Imagine With Me: Disciples Tech Corps

Transcript

**Terri Hord Owens:** Hello, Disciples, and welcome to another edition of Imagine With me for another episode. Today we're here to talk about an exciting development, a collaboration of technical minds and resources across the church that we're simply calling Disciples Tech Corps. And here with me today are Suzanne Castle and Jeff Champleau. Many of you know Suzanne and Jeff. They've served on boards, led in lots of different ways across the life of the church. What you may not know about them is their technical backgrounds, their creative backgrounds, and they have been two of the minds and hearts helping us to give shape to this idea of Disciples Tech Corps. So, welcome, Suzanne, and welcome, Jeff. Let me start with you, Suzanne. Could you tell the church - many folks know you guys, but maybe you can share a little bit about who you are, what you do professionally, and what particular gifts bring you to this table to talk about Disciples Tech Corps.

**Suzanne Castle:** Thank you so much. I'm so excited to get to talk about this new initiative, and I appreciate the time that you're devoting to helping us resource congregations. I am the Rev. Dr. Suzanne Castle. I've been serving churches in unique settings for over 20 years. I'm ordained the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), currently serving in a faithful rural congregation, teeny, tiny church; but I've served our large cathedral churches as well as everything in between. You might know me from my work with Brim, where we're trying to resource, with creative liturgies, different kinds of churches to do things in an interactive nature, and my work with the general church to help produce our assemblies. And I think I bring the creative side meaning; that after years of being a professional entertainer, I look at things from design perspective. And on the balcony, what is the experience feeling like? What does color tell us? What is the shape around us saying, alongside the narrative of the story of God with us? And so, with the work with Disciples Tech that we're going to talk about today, we're trying to bring the tech, and the design, and the visual, and the story components together in a nice, neat little package to help resource people, technology, and congregations.

**THO:** Great, thank you, Suzanne. There are still images floating around from General Assembly 2019. One of the most frequently asked questions I got from that opening worship was, did she intentionally match the backdrop to match your dress color? And
there was no plan. You just did that, but that's a whole ‘nother story. But that's the kind of eye and care that you have, and we were so grateful to have you working with us on General Assembly 2019.

So, Jeff Champeau, tell us a little bit about yourself and what brings you to the Disciples tech conversation.

Jeff Champeau: Thanks for the invitation to be part of this conversation. Yeah, I'm so grateful for people like each of you, but Suzanne, and the creative piece that she brings to the conversation, because that's not me at all. I'm a member, an elder, at First Christian church in Norman, Oklahoma. Professionally, I do information security so I'm a pretty technical guy the - you know, the black boxes with blinky lights, that's my jam. You know, I like doing audio visual. I like doing it. I like doing security. I like turning the nerd knobs and making stuff work. And, you know, in the last year and a half there's been a whole new need for that sort of thing. So, I'm thrilled to be a part of, you know, just to participate in the conversation around Disciples Tech Corps, because it's all about resourcing congregations. Folks have questions. Other folks have answers, connecting the dots and, you know, how to bring the storytelling, the visual, and how to, you know, what equipment to buy and how much money should I spend, and that sort of thing. All pieces of the puzzle that we call church today, and so, yeah, so, that's me.

THO: What I've said before, you may have heard me say before, that where church and tech intersect, that's my happy place. And so, I'm thrilled to be here and chatting about it. Yeah, and Jeff, I just want to thank you for the work that you've done with my office last spring when we were doing our Love Is An Action Word webinar series and we were all trying to figure out how do you broadcast to Facebook live without it costing, you know, thousands of dollars, and you did a lot of knowledge transfer with our team, and were our technical security blanket, if you will, to make sure that we learned how to do that, and to do it well. And many of you, well, you both know and many of the church may or may not know, that I have an IT background. I, for 20, maybe 23 years, I was an IT consultant, really specializing in data warehousing and data management, and did that for many years before discerning a call to ministry and going to be the dean of students at the University of Chicago Divinity School, so initiatives like ALEX, church and tech is my happy place. You know, all of this is part of the infrastructure I believe that we need in order to simply answer our call to bear witness to God's limitless love and to help congregations in this day and time. We're talking about imagine who we must be as a new church in a new world. Well, the pandemic handed us a new world and so, while we're all struggling to figure out, well, we have been struggling to figure out how just to do worship. The reality, the lessons that we're learning, is that we've got to step up our technical infrastructure in our congregations and use those skill sets in order to continue to reach people and connect people. So I know the answers to some of these questions, but let's talk a little bit about how the Tech Corps came to be and who's involved - what are we hoping to accomplish with Disciples Tech Corps. You've answered that a little bit, but maybe we can talk even about where are the starting
points what are we currently doing, to kind of gather people. And, you know, there's a Facebook page. There's a website. Let's talk about what's in place now to gather folks together and what we're hoping to accomplish. Jeff, you want to jump in here?

**JC:** I would love it. You bet; happy to. So. It'll be a surprise to exactly no one that churches had questions and were struggling to figure out how to be church in this pandemic time. There were others with answers, you know, industry professionals like me and Suzanne, but also just hobbyists, and you know people who are interested in this sort of thing and don't mind doing the research and experimenting and tinkering and figuring stuff out. So, the idea for Disciples Tech Corps really came from a genuine need to connect those two groups of people. We needed a place where people could ask questions and get answers and for some, myself included, like I said, my happy places where church and tech intersect. If I can help somebody solve a problem, that is ministry. That is my ministry. And so we're not talking about just, you know, Q & A, but it really is ministry that happens in Disciples Tech Corps. And I think it'll evolve over time, right? Like you said, Terri, we've got a Facebook page right now and that's where a majority of the action is happening. Log in there you'll see people asking questions. You'll see people giving answers. New people are joining practically every day. There's also a website, so, where we're working on kind of a more formal system whereby if you're a church that needs something, you can say, hey here's what I need. If you're a hobbyist that would be interested in volunteering your time, or maybe you're a consultant, or you're a, you know, you're an AV professional, you're an IT professional, you're a broadcast professional, maybe you have some specific skills that you charge for and a church is looking for, you know, for just your kind of help - the website will eventually, once it gets built out, will be a place to make those connections, too. So, Suzanne, anything to add?

**SC:** No. I think the way that this all evolved were several people being asked the same questions, and we realized the greatest way was to harness knowledge, meaning that some people were sharing across regions or different areas and that could there be a place, because these questions were being asked all the time in almost every meeting I was in, and so, we were, like, well let's just start a Facebook group, right? One of the great things that Facebook does when you play in their sandbox is connect people. And so we just launched this as an initiative to get people together and share knowledge, and I love it. So, as we're looking at some of the trends, you know, how initially we were all trying to figure out how to worship, right, how do - some people are doing zoom sessions, and people are doing Facebook live. Others have gotten more sophisticated with different live stream products, etc.

**THO:** What are some of the trends that you're seeing now that people are returning and thinking about how to keep that virtual audience as well as continuing to support maybe a more upscale kind of experience even in their in-person worship? What lessons are you seeing? And what trends are you seeing about the things congregations need to think about?
SC: Well, the first thing that I would say is I think there's been a tightening of worship across the board, meaning that we've realized we don't have to meet for an hour and 20 minutes, and preachers, of which I am one, we don't have to preach for 20 minutes. Like, say what needs to be said. And I've seen a trend of other kind of conversational matters, meaning that maybe we ask people to reflect with one another. We've got people that are literally in the chat, whatever platform you're using, and welcoming people, doing hospitality and comment moderation, which is wonderful. We have churches that are expanding beyond worship to offer online, on-demand options, like Bible study and interactive groups, and connecting people to mission and greater opportunities.

And I think now that people are - some are back, some aren't - the question becomes, how do we harness all of this? Meaning that, if we're in a hybrid model, what do the camera angles need to show? How much do we talk to a camera versus the people in the room? And that's a whole 'nother phase of doing worship life and community life together. And so, the questions that people are asking are changing and morphing, right?

THO: Jeff, I know that a lot of people have been asking questions about cameras and wi-fi speed and those kinds of things. Say a little bit more about the tech infrastructure, of the kinds of questions that people are asking, and what we're learning.

JC: Sure, just a perfect dovetail on what Suzanne said. One of the trends I'm seeing is, you know, folks kind of scrambled and did whatever they needed to do initially. And then now, they're saying, okay, this is, I guess, one trend, I'm seeing is folks making the decision that, hey, this needs to be a permanent part of our ministry. We need to share the Good News. We need to keep sharing the Good News this way, in addition to going back to the ways we did it before.

And so, yeah, people are asking about, okay, I don't want to bring my iPhone every Sunday and put it here and push stream. We need a camera. We need to tie into the house audio system. So, oftentimes, the question is around budget and, with this kind of thing it does make sense to decide what your budget is first, because you can go identify the best, you know, cinema cameras, and, you know, high-end video switchers and stuff like that, but if it's way out of your price range, then then you're going to have to regroup and try again. So, figure out what your budget is and then, you know, and kind of what your needs are. If you're fine with just one camera and a static shot, that's great. If you want three cameras and a switcher, and you want to do title screens and you want to do, you know, the hymn lyrics on the screen, and that sort of stuff, well then ask those questions in Disciples Tech Corps. How is everybody accomplishing this? What, you know, if you've got fifteen hundred dollars to spend on a camera, what's the best camera you can get for 1500 bucks? So, those are - and you two kow - how does this work in your space? Do you need cameras that are that are mounted under a balcony? Are you thinking about putting something on a tripod? Lots of things that go into it, but money is often a good place to start just because it's - there's such a wide
variety. You can spend 250 bucks on a camera; you can spend 25,000 bucks on a camera, and everywhere in between.

THO: So, and one of the things I noticed, and I say this because I was in a congregation - wanted to do an interview with me and we were recording and this was a pretty large church. They were in sort of a fellowship hall space. Their internet kept dropping, and so what it says to me, and to many people, just as working at home has lifted up the issue of not only speed, but reliability of your internet, that we have to look at that. It's not just a nice to have anymore, right? It's something that you really need to invest in, ensuring that your wi-fi capability in your facility - I was asked to preach at a church. I can't be there physically. They don't have that capability for me to Zoom in, or even to play a recording if I were to send it. And I think that that conversation is going to start raising some questions for that church. And you've talked about we have to think about new ways of getting the Gospel out. There new ways of connecting, new ways of doing education. Churches are having council meetings online. We had a virtual gathering on August 7th. We're the whole church, looking at various tools, but we're always now having to think about how do we have this good virtual experience, as well.

What kinds of - what role does production value play? And some of that's tied to budget, but, Suzanne, from the imaginative side, how should churches think about the quality of what they do? Is that superficial? Why does good tech, or even creative design - why does that matter?

SC: Well, the first thing that I would say is I think that we always have to bring to God the very best that we can, right? We see that in the biblical story, in scriptures. And so, I always want to start there. So, what is the excellence in my context? What does it mean for a small rural church? You know, we have our high school kids running AV. We have it pretty simplified, and it's still great. It's what we need and we do and what we have we do to the excellent ability that we have.

For a large-scale church, that looks different. Multiple camera angles, staff devoted to that different kind of infrastructure. So, I think, and that was well said, was start where you are. And what does excellence mean in your context? But I think that we always need to be saying, what are people seeing about us - just like rusted window frames, and shabby carpet, and not-safe toys in your nursery - communicates what you believe and what your church values are. What they see in worship, whether it's on a screen or in person, also communicates the story of God in your place. So, I start asking that question: what do people see? Do they see life or do they see death? And I think that is the place to start, and then make some decisions about how you can visually and auditorily begin to communicate in a different sphere.

THO: Jeff would you want to weigh in on that issue of just quality?

JC: Yeah, a couple thoughts. One the most important aspect of producing a good video
live stream is audio, so if folks can't hear, it almost doesn't matter what's on the screen. So, pay very close attention to audio. And sometimes that's easy and sometimes it's not easy at all, depending on what you've got existing. But that really is, to me, the most important aspect of producing of excellence is, you know, being able to hear.

So, on top of that, with respect to image quality and, you know, the types of cameras you have. There are lots and lots of options, but I would posit that nearly anything you want to do, you can probably do on a reasonable budget.

There's gonna be a learning curve so if having, like I mentioned before, of having title screens and the words to the hymns and QR codes that to send people to your giving page and stuff like that's important, you don't have to spend a lot of money to be able to do that, but have a team, you know, have a a plan for getting there. Assemble a team do some research. Find others that have already solved that problem. Get on and watch some other churches' live streams and then reach out to them and ask them how they have accomplished that. So, excellence to some - excellence is ministry itself providing something that is visually appealing and even if it's not, you know, even a production value you're not shooting for a, you know, for a major network quality, providing something that's distraction free, where there's not, you know, the camera angles are what they should be. Even if you're using a 200 camera, if you're using it appropriately and correctly and you've got good audio, you can do those things on a budget. But just using that equipment to produce the best that it can produce such that folks aren't distracted by bad audio or by, you know, shots that aren't lit correctly and that sort of thing, can go a long way, right? Bad audio is like, you know, the seed that's been sown. The bird comes along and eats it, you know, from that parable.

THO: That is just the most frustrating thing. And for those of us who proclaim on a regular basis, it's like, how can they hear, you know. People need to, certainly, need to be able to hear. We could talk on and on. I am so grateful to both of you, for not only spending time with me today, but for your continuing leadership in helping to shape this new initiative that we're calling Disciples Tech Corps. You led a workshop on our August 7th virtual initiative and I know we got a lot of buzz there. We're going to put links both to the Disciples Tech Corps page as well as disciples.tech.

Disciples.tech is the webpage where, if you have gifts and talents and skills in this area, either on the creative or the technical side, you can go online and sort of create a profile. We're working on a way that that churches who need help will be able to come to that repository and actually search for the kinds of needs. So, we want to match needs questions with answers. So, whether you do this for a living and charge a fee for your services, or you're just a hobbyist, or somebody who just wants to share and volunteer your services to help one of our congregations or ministries in the church, we want to invite you to become a part of Disciples Tech Corps. So, look in the comments when this video is posted for those links.
Thank you, Suzanne and Jeff, so much for your time today. And thank you, Disciples, for always being here for these conversations as we continue to imagine together who we simply must be as a new church in a new world. I'm convinced that God's love is not only limitless but God's imagination is limitless. And, as Walter Brueggemann tells us, if we can get inside God's imagination and there's nothing too far-fetched, there's nothing that we can't do. I believe that God can resource whatever we put our hearts and minds to, because we're doing it all to bear witness to God's limitless love. So, take care. We'll see you next time and remember - God loves you, and so do I.