

From the Industrial Age to the Digital, Downloadable-on-Demand Age

“Every once in a while, a revolutionary product comes along that changes everything.” – Steve Jobs

What does an instant camera, a VHS tape, a cassette tape, and a brick-and-mortar bookstore all have in common with a smartphone? Nothing—and everything all at the same time! Fifteen years ago, these were all viable million-dollar industries that delivered specifically unique services to consumers. Back then, I (Candace) bought books and magazines at Borders and then went to Blockbuster to rent movies. I listened to music and messages on my handheld cassette player. If I wanted to take pictures and see them instantly, I would grab my Polaroid instant camera, load the film, and point and shoot. The quality of the picture was OK, but I didn’t have much else to compare it to as it related to instant photos.

Today, most of these production industries have experienced revolutionary changes in their businesses, if they have not already gone out of business, sold off assets, and laid off employees. But have we stopped engaging in using the Industrial Age services they offered?

In the current digital downloadable-on-demand age, these services are delivered on one handheld device called a smartphone. A smartphone can serve as a movie or publishing distributor as a video store or a bookstore would. It has a camera ten times better than the old instant cameras, and it has replaced the cassette tape and tape player as a device for enjoying music and messages. Think about how seamlessly we’ve accepted and integrated our smartphones into our lives.

Central United Methodist Church, Atlanta, Georgia

In our years serving at Central United Methodist Church, it was customary for us to dress in hats and suits on Sunday morning before heading to church, where we would receive a paper Order of Service. Once the service began, someone would stand to give the weekly announcements, the congregation would sing songs from hymnals, and we would hear the preached Word.

Each Sunday had a theme. First Sunday included Communion service, with hymns and anthems sung. Second Sunday was filled with blended anthems, spirituals, and gospel songs. Third Sunday, the children and youth choir sang; and Fourth Sunday, the gospel choir sang.

On average, the worship service lasted two hours, often taking the form of a celebratory revival-like worship, political rally, community workshop, and prayer service; and then there was the financial appeal. After the service ended, people lingered another 30 minutes or so for fellowship because gathering and being part of the church was the heart of the community and the main source of information and connection.

But today we can connect with people via social media throughout the week and hear their joys and concerns. We can like their posts and the pictures they share. We can contribute to the church whenever we think about it by going to the church’s website or app to give online. We can read the church announcements on the webpage and listen to a sermon we missed on the church’s podcast or online

archive.

We still want to come to church and worship God corporately and fellowship with other believers, but we appreciate the shorter worship services because we also have lunch plans, sports activities, kids' activities, and/or work social activities on Sundays now. So, we appreciate a church that also offers earlier or later worship services to fit our busy schedules. And instead of the hats and formal suits and dresses we used to wear to church, casual clothing is the preference for many on Sundays. Now some of us are not sure why people bother to dress up anymore.

Welcome to the digital age requests and demands of people considering attending your church. Is your church acknowledging and finding ways to address and adapt to these requests and demands? Are there areas in which your church still invests primarily in methods of the Industrial Age instead of connecting with people by using tools of today's digital downloadable-on-demand age?

The message of the good news of God's love through Jesus Christ is unchanging, and people still need to hear and receive this message. But the methods used to share and communicate this message have changed, and the world has moved through the Industrial Age into the digital downloadable-on-demand age. This chapter will challenge and invite leaders to discover and engage new digital downloadable-on-demand resources in a current and future ministry context.

The Black Church Shaped by the Industrial Age

The Industrial Age was shaped by industry, production, and productivity. From the steel mills of Pittsburg to the car manufacturers in Detroit, to the orange groves and orange juice plants of Florida, every company produced high volumes of goods. During the Industrial Age, America was a place of industry; and entire communities, including churches, were built around these industries. Managers were rewarded for employee productivity; and employees were rewarded for producing and following plans and doing their part to contribute to the whole of the process.

But we must ask ourselves, *how was the black church (pastors, leaders, and members) part of the Industrial Age workforce influence as we think about churches of that time?* Whether we had professional, manufacturing, or service industry jobs such as teachers, nurses, secretaries, housekeepers, porters, butlers, maids, longshoremen, drivers, or general laborers, the Industrial Age influenced the black church. While highly valued as employees in certain industries, we also saw these same characteristics appear in church programming and structure.

As part of the black church, we further explored the example of organizational identity. This was especially evident when people made new acquaintances.

After being introduced, if a person wanted to know more about someone, he or she would usually ask, "What church do you belong to?" A typical response might be, "I'm a member of Mt. Calvary, where Rev. So-and-So is my pastor." Adding church identity as part of shared information gave the person a sense of the community to which we were connected. If they talked more, they would then share what they did at their church, for example, choir member, usher, deacon, or missionary. These were communities that brought great pride, and identification was something received in exchange for faithful service to and for the church.

The Black Church Shaped by the Digital Downloadable-on-Demand Age

The movie *Thank God It's Friday* hit theaters in 1978. It told the story of people who regularly enjoyed singing and dancing at a particular disco. Donna Summer sang the theme song, "Thank God It's Friday, Friday, Friday." I (Candace) was ten years old and remember hearing the song on the radio. The song was so popular that it helped coin the acronym TGIF; and later the TGIF restaurant chain opened, a place synonymous with good food and good times.

Fast-forward 30-plus years, and mention TGIF to young adults today. More than likely, their definition of *TGIF* is probably tied somehow to social media. Same acronym but—in light of the shifts in

industry and culture brought on by the digital, social media, social network age—it now has different meanings to different people in different generations.

As we think about this illustration and the black church, think about ways the digital downloadable-on-demand age has, and is, shaping the church today. One of the first lectures I heard that described the influence and the impact of the digital age and the opportunity it presents to the church was by Leonard Sweet, theologian and professor of evangelism at Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, New Jersey. He used the acronym EPIC to start a conversation about ways the church could create EPIC experiences:

- *Experiential*
- *Participatory*
- *Image Rich*
- *Connected*

What does it mean to create a worship service that is experiential, participatory, image rich, and connected? These are questions that the digital age invites us to ask as we plan worship services.

There are several well-known large membership black churches in The United Methodist Church: Windsor Village and St. John's, Houston, Texas; Impact Church, East Point, Georgia; and Ben Hill Church and Cascade Church, Atlanta, Georgia. These churches, while different, possess the following similar traits:

- They are served by dynamic pastoral leaders.
- They attract a large number of diverse and middle-class members.
- They have diverse ministries.

Many people overlook the fact that all of these ministries began as new-church starts, church revitalization projects, or small-membership churches. They were led into vibrant ministry by the effective implementation of strategies that caused them to grow beyond a small-membership mentality. The resulting growth is now history.

Some said that we would never see that type of significant growth in black churches again; but Impact Church and St. James have proven that statement wrong. At the time of this writing, *Outreach Magazine* recognizes Impact Church, in East Point, Georgia, as the 59th fastest growing church in America. And St. James continues to grow in Alpharetta, a northern suburb of Atlanta. This resource captures some of the best things that result in effective church growth and vitality. These churches are also examples of resurgence in local churches that continue to evolve in their leadership, worship experiences, and ministries to meet the needs of the multi-generations in the digital age.

Resurgence celebrates the past but is also focused on emerging principles and practices that direct the path of ministry into creative and innovative strategies for the future. Let's explore the ways your church can use the current digital technology available in your ministry context.

Digital Downloadable-on-Demand Ministry Strategies

People use many digital and social platforms in our society, but your church should not feel pressured to engage all the platforms. Instead, find the best one that members of your church are already using.

Survey the congregation, and ask whether they use any of the current social media platforms. Your church can create a communications team (digital ministry team) of volunteers that is knowledgeable and understands the power of media as a significant ingredient in ministry and missional outreach.

Social media today is what the printing press was in the past. Churches that do not invest in digital media are signaling that they do not intend to invest in a vital future. Social media presence is a must for churches to engage in resurgence.

Evangelism Through Technology

Many churches are using technology as a platform for evangelism. Robust websites have morphed from simply being single-page websites to being more informational, inspirational, and interactive points of entry for many churches. These platforms extend the outreach of ministries beyond the Sunday⁴ morning worship experience. Church on Sunday is no longer a single day of events because social media has extended the worship experience far beyond just Sunday morning.

A question we ask consistently in this resource is, "Who will do this with us?" For answers, we asked millennial social media strategist Kendra Rich to collaborate with us. She designs and runs social media campaigns for churches, profit business, and not-for-profit organizations; and she was excited to contribute the content and strategies for the rest of this chapter.

Through technology and social media, churches now have the opportunity to share the

“personality” of their church, or the manifested body of the church, with more people. Whereas traditionally, people who wanted to get to know a church better would have to visit a service, today they often go online to become better acquainted with a church before they ever visit it. They are looking for what the church does and says outside of Sunday morning; and they are looking to see what that church does in its community and how it addresses the issues of the day, the tragedies of the moment, the currents of change, and the rifts within society.

Keeping that in mind when telling stories or writing captions or copy for your websites or various social media platforms, it's important to filter all that you share through the following questions, paired with your church's stated or adapted mission statement (who/what your church says it does or is). Adding your mission statement to the filter of questions helps to keep your church body's voice consistent.

- How does this connect or reflect our mission?
- How are God's arms reaching?
- How are God's hands healing?
- How are God's words teaching?
- How are God's feet going?
- How is God's love showing them there is a way?

Content Creation Is All About Relationship

We researched a local church whose adapted mission statement was “Committed to guiding people to Jesus through the salvation of Jesus Christ.” That's a pretty lofty mission statement!

As a social media team, we begin by asking, “How do we create content that resonates and relates not only to our church but also to the ever-evolving communities in which we currently abide?” But when we drilled down through the filtering questions to discover the answers, we found that it becomes content that resonates and relates.

The latest incident affecting our community is the killing of an unarmed black man. So if our mission is to be committed to guiding people to Jesus through salvation of Jesus Christ, how does what happened connect or reflect our mission? It connects and reflects our mission because right now our community is grieving the loss of persons and personhood, and it's questioning our humanity in a state that has objectified us instead of seeing us. Through this incident, we have to help our community experience the love that carried Jesus to the cross.

How are God's arms reaching? To further connect with our communities, will we post on our website and other social media outlets and extend invitations for people to come together to grieve and experience Jesus' love shared through His people?

How are God's hands healing? Will we touch the community through outreach promoted on our website or plan to attend a vigil or march as a church?

How are God's words teaching? What about Jesus's salvation story can we educate in an editable yet not oversimplified way to help guide us and root us in the likeness of Christ as we search for answers, justice, and understanding?

How are God's feet going? As we share and write about going to the altar, where else might our feet take us to be among the people and offer them the heart of Christ?

How is God's love showing them there is a way? As we face this most recent death, will

we demonstrate to our communities that they are loved and can find support from their church family? Instead of teaching “respectability politics,” will we celebrate and highlight that people in our communities are loved and worthy of love just as Jesus displayed during His own diminishing experiences in society?

After identifying these filters, we now have a variety of options to create content using technology or other church offerings that represent engagement in the community and care outside of the church walls and Sunday service.

It is important that the church body’s voice should be magnified in all website and social posts, not just in the voice of the person who is responsible for posting or the pastor of your church. Unless your pastor is a nationally recognized televangelist-type person, most people won’t have the connection that you do with him or her. Being mindful of this will keep your social media posts a reflection of the whole body and its role in the larger community instead of just one person.

It’s okay to post quotes or writings that your pastor may want to share, but do so from the standpoint of it being good information and not from the perspective of “our pastor says.” You may not hear it like this, but think of the person who is simply looking for God’s love to show them a way to make it through their current reality. How does that person hear it?

Technological evangelism isn’t a stretch, but again it sounds lofty. This type of outreach is more than simply posting a daily devotion or an inspirational quote. Technological evangelism is reaching out to people with the intent of working through the different filters that make up your church’s manifested voice. It clearly shows who your church is and what your church is about.

The final things to consider are technical and important components in creating content that generates engagement.

- ***Use clean images that are in focused, solid composition and feature stellar lighting.*** Your smartphone camera will work as a great starter tool.
- ***Post succinctly, using few words on images and in captions.*** Say what you need to say, knowing people read things when they are succinct, visually pleasing, and to the point.
- ***Be consistent in posting.*** Uniformity of your posts across all platforms, including your website, is critical.

Church Social Media Strategies

Social media strategies are not one-size-fits-all, just as church ministries and missions are not the same across churches. To assume that I could tell you the best strategy for your church would be imposing on your church and your churches resources.

Three things are key to cultivating a strong social media strategy: (1) Discover your “why” (2) develop consistency, and (3) connect with the platform that the majority of your people use. Many social media strategists suggest that you have a presence on all platforms. But if you find yourself in a situation with minimal resources and time, it’s important to pick the platform where your people are and where you’ll get the most engagement.

Monitor your engagement on social media. It’s wise to heavily monitor your social media and respond with the voice of the church and the heart of God to people who may comment.

This might mean you have to delete obscure commenter posts or fake stories with addresses to send money for a sick family member.

Stay up to date on existing and new social media platforms. Another wise thing to do is to take classes, research information, or hire a social media strategist. (If you're interested in finding a social media strategist, search LinkedIn or use the recommendation of a trusted person who may know a strategist with demonstrated know-how, proven results, and an understanding of the church context, and who has a solid work history). Taking classes, researching information, or hiring someone can help you identify the "why" of starting the church's social media account and what your posts outside of inspirational quotes, church announcements, service time, and devotionals will convey. The content filter questions will also help you create a unified voice for the content you post.

Educating yourself or hiring competent help will assist you in better understanding the different platforms and how to use them. Most of the more popular platforms have a live component, and all of them have an algorithm that affects the way your content is shown and found.

Understanding this information will help fine-tune a strategy that fits your church and your church resources. A clear social media plan will help you enlist volunteers, which can serve on various teams to get your strategy off the ground.

Online Worship Services and Giving

Online worship services are a must for today's culture. There are congregants who are sick or homebound, or they may be out of town or have an unconventional work schedule. So being able to connect or to stay connected with the church as a remote member is a real phenomenon in the way churches are tracking attendance and "doing church" today.

Watching a livestream of the service and being able to give online are important to vital congregations now and in the future. The online service and giving options eliminate any barriers that traditionally may have prevented congregants from experiencing a church service due to life circumstances.

Today church members are experiencing the ease of giving through various programs and apps such as Tithe.ly, iTithe10, PayPal (as a nonprofit), Cash App, Venmo, and Givelify. Each of these has its own price and fees that apply.

These options of worship and giving don't take away from the traditional sacredness of the sanctuary, of worship, and of the offering plate. Instead, they make the worship and giving experience even more tangible wherever a congregant may be, locally or globally. In this way, congregants are always connected to their home church literally and monetarily, which hasn't always been the case in the past.

Using Technology for Church Meetings

Using technology to facilitate routine committee meetings or high-level check-ins is not only a great way to be an effective steward of time through maximized efficiency, but in some cases, it can also keep an entire committee or auxiliary on the same page. Whether you meet in person and use technology or meet virtually, there are various resources available to make your meetings happen seamlessly. For example, Google Docs/Basecamp can be used as a planning

center to store committee notes and create a six-month meeting calendar, with alerts and reminders of upcoming meetings.

Virtual meetings are so readily available that even parents who travel can use technology to say goodnight to their children. Many virtual “face time” technologies exist to make connecting with others easier, including Zoom, Google Hangout, join.me, and Go to Meeting.

Stay abreast of the latest technology that can help you reach your audience. Constantly evolving services are out there, and using search engines or talking to your tech-savvy neighbor will often reveal the latest tech invention to meet your needs.

Online Small Group, Christian Education, and Mission Opportunities

In expanding our in-person congregational communities to online communities, understanding the place of online small groups, Christian education, and mission opportunities can be difficult. Each of these areas seem to naturally fall under this umbrella because they appear to be connectional opportunities that would be better done in person.

But people are currently searching online for ways to meet other people IRL (in real life), to connect with and forge lasting relationships. So even though they may use social media or small-group and Christian education opportunities similar to online learning to connect with like-minded people, they will inevitably migrate from online to in-person and create lasting connections built on the basis of life similarities.

When people are interested in missions, they search for and join Facebook groups for mission and service opportunities that resonate with their core values of wanting to give back. These same groups are meeting in person and committing to mission as a way of building connections and friendships, while helping or aiding their fellow man outside of natural disasters and tragedies.

People look online to find a church’s small groups, Christian education opportunities, and lists of missional engagements. In doing so, the objective is to find and engage with like-minded people, hoping not only to connect with them but also to build lifelong connections through practicing life together as an extended family.

As you begin navigating resurgence from the Industrial Age to the digital downloadable-on-demand age, the strategies discussed in this chapter will be helpful. We are available to assist you in connecting with excellent coaches, professional social media strategists, and resource people to help your church in effectively using social media and digital and technological resources to enhance your ministry.

Conclusion

Every church will not grow into one of the fastest growing churches in America. The focus of this work specifically targets churches that were once vital but now find themselves engaged in ministry in a tough place, struggling to survive. Churches that live into the principles and strategies that are offered in this resource can once again become vital places of ministry.

Reflect and Respond

How will you navigate?

Consider these five strategies, and apply them in your current and future ministry:

1. Know your audience and your current and future ministry context. Then shape the worship experience to meet the needs of the overall audience.
2. Resist the temptation to shape the worship experience solely on a past Industrial Age model and the interests of power brokers in the church.
3. Discover ways to incorporate digital download-able-on-demand experiences in current and future worship experiences.
4. Acknowledge those whom you are not connecting with, losing, not reaching, or disregarding by not navigating the shift in the current and future ministry landscape.
5. Acknowledge those who might consider your current worship experiences outdated because they see no signs of the modern digital age incorporated into the worship experience.

Action Item: The word *navigate* is a verb that means “to steer a course through a medium.” Navigation is the science of getting ships from place to place. In this resource, we are inviting leaders to engage in the science and art of navigating as leaders called to lead the church from its current known place into the future God has in store for the church in our post-Christian culture and pluralistic society.

Today, navigation for the church leader is not a “maybe so”; it is an “absolutely so.” Navigation is the fruit of embarking upon uncharted waters with a specific destination in mind. In the church, that destination is discerned and influenced by God’s vision, spiritually connected leadership, resources, and the wisdom of a team of advisors who seek and sense the need for mid-course corrections along the journey.

As you navigate from the Industrial age to and through the digital, technology age, know that the ministry terrain is changing so quickly that vital organizations often contract coaches and consultants to regularly review and tweak their ministry plans as they seek innovative approaches to expand their ministry focus. If you are a denominational member, some conferences have staff available to consult with you to help assess your church’s health. They can also resource your church in the area of technology. This can occur one-on-one or through group coaching experiences.

Every vital church should have someone with outside eyes examine the systems of the local church to ensure that systems and strategies are evolving in proportion to the church's growth goals. Resurgence consists of constant mid-course corrections fueled by new information gained from informed opportunities to improve our destination.