

Stewarding Online Space in Making Disciples of Gen-Z



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ABSTRACT: *The western church is experiencing a steady decline in membership with each passing generation. If Jesus is the only way, truth, and life available, then seeing fewer people come into life with Him should be very alarming for the Church today, and a major concern to address. How can the Church re-engage youth in today's post-Christian culture? As Gen-Zs are digital natives with much of their experiences being lived out online, what role should the online environment play in the Church in reengaging today's generation of young people? How can churches effectively disciple young people they may never meet in person? What answers might the field of education have to offer practical ministry in these questions? The purpose of this literature review is to examine the available scholarship related to online discipleship and the Gen-Z generation, including how faith nurture, church, community development, learning, and online collaborative learning theory can be understood within the online context. It will also look at the model of traditional discipleship and examine whether the online world is an appropriate place for such discipleship practices. Finally, this paper will offer suggestions based on the literature as to how one may leverage online collaborative learning practices to engage effectively in online discipleship with Gen-Z individuals in a small group setting.*

KEYWORDS: *Online Discipleship, Online Church, Online Learning, Generation-Z, Digital Discipleship, Small Group Ministry, Online Small Group, Youth Ministry*

With the World Health Organization declaring the Coronavirus a worldwide pandemic in March of 2020, churches across Canada were mandated to close their physical doors and instead set up shop in online spaces. While some were outfitted for online services before the pandemic hit, for many this was a considerable challenge and change (Plüss, 2020). Although many churches managed to move online in some form (Holmes, 2020), this move for many was a temporary measure, as the community dimension of church is generally viewed through the lens of an in person gathering (Bryson, 2020; Iwuoha, 2020). Doubts about the ability of the local church to be an engaging community online, as opposed to simply streaming services like a televangelist, were quickly validated as zoom fatigue emerged in April of the same year (Bailenson, 2021). Influential voices spoke strongly on these concerns, such as theologian John MacArthur (2021) who asserted, “there is no such thing as a zoom church.”

Although the environment may have significantly changed, the great commission remains the same (Galang & Macaraan, 2021). The church is called to be actively engaged in making disciples of all nations regardless the challenges or platforms. The pandemic may have changed routines, but it has not changed what God requires (Plüss, 2020). Church leaders know that God has called them to “go into *all* [emphasis added] the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15, NIV). Despite this, they still find themselves asking questions such as, ‘Is it possible to use online media to facilitate the kinds of deep, authentic spiritual formation that are central to theological education in an online context?’ and ‘If it is possible to facilitate spiritual formation online, what can we do to maximize our effectiveness?’ (Flynn, 2013; Holmes 2020, Jun, 2020).

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Although the pandemic has brought up uncertainty regarding the viability of online discipleship specifically, the western church has also been experiencing problems with faith formation in general. According to Grant (2008), religious affiliation has dropped considerably since the 1950's, with this current generation having lesser religious affiliation than any generation previous (White, 2017; Scheitle, Corcoran & Halligan 2018; Bible Society, 2018). This process is termed by researchers Scheitle, Corcoran & Halligan (2018) as "the rise of the nones," and it has led to Gen-Z becoming the first post-Christian generation, as well as the most atheist generation in recent history (Barna, 2019; White, 2017). Yet, despite Gen-Z having the lowest religious affiliation in recent history (Barna, 2019; White, 2017), research from the Barna Group (2021b) also found that one in four non-Christian students are open and interested in learning more about faith and what it means to their lives. If 25% of Gen-Z is open to discovering more about faith (Barna, 2021b), then what must the Church do to engage in those conversations? Gen-Z must be viewed as the window through which we see the future of the Church, coloured by both their hopes and concerns as well as by the trends which unlock opportunity (Villa, Dorsey, & Bocher, 2020).

The church's decline and its struggle to engage and build relationships with Gen-Z raises the questions as to whether or not the Church is fulfilling the great commission. Bergler (2021) observes that the Church's current practices are failing to engage Gen-Z. As Gen-Z is the first digital generation born into a hyper connected world where the internet was always available (Fromm & Read, 2018; Hashim, 2018), engaging Gen-Z and engaging in discipleship digitally may be more interconnected than previously considered. Contrary to opinions of MacArthur (2021), online technology may precisely be the newest tool God is giving the Church to curb the rise of the nones and re-engage the current and next generations. Consideration of the opportunities the internet offers to both re-engage a lost generation and further the call of Christ to make disciples led to the research question of this essay: How can churches steward online spaces to engage and disciple Gen-Z?

There is a considerable amount of literature available on interacting with online technologies in general, but little on online discipleship specifically. Much of the work that is available to churches for reference are blog posts or podcasts; these more informal sources suggest that this is an area needing further study. Scholarly articles identified by this literature review consisted largely of research on educational science and technologies.

The Centrality of Developing Community

The basic outline of small group ministry in a modern western church is this: A group of people who learn both from a leader and from one another (Ajie, 2019). Whether online or offline, relationships are about dialogue, not monologue (Martin, 2019), and developing a two-way conversation is central to discipleship (Fortin, 2021; Jones, 2021). However, despite this clarity of vision, there is a lack of clarity of methodology, leading to a decline in discipleship and thus a decline in membership. McKnight (2020) suggests that, in order to effectively disciple people, leaders should reexamine the methodology of Jesus.

Dr. Robert Coleman (2006) examines the discipleship methodology of Jesus in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. One encouragement to be gleaned from his work is that the direction churches are taking with small group ministry is a positive one (Coleman and Harrington, 2014). Coleman (2006) notes that, while Jesus did teach in multiple styles, He devoted the bulk of His time to one approach in particular: small group communities. Jesus' main small group community of His disciples were afforded the opportunity to grow not only under the direct, daily teaching of Jesus, but also from one another (Ajie, 2019). For the purpose of establishing a deeper foundation for developing community, Coleman's (2006) work must be further examined.

The Master Plan of Evangelism

Apart from scripture itself, Coleman's original work is possibly the most influential book written on discipleship to date, warranting a 50th anniversary sequel that synthesizes the original content and offers further reflections on it. In a 2006 publication of his original work, Coleman identified eight principles for evangelism: 1) Selection – Jesus' method was people; 2) Association – Jesus stayed with them; 3) Consecration – Jesus required obedience; 4) Impartation – Jesus gave Himself away through the Holy Spirit; 5) Demonstration – Jesus showed them how to live; 6) Delegation – Jesus assigned them work; 7)

Supervision – Jesus continued to check on them; and 8) Reproduction – Jesus expected them to reproduce. Upon revisiting this list in 2014 for the 50th anniversary edition, Coleman reordered the list to place impartation at the end and added a ninth principle to the start: incarnation – Jesus coming into our world to show us God’s love. He reordered these principles to iterate that discipleship starts with Jesus, the One which whom our faith is built, and ends with the power of the Holy Spirit which empowers and enables us to become more like Jesus.

Coleman’s (2006/2014) steps are deeply rooted in community. It is impossible to choose people, associate with people, require obedience from people, impart the Holy Spirit upon people, demonstrate to people, delegate to people, supervise people, or reproduce yourself in people, apart from people. In other words, to go and make disciples requires a person going and making a disciple of another person. From Coleman’s work, it should be concluded that it is impossible to engage in discipleship, either being or making, apart from community. Community is absolutely central to the discipleship process. Whether or not digital space can be used in discipleship is largely a matter of whether community can be fostered online.

In their research article on the formation of online communities Panek et al. (2018) acknowledge the historic difficulty in trying to measure online community, and suggest that defining what is being measured would add clarity. They offer that online community may be defined as: members who actively participate in and contribute to discourse over a prolonged period of time. For their article, Panek, et al. researched different online communities and conclude that online community can be formed, but that not all communities are of the same quality. Similarly, Campbell (2020) reminds churches that ministry online is about connection, not content. It appears that community remains the driving force of discipleship, including online discipleship. Given that community can be formed online, but not all online community is of the same quality, we are left with the question: How might the Church produce higher quality community online?

New Generation of Learners Require a New Approach to Learning

One way the Church may gain insight into building higher quality community online is by looking to the online generation themselves. Research commissioned by the Bible Society (2018) finds that the digital age has shifted how Gen Y (‘the Millennials’) lives: To meet them in their context means engaging them digitally. Considering how technology plays a larger role for Gen Z than it did for previous generations (Hashim, 2018; Rue, 2018), the Church must understand the increased demand for online discipleship. While teenage discipleship has been widely researched, little research has been done on Gen-Z in relation to digital discipleship. Technology also plays a crucial role in the lives of Gen-Z (Schroth, 2019), dubbed “Generation Screen” or “Screenagers” (Barna, 2021a; Mckee, 2021). As Hashim (2018) observes, this new generation of learners have learning expectations, styles, and needs that are different from past students; they do not do well as passive learners. Further pressing the matter that Gen-Z demands a digital approach, Hashim (2018) observes:

Due to their unique characteristics, Gen-Z has a different need to engage in learning. Gen-Z needs fast delivery of content with complex graphics. They are kinaesthetic, experiential, hands-on learners who prefer to learn by doing rather than being told what to do or by reading text. They also prefer random access, graphics first and connected activities. They have a need for speed and instant gratification. . . due to the unique characteristics of Gen-Z, teachers cannot run away from integrating and applying technology in teaching and learning. For these learners, technology is not considered an accessory to life but is viewed as a way of life. (p.2)

In *Meet Generation Z*, Dr. White (2017) holds that culture sets the tone for communication, dictating what it is and how it is best accomplished for both the speaker and the hearer. White’s assertion explains Hashim’s (2018) observation that teachers cannot avoid integrating technology because culture has deemed it necessary for effective communication. It is imperative for churches to understand that technology has permeated culture so extensively that its influence impacts how students understand, hear, and process content, whether or not it is intentionally integrated. If churches are to be effective at

communicating the gospel and leading students into discipleship, intentional use of technology must be adopted.

Gen-Z, according to Kahn (2015), is the "'internet-in-its-pocket' generation". Kinnaman and Matlock (2019) observe that young people no longer look to parents, pastors or teachers to guide them because the screens in their pockets offer information on anything they could wonder about. Kinnaman and Matlock's observation reveals an important historical shift in the relationship between adults and teenagers. However, the Fuller Youth Institute found in two separate research projects (Powell & Clark, 2011; Powell et al., 2016) that adults still play an essential role in student learning, especially in spiritual development.

Sharma (2017) sees this shift in education as the movement from teacher to facilitator. In the era of self-sufficiency, education is less about teaching the answers and more about guiding students to discover the answers for themselves. However, the need of Gen-Z to engage in learning is not satisfied solely by being involved in the information discovery process; Gen-Z needs a space (community of practice) to test or apply their learning (Wenger, 2011). This should be especially promising for the Church; during the millennial/MTV era it was believed that, that in order to reach young people, they needed to first be entertained. Now with Gen-Z, it appears they simply need to be engaged, much like how Jesus led His group of disciples. The online environment can offer an avenue in which to engage these learners.

The Digital Era Demands a Digital Approach

In 2011, Andrews observed that little recognition had been given to the transformation possible through the internet. Although over a decade has passed, in some ways this observation may still ring true in the church. Despite the opportunity afforded to the Church by technology, simply having an online presence does not equate to having online effectiveness. As Hunt (2019) observed, ministries have missed opportunities to lead and develop people. However, good online leadership is not simply reproducing offline leadership in virtual spaces (Narbona, 2016). Rather, online leadership requires its own, unique leadership understandings and competencies. There is a need to both be online and understand how to be online. Tech is a crucial part of the digital era (Hashim, 2018), and adapting kingdom-advancing work to the online context cannot be done peripherally or without intention (Fromm and Read, 2018; Gillett-Swan, 2017). The challenge before the Church is thus to engage in discipleship with people who are already accustomed to being connected by modern means, both physically and digitally (Hodøl, 2021). As the landscape of how civilization experiences life has evolved, so too must the process of engaging in discipleship.

With the help of COVID-19, churches have once again embraced ministry like Jesus' - existing primarily outside the four walls of a church. Whether or not churches continue to engage online after the pandemic mandates drop remains to be seen. Galang & Macaraan (2021) believe that the Church has shifted to see online as an important pastoral region. Jun (2020) and Mpofu (2021) indicate the importance of leveraging the digital landscape in considering how the Church conducts its mission online. In addition, Ali (2020) challenges the Church by pointing out technological advances in the world which demand a paradigm shift in the way we approach our mission.

In the digital age, the internet is used by individuals to socialize, maintain relationships, and receive emotional support (Campbell & Garner, 2016). For Gen-Z, there is no separation between online and offline life (Mckee, 2021; Palfrey & Gasser, 2020; Stillman & Stillman, 2017), and for churches wanting to disciple the next generation, they too should see no separation. If community is being experienced online, discipleship should be happening there as well, as discipleship should happen anywhere community can be experienced. As Shirley (2017) notes, the substance of a church's call to discipleship has not changed, but the methodology and technology for accomplishing it has. The instruction to go forth and make disciples truly has no geographical or digital boundaries; it is the job of every church to develop a discipleship pathway that will facilitate all people to be in the relational process of discipleship (Puttman, 2014).

Considering how the modern small group model involves few elements without online counterparts, one may come to the conclusion that small groups will be able to translate seamlessly to the

online context as-is. Unfortunately, researchers have yet to evaluate online small groups against in-person small groups. However, regarding education, researchers have found that no area of education has translated seamlessly, and that scales of adaptation must be applied to differentiate between different contexts of teaching online and offline (Gillett-Swan, 2017).

Online learning needs its own approach, one which was designed for an online audience and with online tools in mind. Further to needing to adapt and differentiate from offline to online, teaching and learning systems should be built from the vantage points of the needs of the intended students and learning outcomes (Anderson, 2008). There are, however, concerns with moving towards a more digital approach. One concern noted by Sharma (2017) is that incorporating technology in classrooms does not guarantee that students will use it appropriately; rather, they may use it to distract themselves or others. While concern that technology may cause an added distraction is valid, a disengaged student who needs technology to properly learn is must equally be given consideration. Gillett-Swan (2017) addresses concerns about digital learning, identifying that teaching with technology, similar to teaching in physical spaces, varies based on the types of tech used and the material being addressed.

Collaborative Learning Theory

Considering a digital approach for the digital era is exactly what Linda Harasim (2012) accomplishes in developing the online collaborative learning theory. The basic outline for the online collaborative learning theory is that individual learners support and add to an emerging pool of knowledge, and the teacher plays a crucial role as both facilitator and member of the knowledge community (Robinson, 2017; Harasim, 2012, Williams, 2015). Online collaborative learning theory, like a traditional small group ministry in a modern western church, also emphasizes developing community:

- Developing community increases teamwork, shared thought, support and commitment toward group outcomes (Chatterjee & Correia, 2019; Robinson, 2017; Saqr et al., 2019);
- Emotion and feeling a sense of community are central to student engagement, satisfaction and academic persistence (Berry, 2019; Phillips & Johnson-Holder, 2018; Jiang & Koo, 2020);
- Students who felt part of community had more social presence and interaction between learners increased (Chatterjee & Correia, 2019; Berry, 2019; Robinson, 2017).

The literature regarding online collaborative learning theory may suggest that a personal investment in the learning community translates into a personal investment into the learning process, which may evolve into a richer, more complete learning experience. In considering the discipleship process, online collaborative learning theory may not only provide a means to effectively disciple people, but may also reveal missing components of current models which have contributed to the decline in church engagement.

In episode 42 of the BETA podcast, Reed (2021) articulates that leaders cannot leverage the strength of the digital environment through one-way communication. Instead, leaders leverage the strength of the digital environment by creating a dialogue space in which others' speaking is truly valued. In a space where the leader models how to listen, students can then learn how to listen through observation and participation. Fortin (2021) addresses how important learning to listen in community is to the process of discipleship by identifying three significant considerations: 1) listening postures the listener to share in the gift of Christ's presence in others, 2) listening provides an opportunity for the listener to practice the love and presence of Jesus to those they are listening to, and 3) growing deeper in ones capacity to listen to others grows ones capacity to listen to God. It may be that a more collaborative approach to discipleship, in which everyone is expected to contribute to the pool of knowledge by sharing the gift of Christ from within oneself, is paramount in today's age. Furthermore, learning to listen will not only enable one to participate more fully in community, but will also inadvertently begin the realignment addressed by Bingham (2021), leading us from merely an intellectual faith to an applied faith - which discipleship requires.

In *The Third Education Revolution*, Sommer (2021) similarly emphasizes the need for a collaborative approach in discipleship, concluding that Christians "should learn to encourage one another to put the scriptures in practice, making the Christian walk both a collective and an individual endeavor" (p. 191). In

Irresistible Community, Donahue (2015) asserts that there is no life change without community. Applying Donahue's assertions against the backdrop of discipleship, evidence is likely to support that people are more spiritually impacted when they are more socially engaged in the community. Perhaps The Lord said "it is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18) because holistic impact is best achieved within the context of collaborative community.

Online Faith Nurture

Holmes (2020) notes that connection and collaboration are foundational components of learning even when learning is online, and that relationships are an integral part of online faith nurture. Campbell (2020) further emphasizes the importance of relationships in online faith nurture by listing six key markers for a successful religious online community:

1. Relationships: A place where people feel known and supported, centered around a common purpose of social relations and friendships
2. Care: A place where people give and receive support and encouragement to one another, requesting care and receiving counsel for dealing with various issues.
3. A Sense of Being Appreciated: A place for people to feel known, seen and loved for who they are and what they offer to the community.
4. A Safe Place: A place where people can be open and have intimate conversations.
5. Trusted Connections: A place for people to experience deep, meaningful connection with others.
6. Shared Faith: A place to explore and grow with Jesus and others in their social network.

Considering both Holmes' and Campbell's observations on the importance of relationships, it follows that developing quality community, connection, and collaboration in an online faith context is imperative to successful digital discipleship.

Conclusion

Although churches did establish online discipleship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a difference between emergency online discipleship and effective online discipleship. In order for churches to shift from the former to the latter, digital space must not be treated as temporary or separate from regular spaces of human interaction, communication, and dialogue, but rather, as a permanent and essential component of it (Galang & Macaraan, 2021). Churches must not lose sight of discipleship as a community endeavor, or a mission to invite people into the body of believers, but must recognize the opportunities found in digital spaces for healthy participation in community (Hunt, 2021). The church must not forget how community was known in the Bible as a purposeful gathering of believers (White, 2017), and must continue to seek to build His Kingdom purposefully and intentionally.

If spiritual community is able to be as real online as it is offline (Campbell, 2020), then it should be embraced and celebrated for the doors it opens (Kinnaman & Matlock, 2019). Gen-Z places high priority on personal growth and development (Rodriguez, Boyer, Fleming & Cohen, 2019), and technology provides increased learning opportunities (Donohue & Schomburg, 2017). Therefore, churches should be involved in online ministry as a way to help curb 'the rise of the nones' (White, 2017; Scheitle, Corcoran & Halligan, 2018) and attract students to engage anew (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). Finally, churches looking to maximize the learning opportunities afforded by online spaces should look to the field of education to gain insight into effective teaching models. In particular, the Church can learn from the Harasim's (2012) online collaborative learning theory. Employing online collaborative learning theory practices may provide Gen-Z with the constructive, experiential, and collaborative learning opportunities they require in order to most effectively develop a growing faith in Jesus.

In conclusion, churches and church leaders must remember that for Jesus, discipleship was not theoretical, it was a way of life (Coleman & Harrington, 2014). The Church needs to engage online as well as offline to make disciples in both the digital age and the age to come (Kinnaman & Matlock, 2019). As stated by author Selladurai in *Third education revolution: From home school to church college* (2021), "It's time we harness the power of technology in fulfilling the great commission" (p. 125).

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