A Hackathon for Global Missions

By **ANDREW FENG** & **NICK WU**

Andrew Feng is the North America Director and Director of Global Partnerships for Indigitous. He helps mobilize young leaders to use their giftedness beyond the four church walls. His heart is for the younger generation and he continues to mentor them under Indigitous.

Nick Wu serves with Indigitous US as theContent Producer. He also helps lead young adults and students in digital missions projects. He also has a passion for telling stories for the missions world through videos. He is currently an MA student at Dallas Seminary.

Indigitous began with the vision to empower Christians to use their digital and creative skills to take the Gospel to the unreached. In this connected and digital world, Indigitous is now a global movement taking the Gospel to new peoples and places.

Indigitous comes from two words: *indigenous* and *digital*.

- *Indigenous*. Locally generated and culturally adapted to successfully share the Good News.
- *Digital*. Tools and platforms to accelerate missions in a digital world.

Inspired by the prophet Habakkuk, who was called by God to *write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it* (Hab. 2:2). Indigitous seeks to engage believers to collaborate and create together for the acceleration of the Gospel. The largest event of Indigitous is the annual global hackathon, #HACK.

What Is a Hackathon?

A hackathon is an event that gathers people of all skill sets to ideate, innovate, and collaborate on digital solutions. It often takes place at tech companies and at university computer science programs. Hackathons encourage friendly competition, where winning projects might receive a prize or generate new ideas and solutions for tech companies. Hackathons can be similar to design sprints, taking place in a limited amount of time for people to brainstorm, prototype, and build.

Hackathons are usually focused on a theme, which guides the type of challenges being addressed. A tech company might be looking to create a better user interface with its customers, or university students might want to know how to be productive with their studying time. A global Christian hackathon aims to address some of the biggest challenges of the Gospel reaching the unreached.

Indigitous held its first hackathon in 2015 at the Urbana student missions conference, called #HACK4Missions. With many more students engaging in technology, including those pursuing careers in the tech industry, a hackathon became a new experience for students to prototype and build digital solutions for global missions.

In the following seven years, Indigitous continued to host #HACK, expanding globally across 40+ countries and 200+ cities. Indigitous has also partnered with 50+ ministries who share the vision or have participated in #HACK.

Note, all Scripture references are ESV.

In the previous #HACK2022, 1,200+ participants joined local and virtual teams. They ideated and prototyped projects from apps, web tools, digital strategies, and more. A dozen ministry and marketplace leaders also joined as global judges to review and support the projects from #HACK. Many came to #HACK to find their faith aligned with their work or study for the first time. This was a rare opportunity to use their skills outside of the four church walls. #HACK was a chance for believers to finally use their skills to reach someone across the world.

The mission world needs innovation and collaboration, especially when there are still 3.2 billion people without the Gospel. #HACK is all about engaging the believer to find a new connection between faith, technology, and missions. It is about being a hearer and doer of the Word. For many young people, a global hackathon was their first exposure to the needs of the mission world. But this was also a first opportunity to see their passions, affinities, and abilities make an impact for God's kingdom.

> *The mission world needs innovation and collaboration, especially when there are still 3.2 billion people without the Gospel.*

The digital world is saturated with content that is non-spiritual. However, a Christian hackathon proposes redemption to technology. The digital world will continue to grow in all facets of daily life. In this age, even the least of digital users will find a place to offer their skills for God's mission. A smartphone is enough to start a conversation with a non-Christian.

#HACK is about creating new tools and strategies for missions. The possibilities are endless, including different apps, tools, platforms, campaigns, content, and many more:

- a Bible story app in the heart language of an Unreached People Group
- an online platform supporting the hurting and needy
- an interactive map of the life of Jesus
- a discipleship tool
- a digital outreach campaign
- exploring data to track where bodies of worship are and for missions reporting

- an evangelistic short film, distributed through social media
- a web app engaging users in spiritual questions
- a missions resource library online
- a prayer walking app
- and many more!

Going Virtual

During the pandemic, Indigitous added a virtual mode for #HACK, allowing participants from anywhere to join. While hackathons regularly involve people in the same space, some may not be able to have this community in person. A virtual hackathon lowers this barrier to entry. This became an opportunity for participants to meet new friends across the globe. They crossed cultures within their own teams, bringing together unique perspectives, tools, and resources to build their projects.

#HACK2022 Challenges

In 2022, the global challenges were:

- Finishing the Task, *Using Data for Evangelism*
- Stadia Church Planting, *Starting Churches for the Next Generation*
- International Justice Mission, *Reporting Online Exploitation*

Using Data for Evangelism

This challenge was in partnership with Finishing the Task (FTT), a network of mission organizations committed to finishing the call of the Great Commission. FTT is broken into three main parts: Bibles (scripture distribution), Believers (evangelism), and Bodies of Christ (church-planting).

Various teams were challenged to identify evangelistic opportunities while harnessing public data. While there are many data points around the globe available online, this data is often underutilized for missions. Data technology has been a focal point for mission efforts, especially in tracking Church Planting Movements and understanding people groups.

Datasets like internet penetration and social media prevalence can also help missionaries decide what digital strategies are relevant for their target region.

Many evangelistic strategies depend on the availability of various types of technology like the internet, various social media platforms, and types of mobile devices.

The winning team developed the "SOS Priority Project," which helps find priority targets among people contemplating suicide through highlighted hotspots of suicide across America.

Starting Churches for the Next Generation

This challenge was in partnership with Stadia Church Planting, whose mission is to help start thriving, growing, and multiplying churches for the next generation. They work in collaboration with over 25 church multiplication partners around the world to provide the resources and relationships people need to start, grow, and multiply churches.

Teams were challenged to create tools, campaigns, or strategies that inspire, empower, and equip the next generation to start new, multiplying churches. Projects ranged from using social media platforms to identifying digital churches taking place online.

The winning project was "Digital Incubator for Church Startups," which was a prototype of a digital tool that provides community, mentorship, and coaching to help new church leaders connect.

Reporting Online Exploitation

This challenge partnered with International Justice Mission (IJM), a global organization that protects people in poverty from violence.

Teams were tasked to develop tools or strategies that help connect the community to local law enforcement and report cases of online sexual exploitation of children. Mission work includes spiritual and holistic care for people in persecution and suffering. This challenge aimed to find practical methods to combat the abuse and trafficking of children.

The team, "Alternative Voice Reporting," won this challenge with their prototype of a web tool featuring a suite of seven voice products that help to report online sexual exploitation of children.

Hackathon solutions to even the most sensitive issues in society might prove to open doors for the Gospel.

A Bible Story App for an Unreached People Group

In the past few years of #HACK, we've seen how ideas became prototypes during the hackathon, and then went on to be developed as tools used among local missionaries.

One example is a Bible story app in the language of an Unreached People Group. Among the 1.45 billion people who do not have the Bible in their language ("2022 Global Scripture Access"), a simple Bible story app can share key stories of Jesus for those who have never heard. Furthermore, this app was designed for a persecuted people group who had little to no access to Gospel content and even fewer existing resources.

Since the hackathon, a team and network have grown behind the app. They have connected with local missionaries within the community of the Unreached People Group, and they can test the app and receive real-time feedback for the developers and designers. For many of the volunteers and interns working on the app, this has been their first exposure to digital missions. Not only do they connect with the local missionaries firsthand but this has become a learning experience that mobilizes them in serving in the mission field.

The team now continues to develop new iterations of the Bible story app, including new languages for other Unreached People Groups.

Hacking for the Next Generation of Missions

#HACK is a starting point for many believers. While the projects often extend beyond the hackathon, their work offers valuable insight. These ideas can be tested by missionaries and organizations. Many find a hackathon a rare opportunity to meet like-minded believers. They can work together while deepening their hearts for missions. Hackathons bring the community together and model collaboration across the digital world.

Christian hackathons are also not exclusive to Indigitous #HACK. KingdomCode, FaithTech, and other ministries have run hackathons or design sprints. While these events are usually limited to a weekend or a few weeks, the encouragement is for ministries to adopt the mindset of innovation and design-thinking.

It is okay to fail, even multiple times. But when we learn from each quick failure, we can build toward a better solution. For the mission world, this might look like taking the extra leap of faith to trust in God with the failures and to test out new ideas.

A #HACK Champion, a leader who hosts a regional hackathon shares about the experience:

> "I loved the environment. As a frequent attendee of hackathons, one thing that stands out with #HACK is the community of hackers wanting to further their faith. There was less of a competitive aspect and more focus on completing the challenges faced to help others in their walks with Christ. Worship music was always playing in the

background, and at times I could hear people around me singing as they worked. Overall, just an amazing event and encouraging to experience as a student in the tech industry." ("Champion (Host) - #HACK2022")

To learn more about #HACK, visit https://hack.indigitous.org.

Works Cited

"Champion (Host) - #HACK2022." *Indigitous #HACK*, https://hack.indigitous.org/hack2022/champion/.

"2022 Global Scripture Access." *Wycliffe Global Alliance*, https://www.wycliffe.net/resources/statistics/.

Digital Missions: Another Step in a Rich History

KEVIN HIGGINS, PhD, is General Director of Frontier Ventures (FV). He is married to Susan, is the grateful father of Rachel, Sarah, and Emma and grandfather of Henry and Eliza.

This issue of *Mission Frontiers* is focused on "Digital Mission." This topic prompted me to look for a fresh approach. I say this as I think most of our readers will have a familiarity with one or two major approaches to this topic, if not both.

One approach is to question whether something so inherently relational as a Gospel—that centers around an incarnational God who came to live among us —can adequately be communicated through digital mission approaches.

The other is the approach that highlights the ability of technology to gain access to people at a scale that is unprecedented, and if done well, with an equally unprecedented level of audience intelligence.

One approach questions the ability of technology to connect well with people, the other highlights how technology can improve our ability to connect well with people.

But those are not the topics I will address here. They are both often expressed, and I assume other contributors will cover them in ways far more helpful than I can do in my column for this edition.

Instead, I want to take a brief tour; of only headlines and of similar pivot points in ways God communicates with people.

The Oral Traditions and the Patriarchs

Long before written portions of what are now collected into the books of what we call the Bible, the stories, messages, prayers, and prophetic oracles we have come to know and love were all passed on orally, people to people, generation to generation. Many other stories, messages, prayers, and oracles were also circulating in the same way at the same time. And they were not circulating all together.

Some versions of the creation story were told among some, and other versions were told among others.