

Technologies for *Engaging & Revitalizing* Our Parishes

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Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

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Introduction

Thank you for allowing me to be a part of your Metropolis Ministries Series today. My name is Jamil Samara. I am the director of the Department of Internet Ministries for the Archdiocese.

The mission of Internet Ministries is to follow the commandment of our Lord Jesus Christ who said: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16.15). For over 25 years, our Department has been responsible for identifying, leveraging, and developing technologies appropriate for Orthodox Christian digital ministry.

We help parishes and individual faithful deepen their faith and improve their ability to communicate online daily through our suite of products and services.

Today's topic is "Technologies for Engaging & Revitalizing Our Parishes". Let's jump right in.

What better way to jump in than for me to begin stating the exact opposite of what you are expecting me to say.

Technology isn't **always** the answer

Before we can advocate FOR technology, we have to take a step back and gain a better understanding of technology and how it affects us.

Our department has been working in this space where technology and ministry intersect for over 25 years. Though we don't have ALL the answers, we have learned a thing or two during this time.

a. Just because we can, doesn't mean that we should.

Though technology is neither "good" nor "bad", there are some ways in which technology and the digital tools available to us can be dangerous or harmful to us and to others.

b. Just because there is a digital tool to make something seemingly easier, doesn't mean it will actually be more effective.

Technology on its own does not solve problems. Often times, the PERSON involved is the catalyst for positive change, not the technology.

c. Just because others are doing it, doesn't mean we should do it also!

Technology and Humanity

Technology certainly is amazing, especially the digital tools that surround and permeate our lives today!

When we hear the word technology, our minds may immediately think of the latest smart phone, computer, video game, or gadget. Really, technology is much bigger than that, and the shared story of technology and humanity is worth considering.

Technology has been a part of our story as humans from the very beginning. At every step in human history, our embracing or rejecting of technological advancements has affected who we are and who the next generation will be. For example, the ability to control fire gave our ancestors the ability to cook, illuminate indoor spaces, create more advanced tools, and more. Since then, new advances in tools, food, science, medicine, and more have extended our lives, and allowed us to grow taller, stronger, faster, and smarter. Just as we continue to develop new technologies, so too do these technologies continue to shape us.

You may have heard those who have raised warning flags about our overuse and over-embracing of digital technologies. There are many, in psychology, medicine, the tech sector, and beyond who describe the issues that can arise - learning development, depression, intimacy issues, addiction, and more. We don't have the time today to address these many issues, but they are worth mentioning.

Whereas in the past, humans have had time to test new discoveries and new inventions to ensure it works to humanity's benefit, our modern tools and technologies, on the other hand, are being developed and pushed to market and into our laps at a blinding rate of speed. Our biology has not and frankly cannot keep up with the advances of technology we are experiencing.

In a very short period of time, we have been forced to become rewired to exist in a technologically saturated world.

Each year, digital technology gains more and more traction in our lives. We already saw how 2020 was a watershed moment in our collective humanity's embracing of technology - even if done so reluctantly. As we can all recall, as we were embarking on our annual spiritual journey through Great Lent in the Spring of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic hit and pushed all of us squarely into the digital realm for ministry.

Those parishes who didn't previously have a digital strategy in place were thrust headfirst into action. Within weeks, you all learned live broadcasting, video conferencing, email marketing, and more.

The Failings of Technology

Technology offers the promise of connection, but it can often fall short.

Sure, Live Broadcasting and Zoom video conferencing allowed us to connect with our parishioners who suddenly were distant and separated. And in some cases, this proved to be beneficial in the short term. The technology may have been the platform where the connection took place, but it was the humans acting that provided the real connection.

Within ministry, technology usually cannot stand on its own. Ministry requires relationship, understanding, and connection. Technology can certainly facilitate those things, but a hybrid approach is often needed.

On the other hand, these tools which have connected us so easily can also often leave us isolated.

There are many studies which record the negative effects of technology usage. We feel more isolated, self-conscious, and lonely. We thirst for real human connection that is often absent from these screen-only interactions.

The embracing of technology - any technology throughout history - ultimately is a mixed bag. With the good, we accept the bad. To survive, and ideally thrive, in the world today, we must be able to discern between the two.

My apologies to St. Paul for my re-interpretation for modern times.

“Therefore, if [Instagram] causes my brother to sin, I will never [use Instagram] again, so that I may not cause my brother to sin.”

We have to consider how our use of technology will affect those around us.

We must remember that digital tools are not an end in themselves, but can be used as a means to an end. Any good technology helps us accomplish something that may not be possible otherwise or helps us to do so more quickly, more efficiently, or with more ease.

To choose and use any tool effectively, we must know what our goals are. What are we trying to accomplish? Have we even asked ourselves and explored our goals over the past few years?

Just as we may have many appliances and gadgets in our kitchen, similarly our ministry toolkit for the modern age must be equally as diverse. We must always remember to use the right tool for the right job. For every microwave, there's an equally useful slow cooker. It's essential to look at the recipe and know what you're cooking in order to use the right tools!

To extend the analogy further, sometimes we turn to the fancy, new gadget when in fact, a more traditional method may in fact be the better option. A phone call at times can be much more effective than an email or a Facebook post. To use the example we see on the screen, sometimes a pen or crayon and paper or a good old fashioned book can help us to learn better than an iPad or Chromebook.

There is an old saying, sometimes called the “law of the instrument” or “Maslow’s hammer” based on a quote from psychologist Abraham Maslow.

“I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.”

We have to be careful since the tools that we are all always holding 24/7 are our smart phones. Let us not fall into the temptation of thinking that all of our problems in this day and age can be solved with technology.

And remember that we need to find the right ways to use the technology rather than succumbing to the technology using us.

Live Broadcasting Done Right

Let's take a look briefly at Live Broadcasting.

Live broadcasting is certainly nothing new. Aside from protestant televangelists and the Catholic TV channels from your youth, Orthodox churches too have been broadcasting their services through the television and radio for many decades. In 1997, Holy Cross Church in Belmont, CA was the first Orthodox parish of which we know in the United States to offer live broadcasting through the Internet. Fr. Peter Salmas and Theo Nicolakis worked together to see this new and exciting ministry come to life.

Since then, Internet Ministries has helped many parishes get set up with Live Internet Streaming. It is a valuable ministry, for certain, but it must be treated as a ministry. Remember that word for me - ministry. We'll come back to that in a few minutes.

Please do not get me wrong. I am an ardent supporter of Live Broadcasting as a ministry for those who are shut-ins and cannot attend Church in person.

Looking to the situation we all faced in 2020, Live Broadcasting was certainly effective in the short-term. It met an immediate need following a crisis. Even today, it is benefiting many around the country who are not comfortable yet or not able to return to church in person. But, both anecdotal and analytical evidence suggest that its effectiveness has faded for some, and for others, it never truly took hold.

Has your community taken the time to ask whether your Live Broadcasting ministry is effective? How would you even describe what effective is?

Have you ever called up your homebound parishioners to ask them about their experience with the Live Broadcasts? I assert with confidence that only a small subset of your population is benefiting today from your Live Broadcasting ministry. We need to rethink our approach.

First, the situation at our parishes has changed dramatically over the past two years. In March of 2020, many of our parishes went into complete lockdown and only allowed a handful of individuals inside the church to serve and sing and ensure our liturgical cycle continued on. Parishioners had no choice then but to tune in online.

Further, back then, the strong desire to stay connected during Lent and Pascha kept faithful online and tuned in. After all, our stay-at-home measures were still fairly new, and the idea of worshipping online was about as novel as the coronavirus we were trying to avoid.

As the hymns of "Christ is Risen" faded and Spring turned into Summer, many of our faithful began to have both Zoom and Live Broadcast fatigue, trading in the digital screen for more active and outdoor pursuits. Our digital connections to the church faded as that Summer went on. Even if someone desired to stay connected, the realities of this world, such as caring for a full house of children cooped up inside on a Sunday morning, made it difficult to truly benefit and engage in a streamed Liturgy.

Today, most of our parishes are once again open for services. Yes, there are those who still not attending services. For those, having the live broadcast available as an option for a way to stay connected CAN be beneficial.

Have we stopped to ask ourselves and our faithful different questions now compared to the questions we were asking in early 2020? Are we just compulsively continuing to offer Live Broadcasting, assuming it is satisfying the needs of our faithful?

Most of us never took the time to equip our faithful with the tools necessary to make Live Broadcasting effective for them. What does it take to effectively participate in a Live Stream of Church Services?

Are we encouraging worship, I mean, actual worship? Or do our faithful ... do you and I ... look at Live Streaming of Church Services as a form of entertainment. Perhaps we've never even stopped to consider it at all. Worship is active, participatory, engaging the senses, focused, standing in the presence of God. Is that how we would describe how we participate in our parish's Live Streams? Or do we trend instead towards passive, multitasking, disengaged, distracted, lounging on our couch?

One might say that the latter is better than nothing at all. Perhaps. I do think we can strive for better. Just as with any other ministry, Live Broadcasting as a ministry requires engaging in relationship with those to whom we are ministering.

Now, here are some questions we could have asked our parishioners, and perhaps we still can.

We need to be ready to listen, learn, and adapt.

Q: How can we help you feel more engaged with the Live Broadcasts?

Q: What are the challenges you are facing staying connected to our community?

Q: Do you want to attend church more regularly?

Q: Do you want to continue staying home until the pandemic has ended/a vaccine has been distributed?

Q: Do you and your family know how to pray together?

Q: Do you and your family know how to read scripture and discuss theological topics together?

Q: What struggles are you facing, and how can the Church help you?

These are great questions for both at-home worship and in-person. I'm presenting you an opportunity here to think differently. Instead of just throwing a technology at a problem, we are called to engage deeply with our faithful.

Answers to questions like these can lead to more creative solutions for parishes and for ministry. Could we have tried for additional services throughout the week to accommodate more parishioners to attend in person? Could we use the gymnasium or an outdoor area for overflow and set up a simulcast of the Liturgy to improve attendance? Of course, if we try these or any other new ideas, we need to reach out to our parishioners individually, speak with them, engage with them, listen to them.

There is no substitute for our communal prayer and worship, but we can do better than passive attendance in our Live Broadcasting. Different family situations warrant different approaches. The evidence is that the minority of our parishioners are actually fully engaged with our live broadcasts for an extended period each Sunday.

Approaching Remote Worship Differently

Perhaps in 2020, what we should have done was equip our families with a worship guide each week. The Center for Family Care already laid the groundwork for such an idea with their Family Gospel Lessons series from several years ago.

Rather than hoping our parishioners would tune in to the Live Broadcasts, we could have instead empowered them to be active participants in a liturgical practice at home which then would have equipped them with the tools and discipline to re-engage in the communal worship at our parishes once we started opening them up again.

What might that have looked like?

We could have told our parishioners - here is a template for how to worship at home as an individual or as a family. Here are the morning prayers, here's the Great Litany, here are the hymns for the day, such as the Sunday resurrectional Apolytikion, the hymn of the church, and the trisagion hymn, a selection that they could either read or sing together, here's the Epistle and Gospel for the day, here's the Creed and the Lord's prayer, and finally, here are a couple discussion questions about the readings for the day.

Encourage them to stand in front of icons together, light a candle and incense, and eliminate all other distractions for 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 20 minutes. Whatever works for them.

Of course, it's not too late. We can still do this. I have noticed with friends, family, and fellow parishioners, that attendance is not back to what it once was.

Again, it is not too late. This is where real ministry comes in.

Empower, equip, and support your faithful to be active participants in the church at home, and in the life of the church at your parish. This might involve some technological solution, or it might look entirely different.

This is just one idea. Careful, thoughtful planning and consideration for each individual is needed to craft and implement a solution that is right for your parish.

When Technology IS the answer

It is a constant struggle to find ways for our parishioners to remain connected to the Life of the Church. Having said all that I have already said about the cautions of technology, I will now say that digital technology CAN be a great avenue to facilitate connection.

Think for a minute of the many technologies that the Church has Embraced throughout the Centuries.

At times throughout the history of the church, we have embraced the technology of the day to help preach the Good News. The use of writing, the Roman road system, the printing press, and more are all uses of technology for the marketing and communication of the Gospel.

The church is certainly not techno-phobic. We must, however, be discerning

The heart of approaching technology is discernment. Proper discernment means asking the right questions, and a very important question is: "What is the problem and for whom are you trying to solve it?"

Every business needs a solid communications plan, and Orthodox parishes are certainly no exception. A parish's digital presence is an integral part of its outward-facing ministry!

Communications Strategy

A communications strategy encompasses the following:

- 1) What are our goals? (the big WHY and the small whys)
- 2) What is the mission and vision of the parish and/or ministry?
- 3) What do we want to communicate?
- 4) Who is our audience(s)?
- 5) What are the unique gifts and talents that our community has to offer?
- 6) What are the channels and methods we will use to share our message?
- 7) What feedback channels will we use to listen?
- 8) How will we evaluate success?

Why Do We Want to Use Technology – For What Purpose Exactly – What are our Goals?

Though we don't have time to explore all of those questions, let's at least look at one of the "Why"s:

Improve Communications with existing parishioners — Communications & Marketing — Website, Social Media, Intranets, Email, Text Messaging, Digital Billboards

Enhancing the Liturgical Experience — Live Broadcasting, Simulcast to Cry Room or Hall, Digital Service Texts, Sound Systems and better microphones and speakers)

Educational Resources — Computers, Tablets, and Smart Boards in Classes, the use of Zoom or other online tools

Create security practices and protocols for parish operations

Improve Hospitality and Outreach — Search engine optimization, Welcome experience with Billboards, QR Codes, Consistent, integrated messaging across website, social, in person, Customer Relationship Management system, etc.

Digitize Stewardship and other analog practices — Touch Screens Kiosks for Stewardship, Text to Give, Online Campaigns, Digitizing of forms, Customer Relationship Management Systems

IT Support services — buying the right computers, phones, copiers, tech support for staff, etc.

These are all very large buckets. Your buckets may look similar or different. For sure, you'll want to get more specific with your goals, and begin to prioritize them. Once you've identified your goals, you can then begin to work to accomplish them

Expanding the Reach of Church ministry

Much like the Roman roads provided easier transport, the internet “superhighway” provides a means to reach beyond the four walls of your church and your church community. Though we’ve already discussed the challenges with Live Broadcasting, we can also speak of its many benefits. Live Broadcasting and recordings of divine services allowed inquirers to experience our divine services before even stepping foot in the door. Passively, this serves its purpose; in a hybrid model, the Live Broadcasting can be coupled with an appropriate greeter ministry and inquirers education class to welcome those coming off the street into our parish for the first time.

Use the Data

One of the greatest assets of the digital tools is the data that comes with it. We have the ability to use this data for the benefit of growing the parish and improving service and outreach. So you have an email mailing list with 500 subscribers. Great, right? How many people are actually opening the email and clicking on anything? Only 10%? Perhaps we need to rethink our email marketing strategy. You have a website with lots of useful information. Yet, 20% of your web traffic is going to an old donate page that doesn’t even work. Time to make some updates!

Faith-based Metric for Using Technology

We have the following Faith-based Metric for Using Technology which we borrowed from a similar guideline from the Center for Family Care on what healthy family ministry is.

- Encourages an active sacramental participation
- Allows for one to bring the Church home
- Breaks down barriers between individuals
- It is people-centered, not technology-centered
- It builds relationships
- It connects the Church to the greater community

Through all of this, we must remember to allow the light of Christ to shine through in how we use and leverage technology. Do we see Christ in the other person, or are we not even bothering to look?

The Noise of the Digital Age

We read in the psalms: “Be Still and Know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10

With all of the potential noise that comes with digital technology usage, it can be difficult to know and experience God.

and also in the book of 1st Kings:

“but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.” 1 Kings 19:11-12

the AUTHOR experiences the Lord in a still small voice, not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire.

“but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.”

The noise of the digital age can be overpowering and consuming, so we must find ways to quiet the noise.

The two-edged sword of technology and digital communications is that it allows us to easily connect with many people at a click of a button. We can disseminate a message to hundreds of our parishioners so easily from anywhere at any time, yet, there is no guarantee that the depth of absorption will in any way equal the breadth of reception.

Said another way, with online communications and the digital landscape, we have grown accustomed to measuring success quantitatively, rather than qualitatively. At a bible study, would you rather 50 people show up and there be a minimal level of engagement, or would you rather 3 people show up and have a deep, heartfelt discussion about how a particular passage has great meaning in these people's lives at this moment? When you post something on Facebook, don't you sit in anticipation as the number of likes and comments increases to a satisfactory amount? If you only get 3 likes on a post, aren't you a little disappointed? Would you ever follow up in person with those 3 people and have a deep discussion about what they liked about your post?

Aren't real relationships that you have in your lives based on depth? It is those deep relationships upon which you rely when the going gets tough. Your 752 Facebook Friends are meaningless unless you can call any one of them up when you are in a difficult spot and need to talk to someone.

Fr. Stephen Freeman in a blog post writes, "as we hurtle along at the speed of our internet service, we tend to nurture the habit of brief encounters. We assimilate information that has been formatted for speedy acquisition. The depth of contradiction, paradox and context tend to be eliminated. The brilliance of the internet is its ability to 'skim and retrieve.' Its genius fails when it comes to understanding and analysis. True human knowing requires the large (and slow) effort of attention and communion."

Internet Ministries Services

Now, please allow me to end briefly by sharing with you, in case you don't know, some of the many ways that Internet Ministries can help you and your parish.

FREE Website Hosting with Templates

We currently offer a variety of hosting packages and will work with you to meet the needs of your community.

FREE Email Marketing

FREE Mailing Lists via Listserv for many years, and now starting this summer, also via Constant Contact, FOR FREE! Yes, that's right, you heard it here first.

FREE Bulletin Builder

Bulletin Builder revolutionizes the way you minister with your Sunday Bulletin. With no technical expertise required you can easily create a professional-looking bulletin in just minutes.

Discounted Zoom Meetings Licenses

For \$100 year, we offer Zoom licenses to parishes

OrthodoxJobs

This is a free service for posting of job openings in lay ministry in parishes and organizations of the Orthodox Church.

The Online Chapel and Daily Readings App

These are great ways to keep your faithful connected to the liturgical life and lives of the saints. There's a mobile app, but also a plugin that can be added to your website and more.

Tech Support and Consulting

We are here to answer your questions and assist you with a variety of issues.

Thank you.

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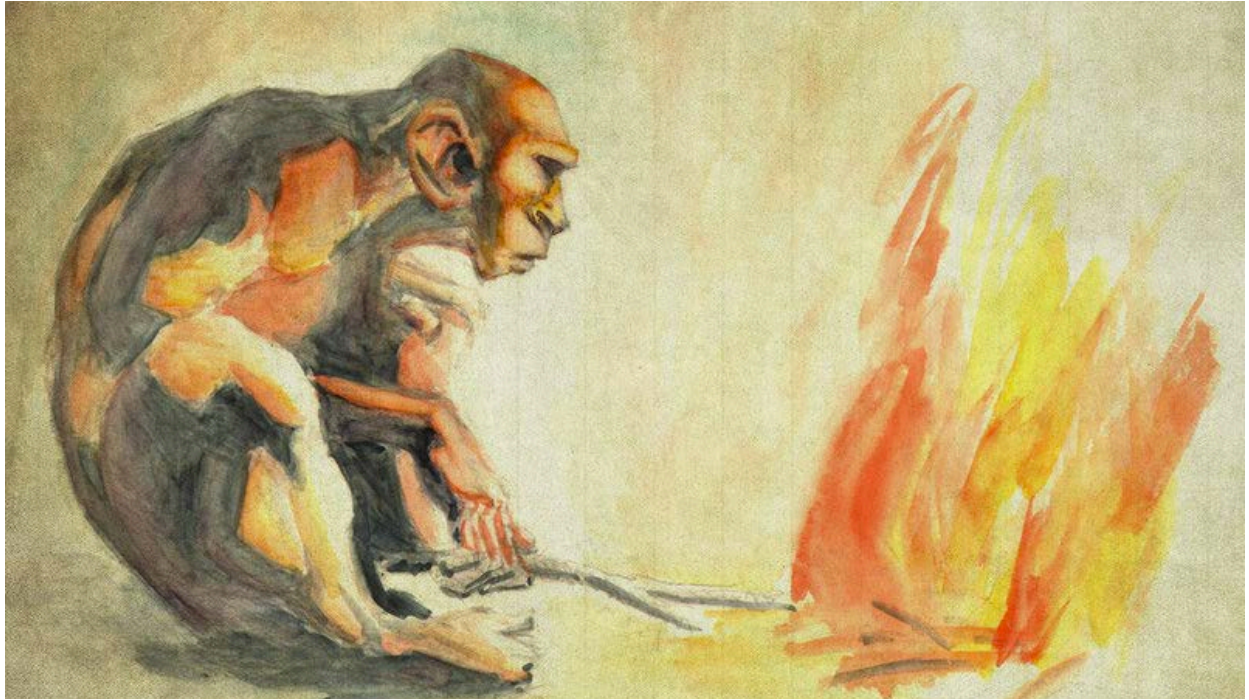
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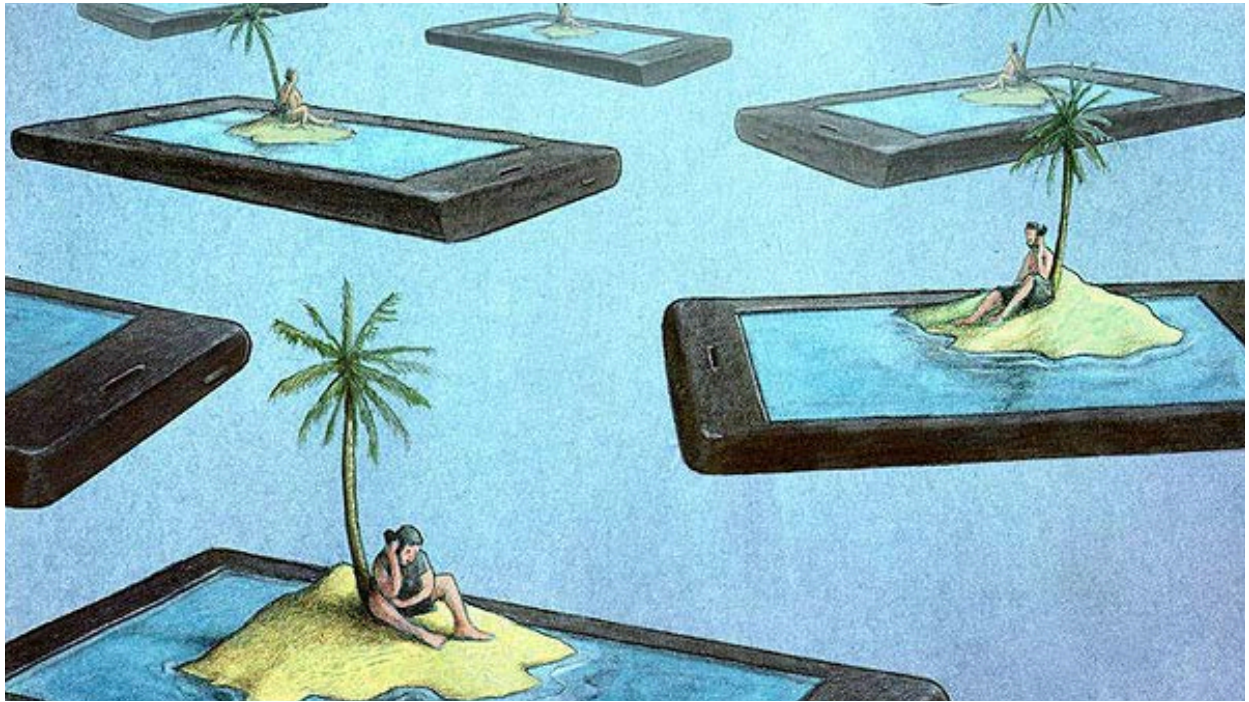
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Just because there is a digital tool to make something seemingly easier, doesn't mean it will actually be more effective.

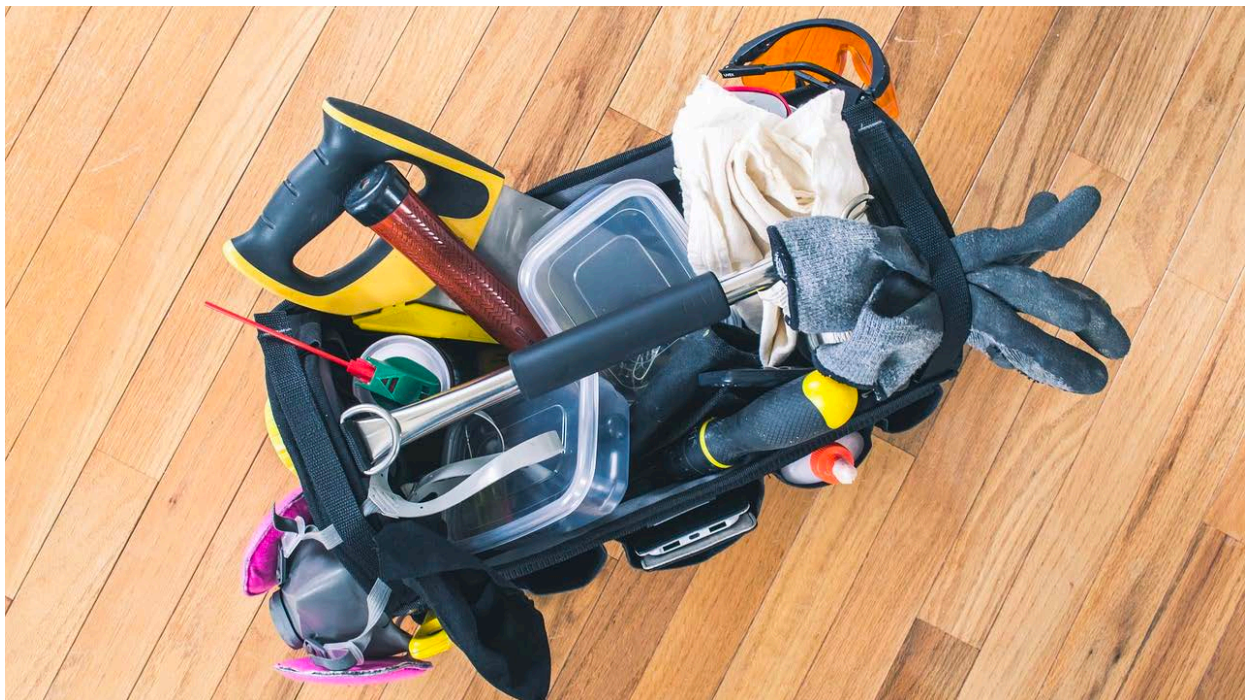
Just because others are doing it, doesn't mean we should do it also.





"Therefore, if [Instagram] causes my brother to sin, I will never [use Instagram] again, so that I may not cause my brother to sin."

I Cor 8:13













Questions We Could Have Asked

Q: How can we help you feel more engaged with the Live Broadcasts?

Q: What are the challenges you are facing staying connected to our community?

Q: Do you want to attend church more regularly?

Q: Do you want to continue staying home until the pandemic has ended / a vaccine has been distributed?

Q: Do you and your family know how to pray together?

Q: Do you and your family know how to read scripture and discuss theological topics together?

Q: What struggles are you facing, and how can the Church help you?



Tradition: The Prodigal Son

FAMILY GOSPEL LESSON

Luke 15:11-32

This beautiful parable tells the story of the sins of a son and the unconditional love of a father. God is our Father who loves us unconditionally. Like the prodigal, we so often turn from our Father and we too must come home through humble repentance. Repentance is a turning from sin and turning toward God. It comes from seeing ourselves as we are. Our heavenly Father is eagerly waiting with open arms for us to see and turn from our sins and come home to Him.

Much is often said about the prodigal son and his father in the parable, but an equally important character is the brother. He is much like the Pharisee we read of last week, trying to measure himself by the sins of his brother. This is an easy trap to fall into with all the evil in the world. We say to ourselves, "I am not as bad as this person," or "At least, I do this." But as a Father, God loves us all; He knows our hearts and what has been given to us. Therefore, He deals with each of us individually.

For Consideration

- What happens to the prodigal son in this story? What does the word "prodigal" mean?
- How does his father react? How does his brother react? Who do you identify with in this parable and why?
- Why is Jesus telling this parable? What does this Gospel passage

TO DO TOGETHER

Modern-day Prodigal
Challenge your family to create a modern-day skit on this parable. Have fun with it; bring out fun costumes, music, and lighting.

Forgive Me
A good habit to begin is asking forgiveness from family members on mornings when you are attending Divine Liturgy. Teach your children to respond to someone that asks for forgiveness by saying, "May God forgive us both."

FINAL THOUGHT

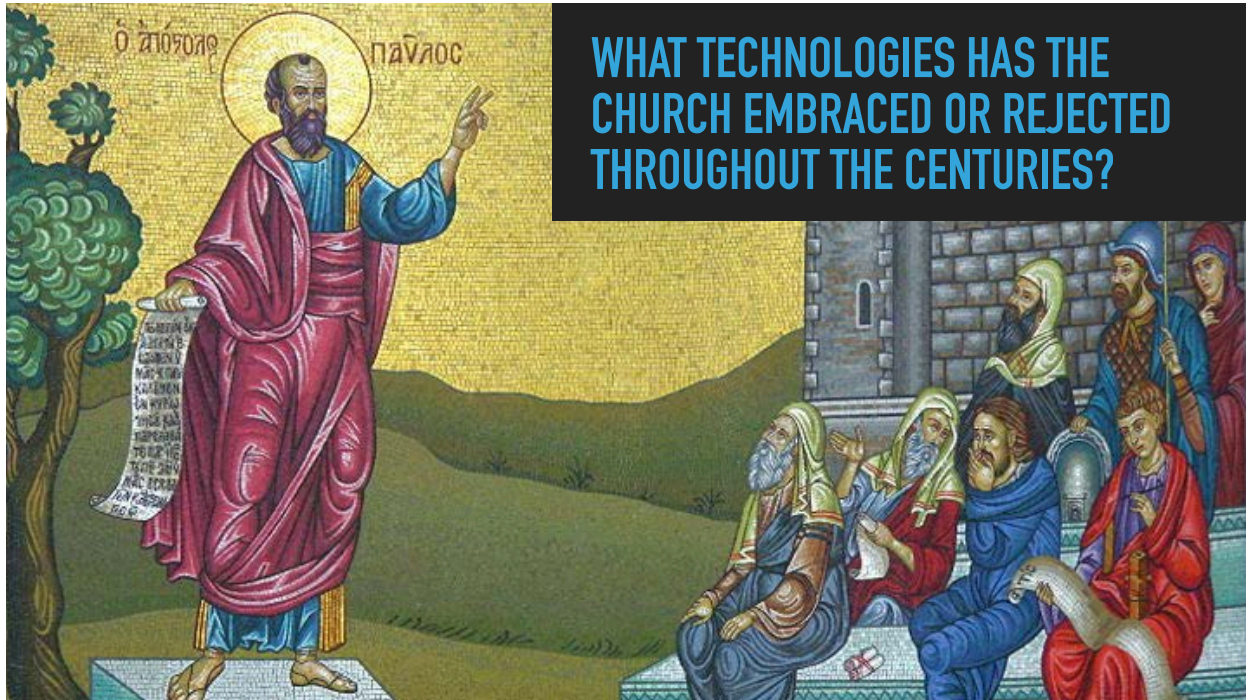
Enter into the Church and wash away your sins; for here there is a hospital and not a court of law; do not be ashamed again to enter the Church; be ashamed when you sin, but not when you repent.

-St. John Chrysostom

Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
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When Technology
IS the answer



WHAT TECHNOLOGIES HAS THE CHURCH EMBRACED OR REJECTED THROUGHOUT THE CENTURIES?

What is the problem and for whom are you trying to solve it?

A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY ENCOMPASSES THE FOLLOWING:

- ▶ What are our goals? (the big WHY and the small whys)
- ▶ What is the mission and vision of the parish and/or ministry?
- ▶ What do we want to communicate?
- ▶ Who is our audience(s)?
- ▶ What are the unique gifts and talents that our community has to offer?
- ▶ What are the channels and methods we will use to share our message?
- ▶ What feedback channels will we use to listen?
- ▶ How will we evaluate success?

WHY DO YOU WANT TO USE TECHNOLOGY?

- ▶ Improve Communications with existing parishioners
- ▶ Enhance the Liturgical Experience
- ▶ Enhance Educational Programs
- ▶ Create Security Practices and Protocols
- ▶ Improve Hospitality and Outreach
- ▶ Digitize Stewardship and Other Analog Practices
- ▶ IT Support Services



A FAITH-BASED METRIC FOR THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

- ▶ Encourages a **Sacramental** Participation
- ▶ Allows for one to **bring the Church home**
- ▶ Breaks down barriers between **individuals**
- ▶ It is **people-centered**, not technology-centered
- ▶ It builds **relationships**
- ▶ It connects the Church to the **greater community**

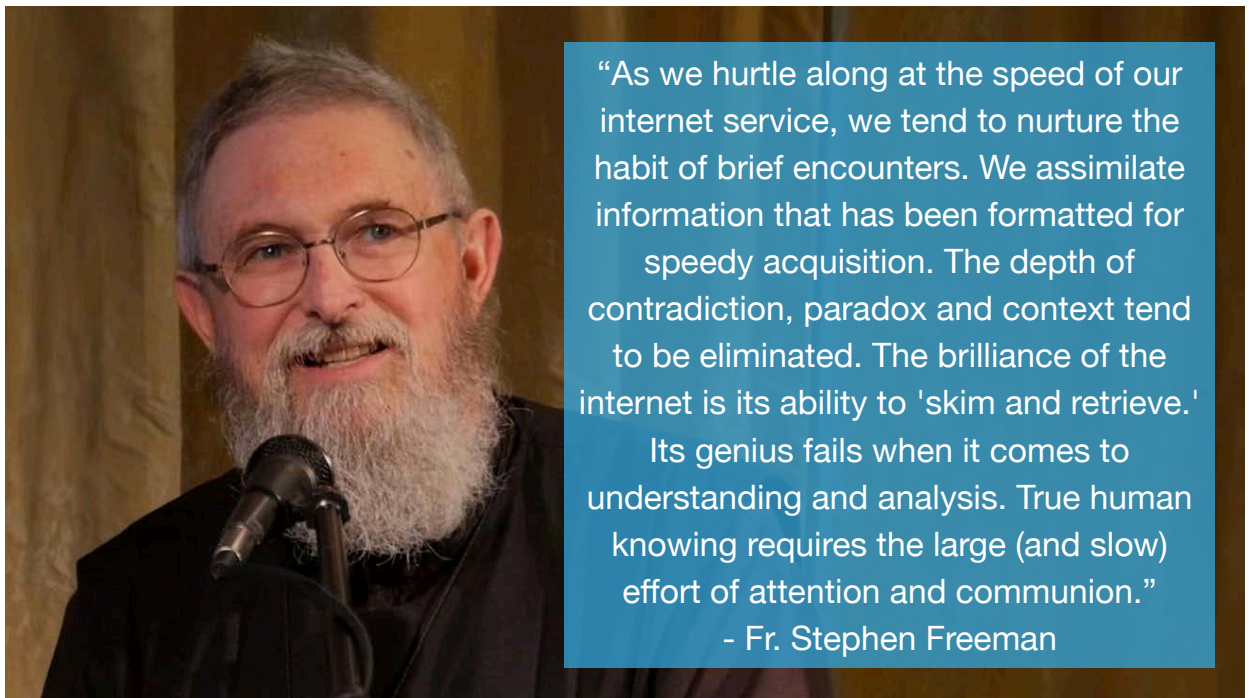
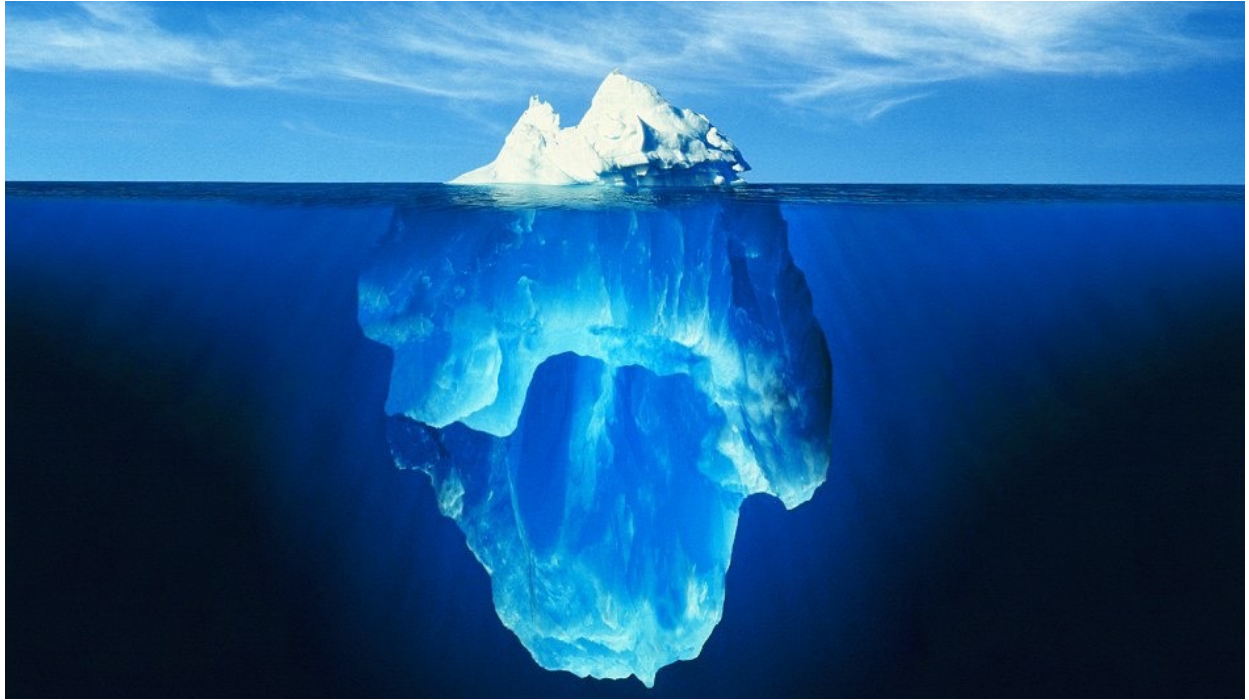
IN CONCLUSION
AND A LITTLE MORE
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"Be still, and know that I am God."

Psalm 46:10

"but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice."

1 Kings 19:11-12



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- Fr. Stephen Freeman

TEXT

INTERNET MINISTRIES PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

- ▶ Website Hosting with Templates
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- ▶ OrthodoxJobs
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- ▶ Tech Support
- ▶ and more!

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