Digital Discipleship & Evangelism

A practical guide for outreach, community service, growth and evangelism for conferences, local churches, and personal ministries.

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Table of Contents

• Introduction

• Definition of Terms: What is Digital Discipleship and Evangelism?

• Why Is Digital Discipleship and Evangelism Needed?

• The Digital Discipleship and Evangelism Model

• Turning Your Digital Influence into Global Impact
Introduction

This guidebook reframes what you may already know regarding discipleship and evangelism with updates to reflect the realities of a digital-centric social structure. These concepts are nothing new, and in fact, these ideas are built on the shoulders of history’s evangelistic giants for application in the modern world. This book serves as a practical guide for applying Biblical concepts of effective discipleship and evangelism in the digital space. We must rethink how we share the gospel message to effectively utilize the innovative tools and technologies freely available to all of us. The platforms and tools will change, but the principles will not, because they are all grounded in Biblical examples.

Local churches are uniquely positioned to combine traditional methods with technology to amplify the gospel message throughout the greater community. Merging the two allows us to be more effective at serving people locally and creating meaningful connections. Digital communication strategies are highly customizable to your organization’s needs and mission. How these strategies play out in your congregation will depend entirely on the members of your congregation, your resources (human, financial, and available technologies), and what makes the most sense for your community.

Individually, we are all called to discipleship, and in the modern world, that means putting Jesus on display in our sphere of influence, both digital and analog. It doesn't matter if you have 4 or 40,000 friends or followers online; you have influence. How we use our social influence matters. This series will also outline how individuals can use their creativity alongside technical skills as well as the digital tools you hold in your hand for kingdom building.

This guide seeks to act as a catalyst for a cultural shift towards prioritizing technology in the Seventh-day Adventist Church at all levels. We can revolutionize ministry delivery through use of innovative technology. To accomplish this, we must start with recognizing the need for and legitimacy of digital mission work. The Social Media + Big Data department is pleased to share with you a model and provide recommendations on how the Church can embrace digital evangelism and discipleship at an individual, church, and corporate level.
Definition of Terms
What is Digital Evangelism? What is Digital Discipleship? What Does It Mean to Be a Digital Missionary?

With the explosion of creative and tech savvy Christians trying their hand at digital mission work, many new terms have been added to the Christian vocabulary to describe this type of ministry. To make sure we understand the differences and similarities between them, it is worth taking time to create clear definitions. As children of God we are all called to do His work, and many find it useful to define their practical role in sharing the gospel—helping to shape their goals, find purpose, and communicate their mission to others.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

**evangelism**

*noun*

evan·ge·lism | \i-ˈvan-ja-lə-zəm\ 

Evangelism is generally understood as the act of publicly preaching the gospel and the teachings of Jesus Christ to persuade people to adopt a Christian worldview. The word *evangelist* comes from the Koine Greek word εὐαγγέλιον (transliterated as euangelion) and originally meant a reward given to the messenger for good news but later came to just mean “good news” ([Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelism)).

Evangelism, then, by extension, can be understood as publicly sharing the good news. The way it is packaged and delivered may change, but as long as the gospel is being shared, it is evangelism.

Digital marketing is the promotion of products, services, causes, or ideas in the online space using digital technologies and tools such as the internet, social media, paid display ads, website platforms, and mobile phones.

Therefore, *digital evangelism* is defined as promoting the good news of the gospel and the teachings of Jesus Christ in the digital space using corresponding technologies to persuade others to adopt Christian beliefs. A *digital evangelist* is one who engages in digital evangelism as defined above.

With this in mind, how should digital discipleship be defined?
disciple

noun

dis-ci-ple | di-sī-pəl |

Definition of disciple according to Merriam-Webster: one who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another.

In this context, a digital disciple is one who accepts and assists in the spreading of the doctrines of Christ through the use of digital tools in the digital space. However, digital discipleship is not limited to digital spaces but can, and often should, intersect with the physical world through the services offered. If we follow Jesus’ example as a model for discipleship, we should expand this definition to include showing genuine interest in people and seeking to fulfill their mental, physical, and spiritual needs before inviting them to follow Christ and adopt His principles.

To do that, we have modified the definition of digital discipleship, as first presented by Rachel Lemons Aitken, Digital Discipleship in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, to be:

Digital discipleship: a way to build relationships, meet the needs of the community, and advance the gospel message in the digital space, around a digital need or by utilizing a digital tool.

missionary

noun

mis-sion-ary | mi-sha-ner-ē |

Definition of missionary according to Merriam-Webster: a person who undertakes a religious mission.

Religious missions are traditionally seen as a means to promote Christianity, or another religion, in a foreign country. However, a digital missionary is one who shares their faith and beliefs in the digital space with digital tools and technologies, without being physically confined to a single geographical location. Digital missions are evangelistic campaigns that leverage digital tools and spaces for the distinct purpose of attracting converts to the faith. Digital evangelists, disciples, and missionaries all engage in digital mission work.
Digital bible workers utilize digital technologies to share the gospel and stimulate religious thought by creating and packaging content that addresses relevant needs/questions and encourages people to advance in their spiritual journey. Digital bible workers build relationships with those in the broader community, online and offline, and usually within a specific geo-location territory, in order to create opportunities for one-on-one or small group Bibles studies held in person or via digital tools. They work in partnership with a local church and pastor to evaluate the needs of a community and determine relevant opportunities for outreach and service. They mentor converts in their development of Christian character and commitment to faith as well as train and equip new members for active discipleship roles. This role encompasses a mix of digital discipleship and evangelism to bridge the gap between working in the digital mission field and achieving real-world impact. Click here for a sample position description.
Why Is Digital Discipleship and Evangelism Needed?
Digital discipleship and evangelism are ways to activate the social influence of a church membership, building bridges to the local community, developing a meaningful understanding of felt needs, and determining relevant ways to serve the community (both in and outside the church). It's also a strategy to scale up friendship evangelism and empower individuals to be actively involved in the larger goals and mission of your church.

It’s a way to reach seekers, especially young seekers.

As of 2017, the average person spends around two hours a day on social media, which adds up to 5 years and 4 months spent over a lifetime. When social media was ranked against other daily activities, it revealed that the average person will spend almost three times as much time socializing on social media as opposed to socializing in person. The average adult spends most of their waking hours behind a screen for work, entertainment, education, and socializing.
These averages are across all age demographics. When we only look at people under 30, a dramatic increase in social and screen time spent is observed. Teens can occupy upwards of **9 hours a day on social media** or **behind a screen**. However, millennials can spend up to **18 hours a day consuming media** in the form of movies, podcasts, social media, video games, reading, etc. This is an astounding amount of time spent on digital devices. Research studies vary, but it's clear that increased use is only limited by the confines of a 24-hour day, and basic human needs such as sleep.

Only **20% of Americans regularly attend church**, and only **2 in 10 millennials consider regular church attendance important**. If we consider time spent “in church,” a member who
attends twice a week for a worship service and one other event only engages for four to five hours a week. How we respond to this reality either represents a challenge or an untapped opportunity. These statistics may seem bleak for our mission, but there’s another way to look at the situation.

**How can we reach the 80%?** Simple. We go and meet them where they spend their time, not where we want them to be. We have nine or more hours a day to connect with them. Part of this effort must utilize digital technologies to better understand behavior and needs before creating programs or resources that satisfy our assumptions about our target audience.

**People are googling for God.**

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Each year there are millions of Google searches for answers to questions like:

- Is God real?
- What happens when we die?
- How do I know I’m saved?
- Why is there so much suffering in the world?

There is a great need for the Adventist message of hope and wholeness. Many people are hurting, entertaining suicidal thoughts, or feel there is no hope for their situation. They turn to the internet for companionship, understanding, information, anonymity, and more. It’s easier for them to pour their hearts out online than it is to come to a friend, neighbor, co-worker, or family member.

Thirty thousand people search the keywords “church online” every month, and they mostly find opportunities to watch people in a building. People searching for answers need more than a program to watch.

At any given time, 22-28% of people are in crisis in the United States and Canada, says Samuel Neves, Associate Director of Communications, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This amounts to 80 million+ people who need support. Crisis can be defined as loss of a loved one, illness, divorce, loss of a job, depression, drug addition, food insecurity, etc. For those who search for answers and comfort online, who is there to answer their questions and help them spiritually?

In addition, Neves says, the two main content categories people search online alone are religion and pornography. Both search categories are related to the need for relationships and connection. How can we steer seekers in a healthy direction?

90% of surveyed people have used social media to communicate with a brand, and millennials prefer to reach out to an organization via social media rather than traditional channels like
phone or email. This brings me to my next point: not everyone is ready to come to church; some are not even ready to discuss their issues in person. Over four million people visit North American Division church/ministry websites each year, and countless more engage on social media. The Church can be a voice that answers back to those seeking help through these channels and help open a door for a seeker’s spiritual experience.

The digital mission field is vast and not restricted by geographical locations. **42% of the world’s population** is on social media, and **77% of Americans** are on social media. Every inhabited continent is represented in the digital space. While Christianity is on the decline in the West, it has never been easier to reach people. I believe the next Great Awakening will be a digital one, and reaching the digital mission field is our generation’s great commission.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).
The Digital Discipleship and Evangelism Model
A model for everyday ministry to real people and how to use social influence for kingdom building as it was demonstrated through the life of Jesus Christ.

**During His three-and-a-half-year ministry, He:**

- shared stories
- shared Godly (and scripture-based) wisdom
- attended to people's needs, physically and spiritually
- answered people's questions regarding spiritual matters and everyday challenges
- gave them hope
- created community
- developed an engaged/active church body
- lead people to wholeness
- equipped people to be disciples and to replicate the model He developed.

This model, when used for digital discipleship and evangelism, is a way we can follow Jesus’ example, while utilizing modern tools and technologies. This approach is integrated, weaving traditional (analog) methods together with digital tools to magnify the scale of our efforts for wider impact in the physical world. For now, we’re going to break down the digital components of the model. Later in this guidebook, we’ll explore how digital can work together with traditional methods in the modern world.

**Credit:** Digital Discipleship in the Seventh-day Adventist Church modified by Jamie Domm, Digital Strategist for the North American Division
In this model:

- **Content creators** are those who package the gospel message and teachings of Jesus into various digital friendly formats such as: video, blogs, images, podcasts, etc.
- **Distributors** are organizations or individuals who use digital tools and technologies to share content within their sphere of digital influence.
- **Engagers** are empathic individuals within an organization, or operating independently, who engage in online conversations for the purpose of building meaningful relationships, better understanding needs, and determining meaningful ways to serve others in the community.

The two-way arrow in the chart indicates the overlap of skills and duties found within any ministry or church, as well as the necessity to curate digital content contributed by members (individuals or organizations) engaged in outreach and fellowship (distribution and engagement). Every organization should develop a strategic plan for digital outreach that covers these basic three elements. Individuals fall into at least one of the three categories but may serve in multiple capacities. Later in this guide we will unpack each of these categories in-depth and provide practical steps for implementation.

Individuals who are seeking to serve as digital missionaries can fulfill all these roles on their own or work within a network of digital missionaries to optimize reach, build community, and share content. By creating an ecosystem of digital missionaries, they can capitalize on each other’s areas of specialty through mutual collaboration and shared social influence. A group of digital missionaries can learn as a group and adapt to changing technologies, increasing their ability to address relevant topics in a timely manner.
Organizations can provide structure for content creation that reflects the official mission and branding of a ministry. An organization should also develop a system for distribution internally and externally, as well as determine ways to tap into the reach potential of its members. Ministries can also set up teams of engagers who work within the brand structure to strengthen the relationships within the church community and/or who are trained to act independently as disciples, developing relationships outside of the Church for the purpose of evangelism. These organizations can also interact within the larger organizational structure of the Church to create a multilayered ecosystem of content creators, distributors, and engagers.

Each organizational level both creates and distributes content through their digital channels: up the chain, down the chain, and to the external audience. Each formal organization should also have a team of engagers to interact with the online community. In terms of the local conference and churches, the role of the engager will need to go beyond the digital space for in-person experiences.
The function of each layer of the Church can be summarized as follows:

- **The Division** serves in a creative role that specializes in developing sharable content, helping people solve problems, and addressing felt needs of those within the Adventist Church, as well as seekers. The goal is to share the gospel in relevant and culturally meaningful ways. The Division distributes this content down to the various levels of the Church’s structure and to targeted individuals. A team of engagers actively responds to messages and builds community online to cultivate meaningful relationships with those it serves, bridging the gap between the individual and the perceived corporate brand.

- Each **union and mission** creates and curates relevant content (from the Division, ministries, and other resources) for its territory, with a distribution mechanism up to the Division and down to its conferences with a people-care team (engagers) dedicated to building relationships with members and the community it serves.

- Each **conference** is responsible for creating and curating content (from the Division, union, local churches, ministries, etc.) relevant to the needs of the churches, members, and communities it serves, distributing content and resources up to its union and out to its churches and communities. At the same time, it develops a care team (engagers) dedicated to building relationships with members and the community it serves. In the case of digital evangelism efforts, each role also endeavors to bring people to a real-world, in-person experiences through connections with relevant programs, bible studies, services, and more.

- The **local church** can repurpose and create spiritual content to help move people through their spiritual journey, as well as address local and member needs, help solve problems, and seek to directly improve the well-being of the community. A church’s distribution focus will be highly targeted to a geographical location and should leverage the social influence of its members. A committed team of engagers can build a 24/7 church experience for members and local community alike that answers questions and addresses felt needs in a timely and meaningful way.

- **Individual members** of a church can serve in one or more roles as content creators (creatives), distributors, and engagers. As creatives, individuals can help package and develop church content in ways that are directly relevant to the community it serves. As distributors, the church body can function as a reach vehicle to their extended contacts by sharing and engaging with content. Empathic persons well suited to engagement can serve to strengthen the community within and outside the church. Individuals may also have their own personal ministry separate from their participation in the local church. Digital disciples can use their digital influence to share their thoughts, perspectives,
testimonies, and faith experiences with their connections, while also proactively building relationships and improving the wellbeing of those they engage with through digital tools.

The Adventist Church should be on the cutting edge of preaching and teaching present truth. We have around 1.2 million members in the North American Division. What if every church (approximately 5,500) became a digital missions hub with those 1.2 million members also serving as creatives, distributors, and engagers? We, as the Church body, could work together as content creators, engagers, and distributors to generate a mighty voice for sharing the gospel message. There is a significant amount of untapped potential when you consider the social influence of every individual, church, ministry, school, conference, union, etc. We could overwhelm our corner of the digital space with truth, hope, and wholeness.

In order to catch up and realize this dream, we must prioritize technology at all levels of the Church’s structure. We must become as effective as secular organizations in getting our message out and reaching our target audiences.
Turning Digital Influence Into Global Impact
I am often asked if digital communications can really make a global impact when only around 42% (as of June 2019) of the world’s population is on social media. This question always reminds me of one of my first campaigns for the Church.

In the summer of 2016, I worked with “Your Best Pathway to Health” to help create community awareness for the free mega-health clinic that was coming to Beckley, WV, the heart of Appalachia. A quick search in Facebook Ads manager revealed that around 200K people within 50 miles of the convention center where the clinic would take place, were on Facebook. With a small budget of $200, I started a community awareness ad campaign targeted at those living within driving distance of Beckley. This digital effort was part of a larger multi-channel campaign that included newspaper ads, 30K+ hand-out flyers, and other traditional media.

Can We Really Reach Those People?
It is said that “familiarity breeds contempt” or, at least, presumptuous behavior. Soon after launching the campaign, I received a call from a long-time friend who felt very strongly that I was out of line to use Church funds for this digital campaign, and that I was out of touch with the realities of this community. After all, “this was Appalachia, and those people don't even have running water and electricity.” After two hours of conversation, I still call her friend, because this was a teaching and learning moment. I had an opportunity to share the potential this technology offers for our mission, as well as gain a better understanding of the cultural paradigm I was up against (in terms of encouraging the Church to embrace digital strategies and the perceptions that may result). What she didn't know was that I made a decision based on data and not assumptions about the “least of these.” In fact, she didn't know that I had been raised in the same economic class she felt I was so disconnected from.

I asked her one simple question: do you know someone who is not on social media? She said yes. I followed up with something like, “If you saw an online advertisement about free medical treatment with no strings attached, and you knew they needed help, would you tell them?” Without hesitation, she responded, “Of course!” One question and response summarized my strategy.

What I had done was make a strategic decision to activate the sharing power of the 200K people who were online and, most likely, connected to others in the community who were not on social media. It’s human nature to share a good thing when we see it, especially with those we care about who need the services offered.
According to an extensive study conducted by the *New York Times*, **94% of people share content online because “they feel the content will improve the lives” of others.** This act of sharing goes beyond the digital space.

> “Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?’ They came out of the town and made their way toward him” (John 4:28-30, New International Version).

However, my ten years of digital marketing experience was entirely secular. I had never done an advertising campaign for a church project before, and consequently prayed a lot in the weeks leading up to the clinic. When the event began I was overjoyed at the testimonies of people who said their family member, friend, or neighbor saw an ad online and told them to come. According to the exit surveys, social media outperformed all the traditional advertising, and was second only to referral by friend or family member. Based on the anecdotal testimonies, word-of-mouth (friend/family) was also largely driven by the social media campaign. **Click here** to learn more about this case study in community awareness.

**Social media is the modern School of Tyrannus, a place where the ancient Ephesians gathered to engage with new ideas, pass the time, share thoughts, and participate in discussions.** Paul spoke at the School of Tyrannus in Greece for two years (Acts 19:8-9), essentially getting the gospel to go viral in his day. (A podcast about Paul’s influence at the School of Tyrannus by Dee Casper, Brand Evangelist, ARTV, can be found [HERE](#)).

> “This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10, New American Standard Bible).

**Paul stayed in one place, and yet his teachings spread. How did this happen?**

Ephesus was an important port for trade and commerce (like the internet), attracting people from all over the Roman Empire. People would come and hear what he had to say, go home, and tell others what they’d learned. In today's terminology, they hit “Like” and “Share” on social media, and their friends and family were exposed to Paul's teachings of the gospel. Social media has the potential to do this on a much larger scale. By reaching the connected, we can reach the unreachable.
In other words, if approximately 42% of the world’s population is on social media, it’s highly likely that they know the other 58% of the world or know someone who is connected to someone who is not on social media. You get the idea.

What starts in the digital space, isn’t confined to the digital space.

We must put our assumptions about those people aside (whoever those people might be), and work with who we can reach.

Evangelism experts tell me that the best way to reach a community or people group is to empower a member of that community. Your average person is just as likely to have moved several times, as to have lived and died in the community they were born, surrounded by a homogeneous collective of people who share the same culture and life experiences. The "simple life" has given way to something more complicated, perhaps messy. Even for those who never change their geographical location, they are globally connected to people through social media in ways that were unheard of just twenty years ago. What this means is that we now live in a world of intersecting cultures and communities.

The city of Ephesus experience is now reflected in every major city in the world and online.

I, myself, am a mid-western transplant to the D.C. metropolitan area. There is still no cellphone reception in my home town. My parents access the internet and phone through satellite. Until recently, our roads were unpaved, and my family was on well water. I go home once or twice a year and call my parents regularly (when the satellite phone is working). I had never heard of Adventism until I went to college; now my parents are closely connected to two Adventists (me and my husband). During our conversations and interactions, I share my experiences and new ideas. While my home town is not as remote as some other countries or communities that still exist in the world, the concept is the same. We can reach people online who have migrated to the digitally connected parts of the world. These people probably maintain ties to their home communities in some way, and since they are from that community, they are in the best position to share the gospel within the cultural norms, language, and expectations of those communities. When they visit their friends and family, they can share the gospel just like the ancient citizens of the Roman empire did back in the first century.
This is how we can obtain global impact through digital communications. It’s the same strategy that Paul leveraged, but scaled up by modern technology.

According to Pew Research, the most racially diverse Christian denomination in North America is the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We are truly a global movement that has yet to realize the full potential of modern technologies. Our challenge is not to just reach those who are online, but to also activate the online and offline sharing power of those we connect with. The membership of the Adventist Church is perfectly positioned to reach the around the world to every nation, tribe, people, and tongue with the gospel message.

And for those isolated communities with, assumed, no access to the outside world, give the Holy Spirit a little credit for being able to carry the message the rest of the way.

If the message went global in Paul’s day without the help of modern technology, let’s not assume limitations on the Holy Spirit in our day.

We aren’t expected to accomplish this mission alone, but we are called to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15, NIV). The world now includes the digital space. We need to dream bigger when doing God’s work. Can you imagine what would happen if each of us committed to sharing the gospel online for two years? And remember, it's not like we have to physically go somewhere, or even leave the couch for that matter! Who knows where God will lead us when we step out in faith.