressed in both the media and in academic research, but the majority of internet users report both positive and negative effects from their online experiences.⁹ Most people are able to 'blur' their online and offline lives in the sense that experiences online inform and cohere with their experiences offline and vice versa, rather than online interactions dominating and overshadowing offline ones in terms of importance. Critically, a study by LifeWay Research found that only 1% of people interviewed said they would prefer to watch a sermon by video over a live sermon.¹⁰ Many people who do view online sermons, treat them as supplementary to Sunday services, which helps them integrate their faith into weekday life.

Having said that, it is valid to be wary of over-emphasis on the digital life of the Church to the neglect of physical fellowship. The value of physical presence is modelled by Jesus himself, who became incarnate in order to be with us in the flesh. We must fully grasp the importance of Jesus' physical presence: when Jesus went to be with people in their house, such as when he visits Zacchaeus' home in Luke 19.1–10, it was a sign of his favour. As we see in Luke 24.39, Jesus felt it necessary to allow people to see him as present after his resurrection, as this satisfied the desire for evidence of who he was and what he had done. Jesus understood the value of what physical presence communicates: it communicates that the one who is present values those around them and is willing to meet others' needs. It is therefore important for us likewise to keep in view the encouraging message that physical presence communicates something about our relationship with the community. However, Millennials themselves, at whom much of the digital activity is aimed, are concerned about this. They recognise that there is value in simply

chatting at the end of church, in hanging out and exchanging thoughts, feelings and prayer requests. There is value in the cups of tea and after-church pub meals shared together. They recognise that genuine relationships are not only built by shared experiences but by shared conversations about those experiences. So, how else can churches empower Millennials to be the solutions to the problems outlined above?

Engaging Millennials through involvement

In this section I will focus on how churches can engage young people healthily using digital tools. As a generation who have been encouraged to engage in discussions and engage in activism, to Millennials the word 'engage' does not just mean to show interest or take enjoyment from something. Millennials in general like to be active for the causes they believe in. Millennial Christians want to express their faith actively, by participating in the activity of the Church. So, in a sense, maybe what we should be thinking about is what Millennials can offer to the Church.

Churches that are worried about the balance between their physical and digital attendance rates can attract those who are engaged online to be part of the church community in person by emphasising the benefits of them doing so for the community, rather than just the individual. It is true that there is something deeply encouraging about gathering together and being able to interact tangibly with other members of the Church. There is no harm in reminding people that their very presence can contribute to this effect in other people. Churches can encourage them to take up roles, whether it be as a welcome team member, a set-up volunteer or a mentor to someone from another generation. However, it is important that churches can do that without being belligerent towards those who need to stay at home while attending a service. We should be wary of quickly jumping to the conclusion that those who are not able to be physically present do not value their communities, as value can be expressed in other ways, too.

The opportunity for greater involvement is attractive to Millennials, and can be incorporated into a church's digital strategy. As I outlined earlier, there is a need for church digital content to be of a high standard. There are plenty of Millennials with strong digital design skills, who are able to create user-friendly content themselves. Why not utilise them, thereby benefitting the Church and giving Millennials the opportunity to engage by reaching other people? Even if this is not in an official 'role' capacity, churches can still encourage Millennials to promote church events and invite others using social media themselves. Invitation to church activities needs to happen at the personal as well as the organisational level. Without a prior connection to a church, most people would not respond to

generic Facebook promotion for their events. However, if they were personally invited by a church member (in real life or online) they would be much more likely to respond. As consumers, Millennials are highly influenced by the opinions of their peers. Before they invest in an experience or product, they want to be as sure as possible that it will be a 'positive interaction or beneficial purchase' so they will check social media to see what their peers have said. It would make sense for a similar trend to apply when it comes to attending a church.¹¹ This is indicative of a desire for authenticity and transparency when it comes to what communities have to offer.

Online interactions between people on social media do not have to be shallow, and can consist of more than just emojis, memes and selfies. If there is intentionality in online interactions, they will be as relationship-building as face to face ones. Churches can encourage those who are digitally engaged to use online platforms as a means of ministering to people by hosting deeper conversations. By ministering I mean sharing the gospel and meeting the needs of others, including answering their questions and satisfying their desire to be involved.

Training new ministers is a crucial aspect of the biblical model of discipleship. Millennials can be given ministerial opportunities to develop their own faith-based content, organise events, manage the social media account, etc. Even if a young person does not have permission to officiate, the digital world offers a separate yet related sphere in which they can minister. For example, my boyfriend has had success in managing a Facebook group dedicated to answering the more puzzling questions about the Bible and is currently working on developing an app, specifically aimed at enabling Christians to connect and share testimonies. The app will categorise testimonies and enable the community to search for them. Creating a digital space where younger ministers can begin giving sermons is also a great way of helping them become leaders.

Conclusion

Making church services digitally accessible, and putting effort into creating user-friendly social media pages, websites and content sends a positive message about a church's openness and accessibility to Millennials. Investing in people in their twenties and thirties and enabling them to contribute to the culture of the church is important, and this can include appealing to them to engage with the church's online life. If, offline, a church community is supportive, full of dynamic interactions and willing to hold discussions and take on board new ideas, then its digital life will reflect that. This way, Millennials will not only be attracted by the digital tools of a church but also drawn in by the sense of authentic community and by opportunities for spiritual growth.

9. C Bailey-Ross, 'Living in a Digital Culture: The Good, the Bad and the Balance Between the Two', in *The Bible in Transmission* (Spring 2016), p. 16.

10. '10 powerful statistics on Church Social Media Use.'

11. www.targetmarketingmag.com/article/how-Millennial-search-behavior-impacts-your-digital-strategy/all/