

[MJTM 24 (2022–2023)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

John Roberto, ed. *Digital Ministry and Leadership in Today's Church*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2022. Pbk. 126 pp. ISBN 9780814668023. \$15.99.

In this book, John Roberto assembles a team of five subject-matter experts and ministry leaders who bring decades of experience using digital tools for delivering effective ministry and faith formation. The book addresses interested ministry leaders possessing varying levels of familiarity with utilizing digital tools to expand faith communities within online gathering spaces (10).

Roberto accentuates the significance of the twenty-first-century digital revolution, led by the invention of the Internet and numerous digital tools, technologies, and social media platforms, which significantly impacts society and the church. The effect is akin to the influence of the printing press in sixteenth-century Europe. Led by access to the Internet, the digital revolution has permeated the church and society. People are now provided with communication opportunities and information gathering that are expanding exponentially. Since the beginning of this century, many churches have utilized digital tools, including social media platforms, to deliver worship services to expanding audiences. This technology and ministry leadership are now leading the way for other ministries to follow.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its related restrictions for public gatherings intensified the need for people to move to virtual activity in numerous areas, including worship services and ministry. Through self-isolation and the inability to gather publicly, they sought digital means to connect with family and friends. With many of these platforms already in place, the pandemic provided the impetus for churches to become more creative in using digital ministry tools.

While the foray into the digital world can seem daunting, the ubiquity of digital devices such as smartphones and tablets has bridged generational and social gaps throughout society. Embracement of these digital devices does not equate with abandoning physical relationships but rather enhancing them. Whether only minutes apart or across the world from one another, it is common for family and friends to move in and out of utilizing digital and physical communication approaches daily; sharing information and faith formation has been revolutionized in the process.

The editor emphasizes how these events have accelerated society's spiritual identities as hybrid people—living lives in alternating fashion, online and offline. In a short period, people developed familiarity with the digital world. They became accustomed to the duality of embracing in-person and online ways of communicating and interacting with others. This combination of physical and virtual relationships has influenced church attendance and faith formation. The door has opened widely for digital ministry and leadership in the church.

Initially, many viewed online worship as temporary for negotiating through the recent pandemic. As restrictions for gatherings were lifted, they anticipated returning to the status quo, with a greater focus on in-person worship attendance. However, numerous churches experienced declining attendance, and expanding the reach of their faith communities through an online presence has now transformed opportunities for ministry and leadership. Considering these technological advances, Roberto acknowledges that the church must now be viewed as both physical and virtual.

The book has a dual focus. First, it discusses digital approaches, tools, methods, and media in the pertinent conversation of church ministries. These areas include worship, learning, spiritual formation, and prayer. Next, the book focuses on extending the ministry of the in-person local church into online spaces for delivering care, social justice, and evangelism to this community through digital tools and reliable platforms.

Timothy Welch provides evidence that church leaders must now become digital communicators. They must also become ac-

quainted with applicable gospel message delivery tools within in-person and online faith communities. Welch underscores the need for ministry leaders to develop familiarity with essential digital tools to select and apply the ones most suitable for their own skill sets and those within the scope of their ministries. Examples include media creation tools, websites, blogs, and learning platforms (32).

The book examines the apostle Paul's use of writing letters to churches to expand the church throughout the world (Acts 1:8). Using the technology available within the first-century church, Paul delivered life-changing opportunities for ministry leadership and spiritual formation to others. Although he expended great efforts to make in-person visits to churches scattered across the Mediterranean, Paul's visits were limited due to many contributing factors. Often, he used the technology of his day to be present virtually with other Christian believers. Roberto asserts that technology and ministry are expanding the foundations of this virtual church body, which has existed for centuries (9).

As experienced educators, Deanna Bartalini and Claudio McIvor explore building a Christian community within virtual spaces. Whether in-person or online, they establish the community of believers as the same—they are simply engaged in different settings (53). Churches now offer faith formation in synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (convenient time) ways for online participants. Using smartphones, tablets, and computers, participants have convenient access to high-quality content for worship and faith formation. Developing a digital community strategy is accentuated with numerous guidelines and examples for creating and implementing effective ministry leadership plans.

The book points to research confirming that people seek faith-based social networks to share their faith while discovering the value and unique places within their online groups and communities. Emphasis is placed on people listening to and getting to know others online versus prioritizing communication of their messages and agendas. They can find meaningful connections by reaching out to others within diverse faith communities and

deepening their digital spiritual practices. Whether through small groups, one-on-one mentoring, or other available options, viable ministry and participation within the twenty-first century must include an online presence (61). The book addresses this subject adeptly.

Marge Babcock and William Miller join Roberto in delineating steps for curating technology by developing, organizing, and evaluating digital resources through an increased understanding of the ministerial needs of the online audiences. The introduction of meticulous management steps gives readers a firm grasp of overseeing and instituting digital tools tailored to meet online faith communities' specific ministerial and leadership needs. In-person and online worshipers can profit significantly by surveying apps and digital tools to identify their ministerial needs and track progress in meeting them.

The book is marked by cutting-edge research, considering some leading voices in the ongoing conversation of digital ministry and leadership, such as Heidi Campbell, Keith Anderson, and Nona Jones (125). The editor has done a superb job of establishing an academic framework while maintaining a Christ-centered ministerial and practical focus on a complex subject.

Roberto does well in bridging the gap between a technological and spiritual focus throughout the book. He addresses links between godly character and the qualities that ministry leaders must exemplify when delivering successful digital ministry in today's church. Collaboration and humility were highlighted on this list. Compelling digital ministry and leadership for the twenty-first century must also include building relationships through media platforms. It involves ethical and biblical approaches for utilizing digital tools when equipping people of all ages and backgrounds to develop mature faith in Christ.

This book embraces digital ministry from a servant leadership perspective. Its key point is that influential ministry leaders are constantly learning and developing in technology and their relationships with God and others. Roberto leads the way by offering essential perspectives on ministry and leadership competencies necessary to deliver effective ministry within digital contexts.

Technological advancements are vital to ministerial success

and must be explored, but the level of detail discussed in the book can be overwhelming (dozens of examples and details critical to the success of online ministry platforms with pragmatic guidance are provided for readers).

Given its page count and modest appearance, this book packs a big punch with the myriad of data disseminated. Consequently, *Digital Ministry and Leadership in Today's Church* provides ministry leaders and anyone interested in online or hybrid ministry options with helpful teaching and ideas for growing in Christ and helping others do the same. From students to ministry professionals, it is a worthwhile resource for personal and professional use.

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