

PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY

We learned in the previous session how the Metaverse is the new Mission field. Before you jump into this new world, I want to give you some Philosophy of Ministry considerations that may be of help to you. As they say, prior prayerful planning prevents poor performance.

I want to give you 6 guiding philosophies to help you prepare. In order to make them as clear as possible, I will contrast them with the ways we often do ministry in the real world. This is not necessarily to critique those philosophies, but merely to bring clarity.

The first Philosophy of Metaverse Ministry is this:

Presence vs. Production

One of the things that all the tribes of the Metaverse appear to have in common is this: they are a very different crowd than what we typically see in the physical church. No people group is monolithic, but some uniformity can often be seen. The people of the Metaverse tend to value personal presence over polished production. For example, we have congregational singing at our Metaverse campuses. But there is a second delay between when the individual hears the worship band and when they hear someone else singing to that same band. It creates an interesting audio experience. It's not exactly a *Season's Greetings from Tonto*, *Tarzan and Frankenstein*, but it definitely is NOT Elevation Worship!

If you are at a church with a high-performing worship band, this would probably drive you nuts. However, the people of the Metaverse love it. You can hear them worshipping their hearts out and see them raising their hands. I have even grown to love this strange and imperfect, but *beautiful* expression of heartfelt worship.

Also, you must understand that there will always be tech issues. Imagine the one mic that went bad that one Sunday last year. Remember how that drove you nuts as a pastor? You knew that for the physical church crowd, this screeching mic was "below the bar of distraction." Well, imagine a tech issue of similar magnitude happening at least once nearly *every Sunday!* Welcome to the Metaverse!! In a world of all tech, the people who congregate there are not fazed by tech issues the way you and I are. You still want to have a team so you can deal with these issues so the Word can still go forth, but the people are not concerned about production. They just want PRESENCE.

That may really make you think twice before just doing a Livestream of your service of your sermon in a Virtual Reality space. Although this can attract some people, the people of the Metaverse really appreciate engaging personally with the pastors and other members of the church. And that even goes for the trolls who pop into church from time to time. At Cornerstone, we say "Jesus loves trolls too!" I've had trolls throw stuff at me. They've come up to pick my nose in the middle of a sermon. We've had them come in screaming obscenities and "hail Satan!" This doesn't happen all the time, rest assured. But it is a memorable experience for all when it does. I will talk about the mechanics of how to deal with situations like this. But bottom line: I love telling those trolls that we love them and are glad they are here. They are always a bit taken off guard by that simple invitation to Come and experience the Community of Christ.

Let's look at the second philosophy:

Communal vs. Consumer Lifestyle

In the typical mega church story, the church became a mega church because of excellent management. Lots of churches have solid biblical worship, preaching and community. But the big churches usually excel at efficient people-movement systems. This allows them to grow and put more resources into making everything more and more excellent. And that excellence and efficiency is attractive to the typical American. It's what we have affectionately termed the "consumer culture". The consumer lifestyle is not as interested in community as much as in individual benefit. The average physical church attendee is not looking to spend *extra* time at church. They just want to get what they need as efficiently as possible so they can go about the rest of their lives.

Even though many of the people of the Metaverse come from the consumeristic culture...they have fled to the Metaverse almost in an act of rebellion against that lifestyle. They are NOT interested in EFFICIENCY. They will gladly waste hours and hours of time to go deeper in relationship together. You must understand that even though planning and programming are still important - like having small group systems - just hanging out with them is critical. For example, I had a Valorant gaming group with some of them. My Metaverse Pastor plays Population One every week with them as they also connect with more unchurched gamers.

The people of the Metaverse have a 24/7 lifestyle. Obviously, you and I can't give that much time to them. But we must be willing to give a little more relational time to them than we may typically do in our physical churches. For example, we have a Discord Server for our churches...which is basically a Zoom platform on steroids combined with Google Hangouts, Facebook and TikTok. I know, it sounds just like the place you want to be! But seriously, when used right, it provides constant relational engagement as a community. I will tell you more about Discord and its importance to your ministry in the next session.

The third philosophy is this:

Depth vs. Breadth

It must be understood that the people of the Metaverse are, on average, a very intelligent group of people. After all, they are usually techies by nature. Inquisitive. Willing to go deep into Reddit chains to figure out all manner of obscure knowledge.

It is important to understand this. They are not typically looking for lighter fare. Again, there is absolutely nothing wrong with bringing messages that put the cookies on the lowest cookie shelf. And there are people in the Metaverse who will certainly appreciate this. But you must be willing to go into the depths. Ask the hard questions. Try to answer the hard questions from God's Word. And be willing to field the hard questions. Always be willing to hear from *everyone*, whether they are a hostile atheist, a confused Satanist, an LGBTQ+ activist seeking to pick a fight, or someone sincerely asking why God allows suffering.

For example, at the end of every service we have a Q&A time. They can ask any question about the message or about anything in general. This usually goes on for another 45 minutes after completing an hour and a half service...and most of the folks stick around to hear the answers! By way of contrast, I tried to do that in my physical church and couldn't get it going. But in everyone's defense, the appeal of a steak and salad bar after church at the local Sizzler is a bit more enticing than talking about eschatology!

Let's talk about the fourth philosophy of metaverse ministry:

Disciple, Deploy & Multiply vs. Mega-fy

I know all of us want discipleship and multiplication to happen. It just can be a bit harder in the physical church. What churches tend to resort to is to increase the existing church structure. In other words, churches tend to move toward “megafication” instead of “multiplication”. Why is this? It is hard to disciple enough solid Timothies to start new churches. And in the modern church climate, in order to be viable in the competitive, consumeristic church marketplace, it is extremely costly to start these new churches. It is often much easier to keep scaling the existing church into larger versions of itself than to disciple, deploy and multiply.

This is very different in the Metaverse. I have found that often the new believers there WANT to be engaged and learn how to have a deeper relationship with Christ and with you. And not only is it easier to find Timothies, it is ridiculously cost effective to plant new churches. In a lot of cases, it only will cost you \$300 for a VR headset. We will talk about costs in the next session.

Another interesting thing about the culture of the Metaverse church as compared to the physical church. So many of the people in the Metaverse are there because they have experienced a great deal of personal brokenness in the real world. When the light of Christ's love shines on them and they come out of their darkness, they often remind me of Mary Magdalene. They are so overcome by the love and forgiveness of Christ, they DESPERATELY want to reach their hurting friends who are in deep darkness in the Metaverse. There are people like this in the physical church, but the ratios are different. The Metaverse, by its very nature in attracting hurting souls into an escapist reality, is more populated with the genuinely thirsty. And this more naturally leads to their interest in being discipled and deployed so the church can be multiplied across the dark landscape of the Metaverse.

The fifth philosophy of ministry in the metaverse is this:

Team vs. Star Leads

As discussed with the normal pull towards megafication, this usually leads to greater emphasis on leaders who have atypical giftedness. To many, it simply seems more efficient and effective to deploy the best leaders over a larger mass of people in just one well-managed organization, than to have less-gifted leaders over a multiplicity of church organizations.

The Metaverse is different. It is crucial that you do not go into the Metaverse alone, no matter how gifted you are as a leader or church planter or preacher. First of all, that goes against the wisdom we see displayed in the ministry of Jesus, Paul and the Apostles. Having a partner with you, and ideally, a Timothy to disciple alongside of you, is very wise. Since the people of the Metaverse do not so much appreciate how gifted you are at preaching or leading, but how much you relate to them and love them, more of your time will be demanded of you. It is good to have others shoulder this burden with you. Also, it is good to have accountability as well. The Metaverse isn't necessarily any more dangerous than the physical world, but there are relational pitfalls and temptations there too. Partnering with others in accountable ministry is a helpful layer of protection.

Once you go in and establish a church community, it is advisable to immediately begin forming a core team. At Cornerstone, we call our volunteers the “Dream Team”. These

Metaverse natives know so much you will never have time to figure out about the Metaverse. Devote yourself to meeting regularly with them and discipling and deploying them as they use their gifts.

It has been one of the highlights and joys of my ministry to watch people like Stewart and Angel and Socks be deployed into ministry. From new faith to sharing their faith with others. Angel has been leading a small group that has grown to 12 very active people gathered from all over the world. They have become active participants in the life of Cornerstone because of Angel's ministry. Angel is now the Director over an entire church campus. Stewart built one of our churches where he too, is the Director. Socks now attends that church and is being disciplined by Stewart and is now also discipling a new believer himself.

Let me conclude with this final philosophy of metaverse ministry:

Hybrid vs. Limited

I personally find that ministry on the extreme ends of the spectrum miss the good aspects of both ends. I prefer to find a middle way. Some believe that a church must only be physical. But they miss the missiological opportunities in the Metaverse. Some believe a church can only be digital. But I think this misses the God-designed need for human interaction *in the flesh*. I want to advocate for the Hybrid approach and encourage you to make it your grounding philosophy for how you do ministry in the Metaverse. I think the hybrid approach also protects us from the potential of falling into either the Gnostic heresy on one end, where the Body is devalued, or the Materialistic heresy on the other end, where the spirit is rendered inferior to the limits and dictates of the body.

As I said in the first session: our goal is to show people in the Metaverse the beauty of the Church...the community they have avoided in the real world because of ignorance, misinformation, or hurt. Once they see this true community, we believe that as they are disciplined, they will desire to connect to a church body in the physical world.

You will have to determine for yourself if you feel more comfortable keeping your Metaverse ministry more in the category of a parachurch mission or if you want to make it an actual church. We practice congregational worship, preaching of the Word, reading of Scripture, prayer, giving, church discipline, evangelism, discipleship, and the administration of the ordinances. We can do this latter practice because we hold to a Memorialist perspective of baptism and communion. We believe these must be visually rendered and publicly experienced in order to memorialize and symbolize deeper spiritual realities. This can be done in VR.

We personally believe that a parachurch mission does not fully display the full grandeur of the Church to unchurched people who need to see the Body of Christ in full action. Their experience of the true Church at Cornerstone VR helps them to desire in-person fellowship in their local community. In fact, we have seen a number of folks make their way into local churches because of Cornerstone.

I hope this has helped you better conceptualize ministry in the Metaverse and begin preparing for how you might approach ministry there. Again, you are always welcome to come visit one of our churches to see what it is like. Please go to cornerstoneyc.com/vr to see how to do so. In our next session, I will help you look at the Mechanics of Metaverse Ministry to take your first practical steps into this new missional frontier.