

LifeChurch.tv Leader Bobby Gruenewald Talks Church Innovation in a Digital Age

It's not often that a local church leader is listed by *Fast Company* magazine as one of the 100 most creative people in business. But that's exactly what happened in 2011 to Bobby Gruenewald, innovation leader, pastor and a member of the directional leadership team at , based in Edmond, Okla.

Working with lead pastor Craig Groeschel, has shaped a missional approach to technology, seen in initiatives like Church Online and the YouVersion Bible app, which helps tens of millions of people around the globe grow closer to God and His Word.

This year, the YouVersion app passed the 100 million downloads mark, and that's why Gruenewald is one of the leading voices in the church as it relates to innovation and the use of technology to reach people for Christ. He frequently writes and speaks on the topic and has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, TechCrunch, NBC, CNN, CBS and more. Recently, filmmaker, media consultant and blogger Phil Cooke sat down with Bobby to find out more.

Phil Cooke: Bobby, tell me about you. What's your background, and how did you end up working with pastor Craig Groeschel?

Bobby Gruenewald: I studied business in college and went on to start and sell several Internet-based startups. In the meantime, my wife and I started attending . I was volunteering as a keyboard player during weekend worship. So when I sold my last company, our executive pastor saw an article in the local paper about the sale and said, "Doesn't that guy play keyboard on our worship team?" They asked me to lunch and posed the idea of joining the staff. I declined, because I was worried

taking a job on staff would change my relationship with this church I loved so much. But I did start serving in a volunteer role helping out with our technology needs. Eventually my passion for the church eclipsed my passion for business, and I asked if the offer still stood. I joined the staff in 2001.

Cooke: Why technology? At what point did you realize the impact technology could make in ministry?

Gruenewald: When I started studying business in college, no one thought I would end up in ministry, including me. But in one of my previous companies, I saw how powerful the relationships were that people formed online. As I started getting more involved in leading at our church, I wondered how we could leverage that same technology to help people build relationships with Christ at the center. That was the seed for what eventually became Church Online. I'm thankful I get to spend my days applying what I learned in the business world to what we do here in the church.

Cooke: Was the YouVersion app the team's first idea, or did that come out of trying something else?

Gruenewald: Most people think of YouVersion as an app. What most people don't realize is that it started as a website. It was born out of the question, Could today's technology transform how our generation and future generations engage in the Bible? Could we be at a Gutenberg moment? But the reason no one knows it was a website is because hardly anyone used it—so much so that we were about ready to shut it down. We just weren't seeing the ROI [return on investment] to make it worthwhile. As a last-ditch effort, we decided to make a few changes to the site so we could view it on our phones.

And something changed. We noticed we were engaging in the Bible more because it was on our phone that we had with us everywhere we went. We naturally began to read and engage in

the Bible so much more. Right around that same time, Apple opened up apps to developers and introduced a whole new concept of an app store. We wondered if we could turn the engagement we saw on our mobile devices into one of the very first apps. That's exactly what happened in July 2008. The App Store launched, and we introduced the Bible app in the first group of apps.

Cooke: When did you realize this could really be big?

Gruenewald: Within three short days of launching the Bible app in 2008, we saw 83,000 people install the app on their iPhone. Our jaws dropped at that number. We had hoped for something like that within our first year, not our first few days. We never would have been able to conceive what was coming. What was downloaded on nearly 100,000 iPhones that weekend has been downloaded and used on over 100 million devices on nearly every smartphone and tablet in every single country on the earth.

Cooke: What are some of the most recent statistics on the app?

Gruenewald: We're past 115 million and counting. We're offering 700 Bible versions, representing 444 languages. Our community has completed more than 11 million reading plans, highlighted nearly half a million verses and created nearly 250,000 bookmarks. At any given moment, you can see the stats at .

Cooke: Many creative leaders try to launch projects in the context of a local church, but most fail. Why has the relationship between YouVersion and been so effective?

Gruenewald: YouVersion is a natural extension of 's missional use of technology. We understand that if we want to reach people no one is reaching, we're going to have to do things no one is doing. Our core mission is to lead people to become fully devoted followers of Christ. And we're going to leverage technology in any way we can to do that, whether it's

launching an Internet campus (as we called Church Online back in 2006), freely sharing our resources digitally or bringing the Bible to the devices we carry with us everywhere.

Cooke: From a creative standpoint, how do you work? What's your typical daily routine?

Gruenewald: "Typical" and "routine" aren't really part of my workflow. [Laughs.] I spend most of my time leading the leaders who are on the front lines of our different ministries and initiatives. I'm an extrovert, so I think by talking, and I have plenty of opportunities to do that as I meet with our teams throughout the week. I really enjoy traveling, too, since it gives me a different perspective and time to ask questions like the ones that led to YouVersion.

Cooke: What's next for Bobby Gruenewald?

Gruenewald: Honestly, I have the best job in the world. I get to wake up every day and do what God's created me to do—dream up ways to leverage technology for the kingdom. It's all I want to do.

Phil Cooke *is a filmmaker, media consultant and founder of The Influence Lab. Find out more at .*