



Faith in the Digital Age

What is the opportunity for
the Church to embrace and
engage the unexplored digital
landscape?

Paul Wetzig

Executive Summary

Increasingly our world is moving into a digitally connected future. These changes are impacting all areas of life, including the journey of faith. In this context it is argued that this is the right moment to consider the opportunities for the Church to explore the emerging digital landscape.

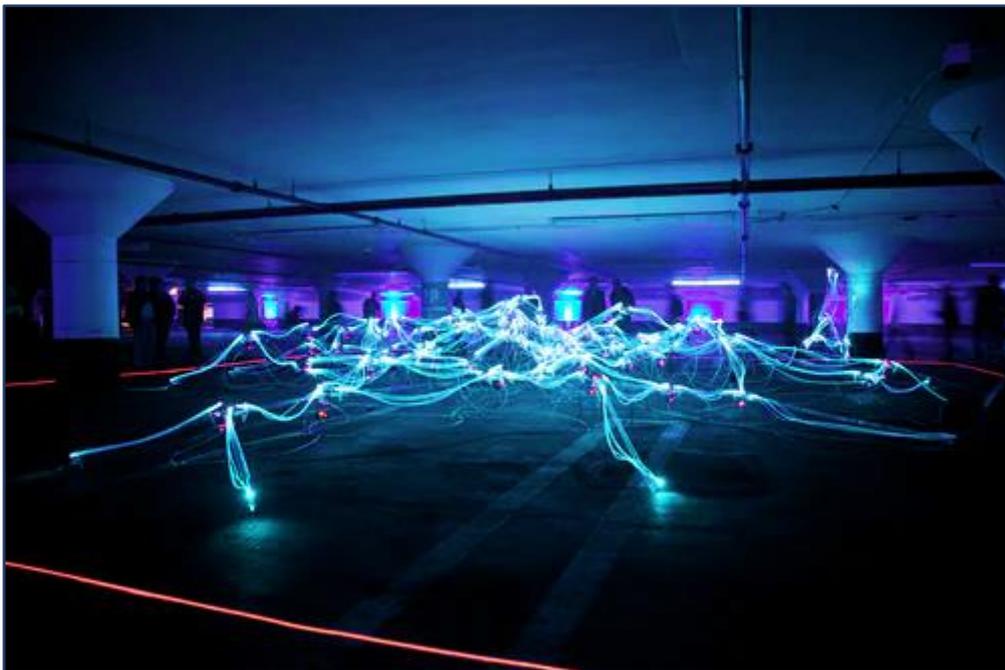
This report initially sets out the current digital landscape and its impact on the journey of faith, concluding that whether we like it or not, we are being disciplined by Google.

It then continues, to suggest a theological basis for the Church entering into this space, as well as a brief examination of how the Church has adapted various technological and social advancements to further God's heart for the flourishing of humanity and the world.

Finally, it is recommended that there are four key areas that the Church should engage in as it travels through the digital world:

1. Digital Empowerment – upskilling existing physical Church, School & Agencies activities in the digital space
2. Digital Discipleship – creating and curating online discipleship resources
3. Digital Mission - Online missional engagement
4. Digital Patronage – facilitating participatory, artistic and creative leadership development.

This engagement would best be undertaken by empowering a Digital Mission Strategist to create a collaborative, networked response based firmly in emergent practice.



The Terrain

As we journey through the twenty first century, we find ourselves overlooking a new and constantly emerging place, of our own creation. We find ourselves moving deeper and deeper into the Digital landscape.

We live in a world with a current population of 7.7 billion people. Of that, Australia has a population of 25.5 million people.

Globally, there are approximately 4.4 billion internet users (57% of the population) with 3.5 billion engaged with some form of social media.

In Australia, there are close to 22 million internet users (87% of the population) with 18 million people engaged in social media (72% of the population).

This year Australians spent more time, as expressed in total hours, on the internet in comparison to time spent working.¹

In practice, what this looks like is each Australian internet user spending a daily average of 5hr 4min on the internet, with 1 hr 31min being spent on some form of social media. Increasingly, Australian internet users are adopting voice search/command technology, such as Google home, as an integral part of their lives. It is predicted that this engagement with the internet will continue to expand along with the expansion of the integration of the “internet of things” (smart device inter-connectivity).^{2 3}

When we turn to the internet here in Australia, here’s where we go⁴

- Top 5 websites visited for Australia
 - Google.com (639m per month)
 - Google.com.au (589m per month)
 - Youtube.com (332m per month)
 - Facebook (318m per month)
 - Wikipedia (78m per month)
- Top searches we make
 - Australia
 - Weather
 - Facebook
 - Google
 - News

In addition to the implications regarding how we spend our time, the increasing expansion of the significance of the digital space in our lives has significantly shifted the way that we engage in the world.

When seeking information regarding a product, service, place or even a person, the internet is where we are most likely to turn for these answers. In doing this, we most frequently turn to Google to help connect us to the information.

Our need for this information has also shifted from a delayed approach, for when the best information is available, to an on-demand framework. This shift is not simply limited now to information however, as globally culture has shifted to an “on-demand” for all aspects of life.

Another considerable social implication connected to the increased presence of the internet, is the increase in availability of information of both the best and worst quality. World class thought and research is available as it

¹ Roy Morgan Research (2018). [Australians spending more time online than working](http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/7665-time-spent-working-and-media-march-2018-201807200811). <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/7665-time-spent-working-and-media-march-2018-201807200811>

² Kemp, S. 2019 [Digital 2019 Australia](https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-australia) <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-australia>

³ Parker, J. [Smart speakers are everywhere – and they’re listening to more than you think](https://theconversation.com/smart-speakers-are-everywhere-and-theyre-listening-to-more-than-you-think-114018). The Conversation <https://theconversation.com/smart-speakers-are-everywhere-and-theyre-listening-to-more-than-you-think-114018>

⁴ Kemp, S. (2019)

has never been before along with some of the least thoughtful and most highly fanciful material. While the material is not new, the ability to so simply access it and connect with others who resonate with it allows new communities and relationships to be formed, that would never have existed in the past. Consequently, new and unexpected social memes can emerge with little predictability.^{5 6}

What this is also generating is a shift in focus from a purely local understanding and awareness of culture and more specifically faith, to a global and wider perspective.⁷

As a result of this opportunity, it has become far simpler to find a tribe to be a part of, based around common interests and knowledge. This has also resulted in a seismic shift in where authority lies in community. In the recent past, power most often lay with those who held the particular knowledge of interest to an individual.

However, with the democratisation of knowledge, by way of the internet, the hierarchical model of authority has been significantly eroded. Increasingly, power is now held by the collective which has resulted in a dramatic shift towards collaborative models of leadership and a networked approach to community. No longer is a linear, rigid social structure accepted as the status quo.⁸

This shift in power dynamics is also resulting in the transition of what were previously internal matters of faith, for the highest levels and deepest theological minds to determine, being transitioned into the social and unregulated sphere of the internet.⁹

While this is clearly happening to the Church, it is not the Church alone who is in this position. Any business or organisation that has connection to a group of people is finding itself wrestling with the externalisation, and potential critique, of all of its stated mission, values and practices.¹⁰

At its heart, whether we want to or not, we are all being disciplined by Google. The question and the challenge that we face is what we are going to do about it.

Digital natives see everyone on the equal level and are not dividing the world into hierarchies, they view the world horizontally. They cross boundaries and embrace the benefits of sharing with each other. Those values exist because of what they are driven by.

We can learn a lot about digital native generations because their world is a genuine democracy and equality. They reject centralized and control-based forms of governance. More aggressive, competitive and result-obsessed generation, the advantage is their productivity. The difference between digital natives and digital immigrants is that digital immigrants are goal oriented and digital natives are value oriented. Digital natives like to parallel process and multi-task.¹¹

⁵ Campbell, H. (2007) Who's Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet by Heidi Campbell. Journal of Computer Mediated Communications 12, 1043-1062, p.1056

⁶ Cloete, A.L. (2015, 11 February) Living in a digital culture: The need for theological reflection. Practical Theology of the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa Journal, p2

⁷ Campbell (2007) p.1050

⁸ Campbell, H. (2011) Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society. Journal of the American Academy of Religion Nov 9, pp1-30

⁹ Campbell, H. (2012) Religion and the Internet: A microcosm for studying Internet trends and implications. New Media & Society 0(0) 1-15, p9

¹⁰ Valentine, O. (2019, July 21) [How Social Media is reshaping the beauty industry](https://wearesocial.com/au/blog/2019/07/how-social-media-is-reshaping-the-beauty-industry) by Olivia Valentine We Are Social GlobalWebIndex <https://wearesocial.com/au/blog/2019/07/how-social-media-is-reshaping-the-beauty-industry>

¹¹ Cut, M. (2017, Nov 16) [Digital natives and digital immigrants — how are they different.](https://medium.com/digital-reflections/digital-natives-and-digital-immigrants-how-are-they-different-e849b0a8a1d3) Digital Reflections. <https://medium.com/digital-reflections/digital-natives-and-digital-immigrants-how-are-they-different-e849b0a8a1d3>

A History of Hopeful Innovation

As we view this landscape, with all of its challenges and seemingly unknown consequences, we should not view it as a bleak and barren Badlands to fear. Rather it can more hopefully be viewed with wonder, curiosity and expectation as we consider where God is already at work.

At the heart of the Christian faith is a God who through history moves and works via humanity to bring flourishing and blessing to the world. It is through those who step into the unknown relying on the creative force behind the universe to direct their path, that this blessing is manifest.

Genesis begins this narrative in the Garden of Eden with a God in whom is contained limitless creative power. From nothing, creation occurs and with each moment of creation comes a declaration of its goodness. Finally, on the 6th day of creation, in Gen 1:31, God views all that has been made and declares it “very good”. It is this creation that in Gen 1:29-30 is then turned over to humanity to enjoy as a blessing and to steward on God’s behalf.

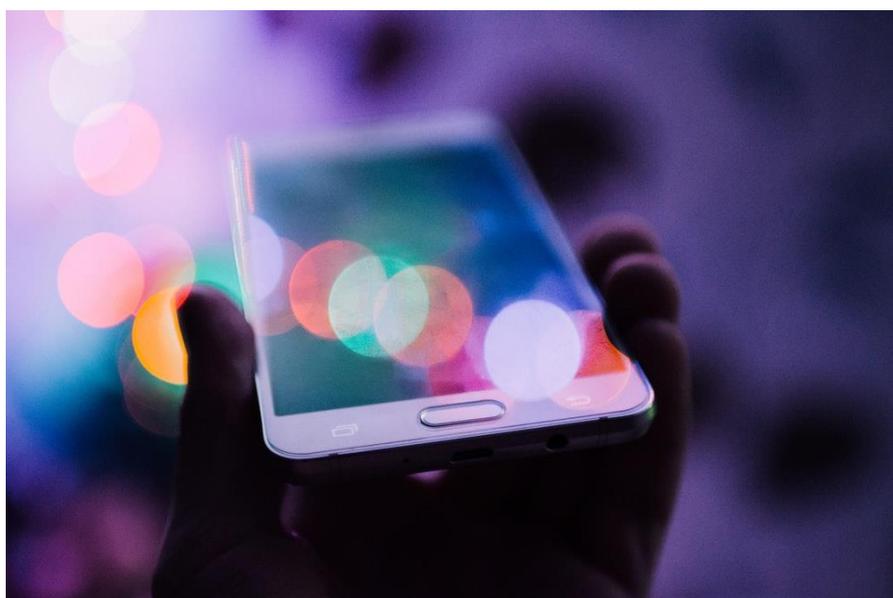
While the Genesis narrative continues with humanities failure to adhere to God’s request for faithfulness and the resulting consequences, we see in Genesis 12 a re-emergence of God’s heart for the blessing and flourishing of the world, this time through Abram. In Genesis 12:1-8 God asks Abram to leave what he has known and go to the land that he will be shown by God. In Abram’s obedience to step out into this, God’s blessing will follow for Abram but even more significantly, that blessing will be for all the people of the earth to be blessed.

This is the story that flows through the remainder of the Old Testament, the blessing flowing with those who follow God and step out in faithfulness. A blessing that is worked out in justice and reconciliation with God. A blessing that is manifest for the poor and the marginalised.

It is then in the New Testament, in Mary’s song of praise to God in Luke 1:46-55 that we see the translation of this same story into the life of Jesus. Now, God will act through an unwed peasant girl, who has stepped in faith into the unknown, to establish a new community of humble, hungry, have-nots who form an upside down kingdom that will transform the world just as had been promised to Abraham.

This then becomes Jesus platform, to take his Jewish faith and birth within it this new movement. A movement that at its heart invited people to love God and love others in the way most needed by that person in the moment they encountered them (Luke 10:25-37). To experience the mercy and blessing of God to then take that mercy and blessing to the world.

So it is that Jesus final instruction to his followers, before his ascension into heaven, in Matthew 28:16-20 is an imperative to go; To once again step into the unknown, trusting in a God who travels with them, to help the world know that there is an infinitely creative God who sees all that is created as good and seeks its redemption and flourishing for justice and reconciliation.



This is the exploration that we are invited into again today. We are invited to look with expectation and hope and to trust and go believing that the Spirit of God goes before and with us to see the Kingdom of God made real for the generations that are emerging and inhabiting this digital world.

In taking seriously this imperative of Jesus to go, throughout history, the Church has creatively appropriated whatever has been most effective to do this. For example:

- In its origins, the Early Church used the framework of Judaism as it's means of facilitating community and teaching.
- To aid with the spread of the Gospel and the expansion beyond those of the Jewish faith, we see the likes of the Apostle Paul using "alters to unknown Gods" and pagan poetry (Acts 17) to make know the story of God.
- In supporting these new communities that were being established throughout Asia minor, we also see Paul discipling these communities by way of letters delivered and shared between the communities.

As the story of Christianity has expanded and grown, it has done so by whatever means were at hand at the time. So we have seen art utilised to tell the stories of faith in a time before widespread literacy.

With the invention of the printing press came the capacity to make the Bible available to the greater population, which while met with resistance from the Church, ultimately proved to be one of the most significant changes in opening faith to the world.¹²

In an exchange (documented in The Justification of Johann Gutenberg), Gutenberg gets into a heated argument with the head monk in a monastery that has decided to expel him:

Gutenberg: 'To help men and women be literate, to give them knowledge, to make books so cheap even a peasant might afford them: that is my hope, yes.' [...]

Head monk: 'The word of God needs to be interpreted by priests, not spread about like dung.'

Gutenberg: 'I do not wish to despoil the Word.'

Head monk: 'But it will happen. To hand it about to all and sundry is languorous. Would you have ploughmen and weavers debating the Gospel in taverns?'

Gutenberg: 'If that is what they want to do.'

Head monk: 'But what of the dangers? It would be like giving a candle to infants.'¹³

Continuing through history, we find Wesley adapting secular music to make worship more accessible for the communities of which he was a part.¹⁴

What this brief reflection highlights is that the Church at this moment is again being invited to trust and follow God into a new place. The invitation is to believe that where we are going is part of the "good" creation that God has given us so that we might love God more and make that love known to a world that is desperately searching for love and community.

We need the confidence to trust that we are walking with God into this new cultural moment, as pilgrims of hope and carriers of blessing for the sake of the world in this moment in time.

¹² Chapman, J. (2018) Gutenberg's Bible: the Real Information Revolution. History Today Vol 68 Issue 10(10) 2018.

¹³ Wirtz, B. (2017, Oct 17) [Today's Techno-Panic Would have Killed the Printing Press](https://fee.org/articles/todays-techno-panic-would-have-killed-the-printing-press/). Foundation for Economic Education <https://fee.org/articles/todays-techno-panic-would-have-killed-the-printing-press/>

¹⁴ Doukhan, L. (1996) [Historical perspectives on change in worship music](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1996/09/historical-perspectives-on-change-in-worship-music). Ministry International Journal for Pastors. Sept <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1996/09/historical-perspectives-on-change-in-worship-music>

The Opportunities

In looking to the implications of this research, there would appear to be four clear areas of opportunity to be considered:

1. Digital Empowerment – upskilling existing physical Church, Schools & Agencies activities in the digital space
2. Digital Discipleship – creating and curating online discipleship resources
3. Digital Mission - Online missional engagement
4. Digital Patronage – facilitating participatory, artistic and creative leadership development

Listed below are some possible examples of what engaging in these areas could look like. They do not however constitute a definitive list of priorities, and as outlined below, they should be subject to the priorities that emerge as the result of strong participatory exploration.

1. Digital Empowerment – upskilling existing physical Church, Schools and Agencies activity in the digital space

Church online will become a front door for the curious, the sceptic and the interested. It will be the first stop for almost everyone, and a temporary resting place for people who are a little too afraid to jump in until they muster the courage to jump in through physical attendance.¹⁵

Websites are the digital foyer. Your website is the gateway for new people to discover amazing leadership, preaching and a faith of their own.¹⁶

Recommendations	Possible Options/Examples
Help Churches consider creating or maximising a digital strategy and a relevant digital presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Create a digital footprint checklist ○ Facilitate social media co-ordination and delivery ○ Train leaders in bringing digital aspects into what is already being done <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For example posting a question about the sermon topic online BEFORE preaching to invite people into the thought space ○ Uploading sermon details and additional readings and questions post sermon delivery ○ Help Churches explore online homegroup options for families & shift workers ○ Help facilitate discovery and development of potential digital leadership in their community
Partner with Educational institutions to find best practice for critical thinking and information discernment for all generations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In the midst of the overload of information supplied by the Internet, one of greatest challenges faced by all users, is practicing discernment about such issues as authenticity, motive and bias. ○ By determining and delivering resources that upskill people in the new ways of thinking for the digital era, a broader conversation regarding what it means to follow the way of Jesus in this moment in time is potentially opened up.

¹⁵ Nieuwhof, C. (2019) [5 disruptive trends that will rule 2019](https://careynieuwhof.com/5-disruptive-church-trends-that-will-rule-2019/). Carey Nieuwhof Blog. <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-disruptive-church-trends-that-will-rule-2019/>

¹⁶ Faith, A. (2019) [5 Digital Shifts That Are Impacting Church Growth](https://careynieuwhof.com/5-digital-shifts-that-are-impacting-church-growth/). Carey Nieuwhof Blog. <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-digital-shifts-that-are-impacting-church-growth/>

Case Study: Southport Church of Christ Homegroups

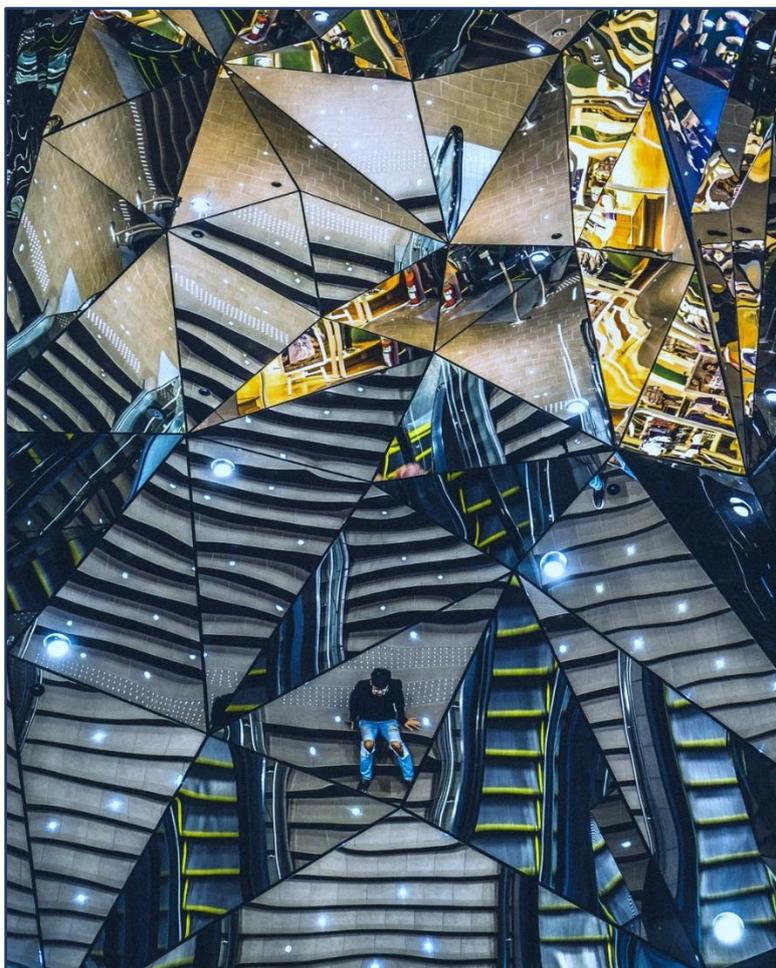
For the last two and half years, Southport Church of Christ, on the Gold Coast, has been running online homegroups as an experiment to keep parents, aged in their 20s-40s, connected with Church. Initially, the trial began with one group but has now expanded to 6, due to its growing success.

Running for an hour, on a night and at a time agreed on by the participants, the groups spend that time discussing the sermon from the previous week and talking about its application to their lives. The sermons are available online to ensure that everyone has easy access to them when they want to listen.

As a result of these online groups, the Church has found that they have gone from 0 engagements with families in home groups to more than 30. They have also found that this model works really well to keep shift workers engaged in Church community.

In addition to the online gatherings they encourage each of the groups to have some kind of physical gathering every four to six weeks at which point all the families come together to interact.

This trial has helped reduce the hurdles for busy people from staying connected with Church and continuing to grow in their faith.



2. Digital Discipleship – creating and curating online discipleship resources

Practicing Christians [aged 18-35] are investing time growing their own spirituality. In addition to praying and reading the bible, they are using another 2 to 3 resources to aid their development.

- 62% read books about faith other than scripture
- 53% listen to religious speakers or teachers on podcasts or radio
- 52% listen to worship music
- 45% are sharing or reading religious teachings on social media
- 41% watching religious speakers or teachers on video or TV¹⁷

Recommendation	Possible Options/Examples
Create and curate discipleship material for the digital age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Create and curate on-demand discipleship content in conjunction with the existing scheduled approach to the delivery of services and resources with regard to faith. ○ Such a move towards developing greater capacity in on-demand delivery, allows a shift towards assisting with point in time learning. ○ Development of increased on-demand content enables material to be used any time, any where for and by anyone. ○ Allows for a “long tail” for the material – something produced now can continue to have extensive long term benefits, outside of expected, immediate context. ○ Has the potential to reach a larger audience than simply the physical context of scheduled resources.¹⁸ ○ Finding and curating the best discipleship material digitally available, allows a gift to be given to the world. If user driven, it also invites contribution from the wider community, leveraging the networked nature of community, delivering a higher potential for “sharing” of both the resource and the hosting platform. This also aligns with Opportunity 4 below.

Case Study: A Big Year

In 2012 a group of friends who had spent their lives growing up in Church, wondered together if there was something more to following the way of Jesus than simply listening to sermons, participating in Church activities and living a moral life. This wondering led them to explore the teachings of Jesus and rediscover that following his way involved not just understanding the information about him, but living like him. The group decided that together they would take the core themes of Jesus teaching and create challenges to undertake together. These challenges would be based around the need to connect with God (monks) others who shared their faith (cheerleaders) and the wider world (activists).

They would then gather together a small group of people who would join them for 12 months in the challenge of living the way of Jesus, meeting regularly to report back on their experience and insights.

After an initial trial year, they realised that this was a genuinely engaging and life altering opportunity that they wanted to share with others and offer as widely as they could. So, with the help of a friend they digitised the material, created the Big Year App, launched a social media presence and offered it up to the world.

It is unclear how far this resource has reached and how many people have undertaken a Big Year, but the reach was never the intended result. The intended result was to take the blessing that had been experienced by the Big Year Creators and offer the opportunity up to anyone who wished to explore what living the way of Jesus might be like.

¹⁷ World Vision Australia. (2019) Millennial Study Supporting Insight into the Barna Faith for the Future Research.

¹⁸ Anderson, K. (2017) [Digital First Faith Formation](https://eformationvts.org/digital-first-faith-formation/). <https://eformationvts.org/digital-first-faith-formation/>

3. Digital Mission - Online missional engagement

I guess the way I think about this is we have all these currencies for every nation state, but if you consider the internet to be the equivalent to a nation state, it will have a currency native to itself, and there is not going to be any one party or institution that makes this happen, and there's not going to be any one party or institution that can stop it from happening. And having a global currency that is native to the internet will allow companies like ours to move much faster and reach a lot more people.

Jack Dorsey, Twitter co-founder¹⁹

Recommendation	Possible Options/Examples
<p>Consideration must be given to thinking of the Internet as a place and not a tool</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Considering the Internet as a “Nation”, rather than simply a tool, enables missional thinking to be applied to engagement in this space. ○ As a result of this, exploration of ministry in this space shifts into a more known realm. ○ Work can be done as anthropologists to consider where points of grace already exist in the culture that can highlight the Good News of God’s engagement in the world. ○ Most significantly, space must be held and room created for the possibility of digital only faith communities that facilitate the Good News of Gods engagement in all of the world, to be created for the digital natives who inhabit this Nation. ○ Individuals are already undertaking this work as they see the immense need and the enormous possibility that exists ○ Opportunity exists to identify, network and support these individuals as they undertake this work as missionaries on a new frontier.



¹⁹ Detrixhe, J. (2019, June 14) [Jack Dorsey says now is our chance to build a global currency for the internet](https://qz.com/1642172/jack-dorsey-on-bitcoin-facebooks-crypto-and-the-end-of-cash/). Quartz. <https://qz.com/1642172/jack-dorsey-on-bitcoin-facebooks-crypto-and-the-end-of-cash/>

Case Study: Crossroads Church

[Crossroads Non-Denominational Church](#) began in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1996 with a heart for connecting people to the way of Jesus and creating a safe space to wrestle with the big questions about God. Over the last 23 years Crossroads has expanded to become a multi-site congregation in 14 different locations.

About 4 years ago, Crossroads began exploring what it would mean for them to become a Church in the digital world. This journey was prompted by a realisation that expanding physical church campuses was a financially draining exercise. More significantly however they realised that if they couldn't connect online with those who had no Church connection, there was very little chance that they would ever simply turn up at one of their physical campuses. What they realised was that the centre point of community had shifted from the Church to the digital world and that they as a Church needed to be exploring what it meant to be a life bringing part of this new communal core.

This realisation enabled them to begin to creatively play in the digital space, driven by a missional impetus that they needed to be as accessible as possible, to as many people as possible. They began to consider what an Air B&B, share economy, approach to creating faith communities would look like. As a result, they began live video-streaming their full weekend services, as well as making them available on their website and YouTube channels for on-demand viewing. More recently they have created a mobile App for young people to more simply access their content and to create space to help users create positive habits such as prayer and bible reading.

What they also intuited was that in creating this digital content, they were not just delivering a Church service but creating "long tail" discipleship resources that could engage and nurture their Church community, Christians outside of their community and provide an entry point for those asking questions of life and faith.

What this online presence has resulted in for Crossroads, is that members of their physical campuses have actually increased in their commitment and participation in the Church community. It has also resulted in online community participants making decisions to follow the way of Jesus, evidenced through their participation in Baptism.

For Matt Welty, Crossroads Digital Strategy Leader, one of the key ideas is that what they are doing is playing, learning and exploring what the new normal might look like for "church". Central to this is a willingness on the part of the leadership of the Church to create the space for what they are doing to breathe, grow and adapt as they venture into this new space and do everything they can to help people connect with and follow the way of Jesus.



4. Digital Patronage – facilitating participatory, artistic and creative leadership development

“I’m hopeful that in 20 years, as art shifts and artists help to lead the way, that institutions begin to be, not just intentional, but more thoughtful about the different ways that art can be presented, and that would require a more inclusive, not just curatorial staff, but also leadership.”²⁰

Recommendation	Possible Options/Examples
<p>If a collaborative, participatory approach is taken to implementing a digital missional strategy, a number of significant opportunities emerge</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Digital natives are already creating content in all manner of artistic ways. Inviting their contribution to this conversation invites them to see that their gifts and passions have a place within the Church. ○ It opens up the opportunity for imagination to be re-engaged within the Church as new creative endeavours are undertaken. ○ It potentially allows discipling relationships to be formed between younger and older members of the faith community as they work together to explore this new space. ○ It provides greater opportunities for leadership development and opportunity for the potential 49% of church attendees who currently don’t feel that they have a leadership or ministry role within their Church²¹

Case Study: Ecks story

Ecks is a 27 year old woman from Brisbane who is part of a well established, traditional, Uniting Church community. She began attending Church over 2 years ago as she searched for a new way of being in the world, after becoming disillusioned with the answers to life she was receiving from the cultural group that she was in.

Since childhood Ecks has had a very strong digital engagement, which has continued through to today. What this has meant is that as Ecks has begun to explore her new faith in Jesus, she has sought out Christian’s in all of the spaces that she engages in, particularly the digital space. This has resulted in her joining a Christian Guild within the online game World of Warcraft. It has also meant that in her desire to form strong habits around her faith that she has joined a faith community in Habitica, an online and App based community that allows you to gamify your life and struggle with other people to create habits.

In addition to engaging in these broader online Christian groups, Ecks is also a digital creator. With a deep interest in mindfulness and meditative reflection, Ecks has begun exploring creating online guided meditations to help those struggling to find acceptance and experience love. She also utilises Instagram to post images of her daily experience of faith. Within her Church, she has been given opportunity to host a series of mindfulness talks and guided meditations through the Lenten period.

All of this is part of her desire to integrate her faith into every aspect of her life and create both a physical and virtual community that explores together the reality of living the way of Jesus in this moment. Her desire is to create safe and inclusive spaces grounded in humility, with a listening posture that invites dialogue and curiosity.

She believes that this kind of space is vital for the vast number of people seeking answers to questions about life and faith where their initial engagement will be in the digital environment.

²⁰ Maldonado, D.V. (2019, April 23). [What will art look like in 20 years?](http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20190418-what-will-art-look-like-in-20-years). BBC Culture. <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20190418-what-will-art-look-like-in-20-years>

²¹ NCLS Research Profile Comparing Uniting Church Qld Attenders by Age Group Report 2017. p6

The Way Forward

The Internet is the newest, most rapidly expanding and, from a faith perspective, least explored frontier in the world today.

To be true to the call of God to go into all the world and make disciples, this is a space where the Church must be.

However, to most effectively engage in this space and create the best environment for positive outcomes, there are a number of key considerations to be addressed.

Initially, there must be a clear sense and agreement by the right leaders around **why** engagement in the digital world is important.

If strategically engaging in the digital world can be identified as a part of the continuing story of being a pilgrim people, called to love God, self and neighbour for the flourishing of the world, then that must form the basis for whatever action follows.

Once agreement on the motive for engagement is determined, this must serve as a compass that allows exploration to begin. Such exploration cannot be wholly about reaching predetermined locations, but stepping into a true expedition expecting the God who calls us into the unknown to lead.

Central to the success of this exploration is a willingness to utilise networked collaboration, heavily informed and resourced by the intended end users, those encountered on the journey. This journey requires a new approach to leadership and systems, harnessing the power of organic structure and self-organising teams.²²

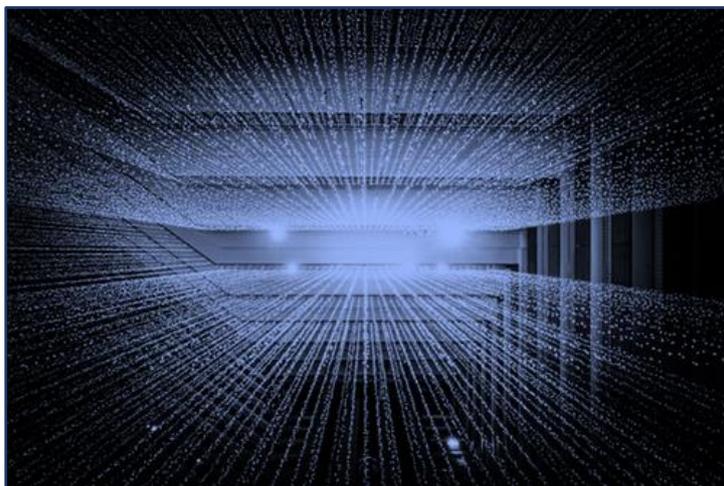
This approach requires a long-term commitment with a high tolerance for “failing forward”, adopting emergent practices that are highly flexible enabling new solutions and unexpected outcomes to emerge.

For this to occur, what is needed at an organisational level is a Digital Missional Strategist to “hold space” for this work to be undertaken. Such a role would exist to oversee exploration of the four key areas of Digital Empowerment, Discipleship, Mission and Patronage. This role would not be expected to deliver all the determined outcomes in these areas, but to establish the right groups of people throughout the Uniting Church of Qld, and beyond, to do so.

The role would also be required to serve as an advocate, when required, to draw people back to the compass point of why the work is being undertaken and champion the work areas across the Movement.

As we, the Church, make our way through the frontier that is the Twenty First Century, we walk a path that while entirely new is at the same moment ancient. A path of hope and trust in the God who is constantly creating and blessing for the flourishing of humanity.

This is our moment to consider what this means for the digital world that lies before us. A place where God already is and to where he calls us to confidently go.



²² Laloux, F. (2014) Reinventing Organisations.

Appendix 1: Future Questions and Potential challenges

The following questions are listed as areas for further investigation. While significant, they were deemed to be beyond the scope of this initial report into the possibilities of engaging in the digital world.

<p><i>Will online faith communities & expressions dilute “In Real Life” faith communities?</i></p>	<p>Research is showing that presence of online religious groups and spaces aren’t reducing IRL participation but actually allowing it to remain steady as members are able to find connection points online that in the past might have caused them to leave a Church.^{23 24}</p> <p>This however may be something that will need to be explored further to provide certainty for those undertaking this journey.</p>
<p><i>How can the Church online be considered “real” church?</i></p>	<p>There are two key questions that need some agreement around in helping this project to succeed:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A definition of what the Church is 2. An understanding of its purpose <p>Exploring the answers to these questions must not limit the ability to commence this endeavour, but should be sought as part of the willingness to look with curiosity and a beginners mind at they mean in praxis in the digital world.</p>
<p><i>What about the Sacraments?</i></p>	<p>This too is a question that will need a resolution but would be best worked out in the joyous event of practical need, rather than theory.</p> <p>This is a piece of work that is already being undertaken by key scholars and practitioners around the world whose wisdom can be drawn on, when required.^{25 26}</p> <p>Ultimately, if the heart of the Gospel is to connect humanity back to God, and creation of online communities are viewed as a means of accomplishing this, it must be argued that a workable solution can be found.</p>
<p><i>Are we feeding the consumer mentality and encouraging a lack of commitment to Church communities by providing online platforms?</i></p>	<p>What is actually being found in the Churches engaging online, is that commitment is increasing as the result of online opportunities to connect both with services and small groups.²⁷</p> <p>Part of this success is coming from investing in dedicated online pastors who are able to create the opportunity for better building of healthy relationships and conversation from passive consumers of digital content to active followers of the way of Jesus.²⁸</p> <p>This question is also potentially answered by better understanding the purpose of Church and considering how all forms of Church are performing in this way.</p>

²³ Campbell (2012)

²⁴ Kranda, J. (2019) [This is why you should care about online Church](https://play.acast.com/s/thechurchleaderspodcast/bc409ff6ca654a3b9625e2f9b67fa9b6). 12 June 2019. ChurchLeaders.com
<https://play.acast.com/s/thechurchleaderspodcast/bc409ff6ca654a3b9625e2f9b67fa9b6>

²⁵ Dereck M & Armstrong M.J. (2019, April 12) [Digital Ecclesiology Round Table](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57759952f5e231b6a29263c5/t/5da93f1084400e460a076927/1571372817416/Digital+Ecclesiology+Transcript.pdf).
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57759952f5e231b6a29263c5/t/5da93f1084400e460a076927/1571372817416/Digital+Ecclesiology+Transcript.pdf>

²⁶ Mullins, T. J (2011). [Online Church: A Biblical Commentary](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1467&context=doctoral). Doctor of Ministry Project for Liberty Theological Seminary.
<https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1467&context=doctoral>

²⁷ Dereck M & Armstrong M.J. (2019)

²⁸ Kranda, J. (2019)

<p><i>What about child safe issues?</i></p>	<p>This is a great question that needs to be considered with the appropriate expert input to ensure that what is undertaken is compliant with all appropriate regulations.</p> <p>What must be considered though is the challenge that arises with the global nature of the internet and that regardless of what is undertaken here in Australia to ensure the safety of children, there is no way of controlling any of the other material that is being accessed by young people.</p> <p>This is where some of the elements of the opportunity to engage in Digital Empowerment also become highly significant in educating people with regard to digital engagement.</p>
--	---