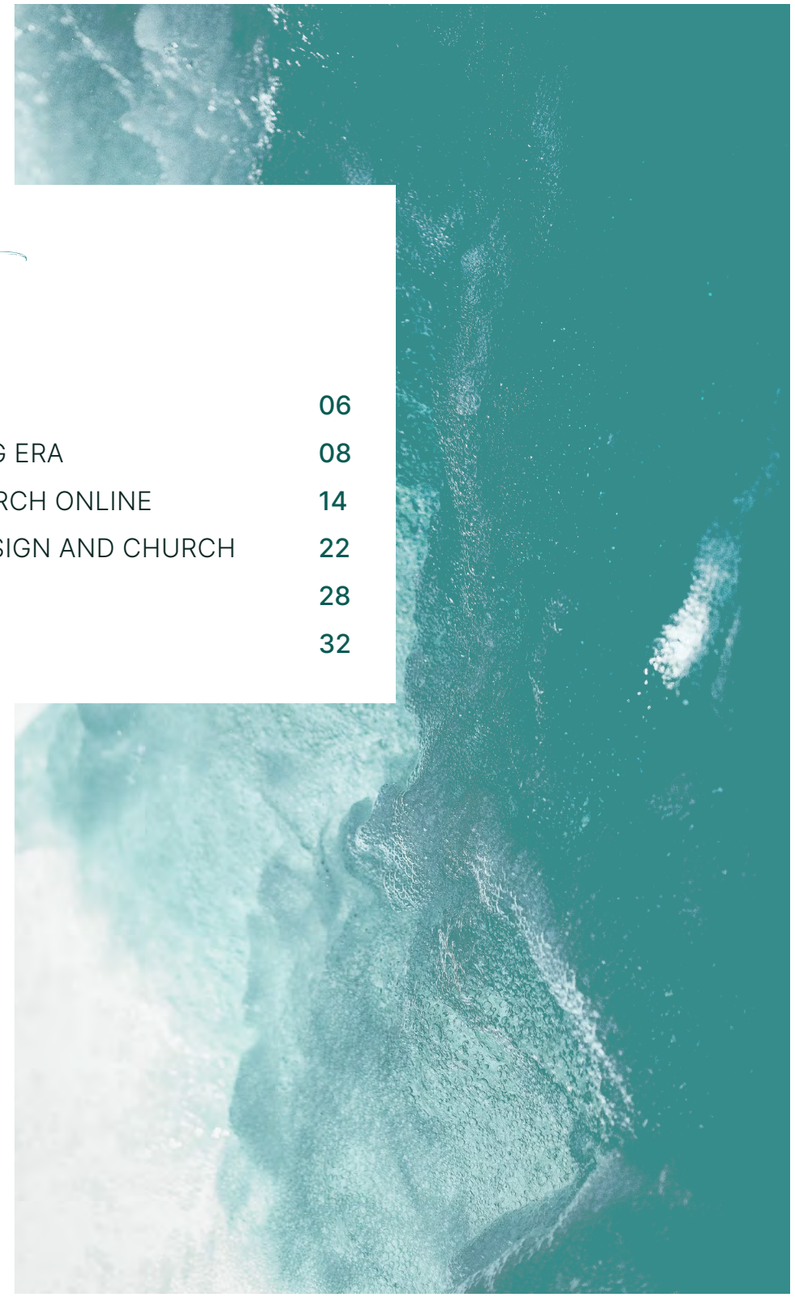
in the world not of the world
TIMOTHY DAVIDSON

How can user experience design and visual design help inspire and shape the church both online and offline in the 21st Century?



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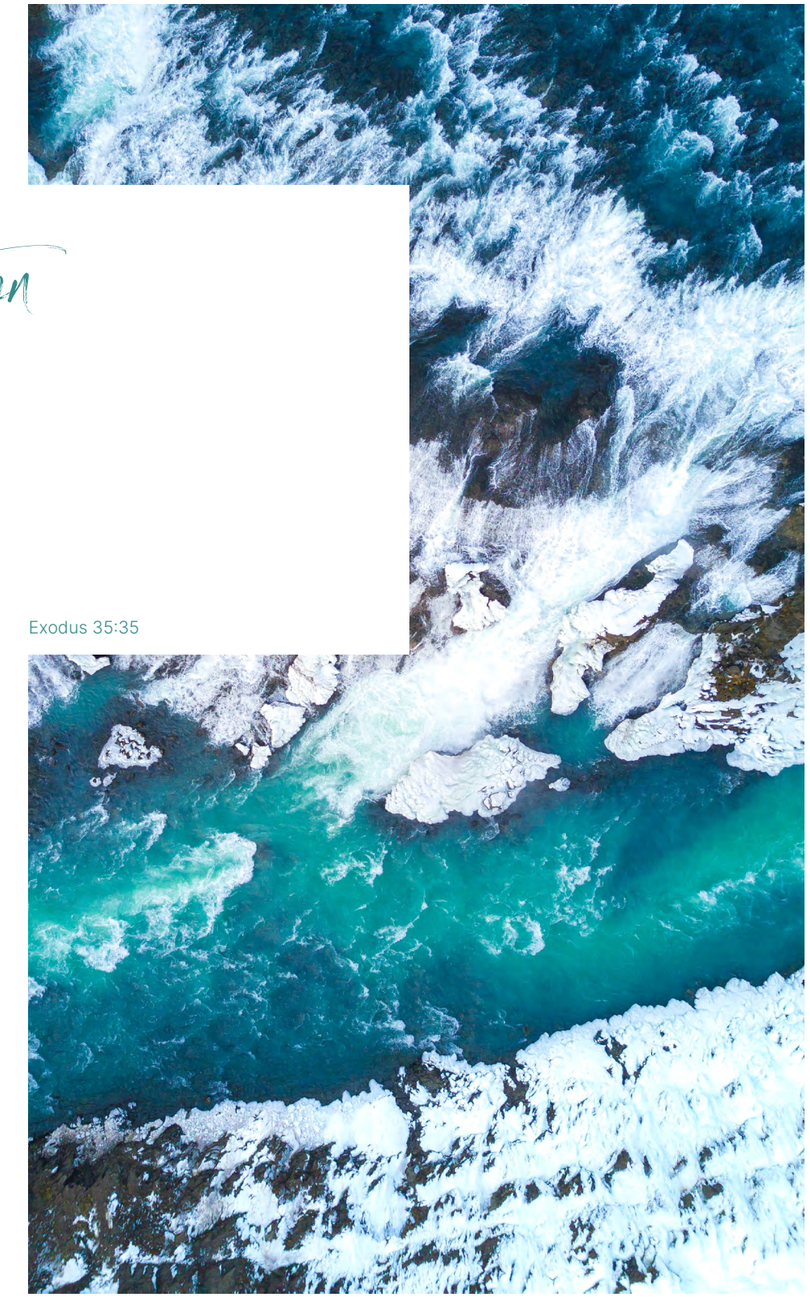
Introduction



Exodus 35:35

Technology and design has progressed to new levels over the past number of years. The introduction of user experience design alone has impacted organisations across the globe. However, the wider church has fallen behind with this progression. There is much for the church to learn such as modern onboarding processes and engaging with digital audiences whilst still maintaining focus. There is a lack of understanding in regards to new technology and updated design techniques which can add value to the organisation. This research aims to explore the relationship between the church and design.

Section one will introduce the concept of onboarding and its possible role within churches. More and more, people are looking for experiences. More than 3 in 4 millennials (78%) would choose to spend money on a desirable experience or event over buying something desirable[27]. Customer service is great, but a delightful experience can set you apart from other organisations. UX design skills can help create and add value to these opportunities such as attracting new people to discover what church is about. By understanding how other products onboard new customers, the church can be inspired to embrace new ideas to create effective transitions into church and help make new members feel welcome.

Section two explores how the church can adopt visual communication and technology in a way that works alongside its mission, not in competition with it. There are many new ways the church can engage with the online digital era, however, knowing how to be effective is becoming increasingly challenging. There are some churches that have embraced the digital era, however many churches have failed to engage with visual communication or develop an online presence.

Section three will explore how design and creativity fits within the church. More recently, some churches have begun to invest resources into their individual ‘style’ and brand. Currently, the church appears not to have an understanding of the value behind thoughtful visual design or a good user experience. The church is in need of experienced people who have the ability to prompt impactful changes to the experience.

The Onboarding Era

Ephesians 2:10

The term ‘User Experience Design’ (UXD) is inevitably linked with a digital product or role. However, UXD is more than digital. Many opportunities exist to use this skill in an offline capacity across a number of different areas and settings. This section focuses on the area of onboarding and how it can be integrated into the church which can impact the overall user experience of the church.

Firstly what is onboarding and what does it actually mean? Onboarding is the process of integrating someone new into an already existing situation, which can be a workplace or a piece of software, in order to help them succeed in their role and to help them feel settled. The term onboarding was originally coined in the 1970’s by organisations as a management term. It was a method for introducing new staff members to the company and to help understand the company values. A digital example of this is using new software. For example, when a programme is opened for the first time, it will often present the option to ‘take the tour’ or offer tutorials in order to understand the best way to use the product. This process has moved from the physical experience in 1970s to an online format experienced across digital products and services. Interestingly, onboarding is now, once again experienced offline by organisations inducting new employees with evidence that a good onboarding experience can increase the success of employees within the business. “Businesses that used a standard process to onboard new employees discovered they achieved 54% greater new hire productivity and saw 50% greater new hire retention”[1]. This process of onboarding appears to have made an interesting ‘full circle’ return to its offline origins.

Making people feel welcome and comfortable when arriving in a new place or situation can be challenging. So how would understanding current onboarding processes and ideas affect how the church introduces a new member? How can these methods impact the church? How can they make it a natural and passive process, requiring minimal effort on the side of the new member?

In considering these questions, Steve Krug's book, Don't Make Me Think, Revisited: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability[2] is useful. He states:

> "People often ask me: "What's the most important thing I should do if I want to make sure my site or app is easy to use?" The answer is simple. It's not "Nothing important should ever be more than two clicks away" or "Speak the user's language" or "Be consistent." It's... "Don't make me think!""

Although Krug is speaking from a digital perspective, this can be translated to an offline environment. This idea of not making the user think about the process would help alleviate some of the work from the user during this onboarding process and allow them to fit comfortably into the church whilst gaining understanding and insight about its core beliefs and values. This would help create an almost invisible onboarding process. By doing this it's "like having good lighting in a store: it just makes everything seem better"[3]. This in turn plays into the overall experience of the church.

So why should the church be putting so much effort into this initial process and overall experience? If users see that no thought or resources have been invested by the church in order to welcome them, then it can "erode...confidence in the... organisation behind it"[4] therefore putting the church at a disadvantage from the start.

CASE STUDY

slack

Slack chat is a messaging application often used within the technology and IT industry. It allows for communication across teams, in channels, or one-on-one, via direct messages.

Looking at the various features of the onboarding process from Slack Chat not only gives excellent insights for a delightful onboarding process, but also how user experience can look offline in church in general. As mentioned before, the initial experience witnessed by the user will directly affect the overall experience during the rest of their time in the church.

Slack

Figure 1.1 shows an initial screen for setting up a workspace (new chat group) in Slack. The focus is simply on the name of that workspace and asks nothing else from the user. At this very early stage Slack are collecting what is needed in order to get started. By only asking for this brief bit of information, it makes it very simple and attractive for a user to create a new workspace. In Figure 1.2 we see Slack has presented the user with an expectation of what is coming next and what they will see. This ensures the user is ready for the output and knows where the new channel should appear once loaded.

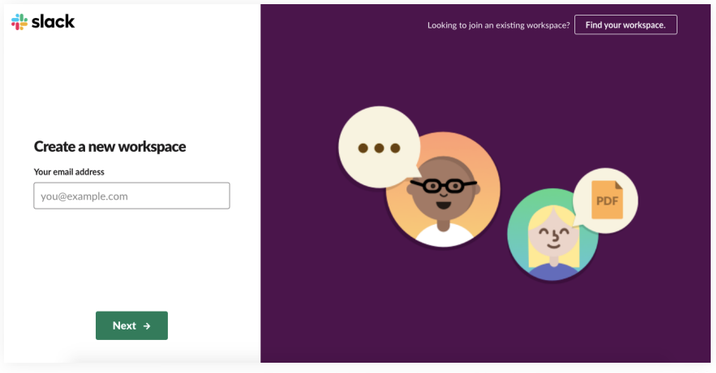


Figure 1.1 Creating a Slack Chat workspace[6]

Church

To help get new members or visitors connected with the church, they may be invited to fill out an information card which includes details such as a name, phone number, email address, and some other church specific questions. For a user this can seem like an unnecessary and time-consuming task and many may feel it is a breach of privacy to submit all this information initially. An alternative option is if churches presented a scannable link (QR code) when attending, either on a projected screen or a naturally accessed area, that allowed users to be taken to an online page where they simply entered their email address and that initiated the beginning of the onboarding process all from their mobile phone. This solution requires minimal effort from the user while gathering important information that can be used to make contact and gather further information in a staggered format when it is needed. Taking a perspective from Figure 1.2, users should be shown what to expect as a result of any actions they take. For example, before they enter their email address they may be presented with a brief message that lets them know that they won't be signed up to any spam but their email will be used to get in touch with them. This solution helps to relieve any tension arising from not knowing what they are 'signing up' for. This use of technology could also help engage a younger audience, helping them integrate into the church through an easier process.

A side benefit to this method is the alleviation of paperwork for the church which reduces the environmental impact the church is having on the wider community.

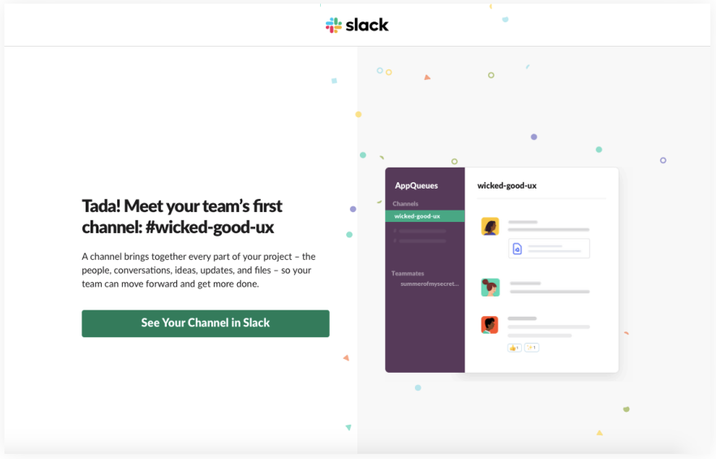


Figure 1.2 Onboarding in Slack Chat[6]

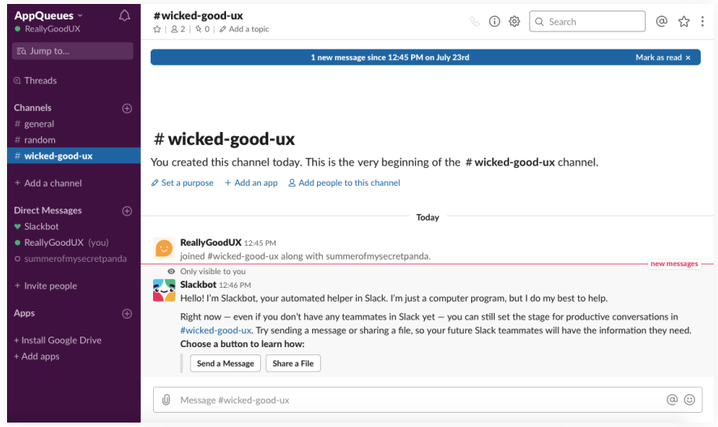


Figure 1.3 Screenshot of Slack in use[6]

Slack

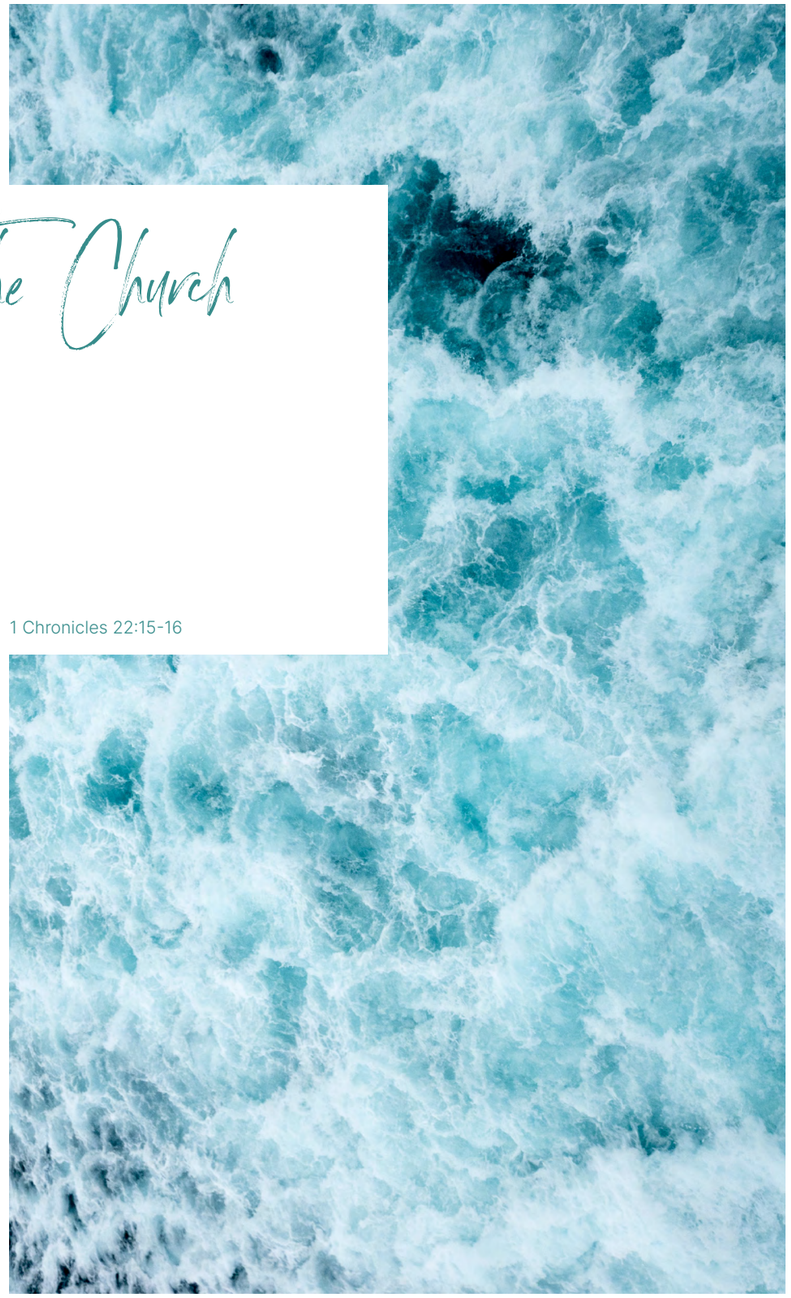
Figure 1.3 is an example of how Slackbot is introduced to users. Slackbot is a friendly companion that provides help and tips across all areas of Slack. Its messages are only visible to the logged in user and speaks to them with a natural, almost human-like tone. If a user in unsure about anything when using the chat, they can instantly access Slackbot though a help command in the chat, it does not require them to leave their workspace or go to a separate help section.

Church

Often new members in church get inundated with people greeting and speaking to them. Although this can be friendly and welcoming, it can also increase their cognitive load, creating frustration and confusion. With a large number of new faces it can be difficult and daunting to know who to ask their questions to. By providing new members with a specified 'friendly face' , a key point of contact, who will look after them and make themselves available to answer any questions, this can help get the member settled in much easier. This contact can help to guide them through the rest of the onboarding process making sure they are set up to succeed in the church and are actively involved in day-to-day life. "Research in workplaces has shown that people who do not have a best friend in their workplace have a 1 in 12 chance of being engaged"[5].

Through these observations, not only will the on-boarding process become much simpler for users, but the overall experience of the church will be directly impacted from these techniques.

Taking The Church Online



1 Chronicles 22:15-16

Churches often hesitate when it comes to using digital spaces and integrating technology. Often this comes from a lack of direction and understanding of the potential that technology can bring to the church. In today's digital world, understanding the best methods to digitally engage people can be challenging due to the vast digital offerings available alongside the investment of time and money. When choosing new technology, a church needs to ensure it maintains focus and uses it to compliment its mission. Technology should be working alongside the church, empowering engagement across audiences both during Sunday gatherings and throughout the rest of the week.

It is estimated that approximately 90% of people in the UK access the internet, and those who are connected spend almost one day a week online[7]. When considering how these users access online content it was found that 48% of internet users in the UK said that a smartphone was the most important device for accessing the internet[8]. These statistics demonstrate the change in mediums in which people are connecting to content each day.

"More than three-quarters of internet users in the UK had a profile or account on a social media or messaging site or app in 2018"[10]. These figures indicate that nearly everyone is connected digitally and dispels a common myth that only young people are online. This strong online presence presents an opportunity for the church to engage digitally with a wide audience. Comparing to online figures, no church building could ever hold this many people! Additionally, utilising digital channels allows churches an opportunity to connect with groups who may not be able to be physically present, such as those who are ill and can't make it out of their home. Studies have shown that "41% of people aged 65 and over in the UK feel out of touch with the pace of modern life and 12% say they feel cut off from society"[11]. Engaging digitally can allow them to feel a part of the church regardless of where they may be, therefore, making the church experience one of inclusion.

Maintaining focus on the churches mission and not becoming technology-centred can be challenging. Churches should define the technology they use; the technology should not define the church. Like any other ministry, it needs to be regularly evaluated, questioning the purpose for using it. This allows churches to uncover the best solution.

The Church of England have begun to publish their messages on social media and have seen more people engage this way than through physically attending a building.
“We hear anecdotally that cathedrals and even traditional services are seeing an upturn in young attenders,...one cannot help but suspect that the digital initiative has something to do with this.”[26]

There are so many different ways in which the church can go online. These can range from a simple website to a custom built app. Not all digital channels are relevant for every church, but churches do need to be represented online one way or another.

> **“97% of people learn more about a local company online than anywhere else”**[12]

In the UK, churches have engaged with visual design and digital mediums to a certain degree, such as setting up a basic social media profiles to post announcements or information. However, churches across the US appear to have embraced it more fully and provide great inspiration such as short courses and video content. Churches such as Watermark Community Church, Dallas, and The Village Church, Flower Mound, now employ full-time staff members to operate and manage these digital channels, since they understand the value of them.

CASE STUDY

WATERMARK
COMMUNITY CHURCH

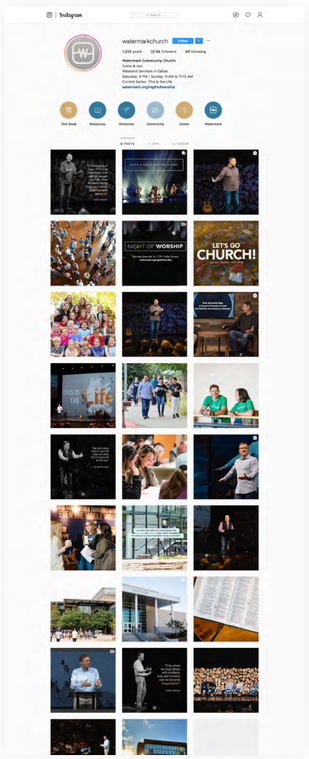
Watermark Community Church is a non-denominational church based in Dallas, Texas. Due to their scale and mission, they utilise a number of different technologies and digital channels to help connect with people locally, and also those unable to attend on a continuous basis.

To raise awareness of the need for churches to engage more with people, Pro Church Tools based in Canada have coined the term ‘Seize the 167’[9]. Every week is made up of 168 hours but only 1 of these is spent in a formal church gathering, hence, how do churches then best use the other 167 hours to engage audiences? By looking at some of the different methods Watermark use, churches can be inspired with new ideas and creative solutions to engage with others and ‘seize the 167’! For Watermark, digital content is extremely important to them so it’s imperative to make sure the correct channels are used. Skipper Pickle, a UX Designer for Watermark Community Church, said they “have a communications manager who helps advise which is the best channel to push certain content”. He continued that they are inspired to create strong content as the ”possibility of getting it wrong will make the gospel stink”[14].
Looking at just three of the digital channels used by Watermark can provide useful insights and ideas for effective ways to engage online audiences.

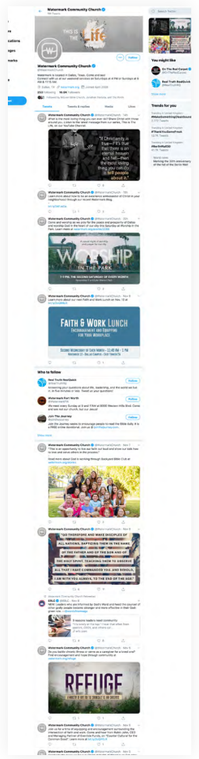
Social Media

By having a presence on social media, Watermark are able to connect to a variety of audiences. Each platform attracts a different audience and can be used in different ways. Social media channels give churches a quick and easy solution to an online presence without the requirement for a website. They allow churches to advertise what's on offer and provide a communication channel with people wanting to connect or find out more. Having this social presence is not enough though, being active gives credibility to those searching for a church. Many churches across the UK are now beginning to take their first step in joining social media, but their content is not as developed as that seen on Watermark's pages. Social media is a great way to publish a range of content such as videos and resources, providing easy and instant access for anyone.

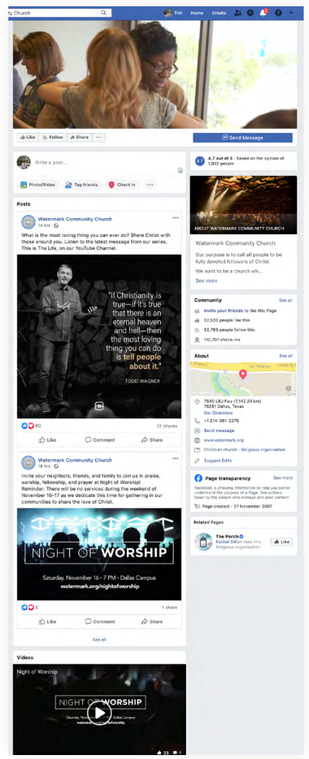
New technology built into social media, such as Facebook Live, enables churches to live-stream gatherings and other events through one single source without the need for specialist equipment.



Watermark Instagram



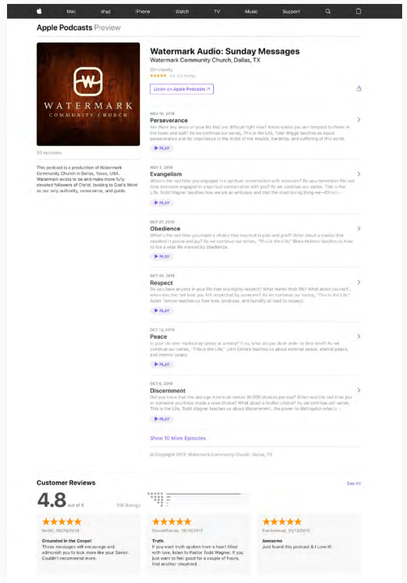
Watermark Twitter



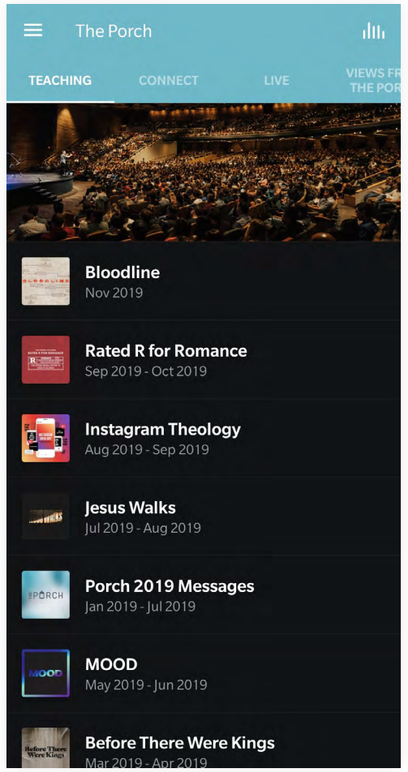
Watermark Facebook

Podcasts

Podcasts have become more popular recently with "an estimated 144 million people listening in during 2019"[15]. Through their website and dedicated app, Watermark offers people the chance to listen to previous talks. This is a simple solution to keeping people engaged, since it does not require any extra effort except for recording the original talk. While there is no new content created, it offers a different way to listen - on demand, which enables people to join in when they can.



Watermark Podcasts, Apple Podcasts

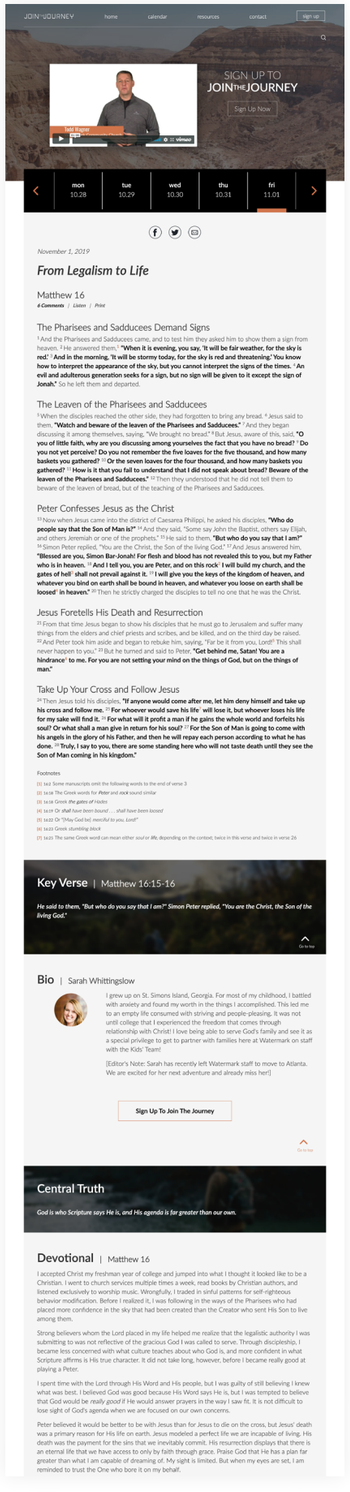


Watermark Porch Pdcasts App

Email

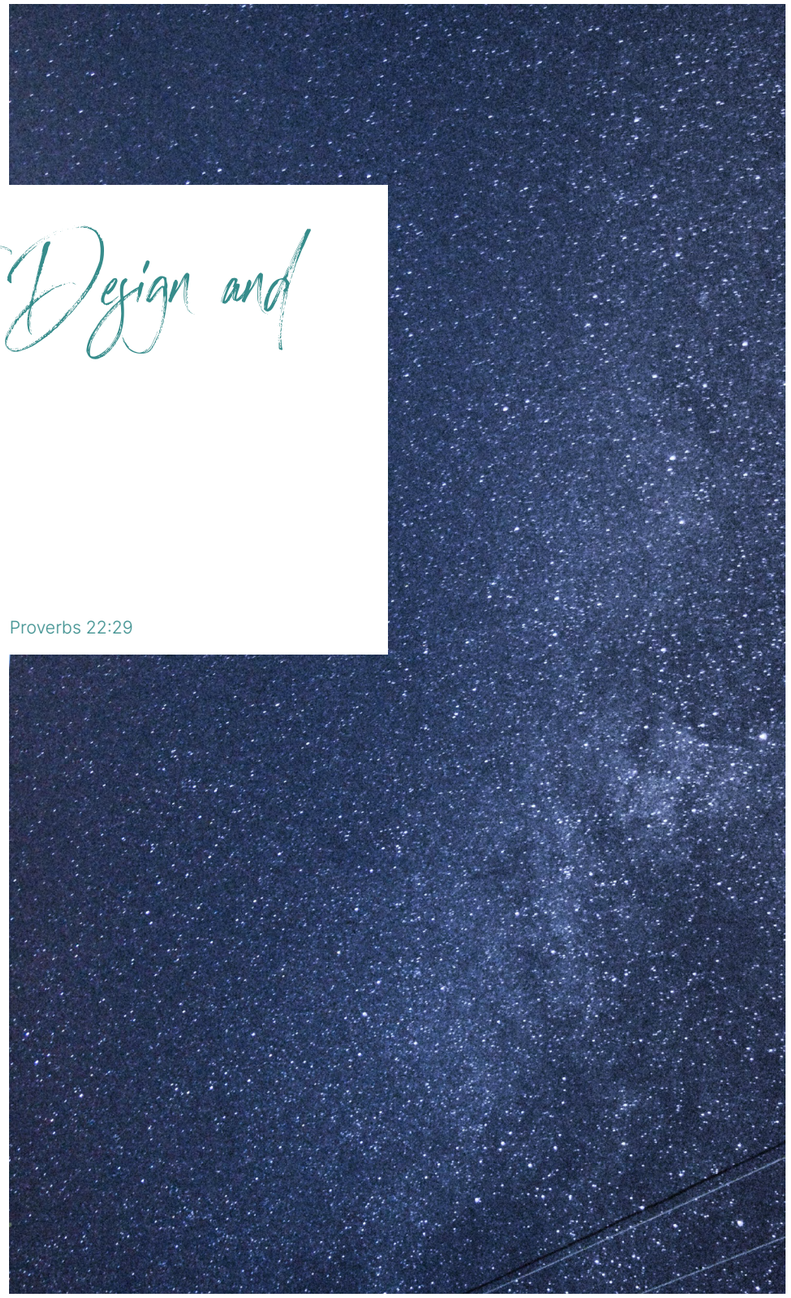
One of Watermark's more interesting ideas is called 'Join The Journey'. They describe it as "...a year-long, guided adventure through various books in the Bible with a specified daily reading plan or curriculum."[16]. This is emailed each morning to subscribers and provides an easy-to-read plan. It can help even the busiest people engage on their way to work or during a short break in their day. The important factor is that it is delivered to them, so there is no need for them to go out of their way to access it. The email format is more developed than many churches would have the ability to do, however the concept for an email following a similar format regularly is a simple yet effective way in which churches could take a digital step out.

Pickle also said "If you don't have a presence online you don't exist"[14]. By not having any online presence, either through a website or a basic social media page, churches can be invisible to the people looking for them.



Join The Journey Emails

Integrating Design and Church



Proverbs 22:29

Many modern churches reputedly lack creativity and engaging design. Stereotypically church buildings have banners made using badly placed stock imagery, accompanied by a bold piece of Comic Sans that represents ‘fun’ or ‘creativity’. But what if these churches took design seriously. Would it really have a noticeable impact for them? Churches should be encouraged and inspired to pursue creative, engaging design.

It appears that when the church is creating material, the content or message is more important than the design. Understandably so. However, without any regard for visuals, people are going to miss out on what is being communicated.

“It takes about 50 milliseconds (0.05 seconds) for users to form an opinion about your website that determines whether they like your site or not, whether they’ll stay or leave.”[17]. This is referring to websites but the same can be said for any visual material. User’s may not be staying or leaving, but they are deciding if it’s worth their time. This is particularly important to consider when dealing with printed material which is going outside of the church. “First impressions are 94% design related[18]. Before even reaching any content, a users opinion has already been formed and will inform their attitude towards the remaining content.

PaperJam Design for Bishop of London[22]

PaperJam Design for Bishop of London[23]

The Bishop of London contacted Paperjam Design to create a brand for his correspondence, separate from the regular Diocese branding. The aim was to bring the current logo up-to-date. This has allowed him to connect with the churches younger audiences whilst acknowledging the history of his position.

This is known as visceral design, focusing solely on appearances. In his book Emotional Design: Why we love (or hate) Everyday Things, Don Norman states that this type of design "concerns itself with appearances"[19]. Andreas Komninos, in his article on the Interaction Design Foundation website, says "This level of design refers to the perceptible qualities of the object and how they make the user/observer feel...The visceral (deep-rooted, unconscious, subjective, and automatic feelings) qualities distinguish the two in the eyes of the owner."[20]

Jamie Davis, Communications Director at Edmond First Methodist Church in Oklahoma, said "If you go to an interview you dress for the job you want. It's the same for design, show off the way you want to be perceived to others"[21]. If churches are to be taken seriously and want to be perceived as interesting and relevant places to be, they need to display these qualities. This is the point at which visual design impacts the church.

PaperJam Design for St Pauls Bow Common[24]

Paperjam Design also created a new brand system for St Pauls Bow Street in the Diocese of London. Their work for this project was featured in Creative Review magazine. The idea was inspired by the brutalist architecture seen in their building. This created the almost dystopian creative style seen across their material now. By moving away from "more traditional religious imagery, [it] is bound to catch the attention of passers-by"[28].

This work was featured and discussed in Creative Review magazine to show how a church is using modernist styles to create something radically different. It was a bold yet brave direction to go.

A further example is Alabaster Co who have selected individual books of the Bible to create crafted, art-directed table books. These have begun to present the Bible in a new way, making these books more accessible for people to pick up and read. They are also modelling biblically-inspired creativity and encouraging others to see the beauty within each book.

So how do these ideas inspire the church? Quite simply, they should shape every communication decision that is made. The church cannot rely on a good message or solid content anymore, they need to make sure people aren't leaving at the first exit and not hearing what there is to be said. According to the Bible, the church's mission is to go out with the message of the gospel, but surely they could be more effective in this if they invested in the resources for design?

Not everyone can create a good design. However, there are many people in churches who could do this but, church's need to be active in discovering these people. This not only helps create great designs for the church, but also raises up new leaders and gives others a sense of ownership with the church's mission and work.

Bible Beautiful by Alabaster Co [25]

Conclusion

Colossians 3:23

The world is now in an experience driven era. Everything from aesthetics to functionality is being measured and remembered. These experiences are what draw audiences back to places, people, and products. Learning from these areas, the church can begin to develop their own experiences to keep members and new visitors engaged and returning. This does not mean the church should become a business or simply an attraction, but rather a place where people feel welcome and included. From taking a more thoughtful and user-centred approach, the church could engage those who attend in a more meaningful way. This experience must be considered from the onboarding at the beginning of a person's journey into church. Without a successful process people may not stay.

Online channels and platforms shouldn't be seen as distractions from a church's mission, but rather a way to reach outside the walls of the building and connect with people around them. Being online provides the church so many new opportunities and audiences to reach, not just in their local area but also on a much larger scale. These channels shouldn't replace going out and speaking to and meeting others, but should be the spark for conversations and discussions around the church. Digital channels also provide a great follow up after speaking with someone, allowing them to find out more about the church.

When producing materials, both internal and external, the design must be thoughtfully considered along with the content. This research has shown that without appropriate visuals, content can be missed by the people it is intended for. Churches should be some of the most creative places in the world, since they are inspired by the greatest designer of all time.

This research underpins a strong basis for the importance of UX and visual design within the church. Churches must be active in discovering people who have strong creative skills, using them to communicate content in the best way possible.

> **"Great and engaged creativity takes intentionality... Ideas are plentiful but amazing execution of those ideas are a rare commodity"[22].**

User experience design and visual design can have a stronger impact on the church than people realise. It can have an effect on the way in which the church communicates with others and how people are made to feel when in church.

Churches should encourage creatives both within and outside of their church and be willing to hear new ideas. In this way the church will flourish through new connections.

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What is your role within the church?
I am a UX Designer within a small team. We currently have 3 coders and have recently added a Business Analyst to the team to help us focus on SEO issues. I mainly focus on functionality of our site and information architecture. I don't really do a lot of visual design, we contract that out to one of the people who attends our church. He does a great job on the visual, he really understands our brand.

Overview of Watermark as a church
Watermark began as a handful of families meeting in a local school hall about 20 years ago. We now have four campuses across the Dallas Fort Worth Metroplex with around 8000 members and 23,000 attendees across all. For the last 7 years we were voted runner up as the best place to work in Dallas by the the Dallas Morning News and this year we came top! A number of churches now look to us as we run a leadership conference and our regeneration program is run nationwide in different churches.

We currently have 220 people on staff here, most of which are focused on community work.

What does UX mean in a church context? What does it mean to you personally?
I seat mainly as hospitality. We want to make sure people feel welcomed, that we don't confuse them, and most importantly we don't harm them in any way. It can be easy to get lost on a couple of our campuses due the their sizes. We operate a large coffee shop with a kids indoor play area in our Dallas campus and we want to try and communicate that sense of community on our website.

I started with user personas. We talked about the priority and for us the priority is the next 100, the best 100 to join us. Who are they and how can we make them feel welcomed?

I look at content a lot of the time. There has been a problem in the past as many of the staff here have had the freedom to put anything they wanted on the website which has resulted in around 13,000 pages on our current site. We are re-platforming our website and stripping back this content.

Another aspect of my job is educating staff, the ones who are closest to the digital spaces. I help them understand my role and why we should care about UX. I have introduced them to concepts such as 'ink-vomit', the idea that people post too many items or links on a page with no indication where they will take them to. I've found that people are less likely to engage with this as they don't know what to click on.

How do you measure success with your digital channels?
Our leadership and Senior Pastor isn't interested in seeing data, they'll ask for the story. We now look for patterns and create the story from it.

We introduced the idea of KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) and began asking the Pastor what his ideas were for them. Was it the number of kids checked in this week, or number of kids checked in twice?

We have been better implementing and learning about analytics to measure our figures better. This has allowed us to begin segmenting our users based on driving distance to the church. If you are outside this distance, we want to build you up and encourage you. If you are within driving distance, our aim is to get your butt in a seat.

Do you think there is a lack of consideration for UX in churches?
I think it's growing. There is a cottage industry of organisations helping churches do things like build better websites. We are starting to see a lot more nice church websites appearing. Some churches have no present and don't care at all.

I've found that a lot of people here don't know what I do and end up describing myself as a web designer.

We need to be careful what we are doing with technology. I've said to people that just because we can technically do something, it doesn't always mean we should. We could very easily match-make small groups and have them meet digitally but that's not how it works. These things can only happen face to face. I will do anything to help get them in the room but that's it.

What advice would you give to churches about improving their user experience?
If you have any hypothesis write them down, test them, and go check them out. Having fresh ideas can be a great habit to nurture. We can excuse ourselves for a lot of things since we understand why they are done in a specific way. We recently sent an employee through our membership

process as a sort of secret shopper to truly understand how good this experience is. They came back with a lot of useful information.

What inspired you to create great experience and design for church?
There is the possibility of getting it wrong will make the gospel stink. We can make this complex idea much more simple through both design and technology. I believe that we really can help you take your next step. I also feel that technology is the devils domain, it gives me a snickering attitude and feels good to steal some of it back from him.

Why do you think the church should put time and resources into their experiences and designs?
It's someones first impression. If you don't have a presences online you don't exist to most people, if you are not interested in growing community don't bother being online. Websites that are stupid can really frustrate people, it's the same as road rage when you cut someone off at a junction. We are doing the same thing by making websites unhelpful and badly organised. By creating great experiences we can bless people by showing them an easy way to content that is going to help them.

21 **Interview with Jamie Davis, 2019**

What is your role within the church?
I am the part-time communications director. I look after the website, social media, weekly newsletters, and general marketing for the church. I have been working for churches the past number of yeas. I originally studied graphic design before completing a second degree in marketing.

What role does design play in your church?
Lot's of churches just create anything using word art but I think you should design how you want to be perceived. When I first started working here I want to create consistency across all of our marketing. From here we have created a real identity that people recognise. This is important as I've seen other churches grow partly as a result of good, recognisable branding and a style that helps communicate well with others outside it.

What inspires you personally and your church to put resources into design?
My main drive is I want things to look nice. If you go to an interview you dress for the job you want. It's the same for design, show off the way you want to be perceived to others. We feel that we can reach more people in the community if we communicate well with them through the effort we put into our designs. Studies have been done that found more people are not attending church at all anymore, I think this comes from the perception that church is behind the times. I want to show people that church is relevant and there is a benefit to attending and part of this mission is achieved through our image. I feel challenged to freshen up the image of church to help show its relevance in the 21st Century.

I have seen in the past other churches who have a great image and look on paper but once getting there, this image was not reflected in the church itself, I feel there is a disconnect and lack of consistency between perceived image and true image of the church.

Do you think design has a noticeable impact on peoples impressions and experience of church?
Yes, absolutely! It has a lot if impact. The way you initially perceive a church sets expectations for when you arrive physically. By creating a great first impression, you can give people a delightful experience before they've even stepped through your churches door. I feel internal marketing is key before even considering external marketing. You can't look good on the outside then unprofessional when people arrive. This sort of experience won't encourage people to return to church.