

# Imagine with Me: Communications for the Phygital Church

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Rev. Terri Hord Owens: Hello disciples and welcome to another episode of imagine with me a series where I get to have just amazing and inspiring conversations with creative and innovative leaders across the life of our church. And today we're going to talk about communication from a congregational standpoint from a regional perspective and also from the perspective of The Wider church. I am so excited to be joined by two greats. Coms people—that's what they call themselves—coms people. Angelique Byrd, who is the Regional Director of Communications for the Christian Church in Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan and also Cara Gilger who is the Director of Communications for the Office of General Minister and President. So I am so excited to bring Angee and Cara to the conversation on Imagine with Me today.

Welcome ladies. Both of you are such energetic people, I am just really thrilled to have both of you with us. Angee serves what is really my home region, Illinois/Wisconsin, and Cara is now on the staff of the Office of General Minister President, so I get to work with her all the time. So thanks to both of you for agreeing to have a conversation with me today.

Angee you have just written a book called The Phygital Church, P-H-Y-G-I-T-A-L. Can you tell us what you mean by that phrase and a little bit about the book? You gave me a copy, so thanks for that.

Angee Byrd: Absolutely, and thank you for having me today as well. The Phygital Church is really doing ministry in both your physical location and in the digital space. It's more than just streaming your worship services. The Phygital Church engages with those who are online. They're intentional about being in both the physical, as well as the digital space.

THO: I like the combination of that. And, as we have said, we're not going back, right? There's no way to go back to whatever. That pre-Covid normal was where we really only thought very few churches were thinking about online streaming and, and even unfortunately, not too many churches thinking about social media. So this is a time when we're going to have to move forward in a hybrid way and I love that term phygital, and I am excited about your book and I know that it will bless congregations.

Cara, what are some of the things that you have been working on from the standpoint of the Office of General Minister and President? It's not just within our office that role speaks for the GMP across the whole church. So, tell us a little bit about some things that you have been working on recently, that help us connect when we can't be together in person.

Cara Gilger: Yeah. Thank you again for having me on, Terri. I think two of the projects that come to mind that I want to share with people is we just released an Imagine a World with More resource. It's a customizable video for congregations to use in their own worship whether they're in person or digital, and there's a six weeks sermon series. And the beautiful thing about it is that it comes with scriptures, it comes with stories from across the life of the church and part of our general churches. So that pastors and congregations can be connected to this wider story of Disciples, which is really our hope for good communication is that people would understand what's happening in the life of the church and they would feel invested and connected to that. So that's one of the one of our projects.

We have an upcoming project where we are reimagining as a church, how we relate to one another structurally through our governance work. Which normally like I think governance, and I think very boring but this is really exciting work about how we are in relationship with one another as congregations as people of faith and how we understand our scriptures. And so those are two projects that I am really excited to be working on right now.

Because part of the challenge with our work as a wider church is, you know, how can we get a sense of being together when we can't physically be together? And yes, the pandemic really like pressed on that but that was already a question. And so thinking about the scriptures and the questions and the stories that we tell to tell this wider story about what God is doing.

THO: Yeah, to hear you be excited about the governance work lets me know that my work is not in vain that people understand there's a wider understanding of what our community is like, and how God is working in among us and giving voice to lots more folks and bringing more people to the table.

Angee, I know you have done workshops and particular over the past couple of years has been working a lot with congregations, how have you begun to help people to expand their sense of community to include people in the life of the church, even though they may live far away? Lots of congregations people have found you right on social media. If you have been broadcasting people who might not ever walk through your door. So what impact do you think that's had on congregations? And what are you sharing with congregations about how to optimize those opportunities?

AB: Okay. Yes, so you are absolutely correct. I have been speaking with pastors, throughout the wider church and those churches that have been able to expand their sense of community, those congregations have been impacted and in positive ways, and I will just share a few examples.

They have seen an increase in online worship attendance again, because those people are finding them on social media, and they are engaging and being present in worship services. And with that comes an increased with online giving. Because now you have people who are in other states who are able to send in their offering electronically. At one particular workshop

that I had one pastor share with me that there was a person worshipping from Washington state online, and they traveled by plane to another church in the southern part of the United States to get baptized. Those are the stories that are very encouraging. Those are the stories that speak to the power of Social Ministry. And when we expand, you know, our sense of what community is and similar to that there was another person who drove from another state to be present at a pastor's anniversary because they had established that connection. They had built that relationship with that congregation, and they wanted to be present. So I have been sharing again. Initially, I think there was some—it stretched people to go online, but I think once churches got there and understood just how effective they could be in ministry, then they were able to go forth. Because when we do expand, our sense of community in this space, then we have the opportunity for more people to receive and hear the Gospel message.

THO: Amen. And that's what it's all about. And people the idea that someone would drive fly to be baptized—that's real connection that's been made? That's nothing that superficial that's soul connection that's been made. When you say you want to fly halfway across the country to be baptized. There was a family who were traveling really from Flint, Michigan, to Light of the World Christian Church, my home church a couple of decades ago. And they saw the church on TV and fell in love with the church started visiting on a weekly basis and ultimately move their whole family to Indianapolis because the connection that began with, this is pre social media, but began with that virtual experience of online digital present. So that's awesome kind of stuff. How can we can either one of you talk about how do we practice as a church digital hospitality? I have been hearing about churches, having e-pastors people who are reaching out to communicate directly with people while they're online and worship either one of you want to address that question about, how do we do hospitality in a digital space?

AB: What I like to say in regards to digital hospitality is the hospitality that we have in our physical churches, should be mirrored in the digital space. When we have visitors that are coming to our churches., we in our physical churches we want them to feel welcomed. We want to acknowledge them. So yes, I have been sharing with churches that it is important to have someone online. When you are streaming your worship service, someone there, who can engage with those people who are there. Otherwise, you really create spectators, right? Because they're just looking in on the service. But to your point, I think the examples that we just talked about and share our fruit of digital hospitality. They had to have felt that presence that connection, the love of God in order for them to even travel as far as they did. But we you know people should feel welcome. People should feel the love of God, whether it is in your physical location or your digital space, you know, you have hospitality. Some people have Hospitality Ministries. And their physical churches, Hospitality Ministries in the digital space is warranted so it definitely is important.

THO: It's great. Go ahead, Cara.

CG: I think the same kind of evaluative process you do for your physical space, you have to do for your digital space. So when you walk through like a physical congregational setting, you

ask, are there signs pointing to where people need to get to? Do people know how to get to the sanctuary? Do they know how to get to the childcare spaces? I encourage congregations and leaders to look at their website, the same way. How many clicks does it take to find out, how to get to your digital space if I want to do something a little bit deeper than stream worship? Is that button nearby? Do I have to go searching? Is the search function, going to help me find things?

And, so I feel like as we're building these digital spaces of hospitality. We have a lot of tools already and how we look at physical spaces, and we can be asking some of the same questions.

THO: Yes, that's really helpful. That's really helpful again phygital. All right, physical and digital, and we have to take care of both of those aspects of our presence together as community. Let us talk about some practical tips. Can each of you share just a few best practices for churches who want to be faithful in their digital space and I will go ahead and tag on if there's a small church that doesn't have the resources to hire a staff person to run social media or their digital broadcast what can they do? So some best practices and some ideas about how you resource that work?

AB: I can share a few best practices. I would say, if you're committed to being in this space. I always say you should be intentional and strategic in the space because churches who do that, you have the opportunity to actually meet some of your church goals in this space. So I would make sure that you create a Social Ministry plan. So that is ministry and on social media. Have dedicated resources. And to your next question, if you are in a small church, and it's not you don't have, the means of hiring someone, volunteers in your congregation are perfectly fine. And I think that they can be charged with doing what needs to be done in there. So, many resources free resources out there that can assist them with doing this. And again, be consistent with your posting and intentional about the content that you're posting because your messages should be aligning with the goals of your church, the values of your church, the same messages that you are sharing in your physical space should still be the same messages that you're sharing in your digital space. There should be some synergy in both of those spaces,

THO: That's really important and the importance of volunteers. Maybe a small plug in for Disciples Tech Corp, which is a group of folks some of them are professionals but a lot of them just want to serve the church and that's been my experience that I was one of those it professionals who just wanted to help and do what I could around the church. So those folks are out there and if they can't sing in the choir, usher, maybe this is a way that they can get involved. So, Cara, share from your perspective, some good ideas.

CG: I think, you know, and you talked about being intentional and strategic. One of the things that I tell churches that are just starting on this or anxious about it is to pick one thing to do well. So you don't have to be on Twitter and Tik Tok and Facebook and Instagram. Pick one platform that you know, you can do well and do it well for your people. And for people to

come and learn and see about you, because it can be kind of overwhelming. There are so many social platforms than we feel the pressure to be in this space or that space and so I encourage smaller congregations to just pick one and do it well. The other thing is to take advantage, you kind of already mentioned. There are a lot of free tools out there to make beautiful designs. Nonprofits have access to Canva at a discounted or free rate. Because one of my big things that I say about communications is a quote I actually got from a fashion history book that says, 'you can't have depth without surface and surfaces are sometimes the only opportunity you get to communicate your depth.' And I feel like Disciples have this rich, well of depth in our congregations and in our communities that we serve. And so, I remind people that their surfaces should be inviting and beautiful. They shouldn't be overwhelming putting too much on them or too much information to overwhelm people. And so those are my two kind of small tips.

THO: Yeah. I love that surface and depth and focus on one thing. You don't have to be on all the platforms. Heaven forbid that I should ever show up on Tik-Tok. I mean, you know what I'm saying? We have expanded to like LinkedIn, the OGMP and the Christian Church, our church wide things. But yeah, let us think about what we do. Well and we have different demographics, different demos, right? We have different audiences on each of those platforms and you have to think about who you're trying to reach and who your people are.

CG: We have congregations that are doing Tik Tok in ways that I admire so much. We have congregations that are doing Instagram and we have congregations that tell wonderful stories on Facebook live. It's not one size, fits all and you don't have to be doing it all.

THO: Right. No shade on Tick-Tok, I am just saying that's probably not my best venue. But yes, all of those things are, you know, I have got a 31-year-old son the way he communicates is he and his wife is different from the way a lot of people different parts of the country people communicate differently. Let us talk a little bit as we close. I wish we had so much more time. But how do you see embracing digital communications is helping us to live in Covenant as church? And how does this whole area help us really to imagine who we must be as a new church? Open that up to either of you.

AB: When we think about the pandemic, we initially started thinking of it and focusing on the limitations all the physical limitations. We were in quarantine, we were isolated. But when we embraced the digital space and embraced digital communications our geographical boundaries were removed as a church. We now have access to speak with, to connect with, to nurture and care for each other, the entire church when we are in this digital space. So instead of thinking of the limitations, when we think about the broader picture of what has happened, and what it is now available to us as a church. We can now be in Covenant with one another in space because we no longer have a lot of those geographical boundaries that were keeping us. This is an example right now of us being able to be in Covenant with one another in this space. So I think when we embrace it, there's so much that we can do to reach, teach, care for one another.

CG: Yeah, I am. I was struck as our congregations reopened how many of my colleagues were blown away by people that came to their church that were like, 'I have been with you for a year. I feel like this is my home, and we have never met before.' Like there were just so many rich and beautiful stories and I think part of having us good digital presence. Angee talked about having a strategy part of our strategy or developing a digital strategy is imagining who God is preparing for us, whom we haven't met yet.

AB: Yes.

CG: And so God is preparing these, these people across our communities and our communities are so much broader now. And so when we get to think about digital strategy, when we get to, think about how we want to stream our worships or do our social media presence. We're really being invited to imagine the people of God that God is preparing for us.

THO: Yes, I love that. Whosoever will the Bible says let them come, and we don't know who those people are. We don't know what it is that might have reached out to them. I am just struck by the fact that without the digital presence many of these people may never have just walked through our doors. They have been able to meet us and get to hear the messages and even establish connections. That wouldn't have been possible or maybe they wouldn't have been open to in justice that physical space.

CG: Yeah, our digital presence allows people to peek through our stained-glass window and determine if we are a safe place to nurture their families, to nurture their spirits, to build a life in a community.

AB: Absolutely. And our mission field has been expanded, you know, they're three point nine, six billion people on social media. So, you know, we have a that's whose peeking into our stained glasses, you know, so we definitely have an opportunity to be the church, right? No longer just concerned about whose in our neighborhood or across the street, but the from our doorsteps literally to the very ends of the earth.

THO: Yes. Yes, our mission. So I just want to thank both of you, so, very much for having this, all too brief conversation with me. We have been working really hard in the OGMP to get this right. I probably have produced more digital content than any previous GMP because it was necessary, right? When the pandemic hit we left with a video saying, 'Hey guys, we're going to be working from home, I am suspending travel' and I was communicating with the church every week and that has sort of evolved into this series of Imagine with Me. And again, we must continue to be phygital. I am traveling again. The regional ministers are traveling again Angee, you're supporting Theresa Parker in Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan. Cara is involved with helping a speak to congregations and ensuring that our General Ministries have been used in and avenues through which they can communicate to the wider church, but it's all changed. And we have greater opportunities than before, and we simply can't turn back. So I want to thank you both for the professionalism and the creativity and The Innovation that you both bring to your ministries and it's a ministry to ensuring that we can speak and

communicate clearly, so, thank you both. I hope we will probably post links to maybe some of the tools that they have mentioned and some other information, how you can get Angee's book. The Phyigital Church, and if you haven't Cara would want me to say this, if you haven't already subscribed to all the newsletters. You can go to [disciples.org](http://disciples.org) and sign up for Disciples New Service, Dear Disciples, which is a my newsletter. There's Disciple Justice Ministries as well as Disciples Together, which is a newsletter for clergy and chaplains. We are on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. Our content is out there. So if you're not plugged in church you have these ways. And if you're an Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan, wherever your regional home is, seek out all the resources that look at the ways in which they're communicating and find out who you can partner with to learn more because together, we make each other better. So, thanks again, Angee Byrd and Cara Gilger. It's just been a joy to talk with you both.

And so Disciples, I hope you will join me for the next episode of Imagine with Me. Thanks for being with me today. And remember, God loves you, and so do I will see you next time.