

How Michael Todd's Success Using the Viral Church Can Inspire You to Be a Light in Darkness

Michael Todd has had huge success sharing the gospel online via what we call "the viral church." He was the cover story for the June/July issue of *Charisma*. Yesterday I wrote about the major success of his Transformation Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. We included a link to the first part of that cover story. And I told about my podcast with him that included personal stories not in the article. The response has been amazing.

I did a second podcast to understand how Todd uses the internet, but more than that, how individuals can be inspired to do what they can to reach the world through social media. What he says may surprise you because it's not so much about technology but about character and the stamina to keep going when there doesn't seem to be much visual success. Todd tells how he did online services and posted his messages with very low viewership. And then one two-minute tweet of one of his sermon went viral and caused everything he had been doing for years to explode.

When I asked him to explain what the church can do, Todd said the church must be the reflection of God in the midst of darkness, adding that the smallest light shines brightest in the darkest places. This doesn't come from the top down but from the bottom up, with each of us committed to the ministry of reconciliation, being faithful to what God has called us to do. This is where we find the anointing from God, and He opens doors.

Having said that, I want to pick up on the second part of the *Charisma article*. You can read the first part [here](#). And then it segues to the part we called the “Future Church”:

“I try to study and to show myself approved, but my filter is ‘How are people going to get it?’, not ‘Is this hermeneutically correct?’” Todd says. “I don’t have a professor in my mind that I’m thinking of. The only person I’m trying to get a ‘well done’ from is God ... I rely on the Holy Spirit to lead me and guide me into all truth, and He has. He’s kept me, He’s corrected me when I’ve been wrong, and He’s sent people to correct me. But because my heart is pure, I think He continues to allow me to be used in that way.”

That said, no matter where pastoral training took place, Todd believes all pastors are learning on the fly what it means to lead in the internet era.

When asked how preaching would change in the future, Todd laughed: “It’s already changed.”

“We have about 5,000 people who come to our physical location every week, and the numbers keep growing every week,” Todd says. “But this past week was like 36,000 unique devices online—and some people are gathered with their whole family watching a single device. So it’s more people than that. But they’re tuning in live with us on Sunday morning from different time zones—Africa, Paris, Florida—and watching live with us. And after we post it, about 200,000 people watch the message in one week.”

Todd says in some ways, the job of a pastor is the same as it’s always been—and in other ways, it’s shifting.

“For me, I have to shepherd the sheep that come to this physical location,” Todd says. “I also have a global apostolic call—that’s what I’m going to call it—to encourage people, help them grow and point them back to the Word of God. But I do not grow my internet church to the level that it impacts my

physical location.”

Besides, he jokes, “I could not manage a 40,000-member church. That doesn’t even sound interesting to me.” In fact, he thinks if his goal were to have a church as big as Lakewood or Gateway Church, Transformation Church would probably be far less successful—because God has provided the exact resources they need to handle a church their size. Still, Todd says he tells his staff that if the church is ever truly persecuted in America, and they take away the building or their tax-exempt status, their church will be just fine: “I could preach in a room with one camera, and we could still get the message out to 30,000 people.”

He hears stories of many house churches that stream Transformation Church’s services and use them to supplement small-group discussions. He’s very encouraged by this development, saying it reminds him of both the early church and Netflix all at once.

“It takes me back to Acts 2:42, where people gathered in homes, shared what they had, read the apostles’ teachings and talked about it,” Todd says. “Well, that’s what they’re doing on social media. They’re sharing about it. Friends are finding out about it. ... We’re not facilitating it or doing anything. The reason Netflix blows up is because they provide content, but you decide how you want to watch it and how you want to use it. And as we’ve done that, we’ve seen salvation skyrocket. We’ve seen people get baptized. We’ve seen people go from being drug addicts or in different lifestyles or shacking up to being convicted or getting married.”

Todd says, in an ideal world, everyone would attend a local church and be heavily involved in service. But for people who are distant from or skeptical about God, sometimes one online service a week is all they will accept—and the Holy Spirit can reach them through that.

"We want to be a long ramp for some people, " Todd says. "In church, we want people to get saved today, get baptized tomorrow, speak in tongues the next day and be on the service team by next weekend. ... But what if it takes somebody three years because of all the damage and the hurt and frustration? Well, they won't come to church, but they'll listen to my messages while they're working out.

"The Bible tells us faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. As they're hearing that Word of God, slowly the Holy Spirit is drawing them near. It may take them six months, a year, two years, three years. But we [could be] the bridge to get them plugged into a local church where they live. They may watch us during the week, but now they're going somewhere where people know their name."

Transformation Church has been particularly effective at reaching a diverse cross-section of young Millennials and Generation Z, a group often described by demographers as uninterested in religion. Todd disputes that point; he says what they are really uninterested in are frauds.

"They're leaving the church because the church, in many respects, is a big business and a facade," Todd says. "That's why they're leaving. This is the most authentic, self-aware generation that we've had in a long time, and they can smell a fake from a mile away. I think that's why I'm appealing to this generation: Because they see it's real. It's authentic. If churches and leaders would value authenticity more, their Millennial and Gen Z attendance would go up tremendously."

Put simply, if young adults are going to do something, they want to be 100% all-in, without any reservations. They don't want to play church politics, pretend to be someone else or compartmentalize Christianity to Sunday meetings. They want to be free to be fully who God created them to be and hold nothing back in pursuit of Jesus. Because of that, Todd believes they can represent a threat to some "old guard"

Christian leaders, but that they can also change the world for God.

“Nobody can tell me Millennials are not interested in God,” Todd says. “They’re not interested in a big business with no power. They can’t do that. ...These young people? If they’re committed to something, they’re getting a tattoo of it, they’re changing their license plates to “SOLD OUT,” they’re telling all their friends. And so, it’s a bigger decision because they can’t do anything halfway.”

Todd says the beautiful thing about Transformation Church is that it’s as diverse as the kingdom of God. Whether young or old, digital or in-person, black or white, the movement is united around loving and obeying Jesus. And Todd says it’s his honor to serve as their pastor.

“Because we made intentional efforts to be multigenerational in our church, you can see a grandmother, mother and grandchild worshipping and praising on the same row, giving God glory, and then going back and talking about the message over lunch,” Todd says. “... Everybody’s the same. They’re just older. The things people dealt with 20 years ago, we’re still dealing with today– it just may have another name on it. Everybody at the core has the same issues and problems: insecurity, comparison, ‘Do I have a call?’, “Do I have a purpose?’ And we know the answer to all of them is Jesus.”