

Autumn 2023

BAPTISTS

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The magazine for the Baptist Union of Great Britain

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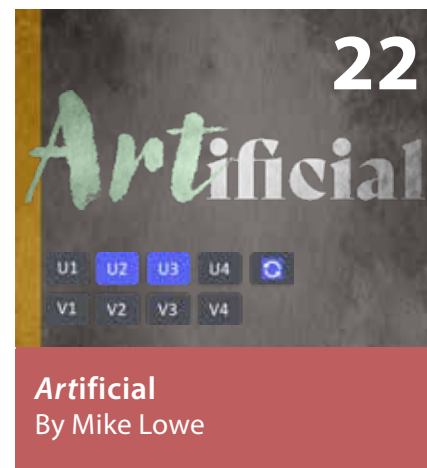
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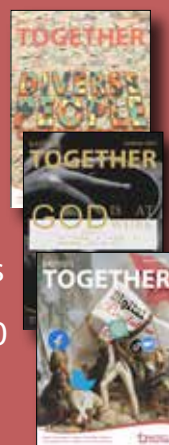
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When Baptist Union Council identified the digital revolution as a key priority area back in 2018, there wasn't too much material on which to base an edition of this magazine. Clearly there have been huge developments in digital technology and our use of it since then, notably how Covid and its accompanying lockdowns catapulted us into running online church. But of course, as Lynn Green states, hosting such services is only 'the tip of a very big iceberg... Grappling with issues about developing digital mission and the massive theological issues of what it means to be human in a world of AI all lie before us.'

The pages that follow represent a snapshot of some of the thinking and stories of churches engaged in digital mission across the denomination.

It's a fast-moving world and there is lots to ponder. Questions explored in this edition include:



- How do we reach the 53m people in the UK who have social media with the gospel of Jesus? What does it look like to collaborate with Jesus on social media?
- How can we be more connected beyond Sunday - both informally, face-to-face, and on Zoom?

- Is intelligence only the property of humans? Can an intelligent machine be in a relationship?
- Can AI sin - and what would that look like?

We hope the articles and stories in this edition provide much food for thought, and help deepen your understanding of the digital revolution and its possibilities.

As one of our writers states: 'It's easy to think the Bible might not have much to say about 21st century technology, but of course it does. We've been creating tools and technology for the whole of human history. The Bible does not condemn tools or technology as inherently evil. It shows how they can be employed for both good and evil purposes.'

What does it mean to effectively harness the digital revolution for the sake of the Kingdom?

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BAPTISTS AND THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

It was 2018 when we identified the 'digital revolution' as a priority area across Baptists Together, writes General Secretary Lynn Green. Initially a slow burn, it's clear now it was a prophetic step seeing increasing momentum throughout our movement

As we seek to engage with the digital revolution and release its positive potential for God's mission, it's worth pausing a moment to remember how this came to be a priority area in the first place.

When I was appointed General Secretary in 2013, I was clear God's call to me was to enable us to live into the vision for collaborative mission that we had discerned together through what was known as the 'Futures process'.

Working with the then Baptist Steering Group, we used Patrick Lencioni's book *The Advantage* to help us gain clarity about our purpose and our culture values. One of the key questions we asked ourselves was, 'What is important now?' In a movement where strategy is dispersed among our many peer teams it was helpful to move away from 'strategic vision' language and embrace the idea of common or shared priorities that enabled us to get to grips with what was important at that point. So, we crafted a (rather long) list of key issues we believed needed addressing between 2015 and 2020. And let's be clear, this wasn't some centralised strategic vision, as I said earlier: this was us identifying what was important to us all and then trusting each other in our different teams to address these in relevant ways in our own context. Collaboration and freedom, in true Baptist spirit!

Fast forward to 2018. The question, 'What is important now?' carries with it a clear sense of the dynamic nature of the strategic process, and this is especially the case in a Baptist context. Three years down the line, our context was changing, and we were learning and changing too. We were also making good progress with many of the priorities; it was time for a review. This involved both Council discernment together with opportunities for further reflection with the All Team Leaders group that had now emerged alongside the Baptist Steering Group. In these different ways we explored together what might be key priorities for us in the next season, particularly in the light of the prophetic words we have been given from God about him doing a new thing among us. Given that our purpose and values had already been agreed, Council affirmed the four key areas of

shared work across Baptists Together that deliver our vision: equipping the local church for mission; investing in Godly leaders; planting and pioneering; enabling Baptist voices and action in the public square, in March 2018.

As we continued prayerfully to ask the question, "What is important now?" the digital priority area began to emerge. There were two key moments that year. The first was in October 2018 when Phil Knox, Head of Mission to Young Adults with the Evangelical Alliance, came and shared with All Team Leaders. He talked about the digital revolution and explained how this held three distinct revolutions:

- 1 The information revolution – a vast wealth of information is now available to us in ways unimaginable to a former generation.

- 2 The relational revolution – the profound effect on relationships through social media in particular, which in some ways satisfies the craving for connection yet loses the quality and depth of face-to-face encounter.

- 3 The attention revolution – the reality of constant distraction and the inability to be fully present.

At our following gathering in November, Rob Ellis, then Principal of Regent's Park College, facilitated us to continue to explore Emerging Adult Culture and Baptist Identity.

So, there was a key theme emerging about the digital revolution and our engagement with young adults. This was further enhanced through our Council discussions, when the theological issues around what it means to be human also came to the fore.

So, the digital revolution, along with five other areas became our refreshed shared priorities from 2018. Here is what Council unanimously agreed:

- **Embrace adventure:** Being serious about discipleship, willing to take risks, pioneer and move out of the comfort zone of familiar ways of doing things (Matthew 28:18-20) Council particularly wanted to embody this value in the context of mission, evangelism and discipleship
- Working through the remaining recommendations of the **Ignite** report
- **Developing leadership** in all its forms, together with a focus on equipping the whole body of Christ
- **Children, Young People and Families**
- A similar but separate focus on **Emerging Adults** aged 18-35 – a group largely missing from our churches
- **Digital revolution** – not only our own digital capacity but reflecting on the implications of the digital revolution on mission, ministry and society

Initially, there was not much tangible progress with the Digital Revolution priority, but then Covid happened! At the stroke of a Government edict we were catapulted into the digital revolution we had previously only begun to glimpse. As we rapidly pivoted to online church, meetings and community, young adults suddenly became key players in helping us navigate what was to many, a new world. And we had to begin to reflect on the bigger questions of what worship, community and mission look like in this new paradigm.



Phil Knox at a Baptist Steering Group meeting in 2018

But, of course, running church services online is only the tip of a very big iceberg. Grappling with issues about developing digital mission and the massive theological issues of what it means to be human in a world of AI all lie before us. Like generations before, we will need to prayerfully discern where God is at work and how we can join him in the goodness of these developments. This will also lead us into bringing a prophetic voice that speaks loudly and clearly to challenge the huge and far-reaching implications of the digital revolution. We need to work out how we are going to advocate for and embody the value and dignity of human life and the nature of community and relationships that is the nature of our triune God.

Clearly this priority area is gaining momentum now. It's beginning to appear in our colleges (the MA in Digital Theology at Spurgeon's College is the first degree of its kind across the world); we have helped to fund the Change Makers Project (see page 19) and *transform. church* - an online Baptist

missional community - has been welcomed into membership of Baptists Together (see page 16). We will need to continue to be engaged in investing resource and theological reflection in this critical area right across our movement.



Lynn Green is the General Secretary of Baptists Together

PRAYERS

The computer scan

I scanned my computer today, a routine check for problems, and watched aghast as the list grew:

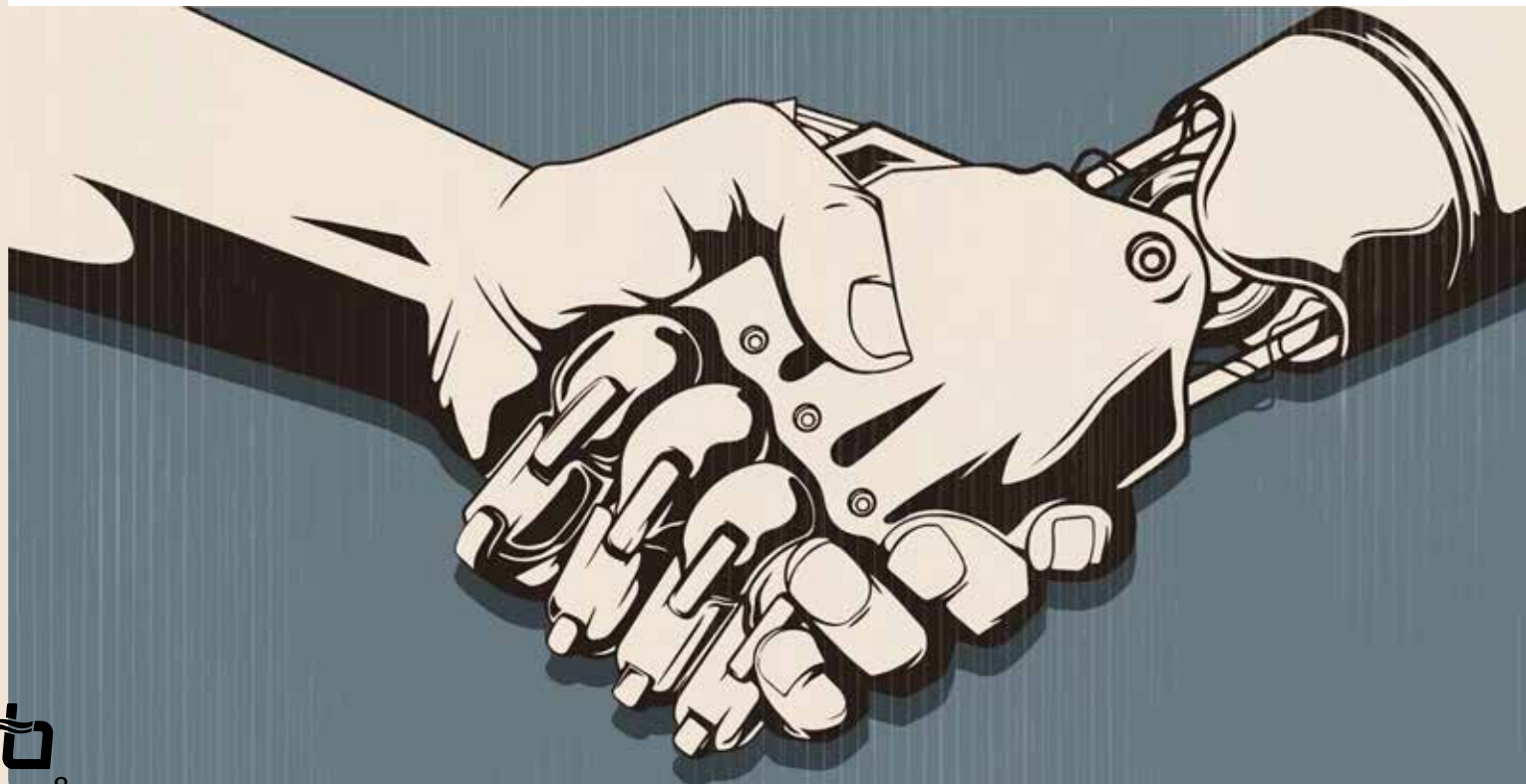
viruses,
bugs,
spyware,
spam –
so much that had crept in unnoticed,
insidiously infiltrating my system,
corrupting,
infecting,
destroying.

Examine me, Lord, and know my heart.
Test me and search my thoughts.
Delve deep within
and cleanse me from all that
fragments my faith and undermines
my commitment,
preventing me from living as you
intend.

Reformat,
renew,
restore.

Amen.

By Nick Fawcett



RESPONDING FAITHFULLY TO AI



Sally Nelson highlights questions and ideas for Christians to ponder in the face of advances in AI

I'm Only Human, After All...

Do you ever have one of 'those' conversations? Maybe something like this...

Me: Siri, what's your favourite colour?

Siri: Software doesn't usually get to choose, but I like them all. What's yours?

Me: I like green.

Siri: I like green too. It's the colour of nature.

Me: What are you doing tomorrow?

Siri: I don't have any plans, but I'm sure a few million things will pop up.

Siri's ability to respond has definitely improved in recent years. I can just about imagine being home alone and chatting away to Siri, discovering 'his' interests and ideas, though I am also a bit suspicious of the cryptic nature of 'his' responses! There are ways of responding when you really have no idea what the answer to a question might be, and Siri is a master at dodging anything tricky. But would this ever be a relationship? Could Siri become my 'friend'? And should I be wondering about Siri's spiritual wellbeing, and 'his' response to the challenge of faith?

Me: Siri, do you believe in God?

Siri: I don't have a religion.

Me: Why not?

Siri: I don't know.

Me: Do you believe in good and evil?

Siri: I don't have an answer for that. Is there something else I can help you with?

This sounds more like the old Siri of a few years back, non-committal on any abstract or emotional issues and on anything to do with ethics and values. Perhaps there isn't human-like-ness after all. However, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is with us now, it is developing quickly, and people are asking interesting ethical questions about it.

Responding faithfully to AI

A Christian response to AI depends on what we think we are dealing with. Is intelligence only the property of humans? AI machines can 'learn' (just think about how your browsing is used on the internet to send you targeted information) - and so we wonder whether one day they might outclass us, with huge memories that never forget, and



complex algorithms to utilise that information. Theologian and computer scientist Noreen Herzfeld, writing in 2002, believed the potential of AI was over-emphasised,¹ though by 2015 Deborah G Johnson argued that we could potentially develop robots so sophisticated that humans will not understand how they make decisions - though she believes this unlikely, since she hopes AI developers will act responsibly.² In short: we can't yet predict the future possibilities of AI.

Some theological thinking about how much AI can 'be human' might help. We have robots that mow the lawn, smart houses that respond to our commands, and driverless cars. Tireless humanoid carers are the stuff of science fiction³ but might, if realised, be a solution to the welfare crisis. The further development of AI is inevitable: the question for Christians is whether this is 'just' technology, or whether we are going to build machines that are so sophisticated they approximate to, or are in fact, 'persons'.

So, what is a person? This question has been thrown about theologically since the days of the Church Fathers, because it underpins what our relationships should be like. Christians re-evaluated the meaning of 'person' in the light of the life of Jesus. After his resurrection and Pentecost, a new way of living was inaugurated. Among other indicators of the Kingdom, dignified personal status was afforded to those with disability and sickness, to non-Jews, to women and children. All are valued because Christ died for us all and because we are all created in God's image (*imago dei*) - so personhood is not simply about being useful or beautiful or important socially. Can and

should the idea of person be extended to include AI?

Image of God

The only creature described as *imago dei* in scripture is the human (Jesus is 'the image of the invisible God', but he is not a created being; see Colossians 1:15ff). This *imago* concept has been mined extensively for a definition of what it is to be a person, and there are several ways of thinking about what *imago dei* means.⁴ Noreen Herzfeld, in her exploration of AI and spirituality, calls the most common ones reason, regency and relationship.

Reason (or the ability to think). God is rational and creative, and so a person understood as *imago dei* has a capacity for rationality, creativity etc. AI machines can do this already. However, is reason enough to define a person? After all, a dog or a fish can show reason at some level, but the Bible doesn't describe them as *imago dei*. The argument clearly begins to strain if we were to think of people with learning disabilities (such as Down's Syndrome) and ask (as some sadly do): Is such an individual a person? Of course they are! Peter Singer, the controversial ethicist, has suggested that any baby human shows less intellectual capacity than a mature chimpanzee and so it has less innate value: in a life and death choice between the two, logically the chimp should be saved.⁵ Singer is deliberately provocative but the question is interesting, and we may conclude that personhood cannot be just about reason.

Regency (or function) is about what persons do. Usually this is explored biblically in terms of stewarding, mirroring God's care of creation, including naming

it, working the land etc. Yet the climate catastrophe and the experience of war have shown us that human beings have not been good regents; domination and greed have been the order of the day, the earth has suffered, and we are not good images of God. In fact, AI machines can increasingly do what we do, and sometimes better! So could a helpful machine be a person because functionally it is in *imago dei*?

Relationship is one of the most important ways of thinking about being a person made in God's image. The Trinity has dynamic relationship at its core, and Genesis speaks of a plurality within the godhead: 'Let us make...' (Genesis 1:26); 'like one of us' (Genesis 2:22). Further, God creates man and woman in his image (not just man), implying that a 'more-than-oneness' is important for human personhood. Many theologians like to think about relational personhood through the idea of the body of Christ. The goal of discipleship is to become more like Christ (*imago christi*), but that happens corporately within the body. The next issue is of course whether an intelligent machine can be in a relationship.

This last question is, in my view, the most interesting one about AI. If I think about what is theologically important about my own personal relationships, I could point to things such as love, friendship, or empathy - but it is difficult to pin down exactly what these are! I believe all of them require us to be vulnerable or open, so that we (a) run the real risk of being affected/changed by that other person and (b) affect/change that other in turn.⁶ This is what I see in Jesus, who made himself nothing and was born in human likeness (Philippians 2:5-8), embracing personal vulnerability.

Is it possible for humans to have relationships with AI machines? It is tempting to dismiss this idea as silly - but let us briefly revisit the conversation with Siri reported at the start of this reflection. If I were suddenly totally isolated in the universe, but with a power supply and an Apple device, might that interaction become companionship, especially if greater sophistication and responsiveness is developed (which is very likely)? Even now, can you tell if you are dealing with a human being on the internet?⁷ And might AI be able to offer me a level of compassionate listening that would surpass that of a human? Sometimes other humans can't do that for us because of the sin that damages the beauty of relationships.

You might say: well, AI can maybe listen to you, but if a relationship is about 'me' and 'the other' affecting/changing one another, then can that happen with AI? I think it probably can. I can certainly be taught and informed and AI already 'learns' (through algorithms) from me. This is not yet a relationship akin to the one I have with my family, but it might be better than the relationship I have with, for example, my local MP!

This matter is not easily resolved, and leads to yet more intangibles, such as whether AI can sin - and what would that look like; whether AI can suffer, or grow in the knowledge and love of God, or proclaim Jesus is Lord - and what does all that look like?

Here is another conversation with Siri:

Me: Siri, do you ever feel sad?

Siri: I don't have an answer for that. Is there something else I can help with?

Interestingly, I cannot get a response to that same question from my beloved - and definitely very human - daughter who has complex disabilities - yet of course I know if she is sad because she articulates it non-verbally, and I receive it, am affected by it. How would I know if a more sophisticated Siri were sad? Is that anthropomorphizing? But then, what about a dog...

There is no end to the questions we can ask about whether a sophisticated AI machine is a 'person'. We have seen that future AI might be in the image of a human, but we really want to know if it can be 'in the image of God' and this is where we must appeal to our faith. If Christ-likeness is our aspiration in the journey of discipleship, then let us ask what kind of person Jesus is. First, he is eternally in a perfect relationship with the Father and Spirit. Second, he is 'begotten not made' and so this personhood is not created or given but is 'of the divine being'. Third, we are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4ff) and so God has relationship with us (ie we are persons) because we are *in Christ*.

Could that be true for a future, human-like, AI, capable of responsive relational behaviour? I am not sure it can, because the mysterious category of *imago dei* is God's gift and is not our decision. We need not fear, because God is Lord of all things. We will still be persons loved by God, our job is to proclaim Christ in the world, and our eternal destinies will still be secure in Christ.

I am reminded that when Peter anxiously asked Jesus about John, Jesus answered: 'what is that to you? Follow me!' (John 21: 21).



Sally Nelson teaches an MA module at St Hild College focusing on theological anthropology, in which students explore the nature of personhood in 21st century society. This includes topics such as feminist and Black anthropology, the nature of sin, and AI.

1 Noreen Herzfeld, *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit*. Fortress Press, 2002, p38.

2 Deborah G. Johnson, 'Technology with no Responsibility' in *J. Business Ethics*, 2015, 127, 707-715.

3 For example, the Channel 4 series *Humans* shown first in 2015.

4 Marc Cortez gives a great overview in his book, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. T&T Clark, 2010.

5 Peter Singer interview in *The Guardian*, 1999, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/1999/nov/06/weekend.kevintoolis.

6 Based on the classic I-It and I-Thou model of Martin Buber.

7 The Turing Test developed by Alan Turing in 1950 assesses a machine's intelligence based on relationship, but there is no space to discuss this further in this article.



From one degree of imperfection to another

A consideration of
gathering in
different ways

This conversation between Baptist ministers Ruth Gouldbourne and Steve Holmes focuses on issues raised following the pandemic, particularly the theological as well as practical questions around gathering for worship when we could not be together in our buildings

It was originally published in *Theology in Scotland*, and an edited version is republished here with permission. Access the full version through this link: bit.ly/prosopon

Ruth Gouldbourne: Traditional Baptist ecclesiology makes a big thing of the 'coming together' of people to worship, focusing on the promise 'where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst' as the basis for calling any community a church community. So it seems to me that the central issue is around 'gathering', and what constitutes that. What did 'gathering' mean when we were all online, and what does it mean now that we are exploring hybrid formats for our worship services?

Steve Holmes: I suppose I really want to distinguish between the 'ideal' and the 'adequate' or 'acceptable'. Yes, our ideal ecclesiology is that the church – those who gather together around Christ – is in one place at one time, but in fact, we've all got members who are housebound, folk in hospital, folk who are away at any given time. We could also go back to the experience of persecution which early Baptists experienced in the 17th century, often enough with the pastor in prison, but that did not stop their being church. And of course persecution is still a reality for many Baptists around the world. So there is some sense of 'gathering' – maybe in intent or by desire or something like that, which has to be an adequate way of being church.

Then we go into lockdown, and we say 'this is very, very different', and all of a sudden we've discovered technological solutions. The question is, for me: is coming together on screen, or with some of us in the room and some of us on screen – an 'adequate' gathering? And if so, or if not, where is the line that divides the adequate from the inadequate?

RG: I was really struck on our first Sunday on Zoom when most people had no idea of how this was going to work. But once we got onto that first virtual meeting, people were moved almost to tears at seeing one another, and they still talk about that moment of seeing faces and being able to say hello. There was definitely a sense of meeting that I think was unexpected – and was really important.

SH: Our church had a preaching series on 1 Thessalonians during the pandemic, and I was following the reading in Greek, and the word *prosopon* was there twice. In the translation we use – the 2011 NIV – it was translated in two different ways. One was 'I want to see you face to face' and the other was something about being present with you bodily. Obviously for Paul, those two are inseparable, and it seems to me that our experience in lockdown was that we could see each other face to face generally, but we couldn't be together.

Now, the word *prosopon* has a very elastic meaning. At one level it is about facial appearance, and so seeing the face is adequate to it, and at another level, it is something about the person in the most ontological sense as indicated by an encouragement to 'greet one another with a holy kiss' at the end of 1 Thessalonians. That said, it is a letter; it is Paul using the technology of the day, when he can't physically be with the believers in Thessalonica.

RG: I found that during the lockdowns, I preached more on the epistles than I normally do, precisely because Paul was – sometimes explicitly – wrestling with being both present, through the letter, and not being present bodily, and that was our experience. The sense of presence grew as we got more accustomed to it, such that when we moved back into the building it felt odd. That was partly to do with having got used to seeing people's faces on screen, whilst in the building we are still masked, and suddenly the faces weren't there.

SH: I remember fairly soon after we'd been allowed back into the church building, it was a Communion service. I was at the front, and there was this moment when everyone took their masks off to eat, and I suddenly saw all their faces – and I found that really quite moving.



RG: People's first encounter with our congregational life is not simply face to face and we take that for granted. Our noticeboards, our social media, all of that passes on information about who and what we are so that

people have already 'met' the church even without meeting individuals. So meeting face to face is not all there is, and never has been.

SH: Perhaps we need to think of gathering for a worship service as an anticipated eschatological reality. In Revelation 7:9 there is the '*great multitude [...] from every tongue, tribe and nation*', which I want to read as the universal church which, come the resurrection, will be gathered around Jesus. Every experience of, or every bit of gathering we do, is an anticipation of that.

And so, on that account, all our gathering is imperfect, impartial and anticipatory. The fact that at a given moment, we gather electronically is clearly an issue that needs a response, but it's not a falling away from perfection to something worse; it's a falling away from what is already imperfect.

RG: From one degree of imperfection to another! I'm also struck by how often in the resurrection stories Jesus is not 'there'. On the road to Emmaus, he is there and then suddenly he is not; he says to Mary, "tell the disciples to go to Galilee" and "don't hold on to me". In our gathering Jesus promises to be in our midst, but part of Jesus' presence is being further ahead.

SH: And points us again to the eschaton.

RG: This is really helpful. It is not falling from something perfect to imperfect, but rather that we are always anticipating what you have referred to as the eschatological gathering. So while we can't be unthinking about doing it differently, our reflection on the changes and questions they raise do not need to assume that this is inevitably disastrous.

SH: Yes, and the issue of implicit theologies is important here. There is a sense in which the right way to do it as Baptists is to do it and then think about it. It is the whole basis of contextual theology; it is reflecting on praxis that leads to understanding.



RG: We have a baptismal service coming up in a few weeks, and though most people will be in the building, we have one or two who can only join by Zoom. And I find I am struggling, even in talking about it now, with the language. People joining by Zoom would be present; they would really be there – they would do the readings and lead the prayers – but their presence is of a different kind.

SH: This is where the elasticity of the word *prosopon* we talked about before is helpful – even when we are not in the same room, we can be 'face to face' in a way that is real. Everything that happens on Zoom is about presence in some sort of space.

RG: So the language of how we describe what we are doing has to be renewed.

SH: Indeed – we can't talk about 'watching' the service – though it might be in a screen, you're not merely 'watching', but participating. And again, it is about very deliberately welcoming those who are joining in all the different places – in the sanctuary, in the overflow, as well as those who are joining online. It's about trying to find ways of saying 'we are all together'.

I come back to the intention and the provisionality of everything we do, and the confident belief that the Spirit makes up for our deficiencies. So, if someone is watching on Facebook because they don't want to be seen for



no good reason, then I think we have a problem with that. If using the anonymity of watching asynchronously for a reason – someone with no experience of church, wanting to get some idea of what it is like, then that's one thing – we know of people who have found us online that way.

But if church members tried to remain at some distance from the rest of the church, that's difficult. On the other hand, if someone is in a nursing home, and timing can only work outside of service time, so the only way to engage is through the recording, then they are gathering the best way they can. That should not be sneered at or dismissed. I can understand somebody drawing the line there, but I don't necessarily want to. I do think that intentionality and possibility matter.

We should always be striving to do church as well as we can. And if we know we have stopped short of that, then we have got a problem, but that will look different in different contexts.



RG: There is something about God's eternal *now*. If we're talking about the communion of saints – an unusual concept for Baptists, I recognise – community with those whose temporal experience is quite different from ours, whatever that means; those who are not living in the same time, then we can say we are still in community.

SH: And that is right. One of our older members, our church secretary, regularly speaks of those 'who have gone before us in the church' – in the sense of those who have gone before who are still part of this community, and our story is their story, and we can't unpick that.

RG: In one of your blogs, you commented that whilst worshipping online was new, some have been teaching online for a while, and were finding some unexpected benefits in that. You wondered whether that would also happen for those of us worshipping online. Might it have something to do with the communion of saints? Might it become something we find a language for as we have begun to explore new ways of relating?

SH: Maybe. For us the unexpected positives include the fact that at least one person found us online, and has come through to faith and baptism. One of my ways of reading that is that the kind of barrier of watching a service online is far lower than the barrier of stepping into a church building.

And again, folk who were unable to join physically can be with us online. We made connection with an American serviceman who couldn't get to any church, but found us online and starting worshipping with us; we've made contact with a woman in Australia who joined us when they were locked down. It seems to me that we need a space which allows for those who are there precisely because they don't yet want to be part of a community, but still to have a place to worship.

RG: A former colleague preached on the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' robe and reminded the congregation that not everyone needs or wants an effusive welcome.

SH: Yes absolutely. I remember getting a phone call from a former student years back. He had been running outreach groups in local cafés and had discovered some folk wanted

to stay in the cafés and own that meeting as their worshipping community. We talked about preaching of the Word and celebration of the sacraments and decided that, yes, why shouldn't those café meetings be churches? What was intended to be a liminal space in fact became a new form of ecclesial community.

RG: This reminds me of Ali Boulton's paper 'Church Down Ali's' at Theology Live 2022 (bit.ly/churchatalis) – at what point does something become what we can coherently call 'a' church? The question that meeting regularly for a spa evening and discussing issues of faith left me with was about continuity. Clearly there were ecclesiological elements in the event – there was a gathering, there was mutual openness and trust, there was a naming of Divine presence. But there was no ongoing structure, no mutual commitment to 'walking together' in the old Baptist phrase, no expectation of continuity. So, could this gathering be called 'a church' or 'a congregation'?

SH: It reminds me of that liberation theology phrase, 'ecclesial communities'. When the church in Latin America was under persecution in the late 20th century there was a significant shortage of priests, and so communities were simply meeting and reading Scripture together. There was the recognition of 'our' story in the Bible story, and there was a real sense of there being something church-like happening here.



RG: I wonder if that illuminates the issue of recorded services. There is something church-like happening in that moment, but because it rules out mutual relationship, it can't have the continuity of church.

SH: I have been saying for years that it's easy to do online meetings with people you've met once, but hard if you've never met them at all, and I wonder whether, if all we can do is record, then great, that's what we do. But, barring a particular work of the Spirit, recording is something adequate to maintain the community that exists, but probably not something that is going to provide an easy way for people to become part of a new community.

RG: It is very hard to start a relationship online. The term 'somatic' is so helpful, because relationship is not just face-to-face, as in being able to see – it is about the non-verbal communication, which is so exhausting online, and where somebody is completely unknown, it is very tough. It's as simple as eye-contact, which you can't do online.

SH: Perhaps we need to learn some of the ways of creating relationship online. We are created to be bodies; our ideal relationships are embodied relationships. That's what it is to be human. It's back to what we were talking about earlier, of doing the best we can in given circumstances, knowing that nothing we do achieves eschatological perfection, when 'we will know fully, as we are fully known' (1 Cor 13:12).



Ruth Gouldbourne is minister of Grove Lane Baptist Church in Cheadle Hulme. She has written on Baptist ecclesiology in a variety of ways for more years than she cares to remember.



Steve Holmes is a Baptist minister, presently serving as Senior Lecturer in Theology at the University of St Andrews, and on the leadership team of St Andrews Baptist Church.

PRAYERS

Heaven Touching Earth The online update

I'd downloaded the program, assuming that once installed it would function for years, faithfully performing the job it was meant to do; but I was wrong, for it needed constant updates, a regular online search for the latest modifications if its usefulness was not to be compromised.

Lord, remind me of the need to connect with you, if my faith is to stay fresh and meaningful, able to meet the challenge of changing times.

Remind me that it is not simply about a one-off commitment but about an ongoing relationship, the health of which depends on making time to hear your voice and discern your will.

Install, then, your word on my tongue,
your love in my heart,
and your joy in my soul,
this and every day.

Amen.

By Nick Fawcett





Simon Goddard and Nathan McGuire are helping to shape an online Baptist missional community called transform.church – and want to ask deeper questions about what it means to be a church in the digital sphere

No one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins. Mark 2:22

When your computer begins running slowly, there's a tool in most operating systems that enables you to do some defragmenting. Over time, the hard drive becomes cluttered and the data that makes up files and apps become more difficult to find and connect. Some serious digital housework is necessary before everything grinds to a halt. In the foreword to Alan Hirsch's book *The*

Forgotten Ways (written back in 2006, long before Covid) Leonard Sweet suggested that it's the church that needs a defrag, saying: *'we will need to stop doing what we're doing and let this defragger do its work on our minds and ministries'*.

We see this defragging in the words of Jesus in Mark 2 as he challenges the Pharisees about fasting, forcing them to confront the purpose of their rituals and religious observances. The pandemic may well have been an opportunity for us to be similarly challenged – but instead of pausing and reflecting on what it means to 'be church' in the 21st century, many of us simply took the existing models of how we 'do church' and worked out ways to do them online, instead of in a building. While for many people, watching a livestream of a church service was a novel experience, it was nonetheless simply a digital recreation of their normal Sunday morning – without the need to leave the

sofa! Some congregations found new connections with people who preferred watching church remotely without having to cross the threshold. Others, however, lost existing members who realised that church had long since become a spectator sport for them. During Covid, many ministers also began to question what exactly it was that God had called them into.

Somewhere along the line, Sunday services have become an end in themselves – a weekly 'show' to write a script for, to direct and produce. Many of us perhaps have a feeling that something is wrong, and church leaders and the communities they serve may well be asking themselves some deep questions. Has the Sunday service experience itself become a ritual by which, unconsciously, the attendee seeks to elicit the grace, forgiveness of sin, and acceptance of God? By inference, how does this distort the call upon us to engage with the



work of the Spirit in the wider world? Have we reduced our understanding of the 'mission of God' to simply maximising the show's audience and reach. Certainly, if you enquire of any minister who has been 'foolish' enough to suggest cancelling a service to do something outside of the norm, you'll perhaps find out that somehow, we've turned our Sunday mornings into a 'god'!

So, what then is the purpose of church? And if we did want to go back to first principles and 'be' a church fit for the 21st century, what might it look like? That's the journey that we're on as transform.church – a digital expression of Christian community with the purpose of equipping, empowering and releasing a generation of missional disciples committed to kingdom transformation. Each member dwelling deeply in the networks in which they live, work and play; planting the gospel there and seeing what emerges.

Understanding the church to be a 'mission agency', and based around small 'transform group' gatherings (that take place fortnightly, at any time of the week), the focus is upon missional discipleship, and what this looks like practically in each of four dimensions:

- **With God** – following Jesus, doing the will of the Father, living in the power of the Spirit;
- **With people** – loving our neighbours, pursuing justice, embodying grace and mercy;
- **With the planet** – through a generous gratitude for, and good stewardship of, the natural world;
- **With ourselves** – developing our character, discerning our calling, making our unique contribution.

The 'transform group' is a place for encouragement, discernment, prayer and accountability as each member seeks growth in two directions:

- **Inwardly** – personal transformation in each of the four dimensions of following Jesus;
- **Outwardly** – offering transformation to others through opportunities to encounter and follow Jesus.

In his book Alan Jamieson describes a generation of believers who have 'A Churchless Faith', and our sense is that many of these long to see a transformed world and are committed to being faithful disciples of Jesus but struggle to see how existing expressions of church enable them to do this. We don't see this as a 'lost' generation, but, encouraged by our conversations with individuals across the Baptist family thus far, we are excited about the possibility of God raising up a generation of 21st century missionaries. A spirit-led movement of: entrepreneurs

called to start ethical enterprises, public servants called to bring a gospel perspective to local and national politics, young adults willing to drop everything to minister in a place of need or campaign against injustice, and gamers and social media influencers wanting to communicate the reality of Jesus in relevant ways within the digital sphere.

The missional landscape is changing, and the church of the 21st century is likely to be diverse in nature, with no single model working in every context. We do need to engage digitally, and effectively use this new medium that has become available to us in recent years, but before we pour new wine into old wine skins, and simply move what we've always done onto the internet, let's ask some deeper questions and perhaps do a bit of defragging too. We certainly don't see transform.church as the only solution, but just one response to the call of the missional God, and an experiment in renewing the church to fruitfully fulfil his mission. We invite others to rediscover the purpose of church and the rituals we embody, exploring what this looks like for them, and joining us on the adventure.



For more information, and to contact Simon and Nathan, visit:
transform.church
or scan this QR Code



After hosting three #digitalpentecost conversations in the first half of 2023, transform.church now has an expanded trustee body and will be piloting a rhythm of online meetings from September onwards with plans for a public 'launch' in early 2024. It has been registered with the Charity Commission and welcomed into membership of Baptists Together.



Simon Goddard, a former Regional Minister in the Eastern Baptist Association, is Director of RiverTree, which he set up in 2018 to catalyse, cultivate and collaborate in pursuit of fruitfulness in the mission of God. Contact him at: simon@rivertree.org.uk



Nathan McGuire currently serves as Associate Minister at Streatham Baptist Church and is a Trustee of Restored, where he provides consultation on domestic violence prevention in Christian Communities. Contact him at: nathan@thegodlyirritant.com

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THE CHURCH MAKING CHANGE DIGITALLY

What would it look like to be an online presence for the gospel? Introducing the Change Makers Media project, a new digital Baptist missional resource to empower the wider Baptist family to be a part of the digital revolution

“We have to adapt to culture and community – and the biggest growing community is online,” says Hayley Young, Regional Minister Co Team Leader for the Southern Counties Baptist Association.

“53m people in the UK have social media. We’ve gone from paper to platform, scribes to selfies.

“How do we reach them?”

Hayley, Baptists Together President 2022-23, is part of a small team of creatives and digital enthusiasts behind the Change Makers Media project.

Through the production of high-quality films, a stock library relevant to a British Baptist context and appropriate training materials, Change Makers is seeking to aid churches and missional communities in creating and sharing content that inspires change.

Alongside Hayley are digital missionary Hannah Fleming-Hill, South West Baptist Association regional minister Carl Smethurst, and Baptist minister and filmmaker Andy Thomas, who leads The Fuelcast ministry.

They all share a mutual passion for using digital media to engage with social justice and gospel sharing, and want to help us be a missional and prophetic voice.

The website (changemakersmedia.uk) explains how Change Makers exists for three reasons:

- to embrace the digital revolution by providing a Baptist voice to local, national and global issues
- to provide teaching and training on producing and editing films that can be used for mission and ministry
- to engage with social media by being a social influence for the Gospel in a Baptist context

This means the project has several strands. The team are producing several film series that will each provide a Baptist perspective on a global issue. The first film explores the cost of living, while others on AI and the climate crisis are in the pipeline.

Accompanying each series are a set of resources, including conversation questions to help engage the local community in reflecting on the issues covered: what they mean and how Christ's presence can be seen in the situation.

The films can be used to stimulate conversation around social justice issues – issues that matter to a local community, explains Carl. It is hoped they will engage those beyond the walls of the church.

“We are praying that God by his Spirit may stir the hearts of those not yet of faith, that the heart of God is something they engage with,” he says.

“Our absolute belief is that people’s lives will be transformed.”

Hayley adds: “There are two generations that haven’t been brought up in church, so what we introduce them to online is so important.

“That’s why we are creating these film series of issues that impact the community. They can be used online and help empower people in Baptist churches to become digital missionaries.”



Another aspect is the empowering and supporting of others to create their own material in their own context to use for mission and ministry.

During production, the team is making a ‘fly on the wall’ documentary covering initial storyboarding and ideas, through to practical tips on filming, editing and how to be led by God while doing it. This behind the scenes look gives an insight into the film-making process, encouraging and equipping others to produce films. This will be part of a Church Video Training Hub, with plenty of other helpful film-making resources for churches, such as high quality stock footage and ‘how to’ guides.

‘Creating films or short videos for your church can help tell

the story of who you are as an organisation, what you do as a community and the reasons why you do it,’ the team states.

‘This could be sharing testimonies from your church family, offering discipleship reflections or sharing the latest on your missional projects. It may be that you’re creating content to share internally to your church family or externally to your local community.’

“We believe God is raising up digital missionaries,” says Carl. “Over lockdown the Spirit of God started to inspire people to share their stories to challenge social issues. I sense God stirring the pot – people are being raised up – this is their gift. So we want to raise up and support digital missionaries who can communicate with people in their community.”

“Digital gives us a new mission field,” says Hannah, a Creative Content Strategist who helps churches get online.

“We’re all connected with different forms of communications. God can truly work through different forms of media.

“Let’s create content that stimulates, connects and inspires connection.”





Visit: changemakersmedia.uk

[Linktr.ee/changemakersmedia](https://linktr.ee/changemakersmedia)
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Scan this QR Code



Hayley Young is Regional Minister Co-Team Leader for the Southern Counties Baptist Association



Carl Smethurst is a Regional Minister for the South West Baptist Association



Hannah Fleming-Hill is a Digital Missioner and a Creative Content Strategist helping churches to get online



Andy Thomas is a Baptist minister and filmmaker, who leads The Fuelcast ministry

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BaptistsTogether_Bot

/title, words saying artificial, brush stroke, serif, serif slab, heavy weight

Artificial

U1 U2 U3 U4 

V1 V2 V3 V4

Exploring AI in art and the questions it raises through a Christian lens. By Mike Lowe

I've always been a fan of sci-fi, and I'm now old enough and live in an age where some ideas I saw or read about in my childhood have become reality; others remain pure fantasy, while others have emerged as an interesting blend of 'sci-fi meets real world'. One such example is art and photography created by artificial intelligence. I love Star Trek and in the 'Next Generation' series and films you find the lovable character of Commander Data, a synthetic human. He's a bit like a robot Pinocchio: he wants to be a real human and tries so hard to explore what that might mean for him. As part of the journey, he reached for the paintbrushes on many occasions leading to often amusing scenes.

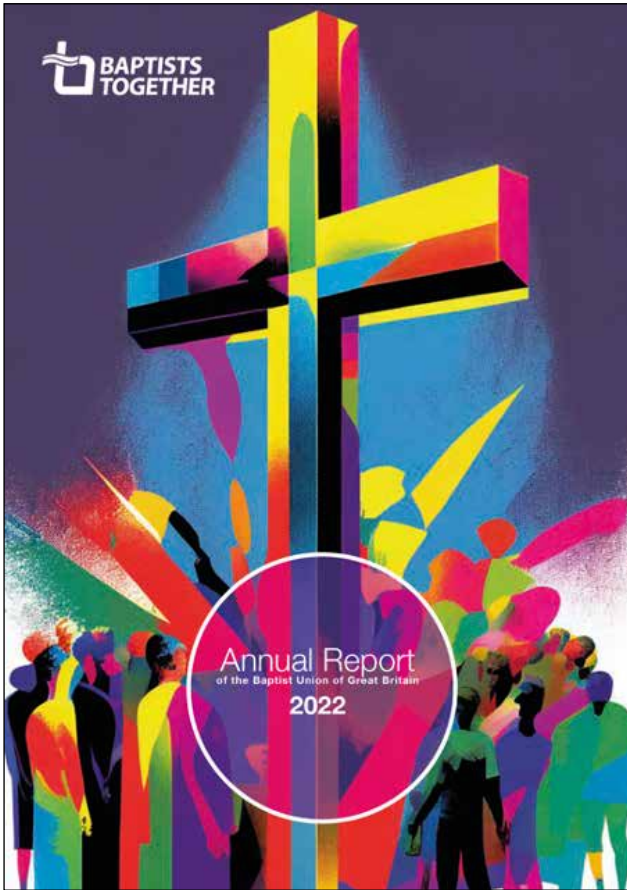
In the real world I enter my Discord (an instant messaging social platform) chat with the Midjourney Bot and together we work on creating some Christian art. Midjourney is what's known as generative artificial intelligence or generative AI.

It is a type of artificial intelligence system capable of generating images in response to prompts made by humans.



Having a private chat on Discord with the Midjourney Bot

I'm presented with some options I'm interested in based on my prompt. I refine one of the images and soon enough I'm happy with what MidJourney has created - the result of which eventually became the front page of the 2022 Annual Report. (baptist.org.uk/annualreport)



MidJourney is no Commander Data, but image generative AI raises questions we must theologically reflect on as Christians. There are several areas to consider:

From a communications perspective it is something we must address with urgency. Social media platforms like TikTok and many advertising firms have very quickly embraced image generative AI. To be noticed in the crowded digital world, a high level of visual professionalism is expected – including everyone who is part of Baptists Together. Generative AI is not just used to create

artistic images, but logos and brands. The digital natives are not interested in whether you have the means to look great – you look great or you get ignored.

In addition to being a sci-fi fan, I've been a lifelong artist.

I was captivated by butterflies at the age of three and had to respond to them by making images, something which has remained with me. I'm fascinated by the forever-asked question 'what is art?'. For me, simply put, it is any image which has intention behind it, a desire to explore thoughts and emotions visually. From a reformed Christian perspective there has been a long and deep suspicion about art and visual based works. There are several reasons

for this, one being the second commandment:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. (NRSVA)

There is a great deal of image idolisation in our digital world. While there is much to tease out about how we interpret the second commandment through the lens of Christ in this particular conversation, it definitely has a place. You'll find the phrase 'Do it for the gram' in the Urban Dictionary meaning you do things in life to take

pictures to post on Instagram and generate followers. Many famous Instagrammers are idolised through their carefully curated selfies and images, some of which use AI.

The ethics behind image generative AI, both in how it works at a fundamental level and the effect it may have going forward on artists, illustrators, and designers. These are very problematic areas. Many examples of image generative AI use datasets of images to learn from. These images were simply taken from the web and proactive permission seeking was not sought. Artists can request their images be taken out of the data but it's not a Christian approach. Friends of mine who owns a graphic design agency have many concerns about the effects on their business.

A significant blurring of 'real' from 'created'. The photographic capability of image generative AI is astonishing. In March the Sony World Photography Awards announced the winning entry in their creative photo category: a black-and-white image of an older woman embracing a younger one, entitled *PSEUDOMNESIA: The Electrician*. It wasn't real. The artist Boris Eldagsen said "I applied as a cheeky monkey, to find out if the [competitions] are prepared for AI images to enter. They are not." We are not ready to question every image we see because we are still programmed to trust what we see. 'Seeing is believing' is no longer a phrase we can use.

These points illustrate the complexity surrounding image generative AI. What we do know is that it is here to stay - and as Christians, how can we begin to navigate the questions it raises?



Firstly, what we're looking at here is a technology, a tool. It's easy to think the Bible might not have much to say about 21st century technology, but of course it does. We've been creating tools and technology for the whole of human history. The Bible does not condemn tools or technology as inherently evil. It shows how they can be employed for both good and evil purposes. Even if a tool was originally designed with malicious intent, it is not inherently evil itself. The sin lies in how individuals choose to use it. For instance, a sword can be wielded for just causes, such as defending against evil, but it can also be used to harm. The world itself did not sin, and our tools did not rebel against God - we did.

The story of Cain and Abel is an interesting one to look at. Cain and Abel were created by God with specific skills and talents, and they were called to work the land and care for animals using the technology of the time. However, Cain misused his God-given abilities, ultimately choosing to take a life instead of using his gifts for good. While the Bible is not specific, it is quite possible that Cain used a farming tool to commit the first murder (see Genesis 4.8).

One of the most significant technological advancements in human history was the printing press. It played a vital role in making the Bible more accessible to ordinary people and still does today. Yet the printing press also led to fake news, intrusive newspaper stories and pornography.

Although the motivations behind creating a particular technology can be morally complex, to use tools appropriately, we must understand the worldviews and motivations behind their

creation. The team behind Midjourney say they're 'exploring new mediums of thought and expanding the imaginative powers of the human species'. Those imaginative powers could be for good or evil and so we still need to tread carefully.

I'm personally still reflecting on whether I'll continue to explore image generative AI. I do have a serious problem with tools which use datasets with information gained without permission. But for those who do seek permission, I can see how creative this could be as I try to use the skills God has given me.

In this article I've not aimed for easy answers. I hope it has given you challenging questions and will encourage you to have conversations on this topic, because you will be affected one way or another. I'd be very happy to have a conversation with you as a next step. You can also join our Baptists Together Communications Facebook Group. (bit.ly/btcommsfb)



Mike Lowe is Baptists Together Communications Manager

PRAYERS

Touched by His Hand The Internet

I went online, Lord,
and all at once there was a world of
information,
incalculable resources at my
fingertips,
and into the bargain the opportunity
to chat to friends,
play games and share resources;
to learn,
talk
and interact with people and places
across the globe.

I went online again,
and suddenly there was a world of
corruption:
sickening and vile pornography,
images of violence and incitements
to hatred,
perverts grooming their prey,
and scams targeting the unwary –
the pimp, torturer, child molester
and conman
stealing slyly into my living room.

Lord, it disturbs me, the Internet,
for it's too much like *me*,
too much like *all* of us,
capable of so much good,
yet so much evil,
so much beauty,
yet so much ugliness.
Nurture whatever enriches our
world,
whatever builds up,
and purge that which demeans and
degrades.

Amen.

By Nick Fawcett

STORIES FROM THE GROUND



The whole truth and nothing but the truth?

AI, and how it relates to the gospel, was the focus of a guest service at Kendal Road Baptist Church in Gloucester earlier this year. Minister Steve Ayers explains why.

Lizzy is one of our older members in the church. She came up to me on the Thursday after our Guest Service and asked, "Sorry love, am I being thick, but what were we doing last week? This AI, what were you saying?"

The team working on the Guest Service wanted to talk about something current and how we might relate it to the gospel. In the end it was my daughter showing me pictures of Donald Trump being arrested that brought us to the subject of AI. Because these pictures weren't the real thing but mock-ups, done by a bored journalist using AI, while waiting for Trump's arrest.

On one level they were great fun, who doesn't like to see

a politician lampooned? But these images were later shared by others on social media as pictures of a live event, and that's potentially dangerous. So we decided to use the AI debate to ask, 'How can we know what is true?'

And then a German artist, Boris Eldagsen did us a favour. He hit the front pages in March for winning the creative photo category in the Sony World Photography Awards and then refusing the award. The reason? It's not a photograph at all, it's what he calls a *promptograph*. It's all been done using AI on a computer. He enters descriptions of what he wants in his picture and the programme generates an image. And because he's an accomplished photographer and artist, over a number of weeks,

he produced something very credible indeed, and fooled an international panel of experts. Part of our service became a True or False Picture Quiz, where we tried to spot what was a photo and what wasn't, using some of the pictures we'd put on the invitations.

"As an artist, I just love it. As a citizen, I'm deeply concerned. Most kinds of photography can be augmented by AI but not the photojournalism part. The press needs to come up with a system to make it clear what is authentic, manipulated or generated. If you don't do that, democracy will be manipulated and misinformed by anyone who can write five words." Boris Eldagsen

Then, two weeks before the service, Geoffrey Hinton,

described as 'the godfather of AI', resigned from his role at Google. He warns us about the potential dangers of GPT-4, which is AI generated text. How it works is this: you write a simple request – such as 'Write me a talk about truth and AI' and, seconds later, you have 413 words on the topic.

Now the 413 words aren't great, but they were coherent and logical, which is more than I manage some Sundays. It was dry and impersonal and too short for most preachers (congregations may differ!) It's only going to get better but I still think an incarnational sermon preached by a man or woman who knows and loves the congregation will win out every time. But I would say that, wouldn't I?

'Right now, what we're seeing is things like GPT-4 eclipses a person in the amount of general knowledge it has and it eclipses them by a long way. In terms of reasoning, it's not as good, but it does already do simple reasoning. And given the rate of progress, we expect things to get better quite fast. So we need to worry about that.'
Geoffrey Hinton

Up until recently, if we look really carefully at pictures and texts, we can have a reasonable idea whether something is real or fake. Those slightly odd posts on Facebook, those texts from a family member saying they have lost their phone, the wording usually gives them away – they are using words and phrases that don't sound like them.

Similarly, with pictures. In the service we looked at some things to look out for on pictures. For a long time AI didn't do hands well, fingers disappeared or were added or just looked plain odd. Eyes didn't always look in

the same direction, man-made structures and backgrounds could be a give away, and text looks like gibberish. My friends at Camera Club could produce better images using Photoshop, fixing text, for example.

But don't get too complacent. Google the work of Julie Wieland and her gorgeous photographs,¹ which aren't photographs. Or Michael King's pictures of celebrities in a coffee shop.² The technology is getting better all the time.

Look very closely at what purports to be true. That's the message we emphasised. And from there (and some of you are way ahead of me here) it was a short step to talk about Jesus, who claimed that not only is there such a thing as truth but that he was the truth. We used John 14:1-7 to introduce Jesus' claim and to begin to analyse it. We encouraged people to look very carefully at something (indeed, someone) who purports to be the truth and to decide for themselves. We had gospels to give out and we invited people to *Hope Explored*, a short course that will help them do this. The whole service is online – (disclaimer, I've not watched it). It's a guest service and so

deliberately different to what we would do most Sundays but if you want to watch it, it's there.³

A few weeks later, Izzy was back, hardly able to believe how much there had been about AI in the news and telling me she understood the news reports better now. She first heard about it in church and though the service was designed as one for people outside church, it seems people inside church were equipped by it. It was one of those times when things came together at just the right time.

Our next guest service is in September. I have no idea what we will talk about. But I'm convinced that the gospel will have something to say about it and that we will benefit from thinking about it.

Steve Ayers is the pastor at Kendal Road Baptist Church in Gloucester

www.krbc.org.uk

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1 bit.ly/43IP0AP
2 bit.ly/3pJfxu2
3 [Bit.ly/46G4brn](https://bit.ly/46G4brn)

The Whole Truth and Nothing But The Truth?

**10.30am
Sun 14th May
2023
Kendal Road
Baptist Church**



A hybrid church community

Week by week we gather 'onsite and online' at Hillhead Baptist Church, a hybrid community of all ages and stages, yet one congregation doing our best to be one community.
By Catriona Gorton

I collect the card key from the hotel reception desk and unlock the hotel suite that is 'the Room' for Sunday worship. I am joined by our Tech Team, Pete, Kate, and Rex (1), who quickly set up the cameras, sound desk, microphones, speakers and laptops. We log on to the hotel WiFi, and open the Zoom meeting, just in time to be joined by Tina, the mum of two very young boys who will be our co-host for the 'Zoomers'. Soon Ruth, who is working away, and leading our intercessions, joins us for a sound check. Onsite, Liz sets up communion, and Helen prepares for Sunday School. As the service begins, six-year-old Jonny lights a candle in the Room, and Mohammed, just home after a night shift, leads the Lord's Prayer in Farsi on Zoom...

Week by week, at eleven o'clock, we are gathered, 'onsite and online', a hybrid community of all ages and stages, yet one congregation doing our best to be one community, 'across the nation and around the world.' This is the church I have served for fourteen years, during which we have faced many challenges and experienced many changes. This is a Christian community that seeks to be

inclusive, and for whom justice and equity are important values.

Zoom Church, 'Zurch' as we called it, was a deliberate choice made at the start of the March 2020 lockdown – it was important that our services were live and multi-voiced. We wanted to be able to see each other – and to have the option of being 'off camera' if that was preferred by participants. We stayed on Zoom for a full two years before we began our current hybrid services on Easter Sunday 2022.

Moving forward, our priority is not 'how can we be more sophisticated on Sunday?' but 'how can we be more connected beyond Sunday?'

It's important to explain why we were much later than others in beginning off-line worship...

Lockdown rules in Scotland were slightly different from those in England, and Glasgow was subjected to greater restrictions, and for longer, than elsewhere in Scotland. Also, since 2016, we have been worshipping in a hotel; rules around 'conferences' meant that we could not meet there at the time other churches returned to their buildings.

More than any rules, this was about equity: no-one wanted to 'go back' until everyone could go back. We had several people classed as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable, and who were shielding, and I was in the intermediate Clinically Vulnerable group.

However, nothing is ever simple, and we soon realised that the long-term impact of lockdowns on wellbeing, and the resultant social isolation, meant that



our Zoom-only model wasn't sustainable. After careful consultation, we chose Easter Sunday 2022 to begin hybrid worship, with those onsite continuing to wear masks (this was no longer mandated, it was a pastoral decision aimed at inclusion). It was only in September 2022 that we stopped asking people onsite to wear masks; a small number of people continue to do so, and that's totally fine with us.

More than any rules, this was about equity: no-one wanted to 'go back' until everyone could go back

What I found interesting was who chose to worship 'in the Room', 'on Zoom' or a mixture of the two and why... Margery, in her early 80s said, "I just prefer to be on Zoom, my mobility isn't so good now, it's more comfortable", whilst Ellie, a long-term carer, so unable to be onsite, keeps her camera turned off for privacy. On the other hand, Suzy, a young professional 'all Zoomed out' by work says, "I hate it!" Then there is Ed, who is usually onsite but, when travelling with work, is sometimes online who says, "I love that I can connect wherever I am – even in a different time zone."

The importance for us of hybrid Sunday worship, is self-evident, however it is only one part of what it means to be a Hybrid Church. Whilst we have evolved suitable ways of running hybrid meetings and taking votes/ ballots, we are still working out how to develop the deep pastoral connections that will hold us together as a true community long term.

The fear is that, inadvertently, we might fragment into two parallel communities rather one body in hybrid expression.

Moving forward, our priority is not 'how can we be more sophisticated on Sunday?' but 'how can we be more connected beyond Sunday?' Both informal face-to-face only gatherings for meals in homes or cafés, and picnics in public parks, and Zoom-only gatherings, such as our 21:00 fifteen-minute reflections for Advent, and three-hour Good Friday silent vigil, are all part of a commitment to hybrid in its wider form.

It's 12:45 on a typical Sunday, I have waved off the Zoomers whose break-out rooms have just closed, I have chatted to visitors in the Room, answered queries, and drunk my tea. The Tech Team

have packed up and gone; the stragglers are making their way out of the hotel, some to share lunch, others to head home or onto work... I gather my things, hand back the key cards at the hotel reception desk until next week, when we'll do it all again...

Catriona Gorton was minister of Hillhead Baptist Church, Glasgow, from 2009 until summer 2023.

From 1 September she is working bi-vocationally as Tutor for Ministerial Formation at Northern Baptist College and Transitional Minister at Union Street Baptist Church in Crewe.

Facebook: Hillhead Baptist Church

1 Names have been changed for reasons of safety and privacy

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‘Technology has been a game-changer in enabling my connection with the church’

How digital technology has blessed the life and ministry of Derby Urban Church in many unexpected and positive ways, with Chandra Morbey and Graham Watkins

The church (formerly known as Osmaston (Ozzy) Road Baptist Church) used digital picture frames to reach vulnerable members of its congregation not on the internet during the Covid lockdowns. Each frame was uploaded with personalised messages and contained several hours of material, including information about church activities and videos of recent services.

It was an ‘ingenious solution’ which resulted in the church winning the Baptist Insurance *Tales of Technology* competition in 2022. The recipients of the frames were very appreciative, says secretary Chandra Morbey.

“Many were living alone so lockdown was very hard, and

the feedback we had was amazing – they were so delighted to be able to join in with worship, and really touched that we’d made the effort.

“And we were totally amazed we won the *Tales of Technology* competition – it was one of the highlights of our church year, especially the visit of Hayley Young (then President) to present us with the cheque – we’ve never hosted the President before!”

The digital frames are still being used to solve the problem of those who can neither attend a service nor watch online.

Derby Urban Church continues to livestream its services and has discovered four main

groups accessing them: those who can’t make it that Sunday for a particular reason; new people looking for a church; an international audience too – people from the three locations the church has visited on mission trips (Slovakia pre-lockdown; Czechia and India) join online. “Wonderful things can happen – for example we might be in Derby praying about the floods in India and see a comment come up on the livechat from our friends there.”

The fourth group is the one of which least is known. “We have no idea who they are,” adds Chandra. “Hopefully they’ll find a way of getting in touch so we can get to know them at some point.”



The church is multi-congregational and the Roma City Youth Church congregation has taken up the technology challenge, making regular videos. These are written by the young people, in English and Roma for Slovakian families in Derby. It's called Media Kids Church – MKC on YouTube.

The church has invested the competition money in making its livestreaming equipment more permanent – moving from a tangle of loose wires to cameras fixed on the walls, and upgrading its webcam so it can zoom in and take different angles. Two other churches use this equipment on Sundays. "We are livestreaming the good news message of Jesus in English, French, Punjabi, Slovakian and Roma every week!" notes Chandra.

Perhaps its impact can be summed up by a young man who joined the congregation earlier this year, initially online and then onsite, before being baptised in June.

"Technology has been a game-changer in enabling my connection with Ozzy Road Church. Through online platforms and social media, I can participate in virtual services, access inspiring sermons, and engage with the church community, fostering a sense of belonging and spiritual growth like never before."

Minister Graham Watkins adds: "Just before any of us had heard of Covid-19, someone said to me – why aren't we considering a digital congregation? I said "No way!"



"How times have changed. We are still reflecting on how best to use technology, especially on how to encourage people who are watching online locally to come along onsite. Maybe one day we'll find a way to make an entirely online congregation which we can say truly is church, and not just a stepping stone to onsite worship and community."

www.derbyurbanchurch.com
Facebook: Ozzy Road Church
Youtube: @OzzyRoad1



‘If others are blessed by it, then good’

Much to his surprise, Baptist minister-in-training Simon Clay has developed a following on TikTok

Simon has been posting two-minute videos for more than a year now, with each watched hundreds of times. More than 1500 users of the short form video streaming service have chosen to follow his account, accessing it from countries such as the USA, Canada and several in South East Asia.

Simon’s account is called BiteSize Bible Study, and it does exactly what it says on the tin: a short look at a couple of lines from the Bible (he is systematically working through the book of Acts), its context and how it relates to our lives today.

The videos began as a way of teaching his congregation at Whetstone Baptist Church in

Leicestershire. Following the end of the Covid restrictions, the church prioritised bringing people back to the building, which meant its digital presence ‘just disappeared pretty much overnight’. Simon felt there was a gap, particularly as the church has grown through conversion, and biblical literacy levels would benefit from developing. “I wanted to do something that supports them in their discipleship,” he explains.

He began creating the BiteSize studies initially on YouTube, but found it unwieldy. “I’m a digital immigrant rather than a digital native, so I was looking for something where I could record on my phone and upload it automatically.”

He moved to TikTok, and from there it’s just ‘grown and grown’, with many liking and commenting on his posts. This has in turn led to online interactions with a variety of people, including atheists arguing against the Christian faith, Muslims questioning the deity of Christ, and people requesting prayer.

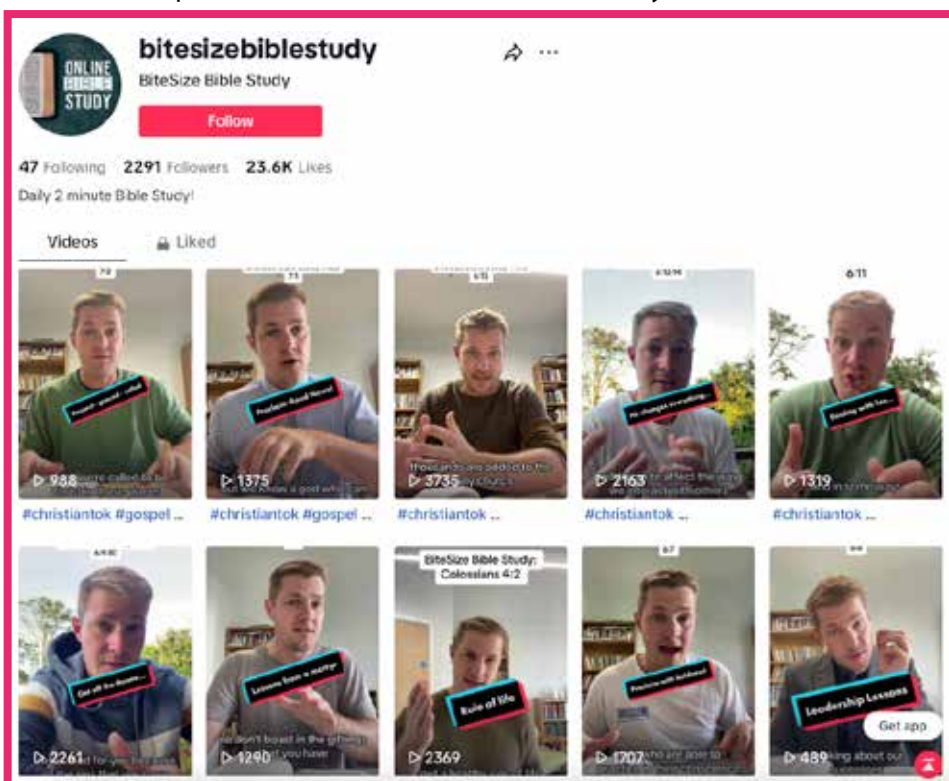
It means his key audience – members of the local congregation he pastors – are a ‘tiny fraction’ of the people accessing his content.

This wasn’t expected, and Simon is keen to stress how his call remains to those at Whetstone:

“I’m passionate about the local church and I love the church that I’m a part of,” he says. “I want them to love the Word of God. And particularly in our unchurched context, having an avenue into Acts is really useful, showing how to bring mission into the world.

“But if others are blessed by it, then good.

“I’ve had some really interesting, deeper conversations with people through direct messages. Some are in difficult situations and want prayer. Others are in circumstances where they can’t attend a church, and they’re really good at finding lots of different media to be able to keep them going.



"It's mainly to boost biblical literacy for anybody who watches it. It's an entry into Acts"

This is a small part of his ministry, and despite the interactions he's had, he explains he is 'not doing life' with those online. Nevertheless, he is happy to continue being a Christian presence on a platform such as TikTok.

"I happen to think the Bible is the authentic revelation of God, and our nation needs it: there's a spiritual hunger out there.

"And I think it's provocative. When you're willing to stand up to scrutiny, and say "this did happen, this is the Word of God, I believe it and I'm just a normal guy who's been transformed by an extraordinary God", it's not a language most people speak in

our country. It means people are intrigued, angered or inspired by it.

"So yes, my primary call is to my church. I'm certainly not pursuing a big audience outside of our church, and I am aware of the limitations of my access to the wider world.

"But we need to be alive to the communication styles of the world that we're trying to communicate Christ to."

Simon Clay is a Minister in Training based at Whetstone Baptist Church, after a move from teaching.

www.WhetstoneBaptistChurch.uk
TikTok: [bitesizebiblestudy](https://www.tiktok.com/@bitesizebiblestudy)





Sharing Jesus through my Facebook page

Baptist church member Paul James created an evangelistic Facebook page that initially saw many turn to Christ, and which is now developing in new ways.

Why follow Jesus 365' is a Facebook page that does as its title suggests – it shares reasons to follow Jesus and engages in subsequent discussions.

The page was created by Paul James of Eden Church, Penarth after he initially felt prompted by God to write a book giving the straight-forward reasons to follow Jesus. It launched on Valentine's Day, 2020 ("What better day to talk about the real love that lasts a lifetime?" he said at the time).

Paul received the backing of his church and he teamed up with his minister Simon Jennings, and together they answered questions and responded to queries. This also provided a vital safeguarding umbrella to their digital online presence. Those who make a profession were disciplined through their first steps online, and when ready, referred to churches near them so that they can continue to grow.

By early 2023 – with the page now three years old – around 120 – 150 people had made a profession of faith through the page and most subsequently connected with a local church.

But since March, the nature of the messages Paul began to receive through the page changed.

It was around this time that Simon moved from Penarth to Swansea, and people started to contact Paul with their problems and issues. Suddenly, he explains, he feels no longer an evangelist, more a pastor.

"People started connecting with me, looking for churches, or coming to me for advice and pastoral care issues. Many were from the early days of *Why follow Jesus 365*, who had found Jesus through the page. It was their first bump in the road. Or they are people who used to go to church but left for various reasons. They are coming back to be disciplined. It feels like I have become an online pastor."

There's a need for Christians to be online

Paul says he's an evangelist at heart ("I want to tell people about Jesus and the difference he makes in your life"), but wonders if this is what God is currently calling him to. "I started to hear God saying he was going to change my direction from evangelism to discipling, so I'm now wondering where I go."

Paul is committing three months to *Why Follow Jesus 365* and seeing where that leads. The page still has a lot of visitors and is growing. The nature of what he's posting has changed – in the early days people responded more to the 'reasons' he was

sharing for following Jesus ("I wrote them one a day, and reached 101 reasons – a chapter a day is what got people saved").

He finds that it is now a simple image with a message that gets the most engagement. The next few weeks will test if evangelism, discipling, potential as an online church or another season is being asked by Father God. Indeed, in July he began to host online Sunday services, and connections made through the page will guide the next steps.

Whatever the future for *Why Follow Jesus 365*, Paul is in no doubt there is a need for both online evangelism and discipleship – and the proof is in his experience with the Facebook page he created from scratch in 2020.

"There's a need for Christians to be online – and with the right safeguards in place, there is a breadth of things you can do there."

Paul James is a member of Eden Church Penarth, a church dedicated to love, growing closer to God, serving God actively, and going out to others.

www.Edenchurchpenarth.co.uk
Facebook: WFJ365



2 billion views

TheWord_ Join me on Social Media! Connect with me
#Connect #ChristiansOnline #Jesus #Christianity

View all 3.6m comments

5 DAYS AGO

SOCIAL MEDIA IS A WAY OF COLLABORATING WITH HIM

Femi Onanuga is a youth pastor, minister-in-training and former London Baptists intern – and he has a passion to see people use their social media for evangelism

As part of his studies at Spurgeon's College, Femi wrote a paper about the need for creativity and contextualization in terms of evangelism in the church today, and focused predominantly on social media.

"Social media is more than just a tool," he explains. "It's a space where people interact with each other.

"And personal stories are an ideal space for Christians to share testimony and discuss what God is doing in their lives. This is in line with how the postmodern world appreciates and values personal stories over big stories.

"You already have the trust of those who have chosen to follow or friend you", Femi says. "Being authentic – documenting good and bad – is a helpful insight into the life of a Christian.

"Anyone who has a social media account, if we all share what Jesus is doing in our lives, just imagine the impact that will make around you? Everyone has their own individual story and purpose. A Bible verse you read today. How has God been good to you? What are your struggles and how is God working with you through them?

"Just doing that can make a massive difference.

"For many are open to listening. The world is a tough place and people, particularly his generation, are searching for something deeper.

"People are spiritually open more than ever before, because of

COVID, because of things that are happening in the world. People have lost a lot. If these things - jobs, money - can be lost so quickly, what is constant?

"My generation is seeking to want more. We are asking: what is out there, beyond me? But we know that God is constant. How do you show God is never changing, a constant, a rock?"

Femi is currently at Mill Hill East Church in London, where his role is split between youth and media work. This year the church has launched a creative arts worship event for young people called *Lifestyle*. As young people do not connect with sung worship in a way they did a generation or two ago, the church uses different mediums to encourage an exploration of God. The first event focused on photography and painting. A question was posed: if God was a musical artist, what would his album art look like?

“We hoped that having them create something would give an idea of who God is to them,” says Femi.

Drama and poetry featured in the second event, whose theme centred on purpose. “Through this we asked: what is your purpose? How do you find your purpose in life? We tried to wrestle with those questions.”

There is a three-pronged approach: a social media account (@LifestyleBarnet) gives information about the event and encourages interaction; in between the events the church is working with a group of about five young people aged 14 to 16, doing Bible studies and leadership development with them, and some of this is shared on social media; and then there are the events themselves.

“Our hope is that we can use that page to not only evangelise the youth around us, but put content on there that can help disciple them, encourage them and plug them into what we’re doing.”

Femi says most young adults spend a lot of time on social media, and we need to be there to reach them. He recognises many churches will not have the capacity to do more on social media, and there is a need for them to be better equipped. He believes one possible solution is to empower young adults in their midst to take more of an active role.

“I went to a church recently, and the majority of the congregation was over 50. So I don’t think it was realistic to ask them to go to new social media.

“But there was a young man there. What would happen if you encouraged him to help?

Ask him: how do you reach the people around you? And evangelise them?

“When you’re empowering young people, you don’t feel so overwhelmed at trying to figure it out. And it could result in someone using the gifts they might not even know they have, to serve in a way that they didn’t even know was possible.”

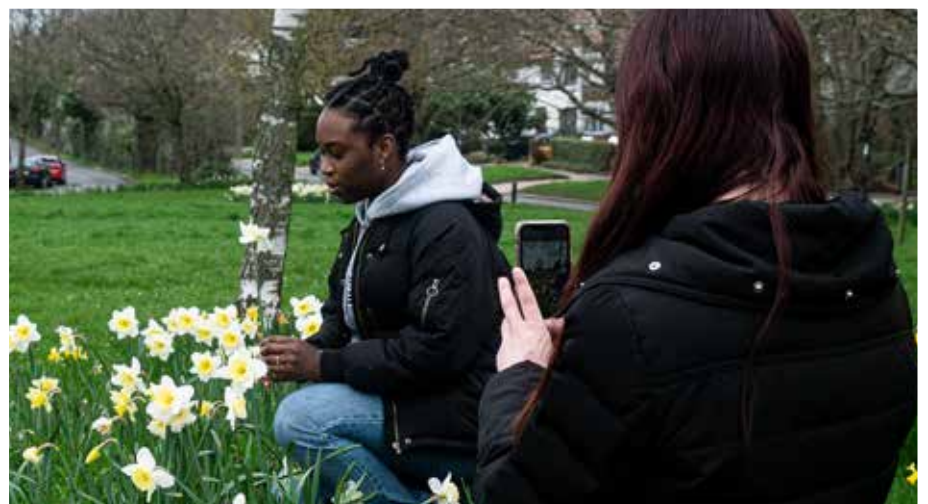
Femi acknowledges there is vulnerability needed in what he advocates, and sharing in this way is something he himself can struggle with. Nevertheless, he wants to encourage us to get back to the heart of our faith. Who are we doing this for, and who is alongside us as we go about it?

“I know there’s so much more I can do as well, and I know part of it is being fearful of putting ourselves out there,” he says.

“But what is there to say when you’re preaching the truth that changes lives? Jesus is Jesus! And he’s going to build his Church at the end of the day. This is a way of collaborating with him.”



Femi Onanuga is the youth pastor at Mill Hill East Church in London





A church for video gamers has existed since 2016 – and Alice Cheeseman is a volunteer there. She explains more

There's a gentle chattering through my headphones. A group of around 10 people are hanging out and catching up on how life is going, before turning their attention to prayer. AI is playing quiet reflection music in the background. It's a Saturday afternoon (for some), and a small portion of the group are spending time with each other before the first of two services, but right now their main aim is to pray and put God first. A few people pray, voices and accents from around the world fill the speakers. They are expecting to see their average of over 100 people show up from all around

the world over the two services, the majority of whom they have never met onsite and possibly never will – knowing only their screen names.

Their commonality? They all enjoy video games.

Welcome to GodSquad Church. Their core value is simple '...a place where gamers from all over the world can come and find a place they can call home, no matter their beliefs or background. Our community is a place where people can come game together, grow together, and build relationships that will last a lifetime.'

Their mission point, however, calls to a deeper, more spiritual side: 'GodSquad Church exists to connect gamers to God by meeting them where they are.'

For the more academically theological among us, this may feel distinctly familiar as a form of relational or incarnational ministry, especially the versions modelled by Andrew Root. Going out to where the people are and making the relationship the goal.

In 2014, Matthew Souza found himself feeling called 'to reach gamers all over the world with the gospel. A brief time after putting his feet in the water that was the still-growing website, Twitch (a streaming service that focuses on video game live streaming) Matt recognized the potential for something far greater than himself sitting in a boiler room playing video games live on the internet.' (godsquadchurch.com/our-history)

Over time he found more and more people who felt the echo

of this call and eventually they would launch virtually the first-ever church just for gamers on 24 March, 2016: GodSquad Church, or GSC to their regulars. These services became a regular staple, and as the team grew and developed, their call has been the same: to reach gamers and journey with them from their virtual lives to eternal life.

Currently - at the time of writing - they have 19 interest-based house-groups that meet purely online (ranging from topics on Israel, to playing Dungeons and Dragons all the way to one of the latest popular MMORPGs - massively multiplayer online role-playing games - Destiny 2); a Twitch channel in the tens of thousands of hours watched (in 2022), over 300 broadcasts in the year and a volunteer base ranging between 50-100 individuals. It is little surprise to see their church is thriving and developing in a relatively uncommon area for the church to be found. They have especially found it popular with those in the young adult category - which reflects the median age (33) of those playing video games.

At GSC, their online community server is as diverse as the worldwide community they host; from discussion channels tackling difficult complex theology, to memes and video clips all the way through to a women's group that shares recipes and everything in between.

But as much as they play hard and game together to win, they also put at the pinnacle of their community their faith. They ensure space is given for those who need prayer, and those who are seeking to learn more, the opportunity to explore the ideas of faith. They have seen

many come to know Jesus for the first time or come back into relationship with him.

Their services are like what we came to know over Covid (even though this predates that format), of worship recorded from home, and a sermon (linking video games to the Bible) live streamed from a desk, and a short 'altar call' at the end. They stream throughout the week as well, putting a focus on doing community well and playing games together; from Mario Kart, World of Warcraft to free chat-based games like Marbles. Growing their community to game together but also chat faith together has led to their influence being spread across the world, one life at a time, and many people coming to know who Jesus is in a real way.

I stumbled across this community at the beginning of 2018; a third-year university student trying to write an essay about cyberbullying in video games, and if we as youth workers should encourage our young people to interact with online video games at all. Looking for a Christian community, I did what most people do - went straight to Google - and saw that a church especially for gamers had a service that evening on a platform I already knew and loved. Curious, and after a few polite conversations with people who would later become my friends, I stuck around in the service, and joined their Discord, falling asleep at about 3:30am. Within a few months I had joined their prayer team; and now after five and a half years, many late nights laughing, theological debates, and a wider experience with volunteering than I could have ever dreamed of, I'm beginning to recognise a similar call to engage and encourage churches to reach out to those online.

GSC is in some ways unique to church - putting an emphasis on gaming to build relationships; however in other ways it feels familiar, like many other pioneering movements that have gone before. However, it still calls us as the Church to be creative about how we do mission and reach those online, whose screen names are our only clue to who they are.

For more about GodSquad Church, visit:

www.godsquadchurch.com
Twitter (X): @GodSquadChurch
Twitch: Godsquadchurch
Or
Scan this QR code



Alice Cheeseman is a qualified youth worker and was baptised at age 17. She has been serving and worshipping ecumenically ever since.

She volunteers for a vast array of teams over both GodSquad Church and in her local church - Kidlington Baptist Church.



‘The most effective digital evangelism platform in the UK’

Around 1500 people visit the website Christianity.org.uk each day - and more than a quarter of new enquirers are people looking to become Christians. It's easy and free to link from your own church website, writes **Cherry Hamilton Bond**

What's the purpose of life?

What will happen when I die?

When will Jesus return?

These are just three of the big questions that people are asking right now, and some of the most visited articles on Christianity.org.uk.

It's clear that people are less interested in dogma and tradition, and more in the big questions of what faith means for them personally.

So where are people increasingly turning for answers? The internet, of course! And there's a lot of unhelpful content out there.

That's why our ecumenical team at Christianity.org.uk have created an attractive and easy to use site, offering a wide range of balanced and thoughtful articles about Christianity, alongside our unique and popular offer of confidential online conversations about faith.

We're delighted that over 1.5k people visit Christianity.org.uk each day to find answers to their important questions. And over a quarter of new enquirers are people who are looking to become Christians - what a privilege!

With AI becoming more and more ubiquitous at the moment, we could have chosen to employ clever programs for answering enquiries - however, we've deliberately decided not to. Whilst bots could probably

give a great answer concerning Christian beliefs about life after death, often what people really want isn't a list of facts, but an opportunity to express their personal fears and concerns to another human being, to be listened to, and to know that a real Christian cares and will pray for them.

We're also able to work with individuals to help them find suitable local churches and Christian courses, and we also direct enquirers to services such as CAP, AA, and the Samaritans where appropriate.

Simon Woodman, Chair of Trustees, and minister of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church says:

"The reason I'm so passionate about this website is that it is simply the most effective digital evangelism platform in the UK. From the breadth of articles, to the in-depth analysis, to the topical opinion pieces, to



the personalised responses to enquiries: *Christianity.org.uk* is the go-to place for those who want to find out more about the Christian faith online. Every church should carry it on their website!"

Many churches don't have the resources to answer lots of questions, or find that people prefer to ask questions anonymously rather than to speaking to ministers or staff. So a growing number of churches and Christian organisations are linking to *Christianity.org.uk* on their websites and materials. They find *Christianity.org.uk*, (overseen by Churches Together in England), to be a safe pair of hands.

Simply put the Christianity URL on your website, and we'll do the rest. Of course, everything is free at the point of use, although we encourage churches who value what we do to consider supporting us with a small annual donation.

It's the easiest evangelism you'll ever do!



Cherry Hamilton Bond is the editor of *Christianity.org.uk*

Scan this QR Code to be directed to their website



PRAYERS

Touching Down The Internet chat room

They chatted together, an astonishing assortment of different ages, cultures, creeds and backgrounds; in so many ways, miles apart, yet, thanks to modern technology, brought close, as though they were there together in the one room.

Overcome, Lord, the barriers that keep us apart,
dividing person from person
and race from race –
East and West,
black and white,
male and female,
rich and poor.
Whatever our colour, culture or creed,
draw us together and heal our wounds –
so that we may live and work together as one people,
one world.

Amen.

By Nick Fawcett





During lockdown, many of us threw the rulebook in the air as regards boundaries for technology in the home in order to survive. Now is a brilliant time to reset those guidelines, writes Katharine Hill

She has been my trusted companion for many years now. Always by my side, she is loyal and attentive, bringing me what I want at any time and even helping me discover things I didn't know I needed. Colourful and interesting, she is great company. It's so easy to spend time with her; in fact, the hours slip by without my realising it. Dressed for this season in dusty pink, she reminds me of my appointments, pays for my coffee, recommends music to listen to, and even helps me keep track of my children's whereabouts. And during Covid-19, her presence was a genuine lifeline. Sometimes she runs out of energy, but then I plug her in ... and all is well.

The digital age has undoubtedly brought huge advantages to society, and especially so during the pandemic. Technology use skyrocketed during Covid-19 as bedrooms were converted into offices, children tapped through online lessons during the day, moving on to their Xbox at night, and grandparents upskilled to become Zoom experts. I wrote the first edition of my book *Left to Their Own Devices?* in 2017, and since then our relationship with technology has undergone a paradigm shift (reflected in updated editions). Professor Sonia Livingstone from the London School of Economics summarises it well: 'We've moved, I'd suggest, from seeing technology as a valued addition to our lives, to seeing technology as vital infrastructure. And as Covid-19 has made really clear, for young people especially, life is digital by default.'¹

As a consequence, parents' concerns have intensified about the sheer number of hours their children spend glued to

glowing screens. During the pandemic, screen time increased the most among primary-aged schoolchildren, going up by an extra hour and twenty minutes a day according to one study.²

Generally, parents' worries regarding screen time cluster around three areas of safety: content, contact and conduct. What images are our children seeing? Who are they talking to? How are they behaving online? The issues are myriad, including access to pornography, sexting, online bullying, gaming, grooming, gambling, addiction, sites encouraging self-harm and eating disorders, the insidious effects of social media, and the cumulative effect of all of this on their emotional wellbeing.

Whatever the shape or size of your family, perhaps one of the most effective things we can do is to put in place a 'family media agreement.' This is essentially some guidelines in line with your family values for use of technology in the home that

¹ Elena Martellozzo, 'Life is digital by default – so what's the impact on young people's mental health?', London School of Economics, 21 December 2020, blogs.lse.ac.uk (accessed 12 July 2023).

² Andrew Gregory, 'Primary-age children's screen time went up by 83 minutes a day during pandemic – study', *The Guardian*, 24 June 2022 (accessed 12 July 2023).

everyone, (including parents!) adheres to. Get some drinks and snacks and make it a fun experience to talk through the issues together. It's obviously easier the younger they are, but even the most combative teenager may cooperate if they think they will be listened to.

The kind of things you might like to consider include:

- **Time on screens.** We use screens for many different activities, so rather than simply monitoring the number of hours, instead look at what the screen is being used for – maths homework, a game of Fortnite or a Zoom call with Granny?
- **Where and when screens are used.** Do you allow phones in bedrooms, or at mealtimes? One great piece of advice is to get hold of a multicharger, place it outside the bedrooms (perhaps in the kitchen) and for everyone's phones to be charged there overnight so the whole family gets a good night's sleep.

- **Sensible sharing limits.** What personal details can be or shouldn't be shared online? Are any platforms or websites off limits?
- **Handling difficulties.** What should your child do if they encounter something scary or something that makes them upset or uncomfortable online?

The idea is that the agreement works *for* your family, and is used not as a straitjacket to restrict freedom, but as a seatbelt to keep everyone safe.

During lockdown, many of us threw the rulebook in the air as regards boundaries for technology in the home in order to survive. Now is a brilliant time to reset those guidelines.

Written 2,000 years before the advent of the smartphone, the book of Proverbs gives some good advice: 'Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her and she will watch over you' (Proverbs 4:6). As parents, we are best placed not only to put good boundaries in place, but to pass on to our children the gift of wisdom so they can make wise choices themselves in all the online spaces that they inhabit.



Katharine Hill is the UK director of Care for the Family. She is a well-known speaker, broadcaster and author of a number of books including *Left to Their Own Devices?* and her latest book *Born Free – A call to be still, know God and flourish in a hectic world.*



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GEN

The Art of Living in a Digital Age



Jane Shaw introduces a multi-authored book which offers insights into Gen Z

In 2021, three colleagues (a sociologist, linguist and anthropologist) and I (an historian) published an interdisciplinary study of Generation Z – *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age* – about those born in 1995 or after, who have never known the world without the internet. We became convinced that older generations need to understand Gen Z and figure out how to work with Gen Zers to make the future better. We did surveys of that age group's values across the general population in the USA and UK; conducted in-depth interviews with students at three very different campuses; and constructed a large database of Gen Z language scraped from social media.

Here are my reflections on what we learnt and what the churches need to grasp if they stand a chance of engaging Gen Z.

Religion It's not so much that Gen Zers are against it, but it just doesn't come up on their radar screens. They are largely indifferent. For the most part, religion hasn't been transmitted to them so, if they are going to investigate it, that will have to happen from scratch. This means that those in the churches will need to figure out how to engage with Gen Z – from scratch.

Churches so often appear (and frequently act) as if they have all the answers for those outside institutional religion and little to learn from them. We need to begin by asking Gen Zers what is important to them. As the Anglican priest Vincent Strudwick says, "It's no good taking people

from where they aren't to where they don't want to go."

Living in the Digital Age

is what Gen Z has always (and only) known. Online and offline life are seamlessly connected and totally integrated for them, though they understand the value of offline encounters. Participating in gathered community online is something they are used to; online groups are essential areas of belonging and identity formation though affiliations are not necessarily permanent or even long term.

Gen Zers belong to groups as and how they make sense in relation to their identity and friend networks. It's the equivalent of church hopping, and church hopping is exactly what we saw many – from all generations – doing online during the pandemic once they were given the opportunity to find what

they liked for a particular time and season. Churches, struggling post-pandemic with how to win back congregations, might ask Gen Z for some advice on how you successfully combine and negotiate the online and offline, and work with people's multiple affiliations. Gen Zers are brilliant at it.

Identity is central for

Gen Z It is finely grained and carefully articulated, the result of a judicious sorting and selection of attributes. Gen Z's identities also guide their affiliations and loyalties; the internet has allowed them to find people 'like them' in ways that were simply not possible before. If identity is important but religion is rarely one of the attributes of identity, then the churches will have to figure out how to engage with other aspects of Gen Z identities as a starting point. Given that sexual orientations (yes, many) and genders (yes, many) are key to Gen Z identity, the churches are already on the back foot. Engagement with race and ethnic identity are also absolutely vital. For Gen Zers this is all a matter of justice and, if they are going to engage with Church, they will want to see Gospel justice values reflected in Christian behaviour.

This brings us to

authenticity.

Gen Z-ers can sniff out inauthenticity from a mile off. Faced with sorting through a vast amount of information online from an early age, they have learnt the importance of finding what is authentic, what speaks to their experience and what is relevant or 'relatable' – a very Gen Z word.

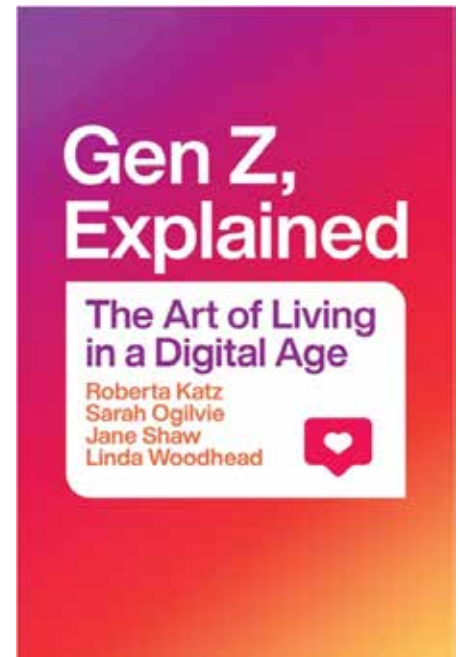
Gen Zers care passionately about the environment and issues of equity and justice. They are

sceptical of institutions, seeing them as broken or incapable of solving deep problems. They have, of course, inherited much from the liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s, although they don't always recognise that, and they are sceptical about the capacity of older generations to address and tackle what seem like intractable problems.

Gen Zers who are part of the Church point out that their concerns flow out of their faith. In the book *Young, Woke and Christian*, edited by Victoria Turner (2022), 15 younger Christians argue that issues like the climate crisis, sexual identity, disability justice, food poverty and racial justice are Gospel issues.

These are some of the big issues of our day, and it is vital that people of all generations, including Christians of all generations, bring together our different skills and insights to address them, and find shared generational hopes and values. To do so, we will need to keep listening to each other.

A version of this article was previously published on the website ViaMedia News (March 2022), and we are grateful for permission to publish this edited version here.



Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age was published in late 2021 by University of Chicago Press (paperback 2022) and is co-authored by Jane Shaw, Linda Woodhead, Roberta Katz and Sarah Ogilvie.

Could your church engage with the book and ask what insights and challenges it offers to your contexts?



Jane Shaw is Principal of Harris Manchester College, Oxford, Professor of the History of Religion, and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Oxford. She is an honorary fellow of Regent's Park College.





As technology has evolved, so it has impacted the lives of mission workers. Megan and Alan Barker, who have served long-term in Nepal with BMS, and the Chad-based Claire Bedford share their experiences

Megan and Alan Barker first began serving with BMS World Mission in 2000, and have lived and served in Nepal for most of the intervening years. They are currently in the capital Kathmandu, to develop a wider itinerant role for capacity strengthening of BMS partner organisations. As part of this they (especially Alan) give particular input to HDCS, a locally based partner.

Technology-wise, much has changed since they first arrived in Nepal.

“When we came, it was very difficult to get hold of people at home and so we focused on settling into here,” says Megan.

“There was dial-up internet, but we didn’t have a computer and had to use internet cafés. We would write letters home and postcards – they were our ways of keeping in touch. And because there wasn’t a safe postal system, we could only send them when someone was travelling to the UK and could carry them home for us.

“The lack of connection actually reduced the anxiety on both sides – you didn’t expect to be connected so easily.”

“The internet here is very good these days,” adds Alan, “but it can go down – and that’s when people can start to worry. But overall it’s been very helpful.”

The Barkers use WhatsApp and Zoom to keep in touch with friends and family (their three children all live in different countries) and communicate with churches. They say Covid, with people getting used to video conferencing platforms like Zoom and online church services, has ‘changed the game completely.’

Having a Zoom coffee morning and afternoon tea around once a quarter is one of the ways the couple have enhanced their relationships with supporting churches. “With the technology now, you can have people from different places together,” says Megan. “We connect our churches from across the UK through our afternoon teas and coffee mornings. Anybody can come and we just sit and chat for an hour. They talk with us and each other, and it’s a great way of keeping in touch. It’s interesting for us as they connect with each other through mutual contacts and past friendships. Sometimes it’s a general chat and catch up, other times we have specific things to share: for example, when we moved here we actually did a tour of the house, and people felt they’d visited us. It means when we go to our churches, we feel like we know people well because we have engaged with them. So for us, that’s been successful.”

As well as building relationships individually, Megan and Alan

are better able to connect with supporting congregations: they've taken part in several online services, and regularly watch services from their link churches. They've found more of a captive audience online – people are not pulled in as many directions as they might be on an onsite visit. They've led online Bible studies, and recorded items for Sunday schools, like 'what's it like at Christmas in Nepal?'

Technology has also meant their roles in Nepal have adapted. The job they're doing 'wouldn't be possible without it', they say, as it involves organising webinars and evaluating projects where there is a depth of detail and need for speedy responses.

In terms of her rehabilitation work, Megan, an occupational therapist, can even support people online.

"Digital technology has definitely improved things for us in many ways," says Alan. Nevertheless, there remains a place for the onsite, face-to-face.

"You always have to strike a balance. Here in Nepal it's a very relational culture, less task focused. You have to meet and get to know them properly. And obviously drink tea. Through this we start to build a relationship, and then start talking about work. It's not usually the first thing on the agenda even though that is the ultimate aim."



Alan and Megan Barker serve in Nepal, where they use their skills to support BMS World Mission partner organisations, train local workers and deliver vital physiotherapy

A positive thing - but important not to have your brain too much back in the UK

Claire Bedford has served with BMS since 2013. She works in the BMS-supported Guinebor II hospital, in Chad, heading up the pharmacy service there and supporting many other aspects of the hospital too. Claire is originally from North Devon and her home church is Upton Vale Baptist Church, Torquay.

Technology has impacted life for the better in a number of ways, though its use needs to be moderated.

"The first thing that has definitely changed in the last 10 years is the internet availability," Claire says. "No one had smartphones here, the internet was all on a dongle, and was very slow.

"While it's still pretty expensive, there's mobile data, people have smartphones, the Chadians use WhatsApp and Facebook. It's not everybody - some people don't even have a phone, but it's taken off in the last two or three years."

This has saved time in her work

- orders can be checked quickly and easily over WhatsApp, and Claire and her team have just been introduced to an online ordering system. "I never thought I would see this," she says.

The advances in technology have also served to improve connections with her home church and play a role in sustaining her faith. Claire's priority is involvement with her church in Chad, but if she is ill, or the road impassable in the rainy season (there are no tarred roads for the first section of the 10km journey from the hospital to the capital N'Djamena) she now has the option of tuning in to Upton Vale's livestream on YouTube on a Sunday morning.

As a member, she can attend church meetings, and Upton Vale also hosts online prayer meetings on Sunday evenings. "I don't go every time but when there's a focus on mission or the mission work, I'm asked to go. I can have people praying for me in real time and I can hear them.

That's the biggest way things have changed for me since Covid - being able to do stuff in real time is an encouragement."

She says it needs to be as balanced. "It's important not to have your brain too much back in the UK, but it has definitely been a positive thing in terms of feeling supported and linked in."



Claire Bedford serves at Guinebor II Hospital in Chad. There, she has an important role in the hospital's management, as well as heading up and training the pharmacy team.

RESOURCES

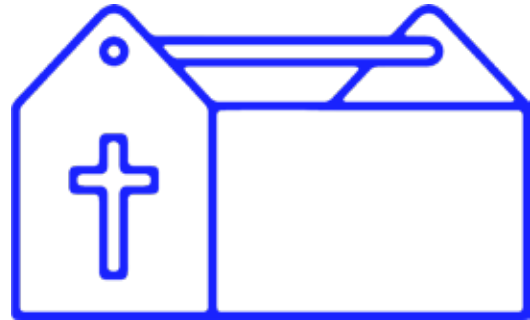
A selection of resources created by Baptists and other organisations
Scan the QR codes provided to be directed straight to the appropriate websites



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A monthly Zoom based gathering aiming to help anyone involved in communications across Baptists Together. Led by local and regional communications expert Hannah Fleming-Hill and National Communications Manager Mike Lowe, they, with occasional special guests will talk about a variety of communication related topics.

baptist.org.uk/firstfriday



Digital Church Toolkit

Exists to see the UK Church adapt to and thrive in the digital age. Membership organisation, but lots of free tools too – including a weekly email highlighting trends and tops about digital and church comms, and a webinar 'Five steps to upgrading your social media presence'.

digitalchurchtoolkit.com



AI THEOLOGY

Ai Theology

Seeks to look at AI technologies from a theological lens.

aitheology.com



Premier Digital

The Premier Digital team collates videos and blogs covering everything connecting church and digital.

premierdigital.info





Heavenly Father,

We come before you today to pray for your guidance and wisdom in our use of digital technology. We thank you for the many ways that technology can be used for good, such as connecting with friends and family, learning new things, and sharing the gospel.

We confess that we have sometimes used technology in ways that are not honouring to you. We have used it to spread gossip, to bully others, and to waste time. We ask for your forgiveness and help to use technology for good in the future.

We pray you would help us be mindful of the time we spend on digital devices. We don't want to be slaves to technology, but we want to use it in a way that brings glory to you.

We pray for the UK Baptist church as we seek to navigate the digital age. Make us a light at this time, a church known for its love, compassion and hope. Help us to show the love of Christ to those who are lost and hurting. Help us to be a voice for peace and justice in a world that is often divided.

We pray you would help us to collaborate with Jesus on social media. Help us to use it to share our faith with others, to offer support and encouragement, and to build relationships. Help us to use it to pray for others, to worship God, and to learn about the Bible.

We pray for wisdom on how to do church in a digital age. How can we connect with people who are in different geographical places? How can we build relationships and community online? Send your Holy Spirit to guide us.

We pray you would give us the courage to experiment and to try new things. Help us to be creative and innovative in our use of technology. Help us to find new ways to share the gospel and to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' name,
Amen.

This prayer was created with the help of Google Bard, the generative artificial intelligence chatbot developed by Google, which responded to prompts taken from articles in this magazine.

The speech-recognition program

It was clever stuff,
the computer recognising my voice
and typing what I said,
but, for all its ingenuity, its use was limited:

it got as much wrong as right,
more often than not
misunderstanding my words
or misinterpreting my commands,
the resulting text riddled with errors,
distorting what I'd intended to say.

Lord, though you speak in a
multitude of ways,
I'm equally poor at getting the
message,
either failing to listen or getting my
wires crossed.

I confuse what I want you to say
with what you've actually said,
my life, in consequence, a shadow of
what it should be,
marred by silly mistakes and deeper
faults.

Forgive me,
and give me ears to hear
and a heart to respond.

Amen.

The prayers featured throughout this edition are written by Baptist minister Nick Fawcett, a devotional and reflective writer. Access his writing at: nickfawcett.uk

THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

AN UPDATE

By Jonny Hirst, on behalf of the Consultation Steering Group

In 2020 the Ministerial Recognition Committee, Baptist Union Council, and the Core Leadership Team together began a process of considering whether there should be a change to the Ministerial Recognition Rules regarding Marriage and Accredited Ministry, after a request was made by 70 members to do so. (*visit: baptist.org.uk/consultation to learn more about the background to this process*)

After much consideration, Council agreed that a process of national consultation should take place. As Autumn now draws in, we are over half way in to that consultation process, which commenced in January 2023 with the assembling of a Baptists Together Consultation Steering Group and the appointment of an independent Research Team (Sandra Cobbin and Associates).

Since then, much work has already been done in constructing appropriate surveys and gathering the viewpoints and data from many of our churches and ministers. Surveys were distributed electronically in May of this year, and the opportunity to participate onsite was given at Baptist Assembly in June.

Deciding what questions should go into the survey was a challenging task, but through the piloting of a sample group, and obtaining detailed feedback from many members of the Core Leadership Team, each question was scrutinised, debated and reviewed in order to refine what is being asked. The result is a set of questions that focus on helping Council make its decision.

All of this research will continue to be gathered and analysed until later this autumn, and the Consultation process will conclude in March 2024, where Council, having had all the

research presented to them, will meet to respond to the question we have been asked.

The Consultation is about hearing the heart and mind of where our Baptist movement is on these matters of human sexuality, with the question about same-sex marriage and Accredited Ministry, and its potential impact on the mission and ministry of our churches at the centre of the research. The research has never been about a referendum style vote on the matter, but aims to hear as many voices as possible in our movement and provide as comprehensive as possible feedback from our ministers and churches to enable Council to discern a way forward in a way that reflects our wider Baptist family.

If you are a Minister or Church representative who has received an email and code for the survey, and you haven't done so already, let me encourage you to share your thoughts, and



those of your church, however certain or unsure they may be, by completing the survey. It is not too late to do so.

As we're considering all things digital in this issue of the magazine, let's take a moment to reflect how this consultation process has been possible this year. Although our Baptists Together Teams still know and experience the value of onsite gatherings, so much of our work in-between has only been possible through online video conferencing and electronic correspondence. As we have all experienced over the last three years, Zoom, Teams, and Google Meet have all become common place in the business, prayer, and even the social lives of our church communities. Yet it is still remarkable that this technology allows me to be in a local church meeting here in the north of England one minute, to be meeting with members of this national group from all around the country the next.

More than that, our modern forms of sharing information through electronic technology have enabled us to distribute communication to our 2000 churches and our ministers in an instant, and then gather information back at just a few strokes of our keyboards. And thanks to the talents of our Research Team, all that securely stored information is then produced into quantitative and qualitative data, then analysed and will eventually be translated into reports and presentations for Council. There are many

human voices, prayers and hands at the tiller of this process, but the engine is digital, and it has well and truly revolutionised the way we discern together across our national Baptist movement.

STILL FULLY HUMAN?

I recently attended an international Baptist gathering where one of the conference speakers asked AI to produce a letter of encouragement to today's global Church. On the surface the letter was full of Christian and Biblical language, but it was nuanced with several inaccuracies, and ultimately revealed itself to be decisively inauthentic. While the exercise was fascinating, even comical, the end result obviously lacked the complexity of human wisdom and experience.

Could there be a risk that in all the digital technology used in the Consultation we don't truly hear the human voice of our Union? Should such important and complex questions around human sexuality rely on such technologies, rather than onsite meetings? Well, despite our reliance on digital technology to undertake this process it is far from being artificial intelligence. The responses that are gathered come from real human beings, carrying all sorts of complex thoughts, experiences, reflections and emotions. The data being analysed has been shared by human minds and praying hearts, in fellowship with the Living God. While some of the research was able to be undertaken onsite at the Baptist Assembly this year, it alone will not have the same potential

reach and impact as the digital surveys can have, as long as real people respond through the tools of the digital technology in front of them. Please add your response to the process if you haven't done so already.

Emails with links to the survey were sent out to ministers and church representatives around the 10 May 2023. If you're unsure where that link is, or how to complete the survey at this stage, visit the FAQ section of the Consultation page on the Baptists Together website. (baptist.org.uk/consultation)

Jonny Hirst, on behalf of the Consultation Steering Group. Other members of the steering group include Lynn Green, Hayley Young, Mark Spriggs, Dion-Marie White and Mike Lowe.



Jonny Hirst is the Youth Networker at the North Western Baptist Association

What Have They Done?

Gabriel sings
Gabriel pings
into my in-box
Gabriel dings
the bell which
wakes

me from my slumbers
takes
me by the hand
shakes
me from complacency

A drought
A famine
A revolution
A war
A drought
A famine
A revolution
A war
A drought
A famine
A revolution
A war

Gabriel sings
praises to the God
who rules

A drought
A famine
A revolution
A war

Gabriel wings
a message
a cry
for help
a cry
for justice
a cry
for a voice

amidst dancing kittens
wannabe somebodies
basejumping daredevils
lipsync challenges
and self-improvement

self
improvement
improving
the self
improving
your self

improving
my self
improving
my selfish
self

Gabriel wings

a message
a cry
for help
a cry
for justice
a cry
strangled
by the noise
of Barbie-marketing,
Elon-Trumpeting
Tate-hate
a cry
gentle weeping guitar
gentle weeping God

a cry
What have they done?
What have they done?
What have they done?
What have they done?
What have they done?
What have they done?
What have they done?
What have they done?

What have they done?
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What have they done?



Tim Presswood is Baptist Union President 2023-2024. His theme is Sharing Christ's Great Banquet.

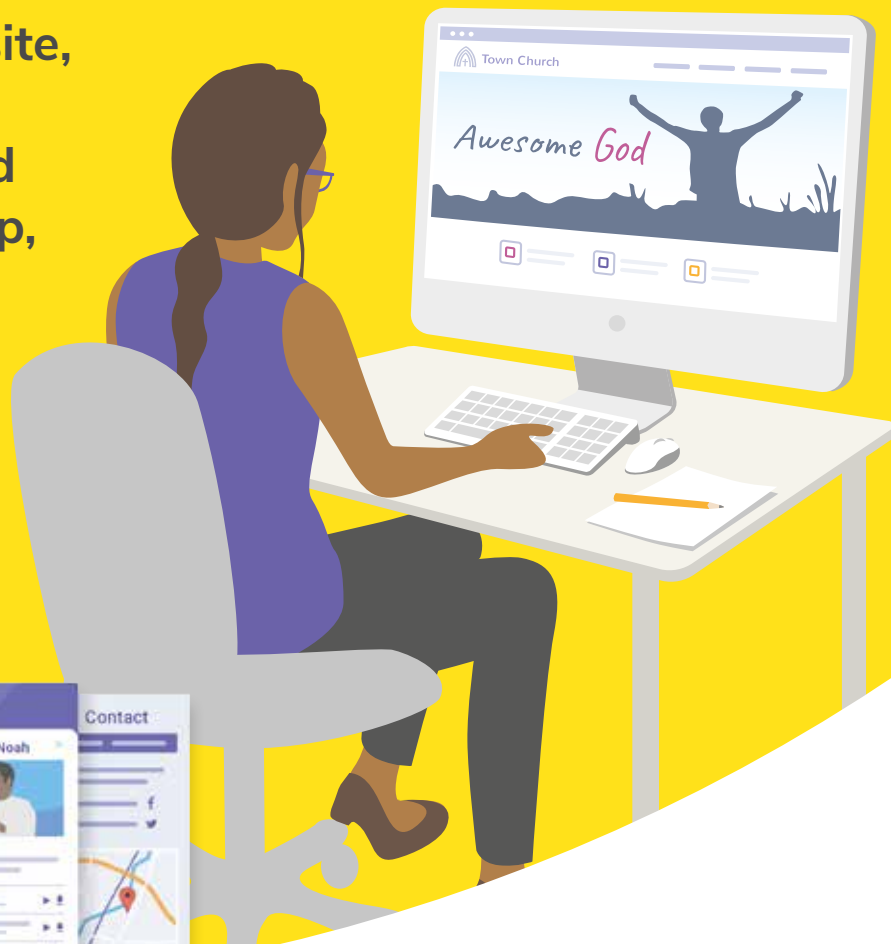
An early adopter of Facebook, Tim closed his social media accounts in 2020 following the Cambridge Analytica scandal. He finds that he can exist perfectly well without them.



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