

Permission to Journey Together

Three Digital Shifts and What they Mean for Ministry

By LIAM SAVAGE

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Mongolia can be an empty and desolate place—even more so during a global pandemic. OneHope’s team was determined to continue ministry work there even though they could not gather in person during the COVID-19 pandemic. So they turned to the internet and got creative about how to use digital content to reach children. Our team started a weekly Facebook livestream sharing the fun, animated Scripture stories from the *Bible App for Kids*, an app we created with our friends at YouVersion.

Tuya, age five, loved logging in for the stories and soon she invited her cousin Gerel over to watch, too. One week after the livestream, six-year-old Gerel prayed to accept Jesus as her Savior! Both girls continued to join in on Facebook and worked hard to memorize each week’s Bible verse together. Gerel also started praying for her family to receive Jesus. After a while, they too were joining in on the livestream to learn more about God’s Word.



The *Bible App for Kids* was OneHope’s first major foray into digital. In our 36 years of ministry, OneHope has reached two billion children and youth with God’s Word. But our mission is to reach *every* child, so we are not stopping anytime soon. While Scripture does not change, we have had to adapt our ministry programs to best speak to each new generation and to best leverage new mediums.

The *Bible App for Kids* was not a success simply because we built an app for a digital-first generation and released it for parents to download onto their phones. It was a success because we created a journey and invited children and their families into it—just like with Tuya, Gerel, and their families.

The app has become a fun way for parents and children all over the world to connect around the Bible at bedtime and other times of day. Even though we designed the app for children ages six and up, we were soon receiving stories and pictures of children

sharing phone screens with their much younger siblings, who were also absorbing God's Word. Today, the app has gone to every country—even areas where printed Bibles are illegal. The impact has been greater than we ever could have imagined!

In his book, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, Peter Drucker, father of modern management, says there is an innovation opportunity to respond to the change that has already happened. Many times, when something significant has changed in the world we don't realize it or respond to it right away, sometimes even much longer. There are market opportunities and ministry opportunities in having eyes that recognize change and what it means for our work going forward.

Let's look at three major shifts digital has introduced to our world and how we must adapt our ministry work in response.

With Your Permission...

The incredible results we saw from the *Bible App for Kids* were made possible by the access digital platforms provide. But transformation was possible because families gave us permission to enter their lives via their phones. They invited us into their living rooms, their car rides to school, and their bedtime routines. This is one of the huge changes digital has brought to our world. We can be part of people's lives, but only if they want us to be.

Gone are the days of mass marketing where the most effective way to get people's attention was to shout your message to the world across as many channels as possible. In yesterday's non-permissioned media world, saturation was the path to success. Businesses focused on maximum exposure to raise awareness and sales of their products. Ministries often followed this model too.

Today, we live with permissioned media. Thanks to streaming services, I no longer sit through commercials when I watch TV. I recently went through my online newsfeed and reported to Google all the articles I did not find interesting (it was almost the entire list). I instructed the platform to no longer show me information from those sources and topics. Those articles quickly disappeared and were replaced by other articles Google hopes I will be interested in.



This is the first major shift to highlight about today's digital world: The user is in control now.

People expect to be shown content and products that are relevant to them and they can filter out what doesn't apply. Unlike in the past, now people can say no to ads, email marketing campaigns, and text messages. The unsubscribe or opt-out functionality is built in.

It is easy to miss this shift from non-permissioned media to permissioned media, but the implications are far-reaching. To be part of the digital landscape, we must get people to say yes. It is no longer enough to create a great ministry product and put it out into the world. We cannot assume people will want what we have to offer or that they will see our message just because we published it online. Instead, we have to seek out the people we are trying to reach and get their permission to start an interaction so we can journey with them as they figure out what faith means.

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Show Up for the Journey

So how do we get users to say yes in digital spaces? Big brands have figured this out and we can learn from them. Now that digital access has changed the terms, it is all about what we do with that access.



Once again, people expect more than just being offered a great product. If you pay attention, you will notice the shift from products to services. The most successful companies know that they not only have to catch a user's attention but they have to serve them in a personal way. For example, Netflix provides a constant stream of customized movie recommendations based on each user's preferences and watch history. The platform goes beyond an on-demand streaming service to help viewers explore and find more media they are specifically interested in. If you give the app permission, it will even download TV episodes and movies it thinks you will like straight to your phone, so you always have something to watch.

This is the second shift to be aware of in today's digital world: Providing amazing service is now expected.

Whereas previously only large organizations could afford the teams required to deliver high-quality experiences, the digital tools available today make anything from graphic design and custom websites, to chat automation and digital marketing accessible to everyone. The best way to stand out and get permission to influence is to delight your audience through an experience that shows you know them.

There is incredible competition in digital spaces as brands compete for people's limited time and attention. In response, we must think in terms of years, not in minutes or seconds. Digital metrics often push us to measure success in terms of downloads,

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clicks, and microseconds spent on landing pages. But life change doesn't happen in seconds. To truly serve people well, we must journey with them in a personal way and commit to faithfully walking that journey for however long it takes.

At OneHope, we have seen the fruit of this as our online missionaries connect with spiritual seekers through digital programs. In a limited-access nation in Southeast Asia, a young Muslim woman connected with us, confessing she felt so empty inside. Every day, she returned to the online chat to ask questions about peace and faith and to hear what the Bible had to say. She was terrified to even explore Christianity, knowing that her family would disown her if they found out. But over the course of many months chatting with an online missionary, she was filled with joy and strength to accept Jesus as her Savior. Even though her worst fears happened and her family did reject her, she was welcomed into a new spiritual family and connected to a local church where she was baptized and is learning to follow Christ.

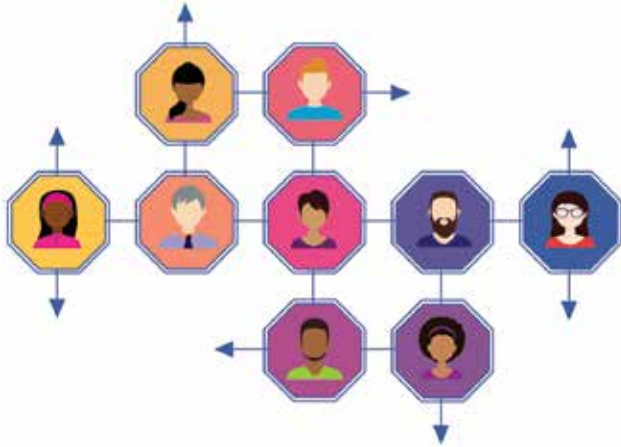
Our teams handle thousands of chats each year, and not every story turns out this way. But it is incredible to see what God can do as we intentionally show up for the journey. We have realized the importance of moving from a transactional mindset to a posture of long-term journeying, and digital tools enable us to do this in new ways.

Collaborate to Succeed

Creating incredible digital experiences that people will want to say yes to is a lot of work! Creating and walking those journeys takes time, money, and effort. It requires new ways of thinking, new ways of structuring our teams and processes, and new ways of measuring success.

It can be discouraging to look at the digital landscape and see the level of competition we are up against. The

bar is high. Even though we have the most important message anyone could ever hear, how can we make sure it doesn't get drowned out in the sea of voices and advertising dollars being thrown at the internet these days?



It would be foolish of us to try to go it alone. This is the third and final shift I want to highlight for digital-ministry success: We must collaborate to succeed.

As OneHope has wrestled with the implications of digital, we have realized that capacity building is key. We need champions, partners, and content collaborators to come alongside if we hope to reach every child with God's Word. Digital tools support us in this work, but we always go farther when we partner.

After launching the *Bible App for Kids*, we quickly realized there was a Scripture-engagement gap for the next age range (10-12). Not kids and not quite teens, these *tweens* had almost no digital Bible tools available, even though social media content for them abounded.

We felt called to close that gap and offer God's Word in a format they would recognize and be attracted to. So we partnered with YouVersion to create the *Kids Bible Experience*, which offers daily Scripture content in an Instagram-style story format. The content disappears in 24 hours, motivating kids to log in every day to hear God's Word.

Kids Bible Experience has been viewed in every country in the world with over five million global users. But

we could never have developed it alone. Planning and creating daily content would be impossible. Instead, we have partnered with local churches and ministries to provide each day's Scripture experience.

Working in partnership has allowed us to create a best-in-class digital experience for kids that can go toe-to-toe with the other social media content competing for their attention. We pray this tool helps the next generation develop a rhythm of Scripture engagement and a hunger to encounter God's Word every day.

God intends for the Church—His Body—to perfectly fill in each other's gaps as we unite in accomplishing His mission. Nothing about today's technological world or the changes it has brought surprises God. In many ways, the work we must do in digital spaces mirrors what Christ did when He was on earth. He preached to thousands, but He also personally journeyed with 12 people for three years. The internet lets us preach to thousands, but also to journey with a much smaller number as they seek Christ personally.

As your ministry asks and answers these questions, I am confident the Holy Spirit will provide inspiration and opportunity to lead the way in using technology to accomplish God's mission.

Jesus knew His disciples deeply and allowed them to know Him deeply. Who are the people you are called to understand deeply so you can minister the Gospel to them? What do they need to hear, and how? Who can you collaborate with to leverage digital tools to their fullest potential?

As your ministry asks and answers these questions, I am confident the Holy Spirit will provide inspiration and opportunity to lead the way in using technology to accomplish God's mission. I pray you will have eyes to see the changes that are happening, minds to understand them, and hands that are quick to respond. ❏