

Andrews University

## Digital Commons @ Andrews University

---

Faculty Publications

---

Fall 2022

### A Story of Digital Church Development and its Implications

Petr A. Činčala

*Andrews University*, [cincala@andrews.edu](mailto:cincala@andrews.edu)

Foye Michael Belyea

Mabio Cohelo

*Andrews University*, [mabioc@andrews.edu](mailto:mabioc@andrews.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Činčala, Petr A.; Belyea, Foye Michael; and Cohelo, Mabio, "A Story of Digital Church Development and its Implications" (2022). *Faculty Publications*. 4455.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/4455>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact [repository@andrews.edu](mailto:repository@andrews.edu).

# A Story of Digital Church Development and its Implications

**P**etr: How did you get introduced to the concept of online church?

**Foye:** My background has always been in traditional church. I spent 20 years in traditional institutional, attractional and missional churches. About 10 years ago, maybe a little longer, I was part of the Evangelical Free Church of America, which had historically been a church planting dynamo. Like the Southern Baptists and the Presbyterian Church of America, our church planting initiative really kind of moved into more of a static situation.

The planting wasn't as effective as it was before, so the national office of the Free Church in Minneapolis asked me to be part of a group of crazy guys who were doing things a little differently to talk about church health. So we got together. The group was called Missional Architects, and we began to talk about why our church planting initiatives were not yielding the same fruit they once did. As I was having this conversation, it became apparent that it really wasn't a church health issue. It was a discipleship issue.

We were good at getting people together, having large attractional gatherings on Sunday, mobilizing people to work in soup kitchens and other community activities, and teaching people the Scriptures. But in terms of

transformation, there really wasn't a lot happening there, at least to the degree that we wanted to see what we saw in the Gospels. So, after a whole lot of conversations, we decided that the issue really was we didn't have a way of life that we were living out with intentionality.

*The Five Stones* was born from those conversations. The five stones are kind of a metaphor. We came up with five key questions that had to be asked: What are we to do? How are we to do it? When are we to do it? With whom are we to do it? And, towards what end?

Our journey really proceeded out of a realized understanding of the kingdom of God: The irreducible core was to love God, love others, and make disciples. How were we to do that through the Holy Spirit's empowerment? The reason we weren't seeing empowerment and breakthrough in the larger church setting is because our parents and our kids really weren't following Jesus together at home—so church is family and then family is church.

What does it look like to gather people into family groups within the larger umbrella of the church, involving single people and divorced people, elderly people in our families of origin, as we live together as mission communities or micro churches through the week, gathering on Sunday for catalyzation, encouragement, and preparation for deployment into the mission field?

As the Natural Church Development (NCD) national partner in the U.S., I (Petr) train NCD coaches and meet with pastors from various faith traditions. This is how I met Pastor Foye from the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference. His inspiring story came to my attention as we dined together. Pastor Mabio has been doing research on the topic of digital churches as an Andrews University doctoral student and so he offered his reflection.

We were great at gathering for events and receiving a wide array of religious goods and services. We also were trying to give back in our communities, trying to memorize our Bible doctrine and all of that. But what does it actually look like to reach pre-Christian people with the gospel in practicable ways? We were helping our people understand that the mission field is not abroad, it's at home in our communities, in our neighborhoods, on our streets, etc.

Clergy are great at explaining the Word of God, but we don't really do too much with the how-to, we just tell people to go and do it, and they're drifting, wondering what's going on here. We need to give people practical ways to actually serve Jesus in the way in which He called us to do. Before COVID, we were living that out in our home and with micro church expressions that were in our home. But I really didn't see it affecting the larger church experience very much at all; it was for the people who really wanted to take Jesus seriously.

When COVID happened, we had to start over from scratch because we couldn't do our big gatherings. We couldn't go to the soup kitchens, we weren't gathering in each other's homes for additional Bible consumption, bellying up to the Bible buffet, so to speak, with permission to not do anything with it, and then come back the next week and get another dose. Right before COVID began, my wife and I were exposed to Tampa, Florida, where they had pioneered the micro-church

movement to do the work of the church out in the community, empowering leaders to be the church.

Sunday gathering was really the launching point to doing church in the community throughout the rest of the week. When COVID happened, we had to shut down our micro-church (i.e., meeting in our home), with people involved from all over the area. We were in our fourth generation; my living room and my kitchen had been overflowing with people who were hungry to do church differently. It looked very different than a Sunday morning gathering. There was a discovery Bible time, where we would discuss what the Scripture said in real time, as the Spirit was moving. We spent a lot of time praying for one another, listening to God. There would be a place for the gifts of the Spirit to be used, operating in the prophetic mode. People would be encouraged and deployed for mission. Meetings would go from 7 to past 10 p.m. and people would continue meeting in the parking lot for 30–45 more [minutes] because they were so energized at being empowered to share in the dynamic rather than having the clerical professional do it for them.

But when COVID happened and the micro-church had to put on hold because of the order of the governor of the state of Florida, we moved it online. And this is part of the story. When we moved it online, we had to do Facebook Live because that's what everybody was doing. Then it became unidirectional and flat once more, in a way which I really

came to despise. It's just not me anymore. I want to collaborate. I want to be collegial. I see the kingdom extend by activating the whole of the priesthood of believers, not making them dependent on the clerical professionals; moving beyond a lecture and a concert model that is so prevalent at a lot of our functions and gatherings historically.

So, after a few weeks, I told my wife, "I don't want to do this anymore." She said, "Well, what if we do virtual church?" "You mean like we were doing? I just told you I don't want to do it anymore." She said, "No, let's do what we were doing in our living room, but on a different platform, let's do it on Zoom." So, we looked into virtual church, and there were only two people doing what I understand virtual church to be. There were a lot of people out there who had virtual hubs for their brick and mortar, which were basically platforms for personalities and performances to gather money to perpetuate the brick and mortar. That's not what I wanted and that's not what she was talking about. We were talking about doing what was happening in our living room online, so we could do life together separately.

That was the phrase the Lord gave us. We do together, but separately, everything that we do in church. If we were for embracing a theology of rootedness and being incarnationally present in our communities, COVID didn't allow us to do that. So we needed to be entrepreneurial and innovative. We moved into the Zoom room, and there were tons of people who were interested. I didn't create a website. I didn't do any marketing. People heard that we were doing it and then just showed up. Dozens and dozens of people were hungry, wanted community, and it was really good.

**Petr:** So Mabio, how did it happen to you?

**Mabio:** Since the beginning of my ministry, even before completing my seminary training, I tried to base everything I did in my church life on biblical principles. I noticed that in the Old Testament times, the church had a few large gathering celebrations and some smaller gatherings/convocations on the Sabbath and the festivals at the beginning of each month. But reading my Bible, it dawned on me that since the patriarchal period, church life really happened in homes. I saw

the same principle being reproduced in the New Testament church. I always tried to reproduce that in my churches, the churches I led as an elder, lay pastor, church planter, or pastor.

Fast-forward some years, I was attending Andrews University, finishing up my MDiv while trying to get all the requirements for my PhD (which I am currently working on)—after having experienced and helping others to experience church life in community in what people today call micro-churches. I was volunteering in a nearby small church with a core group of 8–10 people who were studying the Bible together to see how to bring life back to our congregation. When COVID hit, we had been meeting for several months and were gearing toward involving more people in our movement. Because we were ordered to stay home, although that brought some disappointment, we rapidly switched gears to Zoom. We started to do our Sabbath gatherings there (in addition to our weekly small group meeting). However, our goal was not only to reproduce what the church did on Sabbath. We saw it as an opportunity to inject life back into the church. We did that by engineering a program that would leverage the platform resources and allow us to participate actively in church life and to achieve a high degree of intimacy as before in our Sabbath gatherings. People really felt close to each other—many felt more intimacy than ever before.

**Petr:** Foye, tell us about the challenges you faced.

**Foye:** As we introduced some of these tools that we were doing on Wednesday night, my churchy people, my traditional people, did not want to be involved in a contributory way. They didn't want to share, they didn't want to be vulnerable and live in an atmosphere of mutuality. We told them this could not continue if they were going to be part of our community. We have the shared way of life and values that we need to perpetuate, which require their participation. In the church, we live out of one side of our brain where information is processed and doctrine is formulated, and it doesn't affect us unless it's processed through the other side, where our will is, where our intentionality and our emotions are.

We decided to utilize some of the methods that I had already jotted down in *The Five Stones—An*

*Everyday Guide to Following Jesus.* We'd listen to Jesus together. I was teaching evangelicals and mainline Christians that you can actually hear the Father's voice. I have a tool to help people understand from the Scripture. There are 12 different ways God speaks to us, not just when we're listening to a sermon, or we're in a church building, so that they would open their ears, air would come into their lungs, and they could hear God for themselves, and we practiced this together. We did the Discovery Bible studies rather than having a traditional Sabbath School. They got a chance to contribute, and these people would bring things out that I never would have thought of because it was the words of God intersecting their lives in real time.

It was laity connecting on a heart level in ways in which they trusted the other person's experience, because the paid professional wasn't delivering. It was beautiful. We had some collective times of worship. Different people would use their gifts; some people were more liturgical, and would want to pray a liturgical prayer. It lasted about 90 minutes with lots of sharing and contribution. A beautiful and startling thing emerged in the midst of this which blew my mind, and that was I had people tell me time and time again that they felt closer to people they never met than people they'd gone to church with for 30 years, who sat in the same pew! Was it the Spirit of God? Yes, was it teaching from the Scripture? Yes. But it was [also] the chance to connect on a heart level with one another.

We met together for an Easter celebration in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, about six months into this, maybe eight months, and people showed up. There were 18 or 20 people. Some of them flew all the way across the country, others drove from New England down. These people walked in and it was as if they were lifelong friends, just hugging, kissing, telling each other what was happening in their lives because they'd been worshipping and connecting online with each other in powerful ways. It was just a beautiful illustration where I felt like the Holy Spirit said to me very clearly, "This is an effective way to do church. This is the kind of community that you need to develop." This is friendship with God.

The statistics are telling. It used to be that the majority of American males did not have one person that they would call their friend. The statistics

now show that the majority of Americans of both genders don't have anyone.

"Spoon feed me" people leave after about six months. Then there is another significant group. They leave after about a year and half into it. They had gone as far as they could, being emotionally available and transparent, and all the years of their brokenness and hurts and church hurts just would not permit them to go any further. They began to check out. It made me think of the Scripture where we've tasted of the goodness of God and then are out because we cannot trust God to take us the rest of the way through our brokenness, in our hurt and our pain.

The discipleship paradigm and the way of life that American Evangelicalism has constructed over the last 100 years is counterproductive to the real kingdom life that Jesus is calling us to. You have to be super broken, like people in the recovery community. People who are drug addicts and drunks and sex addicts, and all that stuff come here where I live to get whole, and they know how needy they are. They don't have anything they can put their trust in. So, they throw themselves on the mercy of Jesus and follow Him. I don't see that desperation in a lot of the people that I know who claim to follow Jesus.

I see that same Spirit at work in me often as well, where I want to trust in my education or my clergy experience instead of realizing how dependent I am! How desperate I am for empowerment, illumination, and encounters with divine love. The manna episodes in the Old Testament have become illustrative to me that the Israelites were encouraged not to collect manna for tomorrow, because it would spoil. And I think a lot of people are trying to live off yesterday's manna. Clergy and elders try to live off yesterday's manna.

My friend, Mike Cheryl, said something very profound: "Church is never meant to be large alone." You can gather together in larger expressions, but you can't gather together in large expressions only. You will never develop and disciple people and reach people unless you do this in smaller units where you get a chance to serve one-on-one." The leadership team of the group I am part of is really concerned about reaching pre-Christian people.

When you get churchy people coming into these micro groups, they want to perpetuate what they've known in their past; they want to live off yesterday's



man, they want to have another life group or care group or Bible study group or whatever they call it, and that's not what I'm interested in.

I'm interested in encouraging, exhorting, empowering God's people in the midst of pre-Christians as we live in community together, creating spaces for belonging so that belief will emerge and then we'll worry about all those behaviors that churchy folks get hung up on down the line—because God is able to take care of it. He doesn't need me to do it for Him.

**Petr:** Mabio, how does your experience relate (or not) with Foye's?

**Mabio:** We were intentional from the beginning to live life in community in a radically different way from what most folks are used to. Since I had done this type of community building before (both in my churches and the churches of some of my pastor friends), I said to the pastor of the congregation I was helping with that we would lose some 10% to 20% of our people because, as we progress in our path, people would realize the commitment was not really for them. And that really happened way before COVID hit us. When the lockdown came, we were at a point where everybody who was in the group was solid. We had a group of very committed individuals who were on fire. As we started to meet only for church on Sabbath, this group took charge as they directed elements of the worship service (such as our breakout sessions) to be more interactive and to foster growth and intimacy.

In the online space, some of our first challenges were related to familiarity with technology, but a member of our core group helped to work with everybody, young and old, to get them comfortable with technology so we could focus on relationship building. We also never got around to how we could break bread together through Zoom.

**Petr:** So, if I understand correctly, you created community through breakout rooms and through Zoom. Because we live in a very individualistic culture, people have their longings, and they have lack of community. Suddenly, online it became easier to connect than if it was face-to-face. You basically took the disadvantage and turned it into advantage. People realized they could actually open up and

share with someone and develop relationships they were not able to otherwise. If they would call you to attempt church physically, it would just not click. It would not be possible. How do you do ongoing training, though? How do these people get involved in their community, face-to-face, in person?

**Foye:** Digital church means a network of practitioners who will take principles of the Gospel and integrate them in a rooted way in the communities where they reside. That has been an expansion on the original vision, and it requires people to be honest. It requires a lot of de-programming and deconstruction, even with people who are on these calls, and have been for almost two years, because they think you've got to be a clergy person to do this.

**"I want people to catch the contagion, the kingdom, where we're being transparent with God and with ourselves..."**

You do not have to be an apostolically activated ambassador to live the kingdom out in your home. With these rhythms, listen to Jesus together. Care for one another together. Be in prayer together. Search the Scriptures together. Practice radical generosity together, practice radical hospitality, live on a mission as a family, and allow that to catalyze other relationships around you, so that these mutual care outposts can begin to pop up around the country. That's the trajectory that we're on right now in terms of training. Much of it is done online and I have to be honest. I'm still figuring out how we do this weird, wacky and wild thing of developing community online to mobilize people to connect with and embrace a theology of rootedness, but in a new entrepreneurial sense. That really isn't new at all; it's the kind of stuff we see in the *Acts of the Apostles*, which probably should have been called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, way back in the beginning. What I have decided I need to do as kind of the originator of this vision is to do retreats with leaders and with proto-community members.

That's how you multiply. Contagiously sharing, apostolic work; they take it and reproduce what they have experienced and then you encourage each other on Zoom. I want people to catch the contagion, the kingdom, where we're being transparent with God and with ourselves, living on a mission, caring for pre-Christian people, not because they can add to our bottom line or our worship or attendance, but just to love them extravagantly and generously to see them as bearers of the *Imago Dei* that I'm going to invest in with no strings attached, and that goes counter to everything we've learned as clergy, and as congregants with a limited amount of resources.



**Mabio:** From the start, we discovered together that we (each individual) are the Church. And our church experience goes beyond the four walls of the building. Church is not about what we do (or don't do), church is about who we are and how we emulate Jesus in our daily lives. Our corporate gatherings should be a reflection of that and should be intentionally projected to allow the whole community to minister to one another in preparation for what they will do in the community. As people learn to be Christlike to one another in community, they embrace a lifestyle that will bleed into the other segments of their lives (work, home, school, etc.) and, through some intentional planning and incentive, they learn how to reach out to people beyond the borders of their faith, pouring life into one person (or family) at a time, as Jesus and His disciples did. Once this new lifestyle gets in somebody's DNA, it propagates organically as each individual passes it along to those God puts in their way, inside and outside of their home community.

**Petr:** You mentioned—and I so wholeheartedly agree with you—that big church doesn't make it. But, from time to time, you really want a worshipful event that reminds people that they are part of something much, much, much bigger. So, imagine, my son is called by God to do worship drumming. He's equipping worship drummers across the world—basically through his website. But when the time comes to do one of those big worshipful events, of course, you use the gifts that you cannot use in your home, because the drummer in your home wouldn't probably work. That's just an example. How do you incorporate that?

**Mabio:** We've got people who are musicians who lead us in worship online from their homes. I don't think we've had a drummer yet, but we've had piano and guitar, so it can be done. It's not the same catalytic energizing kind of event that the large gathering is. But I think there is room for large gatherings. Some of the micro-church networks have churches out in communities, in homes, pubs and bars, in doctors' offices—I mean all over the place. And then, once a month, sometimes twice a month, depending on whoever the overseer is, they come together to celebrate what God is doing in the midst of their network at large, because I think you're exactly right, you need to understand that you're connected to a larger whole not just theoretically, or theologically, or philosophically.

We're doing this together in New Hampshire, North Carolina, Florida, Nebraska, and Colorado. And here we are together to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, freezing our behinds off in April, in the Outer Banks, or wherever we're at it. We try to

integrate those who could not come to the face-to-face gatherings, but the logistics of it are difficult because of Wi-Fi and other things. But yes, we try to integrate all our component parts, all our congregants, all the others who are being activated for mission, whenever we can. That's our core value.

People are connecting with each other from across the country in the digital age, in ways which are blowing our minds. Jesus is helping me to understand that though physical proximity is helpful, and maybe on some level essential, it's not necessary.

**Mabio:** Petr, in response to your last question to Foye, I have to add that, as Christians, we must learn how to live a life based in biblical principles and to reason from cause to affect. Once we realize that, biblically speaking, being a Christian is about what you are (i.e., a missionary, an ambassador of

Christ), not what you do. Once we realize that, as Paul so eloquently says in 1 Cor. 3:2–3, we are open letters from Christ to the world, our perspective and expectations about church change. Instead of the consumer mentality we grew up with, we start to change toward a posture of service driven by Christ's other-centered love. And when that happens, the medium (i.e., digital church versus brick and mortar) is not as important as the experience of building community together, caring for one another, the best way we can.

Online church, a digital experience, will never be the same as a face-to-face experience. But if we really understand what church is all about, it does not need to be the same. Physical proximity is important and helpful, but with the right attitude and God's guidance, it may not be necessary in all contexts to build community and to grow disciples in the biblical sense.



**Petr Činčala, PhD, MSW, MDiv,** is associate professor in research and missiology, and serves as the director of the Institute of Church Ministry and Doctor of Missiology program at Andrews University's Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. He heads the office of U.S. national partner for NCD (Natural Church Development). As a freelance missionary he has developed a model for reaching unreached Czech atheists.



**Foye Michael Belyea** is the abbot of Anam Cara Life Community, an inter-generational community of missionary practitioners who meet digitally in order to encourage and equip one another for joyous Kingdom service. Foye's passion is to promote joy-fueled, Jesus-led communities of practice by training spiritual moms and dads to nurture ecosystems of grace in the harvest fields where Papa has providentially planted them.



**Mabio Coelho, MDiv, MBA, CIPP,** is a pastor in the Michigan Conference and a PhD student at Andrews University. He is passionate to make the Bible plain and simple people and to raise disciples for the Kingdom.