

The Digital Awakening

The church is more technologically advanced than you might think. Here are five ways believers are paving the way with their innovation.

Having spent the better part of his life in organized crime, “William” woke up one morning at 3 o’clock and questioned whether he wanted to be a part of it anymore. A native of Ireland, the 37-year-old father of three thought about his young children and decided he had to change his life. Googling “church and God,” he came across and clicked on “church online.”

As he listened to the music, he cracked open a beer, logged onto the chat room and began talking with Brandon Donaldson, one of the church’s online pastors. As God touched his heart, William told Donaldson he felt he was “breaking down” from the pressures of a life of crime and an upcoming criminal trial. Feeling a sense of conviction, William decided to pray with Donaldson to ask Jesus to forgive him of his sins and change his life. When he awoke the next morning, William says he was a different guy. “If I was to summarize who I was before—I’m not going to glamorize my life—I was a thug,” William says. “I wouldn’t say I’m not a thug anymore. I would say God is dealing with this thug.

“The person I was before ... people avoided me on the street when they saw me. People crossed the road. If I asked for something to be done, it was done. But here I am now—I don’t want to be spiritual about it—but I’m a new person in Christ.”

Bobby Gruenewald, a pastor and innovation leader at , says tens of thousands of people like William have come to the Lord through the church’s online ministry. Since it began in a two-car garage in 1996, has grown to become the second-largest church in the United States. Now more than 30,000 people

attend services at the 13 physical campuses in Oklahoma, Texas, Tennessee, New York and Florida. In addition, more than 60,000 computers from 140 countries are logged in to the church's online services each week.

"We believe this is an amazing opportunity to fulfill the Great Commission," Gruenewald says. "We don't think it's an accident that God has placed us here in this unique time in history when not only are there more people alive than ever before, but we're more connected to the world's population than we ever have been in history. With all the technology tools available today, we have the ability to share the gospel with more people than ever before."

Just as the invention of the printing press and Gutenberg Bible played a major role in the Age of Enlightenment, Cynthia Ware, executive director of the Center for Church Communication in Los Angeles, says the explosion in Internet and mobile-device technology is creating a "priesthood of every believer," giving Christians the chance to digitally take the good news to the ends of the earth.

"We've gone from the Gutenberg generation of the church to the Google generation of the church," Ware says. "For 500 years, things have been one way. And now, in five years' time, almost everything has changed. The gospel message doesn't change, but the presentation of it and the accessibility of it and everything in the culture around it has changed."

Of the world's 6.8 billion people, 61 percent now have mobile phones and 26 percent have Internet access. As these numbers increase exponentially and people increasingly rely on technology to facilitate their search for meaning and connection, the church is becoming far more technologically advanced than many might think. As millions of people worldwide come to Christ through online churches and ministries, Christian innovators and technophiles are leading the digital revolution with a profusion of technological

breakthroughs.

For example, more than 1.7 million people have reported decisions for Christ at , a France-based Internet evangelism ministry overseen by pastor and team director Eric Célérier. By clicking on “Joy in Heaven,” the Web site displays a satellite map showing where the latest decision for Christ occurred, and it offers viewers a chance to pray for that new Christian. Each day, about 1,500 people accept Christ through the ministry. After completing a contact form, they receive a free Bible and are contacted by a church or Christian in their area.

“As Christians, we need to seize the opportunity of the Internet age,” Célérier says. “The largest unreached people group in the entire world is those under the age of 30 years old—the Internet generation. There is a dying world, and we can reach it.”

A similar ministry, Global Media Outreach (GMO) says that last year 10 million people made a decision to follow Christ after logging on to one of its more than 100 Web sites. The simple, one-page sites present the gospel using the Four Spiritual Laws. “This is the Internet moment in human history,” says GMO founder Walt Wilson, a former Apple Computer executive and one-time senior vice president at Computer Sciences Corp. “We have the technology to reach every man, woman and child on the earth. We’re the first generation in all human history to have this capacity.”

Online evangelism is just one way Christians are embracing new technology to advance God’s kingdom. Here are several other inventions and innovations reshaping the way people experience the gospel:

1.

Hoping to encourage greater biblical literacy among the largest generation in modern history—the “net generation” born

between 1980 and 1995– created , a personalized, interactive Bible. So far, 4.4 million users from more than 200 countries have downloaded the free online and mobile Bible.

In airports, subways, coffee shops, carpool lines and countless points between, individuals have spent more than 1.5 billion minutes reading the Bible on their mobile devices, including iPhones, BlackBerrys, Androids and Web-enabled phones. Each month, about 500,000 people download the Bible application for their mobile device.

“You can choose from 20 different reading plans to help you read through the Bible,” says Gruenewald, who is known as the “digerati” at LifeChurch. “What we’ve found by making the Bible freely available on mobile devices is that people’s engagement with Scripture has increased tremendously.”

One of the reasons the 18- to 29-year-olds in the millennial generation—and even the older generations—don’t read the Bible is because the book format isn’t conducive to engaging them in their daily lives, Gruenewald says. “I’ve heard statistics about how many Bibles are in the U.S. and how few people in the emerging generation are actually picking it up and reading it,” he says. “The challenge today is that people struggle to carry two devices with them—iPods and their mobile phones—let alone a large book.”

Among the church’s other technological innovations is —a free online chat tool that enables people to communicate with anyone, anywhere in up to 45 languages. Gruenewald and senior pastor Craig Groeschel also write a leadership, technology and innovation blog, . The blog, which includes leadership tips, new ideas and community feedback, is read by more than 10,000 pastors and church leaders monthly.

In addition, a Web-based application, , helps churches make informed decisions to stay on track with their mission. More than 5,400 churches use it to keep tabs on attendance, giving,

salvations and baptisms. And offers free weekend teaching videos, series graphics and artwork, small-group resources, church leadership materials, youth messages and children's curriculum.

2. GIo Bible

An invention that could fill church pews with people reading iPads instead of Bibles, the interactive Glo Bible brings God's Word to life with high-definition video and documentaries, high-resolution images, maps users can zoom in on, 360-degree virtual tours and many other features.

Recently released by Zondervan, the groundbreaking Glo Bible combines traditional Bible text with interactive materials, allowing people to see and feel the Bible rather than just read it. The three-DVD set costs about \$79 and features five different lenses for easy navigation. The Bible, atlas, timeline, media and topical features create an entirely new experience through the digital exploration of the biblical world.

Glo users have the ability to take virtual reality tours of Jerusalem in the times of Christ then view how it appears today, explore the Sistine Chapel in high definition or customize a reading plan according to their interests. The five lenses also filter content in ways never before possible because searches are based on "tags." A user can quickly, visually and intuitively conduct a complicated search, such as finding all the Scriptures that feature what Jesus had to say on the subject of redemption during the Passover Week in Jerusalem.

Nelson Saba, Glo co-creator and chief executive officer of Immersion Digital in Orlando, Fla., says Glo explores the incredible potential of interactive media, the preferred media of the new generations. "If you look at biblical literacy among the younger generations, it's very, very low because

most of what you have today in terms of digital Bibles is geared toward Bible students and scholars, but Glo is geared to really be the alternative to the paper Bible,” Saba says. “This generation would prefer to go to church with an iPad running Glo, and that’s one of the platforms we are targeting.”

By offering the Bible in a format younger generations are accustomed to, Saba says he hopes the Glo Bible will bring fathers and sons, and mothers and daughters, together to read God’s Word. “The big hope I have with this product is [that] we’ll re-engage this generation and bring them back to the Bible like the older generations,” Saba says.

3.

Specializing in text messaging, helps churches modify their Web pages so church members can text questions to the pastor during services, making church more interactive. The Chicago-based firm also gives church leaders the ability to send text messages to their congregations. No special software or hardware is required, and churches can manage the text messaging through the church Web page.

“We call it text-to-screen, or text Q & A, where the congregation, if they have questions about what the pastor is speaking about, can ask questions of the pastor,” says “textologist” Michael Forsberg. “It’s sort of like digital hand-raising. The associate pastor or production team can filter through the questions and select one—maybe overlapping ones that speak closely to the sermon—and the pastor can dig a little deeper into what people are questioning or are curious about in the message.”

A company founded in the summer of 2008, has already helped more than 130 churches nationwide find text messaging solutions. With costs ranging as low as \$150 per month, the

service is especially popular among church youth who like to give their feedback and keep up-to-date on church announcements via text messages, Forsberg says.

“In one way, when churches utilize text-messaging, they are speaking the language of the millennials,” Forsberg says. “Instead of seeing the church as an archaic place with pews and hymnals, they see it as a new place for community, which kind of shatters their previous notions of what the church was for them growing up. As churches utilize new methods of interactive media, online video- and Web-casting, Twitter, Facebook and texting, it allows them to engage with the millennials outside of the church walls.”

4. ‘No. 17’

An inventor of more than 150 intellectual properties, Barry Goldfarb has created a patent-pending technology—now known only as “No. 17”—that unlocks the information contained in audio recordings, transforming old recordings made before stereo into what sounds like a “real-life acoustical event.”

“I demonstrated a musical piece by Louie Armstrong in the 1940s, and it was as if Louie Armstrong appeared right in the room with his orchestra,” says Goldfarb, the co-founder of BSG Technologies LLC.

“It’s a marvelous thing to release what is locked in these old recordings. But even with today’s music, we’ve had conductors and recording company owners here at my labs, and if you take what you think is a great, state-of-the-art digital CD and pop it into our system, it’s like night and day. I put on something by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, and the bass was shaking our teeth, and it sounded like you were there right before them. It’s not subtle at all.”

Goldfarb, a child prodigy who nearly lost his hearing as a youth and believes God gave him a “gift to see into His realms,” says the technology will transform the sound systems

for churches and other ministries. "When a pastor speaks, it will sound to everyone like he's talking right in front of them, but quietly," Goldfarb says.

Currently, most contemporary churches use the same sound systems used for rock 'n' roll concerts. But Goldfarb says churches are a unique sound environment and need unique sound systems. "When people hear this sound, I think they will say, 'Gee, I've never heard a sound like that before,' and they will be running to church just to hear the sound," Goldfarb says.

"There have been numerous prophets who have come here and said to me with tears in their eyes that God has been promising a new sound. It's been spoken of in many churches around the world, and the prophets who have come here have said this is that sound."

5. VAV Media

Helping churches and ministries create their own mini-Internet TV stations, Hollywood-based VAV Media uses an innovative technology to broadcast programming to Web sites and mobile phones. Helena Hwang, founder and chief executive officer of VAV Media, says her company partners with RAYV, which developed a television-over-Internet Protocol similar to the technology behind Skype, that allows ministries such as Harvest International Ministry and Rhema Ministries to broadcast programming over the Internet. "We're giving ministries and media companies the ability to use cutting-edge technology that is lower cost, higher quality and scaleable," says Hwang, a former vice president of TheCall prayer movement. "In addition we integrate the interactivity of Facebook, Twitter, chat and other widgets."

VAV Media sets up a television "control room" by installing the broadcast software on ministry computers. "They can basically have their own TV station from their church," Hwang says. "It gives believers access to the media airwaves.

Ministries around the world can have live shows. And if there is a crisis somewhere, they can offer content from a biblical worldview.”

The Power of Connection

Despite the dizzying array of media and technology impacting the church and the way it shares the gospel with the world, Shane Hipps, a teaching pastor at Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., and author of *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*, says he wants to raise awareness about the “hidden power of the media” and how the “message changes when we change the method.”

Since the electronic revolution of the late 1800s, the telegraph, telephone, radio, television, Internet and mobile devices have replaced the printed word as the dominant mode of communication. As scientists study how these changes have affected people’s brains, Hipps says they have discovered a repatterning of neuro-pathways.

As a result, the culture has changed from a left brain one—focused on logic and linear, sequential thinking—to a right hemisphere one preoccupied with intuition, relationship and holistic experience. “In this new world, people care more about your behavior and practices rather than your beliefs and ethics,” Hipps says.

Similarly, the church has changed from one focused on doctrine, dogma and abstract beliefs to one more concerned with concrete experience and ethical practices, Hipps says. “The digital age has merely amplified and intensified the electronic age,” says Hipps, whose latest book “takes readers beneath the surface of things to see how the technologies we use end up using us.”

“The effect is practically nuclear,” Hipps continues. “One of the big changes is that we’ve become increasingly disembodied with our faces buried in computer monitors or small screens

that we hold in the palm of our hands. We've become digital nomads, wandering around the globe without a body."

Although the electronic culture is expansive, connecting Christians with people around the world, Hipps says believers are losing touch with the "immense power of the incarnation, which is that God became a body for a reason."

"God did not remain an ethereal, detached Spirit, but transformed into a body because there is something about a presence in one another's lives physically that is actually very transformative," Hipps says.

The transformative power of our physical presence can't be conveyed over a computer screen, in an e-mail, text or tweet or even over the telephone, Hipps adds. So although all the latest electronic gadgets and devices are revolutionizing the way churches and ministries fulfill the Great Commission, Hipps says people need to remember that Jesus calls us to love others too—something best done one-on-one. "I think plenty of the good news can be conveyed [electronically]," he says, "but I think more of the good news is conveyed in relationships with people."

Troy Anderson is a freelance journalist based in Southern California. Although he doesn't consider himself a digerati, he once created a computer role-playing game based on the book of Acts.

Watch video demonstrations of some of these inventions at