

Exponential Ventures Article

Jason Poling

Background

It started with a simple prayer: “Lord, no more fear! Increase my faith! Help me do your mission with all my strength until I die.”

For the first ten years of my ministry as a pastor, I felt like I had lived in “maintenance mode.” I was doing my best to be a faithful shepherd and leader of the flock, but I was weak when it came to Jesus’ main mission to “seek and save the lost.” It’s not like I wasn’t willing to share my faith. I was. And I did see some fruit. It’s just that opportunities to share the gospel with true, yet-to-believers seemed few and far between. I started recognizing in my own church the problematic patterns that so many had been noticing about the broader Church for some time.

Yes, we were growing. And thankfully, some of this growth was due to brand new believers. But a lot of the growth came from the already-churched crowd. My local pastor friends and I often joked about the constant church-hopping between our churches. I could almost hear David Attenborough’s distinguished voice, of nature documentary fame, describing the “*biennial migratory flight patterns of the common evangelical as they search for better Vacation Bible Schools for their young.*” The reality was, I was the primary purveyor of this non-missional behavior in the Church because I was leading from the impotent posture of “Maintenance Mode.” And this was a result of my fear, specifically the fear of Man. Leading a congregation into greater obedience to Jesus’ radically sacrificial mission could cause pushback and opposition. It was safe to keep the “church machine” going, but dangerous to be radically on mission for Jesus. But I didn’t want to live in this fear anymore. So I prayed to God to increase my faith. I wanted to live out the rest of my days in “Missional Mode.”

In 2019, God opened my eyes to the massive, unchurched population in the digital world. This digital world is often called “The Metaverse,” a term coined in Neal Stephenson’s book *Snow Crash*, because it is a universe “beyond” the physical one. It includes a wide variety of platforms from Virtual Reality, to massively multiplayer online games, to consoles, to mobile apps, to gamer livestreams, and more. There will soon be almost *3 billion* gamers in the Metaverse. This number will only continue to grow. The Metaverse now outstrips revenues and users in both the professional sports and movie industries combined. From the anecdotal evidence garnered by those of us immersed in the Metaverse, it appears the majority of those who call the Metaverse their home are deeply unchurched..

I have always been a big fan of Virtual Reality technology, so I felt like God was using that interest to take my first step into Metaverse Ministry. In early 2020, I led my local IRL (“in real life”) church in Northern California to plant a VR church. In just over a year, we have seen more gospel seeds planted, souls saved, and lives changed than we could have ever imagined.

Mission and Vision

Our mission at Cornerstone is to “*Reach All Worlds for Jesus,*” and then when people come to Christ, we seek to “*Build New Lives on Jesus. Together.*” Every platform in the Metaverse is like a brand new mission field, filled with “tribes” that have never heard the gospel.

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In order to reach them and expand the Kingdom of God, we have a vision to “*Plant 10,000 Gospel Seeds in 10 Years*” throughout the Metaverse and in our IRL context in Yuba City, California. God has blessed this effort already.

Since jumping into the Metaverse, we have had far more opportunities to share the gospel than we usually have in the physical world. The initial sense of anonymity in the Metaverse, combined with the clear, existential desperation of so many of the people there, create opportunities for deep and personal conversations, often happening within the first five minutes of meeting someone. Even more powerful is the unprecedented reach we have in the Metaverse.

One woman from the UK came last summer to “troll” our church in VR. She was a self-proclaimed Satanist. Because we love everyone, even troubled trolls and Satanists, we welcomed and encouraged her to come experience the Community of Jesus. She has come to our church faithfully ever since, has become a good friend, and recently received Christ as her Savior, the first in several generations in her family to do so! She even used her world-building and design skills to help us build a church for our third VR church plant! Yes, ministry in the Metaverse might be weird, but it is truly *awesome!!*

When we first planted in the Metaverse, we met a man from Estonia, a small country in the former U.S.S.R. There are shockingly very few gospel-centered churches in his country. He was also being hounded by a number of Muslim neighbors who were trying to convert him to Islam. God sovereignly arranged for one of our IRL members to be present in our VR church on one of the first Sundays this man from Estonia was in attendance. My Cornerstone IRL friend just happens to be an intelligence officer for the US government and is specialized in Islam. These two began to talk, and from this conversation, the man from Estonia became a Christian, was baptized and is currently being discipled! These types of interactions with people in countries either closed to the gospel or hostile to it are frequent in the Metaverse. In places where physical access to churches has historically been denied, we now have access via the “open country” of the Metaverse.

The Metaverse is not only a gaping door for gospel conversations, it is a robust resource for Discipleship. Because the Metaverse is fundamentally a communication medium, the opportunities for ongoing biblical training, soul care conversations, and hands-on ministry training are plentiful. Early in our ministry in VR, I met a guy from North Carolina who had been unchurched for many years and wanted to follow Jesus. He was baptized and I began to disciple him. Eventually, he invited his non-Christian friend to church. Even though they lived in different states, they had been close friends for a number of years playing Call of Duty together online. The friend became a Christian, was baptized, and his friend and I have been co-discipling him since. They both began to serve and recently built and planted our second church in VR! They have already seen scores of people hear the gospel and two people come to faith in Christ! The Metaverse may exist in a non-physical location, but our efforts within the Metaverse have had an extensive real-world impact.

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Over the past year, I have been training a group in preaching, teaching, and evangelism. Through a video conferencing platform called Discord, our IRL and VR trainees are able to meet together weekly. I have been able to take these disciples into VR worlds to give them opportunities to lead, teach, and evangelize. We've used this same hybrid discipleship setup for training our small group leaders in both VR and IRL. This has unified our campuses across the Metaverse and IRL congregations.

Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives of Cornerstone are quite simple. We believe the Metaverse will only continue to grow, especially in the emerging generations. We believe that fewer and fewer of the people in these generations will be interested in coming to physical, IRL churches. So, we must go to them. Since the majority of them can be found "living in the Metaverse," we want to help IRL churches go there.

Our first goal is simple: We want to be a model (perhaps "guinea pig" is more appropriate) for other IRL churches to learn to "hybridize" and go to the unreached tribes of the Metaverse. The pandemic caused many churches to learn to livestream their services, but true hybridization has not occurred for most. This is partly due to the limitations of livestream that VR and MMO game platforms are able to overcome. The latter platforms give a more realistic sense of actual "presence" and interpersonal communication than livestream technology can provide. But hybridization has primarily been stymied because many IRL churches aren't sure how to proceed. We want to be a model to show them that they can do this 21st century missional work!

Our second goal follows on the first: We want to Expose, Equip, and Encourage hybrid church planters. We love church planting and support this work in IRL. But aside from microchurch planting, in the United States we may have arrived at a saturation point with traditional church plants. We are nowhere near a church saturation point in the Metaverse! The harvest truly is plentiful in the Metaverse, but the workers are few. And it is far easier, quicker, and less expensive to launch in the Metaverse than IRL. To launch more Metaverse missionary church planters, we want to first help IRL churches and planting organizations overcome their fear and objections to Metaverse ministry by creating opportunities for them to actually *experience* it. As they become interested, we want to provide practical training to plant in the Metaverse. Finally, we want to create a community of hybrid church planters to offer ongoing encouragement and support.

Our final goal is this: We are actively working to create new digital content and platforms to expand the Kingdom of God more deeply into the Metaverse. We aim to create a catalog of fully immersive illustrations that make evangelism and discipleship more accessible and impactful, especially for the great mass of biblically illiterate residents of the Metaverse. Imagine, for example, the famous Bridge illustration fully rendered as a 3D Virtual Reality world? Imagine taking a yet-to-believer on a guided journey, culminating with a walk of faith across the cross? But we want to do more than this. We want to create a platform that can act as a missional hub for hybrid churches getting started in the Metaverse. Currently, all Metaverse

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pastors must figure out how to navigate the Metaverse on their own. We want to create a central platform that would allow new entrants into the Metaverse a headstart on getting a campus planted without needing a team of programmers and artists. Additionally, right now we are beholden to the Big Tech companies who own and operate the platforms. We want to create a platform that will give gospel-centered hybrid churches a safe place to get resourced and launched without the fear of being shut down because we preach the gospel.

Results

Even though we entered the Metaverse a year ago, we have already seen some encouraging results. We've planted two churches and one that is soon to launch, established multiple small group microchurches, launched several missional Bible studies, planted hundreds, if not thousands, of gospel seeds, have baptized and disciplined a number of new believers, apprenticed and disciplined multiple hybrid leaders, started the first ever biblical counseling center in the Metaverse, and helped an IRL church become a hybrid church by planting this year in VR. Along with some other Metaverse pastors, we established a ministry network for ongoing encouragement and support. And recently, we hired a Metaverse Pastor with coding skills. He is currently working on the creation of new digital content.

Discoveries

We've certainly learned a lot along the way! I was truly shocked by how little the younger generations in the Metaverse know about Jesus and Christianity. Even though I had read about this phenomenon, experiencing it first hand was overwhelming. I am also continually blown away by the sheer power of the Word of God! Whenever we read from it or teach from it, we have seen trolls, Satanists, atheists, nones, hyperactive teenagers, Muslims, skeptics, and the biblically illiterate quiet down to hear it. It is nothing short of supernatural! I often preach 45 minutes or more every Sunday in VR. This had worked fine in IRL, but I wasn't sure if it would in the Metaverse. It has. The church is growing. And we even do a Q&A after each sermon that lasts almost 45 minutes as well. It has shown me that no matter their background, people are desperately hungry for Truth!

Challenges

The biggest challenge has been helping the broader Church get past our natural inclination against technological advances when it comes to religion. It is really hard for all of us to change methods. It always feels like we are giving up our message and mission. But this is often a false correlation. The Church has constantly changed throughout the centuries in response to technological and cultural advances without changing its core message or mission. Think of Paul employing the available technology of the day, pen, ink, papyrus and parchment, to deliver the gospel and theology to people; book-binding technology to move from scrolls to codices; the organ in the 7th century and the piano in the 19th for worship; advances in sea travel to send missionaries across the globe; the printing press to distribute Luther's writings to increase the reach of the Reformation; the telegraph to send resources like Charles Spurgeon's sermons across the Atlantic Ocean; the microphone to virtually amplify the preacher's voice and the Word of God through electronic reproduction; radio and then television to distribute sermons, from evangelists like Billy Graham, throughout the world and even into restricted areas

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behind the Iron Curtain; and finally, the internet to deliver biblical resources and live-streamed worship services to millions of people.

Another challenge is to help those who are interested in planting in the Metaverse to understand that it is not difficult nor expensive to do so. No church is too small to get started. There is always at least one digital native in any congregation who spends a lot of their time in the Metaverse. A discipling pastor only has to tap some shoulders and cast a vision. The harvest is plentiful and ripe, and the workers are sitting in our pews. We just have to activate them and then point them in the right direction. It takes as little as one person with minimal financial resources to begin advancing the gospel in the Metaverse.

The next era of Church is coming. In fact, it is already here. It requires that we go into new worlds and reach them for Jesus. We must be on mission and not get stuck in “maintenance mode.” The Metaverse may be strange, but we know that every world is God’s world, and He has soberly charged us to go wherever there are lost souls. I encourage you to see the Metaverse not as a scary “Brave New World,” but as a beautiful “Saved New World” for the glory of God and the joy of all peoples...wherever they may be found!