

# Strategically Digital Church

*Local church communities in the past were large enough for professionals to meet each other and discuss their work and faith. Mike Clargo suggests that new digital professional communities can include Christian debate and so attract professionals to the faith.*

## Introduction

There was a time when most people in a community would hear something in their church that they could immediately apply, not just to everyday life, but specifically to their work responsibilities. Where they could turn to the person sat next to them and gain practical, God-given, insight on a professional dilemma they were wrestling with. Where they could invite colleagues sure in the knowledge they would hear something they would immediately value, because the topics, the language, the examples used all related to that work in ways people could immediately understand.

My prayer is that our new-found insights into the world of online communities will empower the possibility that Church can again function in that way.

## Jesus speaks in a community's language

Until quite recently, in historical terms, communities were settlements of people who were directly engaged with, influenced by, dependent on, or supporting others in a specific field of work.

When Jesus spoke to such people, he deliberately used fishing and farming examples in the communities that were centred around these things. You can see this in many of the parables.

And I imagine that, even as recently as the 1960s, pastors in coal-mining, potteries, manufacturing, steel-making, weaving, and shipbuilding communities did much the same thing, and reflected Jesus' teaching in stories that were immediately relevant to what that community was currently facing.

Church delivered meaning and value. Not just for the elderly and the domestically focused. But also for those who drove and enabled the direction of the community and the morality that underpinned it. The churches were full, by today's standards at least. The Bible and God's purposes were a big topic of conversation and directly relevant to the most important topics of the day. People grew to know God as the leading authority in their professional disciplines and choices, and sought to listen to him.

Whilst professions have changed and multiplied since those times, and are changing still, God is still the leading authority in each of their disciplines and dilemmas. He reveals himself not

only through the Bible but through his Spirit and the technical and professional revelations and insights he gives his followers in each profession (few as they may be). They know what God is trying to say to them about the right way to proceed and the struggles their colleagues are going through.

## The changing nature of community

But the communities themselves don't know that. They rarely get to hear that insight.

Community is far more complex in 2022 than it was even in 2000. Many of us are part of multiple communities. Some of those communities will be geographically based, but so many more are based around shared interests, causes, professions, endeavours, projects or businesses.

And increasingly we are engaging with those communities through online events. One positive impact of the pandemic is the way it has accelerated our use of Zoom and Teams to increase our participation in these communities. As a result of all of this, even pre-pandemic, the communities many people most align and identify with are professional or interest-based.



In respect of geographic community, for a significant proportion of the members, mainly those in professions and active careers, it is often little more than a dormitory. People move for their work, many don't know their neighbours, their 'settlement' is little more than that – a place to 'settle' for convenience – the place where their house and children's school are located. If they are looking for deeper levels of guidance, insight, inclusion, and support, it is more likely to be concerned with their professional or interest communities. And they get that guidance, insight, inclusion, and support through those non-geographically based communities.

## Who speaks to the new communities?

But usually there is no Church to those communities. Instead that guidance, insight, inclusion, and support is far more likely to be informed by yoga, mindfulness, secularism, humanism, science, or even New Age ideas, depending on the community and the influencers within it.

But not by the wisdom of Jesus. True, those of us who are Christians in these professions do seek to share his wisdom with those 'around' us. However, without an obviously relevant community to draw them into, they struggle to make all the connections that are needed for their step of faith. And while there are excellent Christian support groups covering a number of professions, these are designed primarily to serve existing Christians in those communities. They are not equipped to support the existing models of how people come to faith.

Conversely, if non-Christians from those communities do turn up to church in their geographic community, they are unlikely to hear something in a form that is immediately and obviously relevant to their current business preoccupations. In all probability, based on what we see and hear, they are unlikely to register anything which will bring them back next week. That is understandable. How can a village church realistically tailor themselves to the needs and examples of over 120 professions?

## The wrong picture of Jesus

So, not hearing anything that is vocationally relevant, they continue to assume Jesus is only for the poor, the sick, the domestic, those grounded in antiquated traditions. "Let's face it, what does a 2000 year-old God know about digitalisation, embryology, utility planning, business strategy?"

The answer, of course, is 'everything'. But it is very unlikely they will be convinced of that in a geographically local church. Not through the worship, or the prayers, or the sermon, or the liturgy, or the gathering afterwards. As a result, they won't get to meet the professionally advanced Jesus in the words, insights and actions of those around them. They won't come to be surprised by how much he knows and how relevant that is. Yes they can see it if they try hard, but in most cases they don't do that.

## A church to every community

But what if there were digital community churches covering the whole country, 120 or more of them, each

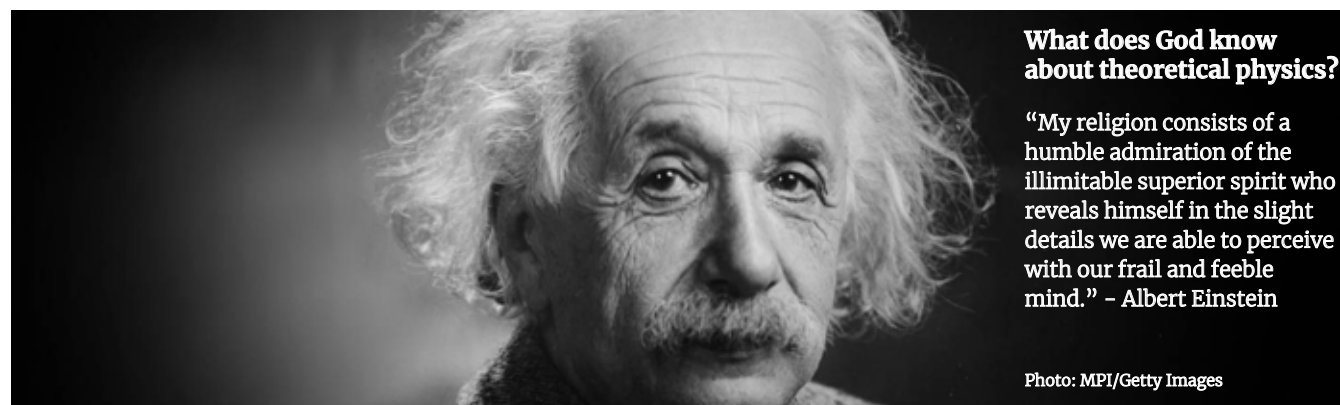
covering on a national basis a different profession or large interest group, and meeting online like we did in lockdown? Each of which meets regularly over the internet to pray and preach on topics, and in a language that is immediately relevant to each vocation and its current challenges. Each with a critical mass of attendance, and where you could feel confident that your invited non-Christian colleague will hear (and recognise) something of personal value to them.

Of course, this is not actually a new idea. The local church has been doing it all through the pandemic, and with ideas like Little Worship Mothers and Toddler groups, Messy Church, etc. it is reaching out to communities of shared interest within the geographic community using this model. And the general church community is achieving this also for those whose focus is within the community, such as retirees, schools, retail etc., which in many cases it is doing very well, and it continues to attract people with these interests in the ways described in the previous paragraph.

Furthermore, the make-up of their congregations are increasingly reflecting those they are succeeding in serving in this way. But in many cases, this does not include those with strong professional interests. And it is for those we need to consider a national digital model.

## An online component

But how would this work for people in those communities? Do we really want to return to online church? You cannot hug someone through a computer screen, or share bread and wine, can you?



### What does God know about theoretical physics?

"My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind." – Albert Einstein

Photo: MPI/Getty Images

My response to that is, that just like we are now part of multiple communities, we can also be part of multiple (two at least) churches. One relevant to the decisions that you are called to make to impact society (and thereby the Kingdom). And one where you can cuddle up close.

The second type of church community (our current physical model) will make far more sense to those who are currently non-Christians once they have had the opportunity to really understand how great God is ... in their own field.

Jesus exhorted us to go and make disciples of all nations (Greek *ethnē*). But the nature of ethnology has evolved. If we think of tribes as a "social division in a society consisting of communities linked by social ... or economic ties, with a common culture and dialect" then professions are pretty much up there. We need churches which share God's love in the language of their culture and dialect, so that he can be properly understood by them. As with Philip's Ethiopian, this is key to discipleship.

## Practical steps forward

So how do we do it in practice?

Like all new things, it is highly likely that our initial attempts to create digital community churches will be more of a learning exercise than a sure-fire hit first time around. But we have to start somewhere, and where we start will help us better understand and share what works, and to improve it with the experience of others.

Furthermore, the most obvious initial steps are likely to be a happy

combination of a connection between an existing church community and a critical mass of professional interests. This is most likely to occur in the bigger city churches, an example of which would be HTB's engagement with the legal professions. Here an online church could be hosted by the local church, but extending its reach through networks within that profession.

In other cases, it may be a Christian interest group within a profession who can see the value in reaching out to others in that profession through creating some of their meetings as 'Church' in the manner described above.

However, in both cases, the next steps are unlikely to be taken until the particular group of Christian professionals takes seriously the need to create a Church to their wider professional community. After all, without such a perspective and intent, it is frankly easier to keep on doing what they are doing just for themselves. So we need either foresighted communities, or a movement of some sort, to help this to happen – and probably both.


Ultimately, I believe such a movement will be best served by creating something akin to a non-geographic digital diocese. This could be either within a particular denomination or, more helpfully, an ecumenical partnership. Such a step would serve three important purposes: it would galvanise and validate people in their attempts to initiate and grow digital community churches; it would serve as an agency to promote and support their creation; and it would provide a means for oversight of them.

## Clarion call

The people in the communities that our proposed digital community churches would serve will prove key to addressing the massive challenges of the 21st century. And whether they know it yet or not, they are desperately in need of God's wisdom, love and calling in tackling these effectively.

In John 4:21-24, Jesus explained that where we worship is virtually irrelevant in comparison to how we worship. God is not bound by buildings and locations, and therefore neither should our individual and collective worship of him be. The developments of the 21st century will inevitably see the fulfilment of this in ways his first century followers could not have imagined. The question is: will we be leading this strategically, or simply dragging our feet in the rear?

If we are to 'go and make disciples of all *ethnē*', and our strategy is 'a church to every community', the challenges of this century – and God's technical provision for it – provide a great place to start. But it is already clear that things are quickly falling out of control, and we, as a Church, still have much to do to get our act together in this space.

Each of us needs to consider whether our situation, our current professional and church groups, provide the basis of a platform for piloting such digital community churches. We need to encourage our current church leadership to actively engage in thinking this through and promoting it. We need to pray, and we need to take the initiative. And the reality is, we need to start now. 



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*He is passionate about gaining a better balance between the potential of the new and the potential of tradition in achieving God's purposes, and in better reflecting the reality that God is far in advance of our thinking.*