

# What is digital evangelism?

On the surface it may seem quite straightforward but, when it comes to practically being evangelistic online, there is a broad range of opinion on what content is considered digital evangelism. Is it just those pioneering 'online Christian communities' (ie new ways of being church in a digital space), or is simply having a church presence online considered evangelism? And should we all be engaging in it? Is putting Christian content online enough or does it need to be pushed to people's feeds? Should we be sharing prayers and Bible passages or engaging in apologetics? What if we invite people to church or to evangelistic events? Does digital evangelism require a response and how should we measure success? Are we only looking for more people to attend our church?

This guide is to help discuss some of these questions and explain the complex nature of digital evangelism, not from a theological standpoint but to provide very practical examples of how to engage in evangelism online.



# WHAT IS EVANGELISM?

The Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth describes the term ‘evangelism’ as the following:

“At a foundational level, we hold that evangelism is an orientation to the good news in all of our life together. It is not limited to techniques or practices of inviting or speaking (though it includes those) but is a cross-current in every aspect of mission and ministry.

“Flowing from that general orientation, evangelism can then be understood as set of practices that introduces and inaugurates people into the kingdom of God for the first time (W Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*). A particular and particularly important practice of evangelism is intentionally proclaiming the goodness of God as known in the person of Jesus Christ. This proclamation involves three dynamics: (1) speaking of the goodness of God; (2) listening for the goodness of God in the voices of others; and (3) living out the goodness of God. Fully engaged evangelism necessarily involves all three.”

One of the 5 Core Strategic Streams of the Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth is ‘Digital Presence: Digital Age Mission’:

“In the digital age of communication, the internet is our parish – particularly for younger generations who spend 15+ hours a day online but also for those who are isolated, housebound, or far from home. There is a need for a digital and social media transformation in how the Church relates to iGen/Gen Z and all of those whose lives are inextricably connected in this way. Approaches are needed to online evangelism and Christian community that are not simply digital versions of those offline.”

# DIGITAL EVANGELISM – WHAT DO OTHERS SAY?

Here are a couple of definitions of digital evangelism provided by other organisations from around the world:

“Evangelism can be understood as publicly sharing the good news. The way it is packaged and delivered may change, but as long as the gospel is being shared, it is evangelism. Therefore, digital evangelism is defined as promoting the good news of the gospel and the teachings of Jesus Christ in the digital space using corresponding digital marketing technologies to persuade others to adopt Christian beliefs.  
– Seventh Day Adventist Church

“Using online content specifically aimed at proclaiming the good news of Jesus through social media and websites in faith that people find the one true hope in Him.  
– Youth for Christ

“Digital Evangelism is strategically using internet, mobile, and social media platforms to meet the needs of others and share the Gospel with the online world. Making use of digital means to further the Gospel work means that more church members can be missionaries, Christian presence online will be stronger, and more people will know of the saving love of Jesus. Digital Evangelism should be incorporated with traditional forms of evangelism – it does not replace traditional methods.  
– Centre for Online Evangelism

# WHY DIGITAL TOOLS ARE EFFECTIVE FOR EVANGELISM

“Digital tools are a gift for communicating – and so are all the other traditional church methods, but they are more effective when used together.” *Using Social Media for Evangelism* (CPO)

“As Christians and Churches we need to understand how communication is changing, and adapt the way we communicate with those we wish to reach with the gospel. We must avoid reaching the point where what we do inside the church is so distant from what happens outside, that people assume our gospel is as outdated as our technology. If we insist on communicating only in ways that we find familiar, we will find that fewer and fewer people are willing to listen.” Pam Smith, *Online Mission and Ministry* (SPCK)

## Reaching more people

Websites and social media can reach places other forms of local or physical communication cannot in the same way. Your reach online might be wider than you realise. Most of us have direct or indirect access to thousands of real people through our social media accounts or smartphones, both in our local area and globally, and it's easy to forget just what an opportunity this is for the church. It's a case of going where people are.

## People are looking

Google and social media sites are destinations for learning and discovery, and people are increasingly using these mediums to search for faith and spirituality. Each year there are millions of Google searches for answers to questions like: “Is God real?”, “What happens when we die?”, “Why is there so much suffering in the world?” If answers are only to be found by visiting an offline church, faith can be perceived as irrelevant and old-fashioned.

## Non-threatening and personal

Social media provides a space to start faith conversations in a non-threatening environment. For those who would find coming to a physical church daunting or unfamiliar, online tools give us an opportunity to go to them and engage in authentic and personal conversations and discussion. Digital evangelism isn't about broadcasting random messages to the world and hoping someone will find it but enables sharing our faith in highly personal ways with friends.

## A new generation

We are living in a digital age and for young people the internet is part of how they live their lives. According to Youth for Christ research, over 94% of young people engage with social media daily. A recent Barna Group study revealed that 58% of millennials believe digital platforms have made sharing their faith easier. If we wish to remain relevant to a new generation in carrying out the Great Commission, we must learn how to use platforms that can help us reach the masses. Today's evangelistic efforts need to be appropriate to the current time and context.

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Digital Evangelism helps us spread the Gospel into all the world at a rate we never could've imagined before.

– *Centre for Online Evangelism*

We've only just taken the first steps on a journey that is set to fundamentally change the way people relate to each other. What does it look like to be the church in a world where modes of communication have been fundamentally altered by technology? One thing is certain: the individuals and ministries that will thrive in that brave new world; the churches that will communicate the Gospel effectively in 2040; will be the ones that are courageous enough to experiment right now.

– *Christian Vision* (CV Global)

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# PRACTICAL EXAMPLES



We live in an increasingly digital age and the opportunities are greater than ever for us to reach people with our message where they are: online. As a young adult, I believe our methods must change to reach my generation, and I'm passionate about equipping churches to use both websites and social media for this purpose. Now, more than ever, the church must strive to explore how we can use these digital tools for evangelism. *Elliot Crippen, Digital Communications Enabler*



## Different approaches

It is not clear cut and there isn't a line in the sand about what is considered 'digital evangelism' – it is a spectrum. Whilst some might decide to draw the line at a certain point, others may not, and so we should hold the following together as different online methods, all equally valid, of achieving digital evangelism:

- having a church presence (website or social media)
- advertising church events or activities
- engaging in social justice
- living out the love of God in the way we act online
- sharing content that invites conversation (with those of faith, those searching, and those of no faith)
- publishing sermons, quotes, podcasts, videos, or other media downloads
- engaging in conversation in secular online spaces
- directly sharing the good news with people
- livestreaming or recording church services
- creating 'online Christian community' (a digital version of a physical community)
- pioneering new ways of forming Christian community in a digital space

You do not need to be an expert to engage in evangelism online. It is no longer just for pioneers or those training in digital marketing. If we are active online, have a smartphone, or engage on social media, then we can take part in sharing the good news – we are all responsible. You might not have the technical skills to build a website, but within the digital capabilities that you do have, there are ways you can engage in digital evangelism. Read on in this guide to find some simple suggestions on what you could post online.

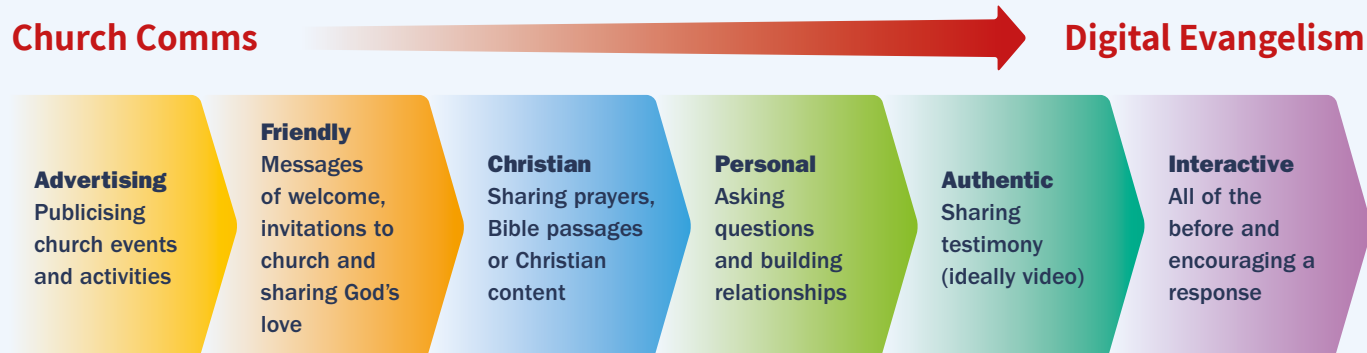
We can engage in digital evangelism as an individual but also as a church, and the methods may vary for each. Some of the approaches above refer to churches engaging in digital evangelism whilst others are approaches that can be undertaken by individuals (and of course there is some overlap). There are a range of methods listed above for the different approaches to engaging in evangelism online. However, within each of these there is also a range of ways to achieve them and various 'content' that can be used. The next section will cover suggestions for content that can be used whatever approach you are taking.

# SUGGESTIONS FOR ONLINE CONTENT

There is a range of digital content we can produce to share the good news. If you are thinking about it from a church organisation point of view, then the spectrum might extend from traditional 'church comms' at the one end (usually a form of advertising) to effective 'digital evangelism' at the other (where the sole motivation is to spread the good news). Practically this might look different depending on the platform or medium you are using.

For detailed advice and further suggestions, please see the accompanying digital evangelism guides, which can be found at [www.methodist.org.uk/digitalevangelism](http://www.methodist.org.uk/digitalevangelism)

For your church website or church Facebook page:



Simple suggestions for individuals on social media. Could you:

- post that you are going to church this Sunday (maybe tag your church Facebook page if they have one) or post a photo after you have been to church
- share something like: "Attended [example] Methodist Church this morning and had a great time. If any of my friends would like to come along next week message me"
- share something spiritual that happened during your day
- share your favourite Bible passage or quote
- tell part of your story or faith journey (however small)
- share posts from your church
- share something that has influenced your faith (eg a song, movie, TV show, event, etc)?

As all of these can be considered 'digital evangelism' in one form or another, the question becomes, not "is this digital evangelism?" but instead "how can we be more evangelistic?"



# WHAT IS SUCCESS?

Does it matter if no one sees our online content – is it still evangelism? This question is almost like the philosophical thought experiment, “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” which is designed to raise questions regarding observation and perception. This concern is maybe less of an issue with traditional methods of evangelism, where you might not question when you hand someone a leaflet or speak to them in the street, whether they have read your words or listened to your talk. But in the digital age it is a far more relevant and valid question to ask, as we can easily put information up on our church website without anyone ever seeing it. We often believe we can communicate with the whole world in a single tweet, but the truth is far more complex. There is a need, therefore, to look at the methods we are using to convey our message, as well as the message itself.

Once again there is a spectrum of methods we can implement to be effective. At one end we may need a big budget to invest in good SEO (search engine optimisation – the way our website gets found via Google) or investing in paid Facebook Ads to reach people in our local community with our posts. Or, at the other end, it can be as simple as following best practice for how we communicate and keep people’s attention. Whether we are using social media, websites or some other digital platform, there are some general trends in the online world that can help us reach more people with our message:



The digital world allows us to measure how ‘successful’ we are in this area by providing statistics on how many views, likes or users we have reached with our content. But is this truly a measure of success? Is our aim solely to get our content seen? If we know that the message has been received but not acted on, can we say we have been ‘successful’ in our evangelistic efforts? This is partly why the previous graphics for church websites and Facebook pages includes a suggestion that we encourage people to respond – whether through getting in touch, continuing the conversation, inviting them to church, or another interaction (which in the world of digital marketing is called a ‘call to action’).

Ultimately, even if very few people outside of our church or outside of our online friendship group see our online content (whether on social media, on a website, or other digital means), remember that you never know what impact you may be having. We may be planting an initial seed that will eventually flower. We do not necessarily seek to just bring more people to our physical church on a Sunday. Rather we hope to demonstrate a set of practices that enable us and others to enter the fullness of God’s kingdom.