

We Are All Digital Missionaries

By MARK APPLETON

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We are all digital missionaries. Is this an overstatement? Yes, technically.

You may not be running a full digital ministry strategy or even know how to place an ad on social media, but every time you've shared about a spiritual gathering on Facebook or used WhatsApp to invite an unbelieving friend to coffee, you are serving as a digital missionary.

We are all digital missionaries when we leverage digital tools for the purpose of connecting to lost souls, hoping to lead them to their Savior—Jesus Christ.

At this point, two-thirds of the world's population is digitally connected.¹ Slightly more than that have mobile phones. Connectivity is not exclusive to the wealthy or even to developed countries. Rural isolation is no longer a problem as wireless services like Starlink² have become available and more affordable. For most of us, even those of us reaching frontier areas, digital tools are already a part of our mission. For the rest, you are at the door.

¹ "Digital around the World - Datareportal - Global Digital Insights." DataReportal. Accessed March 6, 2023. <https://datareportal.com/global-digital-overview>.

² <https://www.starlink.com/>

Digital Technologies as Tools for Mission

The mission of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) has always been to use every effective means possible to share the Gospel. Radio, TV, satellite, and digital technologies can be tools in the hand of every evangelist or missionary—mediums to utilize methods to leverage.

BGEA launched its first testing of an internet evangelism strategy in 2011, followed by a fully developed ministry model called *Search for Jesus* in 2012. Similar to other organizations, we utilize digital marketing, equip volunteers to engage in online conversations, disciple visitors through online resources, and connect them to local believers when they are ready. We're currently active in seven language groups in various regions of the world and are developing several others.



One Click Away from Knowing Jesus

“I read everything about Christ and I want to become a Christian.” That was Zahir’s³ Instagram message to one of our Arabic volunteers. Zahir was a Muslim living in Baghdad, Iraq. Months earlier, he clicked on one of our Instagram ads and took an online course to learn about Jesus and the Christian faith. Afterward, he found a Christian and discussed the faith with him. He had a growing sense of urgency to accept Christ and finally messaged us through Instagram to take that step. Zahir has begun walking with Jesus, watching our videos on YouTube for more encouragement, and is now meeting with other believers we connected him with in his city.

Several years ago, BGEA began exploring an outreach to Arabic speakers online, and we met with many people and organizations to learn where the needs were. We were told Iraq was a country getting less focus, primarily because its digital infrastructure was weak and just beginning to grow. We prayerfully considered this as an opportunity, launching our Arabic ministry with a focus on Iraq in late 2018.

Over the past few years, Iraq has invested in and grown its digital infrastructure. Recently the government announced it was going to provide free internet for the entire country. Today, the *Search for Jesus*

³ Name changed to protect privacy.

Facebook page has almost half a million followers from Iraq. Several hundred Muslims in this country have come to faith in Jesus Christ through our digital presence and team of volunteers, many with powerful testimonies of courageous faith.

This story is encouraging and faith-building, but it also illustrates an opportunity. I began with an overstatement: We’re all digital missionaries. Yet there are many people, billions of people, who are not online. While this is a current reality, the global picture is clear. At this point, there are mainly two groups in the world: the digitally connected and those almost connected.

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A New Mission Field

A growing number of people are exploring digital space not only as a method for mission but also as a mission field itself.

Digital space has its own culture. It is its own place and has its own language and idioms. It has unspoken rules of engagement and social expectations. There are growing sociological similarities between teenagers

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in Topeka, Kansas, and those in Jakarta, Indonesia. While each group still has their ethnic culture, because of their shared experiences in the global digital space, there are aspects of their lives in which they will relate more to each other than they will to their own parents.

We will reach them by meeting them in virtual reality or their digital culture or platform of choice, and carrying the light of Christ to them within that space.

There are now whole communities that are entirely online ecosystems. Online gaming is a global phenomenon. 3.2 billion people in the world play video games, a majority of them now online.⁴ We've all heard of the growing metaverse. While not mainstream, millions are flocking to it and exploring virtual reality (VR).

These are just two examples, but there are a growing number of people in the world whom we will not reach simply by learning their language and traveling to their country. We will reach them by meeting them in virtual reality or their digital culture or platform of choice, and carrying the light of Christ to them within that space.

⁴ "Video Game Industry Statistics, Trends and Data in 2023." WePC. WePC, January 12, 2023. <https://www.wepc.com/news/video-game-statistics/>.

God Is Moving in the Digital World

As new regions come online, they are coming into a digital ecosystem that has already matured. Their starting point is our current experience. They dive in quickly and explore thoroughly. Our Iraqi ministry blossomed as it did because we were established, by God's grace and leading, on the front end of the rise of their connectivity.

Missions to people in unconnected populations or regions of the world should give thought to what's on the technological horizon. When they have no online options, consider what it might look like when they do. When they have limited or poor online options, the time is now. Develop a clear and compelling presentation of the Gospel that will already be available when they take their first steps online. The noise will rise quickly with messages from all kinds of religions and ideological ideas. Be a welcoming voice before you have to shout over the crowd.

While it can be as confusing and difficult as it is exciting, there is unequalled opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. May the Lord find us faithful to proclaim His truth, and may He give us the wisdom we need to do it well. 📺

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