Introduction

Christianity is fundamentally a communication event.
It is God revealing God's self to the world.
And God uses a large variety of media
to accomplish that revelation.

Shane Hipps[1]

In March, 2012, the nonprofit organization Invisible Children released a thirty-minute video to publicize a campaign aimed at bringing a war criminal to justice. Within the first twenty-four hours, the video had been viewed over one million times on YouTube; within the first month, it had been viewed over eighty-six million times.[2] This success did not just happen by chance. Invisible Children had spent months developing a community of followers and then developed a strategy to leverage that interest for the campaign.[3]

Many organizations are now trying to copy the approach taken by Invisible Children and use this strategy for their own efforts. But this may not necessarily be the right way to go about it, because each organization is unique. A strategy developed by one organization may not translate into success for another.

This book is about developing your own strategy for success using digital tools. Whether you are part of a large ministry looking for some fresh ideas, a small church just getting into this Internet thing or an individual who wants to understand how to contribute to God's kingdom, this book will guide you down the path to developing an effective digital strategy.

The Internet is the greatest communications tool ever invented by humans. It is the most rapidly adopted communication technology of all time, available to over two billion people at the time of this writing.[4] Social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube are growing at a fast pace, with Facebook garnering over 1 billion user accounts in seven years and YouTube now receiving 800 million unique users watching over four billion hours of video every month.[5]

If it is true, as Shane Hipps says, that Christianity is fundamentally a communication event, then it is imperative that Christians understand how to use the Internet well. This book was not written to convince you that the Internet or social media is important or that your ministry should use it. I am assuming that, if you have picked up this book, you already believe this to be true. I have written this book for one purpose: *to provide churches and ministries with the guidance they need to successfully embrace and use digital technologies as a means to fulfill their mission.*

Being successful online is not easy. Digital technologies are changing and evolving constantly. Websites that were once useful and efficient are now outdated (remember MySpace?). Even the logos and colors we use must keep up with the latest styles; what previously looked cutting edge may now convey the message that your ministry doesn't "get it" anymore.

And it isn't just the technologies that are changing; user expectations are as well. Just as television-viewers came to expect first color, then stereo sound, and now high-definition, the visitors to your website and Facebook page have also raised their expecta-

tions. Users today expect to be able to interact with your site. They expect video. They expect to be able to view your site on their mobile device. They don't want to have to work hard to find you: they expect you to come to them. I can sum it up this way: *they expect a relationship.*

Thinking Strategically

The single most important thing you can do for your ministry's use of the Internet and social media is to design, document and implement a digital strategy. It is not enough to rely on one person in your ministry to put up an attractive website or to give a volunteer the task of managing your Facebook page. You must be intentional.

A well-planned strategy will have several components, from initial planning to tool selection to implementation and follow-up. But even more than that, a good digital strategy must encompass the full range of activities necessary to be successful online. This means that your ministry must focus on more than just the technology; it must also focus on the *people* who are involved in the online ministry and the *processes* that must be put in place to ensure that all tasks are completed. All three of these components—technology, people and process—are equally important for a successful online ministry. I call this the *digital ministry framework*, and it is one of the core concepts in this book.

How does this play out? What value does a specific strategy for your digital ministry have? A well-thought-out digital strategy will enable you to answer some of the important questions about your ministry and will guide you through key decisions that you will have to make. Here are just a few of those questions and decisions.

Technology

• Should your ministry be on Facebook? Should you use a Facebook page or a Facebook group?

- How are people going to find your website? What steps have you taken to make this more likely?

- What search terms are people using to find you? Where do you show up in a web search of those terms?

- What does your website look like on a smartphone? Would an iPhone app be appropriate for your ministry? What about the iPad or other mobile devices?

People

- Who are you primarily targeting with your Internet presence? What percentage of that group uses the Internet daily? Or uses Facebook? Or has an iPhone?

- Who is responsible for your digital presence? Is it in that person's job description? Does she or he have the authority needed to be successful?

- What roles are appropriate for volunteers, and what should be assigned only to paid staff?

Process

- Who has to approve new content for the website or Facebook page?

- Do the appropriate people within your ministry have the ability to directly change the online information they are responsible for? Should they?

- What are the specific, measurable goals for your online ministry? What methods are you using to measure those goals? What will you do if you do not meet these goals?

- What is your process for making changes to parts of your digital ministry? When do you decide to shut something down?

A well-developed strategy can address these questions and decisions and many more. In this book, I will walk you through the

steps necessary to develop the digital strategy that is right for your ministry. I will also introduce you to my research project on digital ministry best practices, which is based on this same framework. Using a combination of research and examples, the digital strategy framework used here will guide you through the creation of a plan that will allow you to be confident that your use of digital technologies is on the right track.

My prayer for you and your ministry is that you will be inspired and encouraged to take these specific steps for your digital ministry. Whether you are just beginning to use the Internet and social media for your ministry or you have been online for years, the concepts and recommendations outlined in this book will give you the opportunity to make full use of digital technologies.