

Brainstorming Session – Use of Technology in Leader Development (David Yeghnazar)

David: My name is David Yeghnazar. I serve with Elam Ministries. We work in Iran, and as we shared earlier, the church in Iran is growing. There are many isolated Christians in Iran so we have a lot of opportunities to reach people through technology. And so we're wrestling with the whole idea of using technology and how to use it well.. So Malcolm asked me to lead the brainstorming session for those interested in this area.

I want to give you some background about what we're trying to do today so that you know what to expect. Obviously, technology is a big area. I am not a technology expert; we're not going to come to all the solutions here. What we're really trying to do is think through ways that we can use technology in an intelligent, intentional manner to actually assist in developing leaders. So what are the possibilities that technology opens for us, what are the limitations we need to be aware of, and how can you use technology in your environment?

I want to do a little ice-breaking exercise. The other morning I woke up and I don't know why I had this thought, but the thought was how would I feel if I was told that I could never again in my life use a smartphone, or an iPad or anything like that. How would you feel? Go ahead and discuss in your groups and then we'll share some thoughts.

It's an interesting thought and the reason I ask that question is the reality is that technology is so much a part of our lives. And I think particularly ... I have four kids, so this is something that we're dealing with as parents; it's one of the biggest discussions. How many of you have children? So you know that it is one of the biggest issues in terms of parenting.

So one of our assumptions is that technology is a part of our lives. It is. And particularly for the future, when we are talking about reaching and working with people, you cannot just say well, you know technology is a little bit of an add-on to a ministry, it's a luxury to a ministry. It is actually a part of life. (Some of you thought I was telling you that you are going to die tomorrow if you didn't have a phone. You walk around with battery packs and planning when you're going to charge your phone....) So technology is an integral part of life, and I think as ministries we need to really think about that, not as an add-on or a luxury. For some it is, but for many it has to become a part of what we do. The question is how do we do use it well , and what are the limitations and how can it create problems for you? I think some other assumptions ... technology is neither good nor evil; it is just technology and can be used. As we have these discussions let's just assume that whatever technology you use, you find the secure way of using it because otherwise, that's going to get into a whole other field. So it's basically a brainstorming session to share ideas, generate new ideas possibly, and help us sharpen our thinking in our own context..

So quickly let's just in five minutes answer these questions in your group. How have you been using technology in your ministry? What has been good about it? In other words, how is it actually impacting people's lives? And what are the limitations that you are finding?

Can we quickly shout out some of the ideas, some of the ways that you have been using technology in your ministries?

Participant: We have WhatsApp and Skype thing, but also we have a project too called Wrike.

David: So you're using apps, and it's mainly for communication connection? Is that within your team? Apps, team communication, social media, branding, support raising, blogs, videos. What is the purpose of that?

Participant: Highlighting different things that are happening within to catch people's attention, because there's just like a barrage of information always happening. So it helps them to stop and to connect to a face and a voice.

David: Is there any other thing you are using other than communication?

Participant: For evangelism, discipleship, and accountability. We are basically sending evangelistic material as PDF or audio through an app. Also, discipleship – creating groups and basically training them with materials – people who I cannot reach physically. And they can report back, which is accountability. So they are accountable, and they send me their homework.

David: So how are you actually doing that?

Participant: Through telegram app, evangelism.

Participant: So if I have a contest with middle school kids and high school kids and university students in China where they submit a two-minute video, and they get a prize for the best one. And then we take these 50 videos and mix them together, on the glory of God and creation and how God is real. Then post it on a website – what would you call that? I would call it discipling the people who are making videos; then we used those videos for evangelism. Then I also teach Hebrew to a group of Chinese kids through WhatsApp, sometimes real-time; sometimes I create videos.

David: Teaching. Okay, so we're using it for team communication, social media, evangelism, discipleship, and teaching and *training*, which is really what we want to talk about here. Because this is in leadership development. Most ministries are using technology at the very basic level, for communication. The reality is there is so much that can be done with technology. And in particular, there are things that can be done for leader development, to help people in their context. But it's not everything; we want to see how can it be useful and what are the limitations? Just to give you an idea, in our context you have Iran where there used to be about 20 church buildings about 20 years ago. Then they went into house churches which were in about 100 cities. But now because of the evangelism and all that is happening in Iran, there are thousands of Christians all over the country, literally spread all over, isolated. So what we've been thinking about this is how we can use technology to reach these people, and then take them on a discipleship journey. You may have similar kinds of needs in your area – anybody can relate to that kind of situation?

Participant: 20 years ago when China was blocked from the outside, many ministries had a radio broadcast in from South Asia, like Singapore and Hong Kong. They radioed all the information to that inland China station the way they did 20 years ago.

David: What about here, anything? What are the needs you have? This is our context where we're trying to reach people who are not easily accessible to us. We don't have one location. Is that similar to your situation?

Participant: Because if we're using one particular media, it would not reach all people. You have to divide it into different kinds of media.

David: When it comes to leader development: so you've evangelized, you're communicating within your team. But now you have people that you want to train; you want to help them grow, whether it's in a particular skill or a particular ability. And you want to use technology because they don't come to your center all the time. How can you use technology in that case? So the question here is before we go to the technology, what is good leader development? When it comes to technology let's not forget the principles of good leader development. What is actually necessary to build healthy leaders? The question is how can you use technology according to that? What are some of the principles of good leader development that you've heard this week? Is everybody aware of the ConneXions Model? If you look at the ConneXions Model and particularly the 4Ds, you have the Spiritual dynamic, you have the Relational, Experiential, and Instructional - We need all of those 4Ds to be strong in our training models. So the question is what have we been using technology for? Where have you used technology?

Participant: Mostly relational I think because it's communication, it's connecting. So we're trying to have a relationship through that, but I think that there might be a real temptation to miss out on experience because you're not experiencing.

David: So a little bit of the relational comesthrough electronic communication. What does that mean? Maybe let's have a discussion in the groups here, just this Spiritual, Relational, Experiential, Instructional – where do you think technology can be most useful?

What are some of the ways that you've done training, encouraging or equipping people in each of these four areas? We can learn from each other, and we will move on to the next step. In terms of spiritual, what are some of the things that people do? Prayer chains ... how does that actually work, a way of communication.

Participant: Similar to that is instead of just telling them your next prayer request, we actually exchanged texts of prayers with each other.

David: So communication and info. So what I like about that is that it's actually relational as well because they're not doing it alone. They feel “part of,” that's going to be an important thing which I'll mention after we finish this. What other ideas do we have in terms of building people spiritually and using technology?

Participant: We have videos of teachings, and also instructional.

David: Okay, so that's an instructional or spiritual. This is a spiritual experience, so the question is how are you using technology to give them a spiritual encounter? Prayer is spiritual activity. Can you see the difference?

Participant: Many people who are illiterate can't read this how they are.

David: So let's call it audio/video devotional ways. What we've done at Elam, we have created a 30-minute worship program which is called *Time for Worship*, and it's not a show of music. It's intentional, it's a group of people worshipping, and they encourage them to join in the worship. Every time it is encouraging them to join worship for their house church. They watch it; they actually worship together.

Participant: I think there is something called "worship mob," where it appears to me that they are meeting at different places and through the Internet, so you feel you're worshipping, always people at the same time.

David: Okay, let's have one more. Any more on the spiritual, building a spiritual life?

Participant: Instagram Live, and basically people can watch the whole church service at home or wherever they are.

David: It's helpful to know: what is it building? how is it actually aiding the people that you're serving? I think the reality is most ministries think, *oh that's a cool idea let's do that*. And they become fans. They do an Instagram Live, that's cool, they have 6000 followers. What are you doing that's actually building the life of the people you're trying to equip? So what else do we have, anything relationally? Content, it can be used spiritually, it can be instructional depending on what the content of the audio is. The idea here is just because you have something it's not necessarily building spiritual life unless you intentionally use it that way. So just because we have an audio Bible app how do you teach people to engage with that app to build this in their life? It's like giving somebody a hard copy of the Bible, whether or not they know how to read it and how to use it..... So that engagement with the app or the technology ... how are they actually engaging?

What else do we have?

Social media groups for prayers, for needs, for updates.

What else do you have?

Go There Groups, conference calls.

Let's go to the instructional. You have videos, teachings, theological content, devotional content apps, testimonies, personal evaluation tools, PDFs, degrees, all sorts of training materials. I love some of these things here, especially this Go There Group, and I'll mention why. If you did the study - I haven't done an official study, but I have talked to different people, and I've also read a little bit in the business world - the reality is that basically when it comes to technology the main thing that we do is deliver content to people. So we have an idea that we want to share, or we think that was a brilliant message more people should hear. So you get the audio of it, and you send it to people; somebody

receives that. So a lot of ministries do that, they do it well, they have a church website, they promote their website, people listen to the messages and if it's a great preacher, people hear it.

But a lot of us use technology mainly for delivering content, and we think the more we can get content out there, the better. So the question really is, is there more we can do with technology than just delivering content? How can you become more effective? This is a helpful grid in thinking about training, because if it's just content that we're delivering to people, then you're missing out on these different areas. And we need to decide in our own context, is technology going to be a supplement only to the training and the equipping that we do? Or can it become more of a key part of what we're doing? And then within that, there's basically two models here; one is just the supplement to deliver content, or there's other things that we can do with it, knowing the limitations.

So Harvard Business School has a great reputation, and they did some research because they actually went into the whole world of online education. And actually listening to them talk about this was fascinating because for them it was even an extremely difficult thing to get right, and they tried different models. But Harvard has a model of training people where they used case studies all the time. That's how they train people, even in the live education in Massachusetts. So it's all case studies, to get people together and they'll say this is a real-life situation, what would you do? Then they go backwards to go to the theory and all that. So what they said was how are we going to replicate this online? And the traditional model in the short history of technology, would be, the answer was okay, let's film the discussion. So we'll have a live teaching here, let's film it, we put it online, people can register and watch the discussion, and at least get something out of it, and that is a fail for them. What they realized was you can use technology to replicate *some* of the experiences. But people don't really get education. Why? Because they're not actually having the experience that the students are having.

So you guys have had an experience talking to each other, you've got some ideas; they popped into your head because you've had a discussion. Now if I'm just watching you in a different time zone, in a different place, I don't have that same experience. So the question that they're asking is, can we use technology to replicate that kind of experience? Ministries need to realize that it's not just filming content, even though it looks live, we want to use technology to give people an experience. So that's why you're Go There Groups are actually useful. They're actually becoming open because they're having real conversations. So what Harvard did was they created online learning communities which is something like this Go There Group where people are actually communicating with each other. So it's worth investing in the right platform. There are many, many different ways where people can actually communicate with each other; they feel part of the group.

The prayer chain is an interesting one from a spiritual perspective. You can tell people who are isolated in Iran, do you need to pray? Here's a video that shows you how to pray; watch this video, and you'll learn how to pray. But how much better to give them an actual environment where they're actually praying together with somebody else? You see how the dynamics begin to grow the experience and you're actually building spiritual enlightenment other than this video.

The question they had at Harvard was, "well if we have all these learning groups are we going to have to employ loads and loads of mentors and teachers who are going to manage each of these groups?" What they actually found was that when they gave the assignments, the same real-life case studies that they gave in the live sessions, through their interaction, students were actually coming up with all the right answers on their own. And so they had much less of a need for adding staff than they expected to,

because there's so much information online, people are able to educate each other; they have information. And it's actually the dynamic of learning together, speaking together, giving them groups assignments and giving them the assignments to come back as a group to give a report or project. And they found that actually, the group was self-teaching. What they discovered was that the people were actually able to engage with each other in the group.

Now actually I was talking to Rob Walter, and we were talking about this. There is a group that found that sometimes the online groups actually open up more about their real problems and their real difficulties because of the anonymity. So the whole point is how can you use technology so that the person isn't just receiving information but actually engaging in the process of learning and being equipped? And I would be happy if we all leave only thinking and understanding that technology isn't just delivering content. And we find ways that are fantastic tools.

The question though is, what are the limitations of technology? So here's a question for you ... how much would Paul have used technology if he had access to everything that we had? How do you think Paul would have used it?

Participant: I think Paul would have used technology as much as he could; he'd use technology, the technology that was available to him. He would have used it not just to deliver the information; he would have used it to build a conversation. I think though he would still have taken Timothy with him. He would have used technology to the max. The letter we have is because he was using technology – that was the technology of the day. But he still would have taken Timothy with him. So where we have landed as a ministry we want to say, we want to use technology the best way that we possibly can. We want to study it, we want to use it effectively, but we still believe in face-to-face ministry wherever it is possible because that's where there's some kind of transaction that happens between people. That is very, very ... that's the most transformative, is the way that people connect. But that doesn't mean to say that we can't replicate some parts of that. Intelligently using technology as much as possible. And so that's what we try to do.

So as far as our ministry is concerned, we have multiple different groups using communications. We have a preaching team; we have over 40 churches in Turkey for example, and they're all fairly new. They don't know how to preach messages very well. They've been through training, but they're still young leaders.

David: So we have a weekly preaching team that meets together, they discuss the text, they share their outlines. So they're actually building up their messages together with people all around the country. That's an absolutely brilliant use of technology. We have daily Internet churches; the different Internet churches are like we've heard from our brother here, people all around the world possibly or all around Iran. And sometimes it's one person in one place teaching a group of 12 people in one house. So there's different ways you're trying to use the technology to give them some kind of interaction. We use videos and all sorts of materials. Where we have not become strong enough yet is this whole idea of peer-to-peer groups actually working together and then coming back to us. I think there's a different level of assigning a group of people work to do, letting them collaborate and come back. And that means that they're doing the work, and it's less responsibility on the mentor. So that way you can multiply basically more. That's something that we're going to try and do more and more and see how it goes.

What are some of the ideas that have come to your mind as we talked?

Participant: With the span of attention now growing less and less in people and the time, because people don't spend time anymore, just on whatever app, whatever website, whatever. People just slip through. So when you do this, how long is your session, for example? What would be something that would grab people's attention for more than three minutes?

David: What you're identifying is there is a divide. There is your general audience getting people's attention who are not committed to a program. So you have general questions that you make a great three-minute video on how to pray; you want those people to watch it. That's what would be sort of general consumption. What I'm talking about with our groups is where there's a committed group who actually are signed up to be a part of a study group, or part of your leadership development program, whatever that might be. And I think what we haven't, but what many ministries haven't done, is distinguish between these two groups, because we will produce a five-minute video on a particular teaching or something, and we sort of throw it out here hoping that some of these people who need to watch it will watch it. Do you see what I'm saying? And I think the more you can help the people that you are trying to actually disciple and train feel like they're actually part of something real even though it's digital, the better. So there are ways that you can do that; they actually sign up, there are schedules that they have to commit to, Thursday morning 10 o'clock we always have a session. And report, this is where they have to report and actually send information.

One of the things that Harvard found interesting was in the Harvard system, like in any class, you call out people to contribute. It's not just put your hands up, you actually say, so if somebody puts their hand up and then I say, "Hey Neema, what do you think?" and that person then has to stand up and give a response. So you can do that online as well, so that people feel like they're not alone. How many of you have been in a meeting where you've turned it on mute and started doing your emails, right? So what they do is they have found ways of doing that so that they will say, "Okay John, what do you think? Come and give us your presentation now. And not just a quick answer, we want your five-minute presentation on the subject." So all of them come to the class expecting I might be expected to contribute something significant here. So they actually come prepared rather than just, "Oh yeah, I've got a meeting."

The interesting thing for parents ... children used to go to school, they would have problems with their friends while they were at school, they would come home, and at least they would have a break from being engaged with the difficulties at school. But they're engaged with problems of school until the moment they sleep unless you have guidelines for them. And that's a really hard thing. So we'll come back to that in a minute, but just to finish this here. The other way to get them to commit is to both report and also to prepare to contribute to the group, however it is.

Participant: When you do this, how long do you think people are willing to engage?

David: It depends on the group, and it depends on the program.

Participant: So if you have a session like this, how long does it last?

David: So we would have a session usually it's about an hour, an hour and a half; it depends on what it is. But it depends on how well it's done. If it is an hour of one person speaking, then I'm definitely going to be checking my email. But if you use some of these tactics ... it's the same thing in the classroom. If I

spoke for an hour directly, you would definitely be nodding off by now, but you're still talking because we're talking together. And so I think that's the thing, so the preaching class that we have they are all contributing. It is not just one guy saying, "Here is what I think you should preach." So they're actually conversing almost like they are in person. And it's really, really a powerful experience for them; they love that. We have team meetings; people do that all the time. Now, you can spend too much time; you can spend too little time; it depends on the way that you deliver that training. I think it's helpful to think about the distinction between a committed group for a specific purpose or a general group.

Now there was just as an example, there was a 12-week course I thought would be good for some of our people to do. So we paid for some of them to do this, and they went to the first one, a couple of them went to the second one. I think by the third lesson none of them continued. Because basically it was like watching YouTube videos, and it was like "I can watch that another time, I don't have time right now." So as much as possible use it in a structured way just like you would in a normal training course.

But coming back to our brother's point, there are limitations, and we have to be aware of that, particularly within our context. One of the main areas that there was a limitation is the relational area, as much as you can do some of this, you cannot beat the face-to-face interaction. That's why I say Paul would still take Timothy with him. If you really want to deal with people, never replace the face-to-face interaction. And if we as leaders are only communicating with our people through apps and through email, then we're going to lose touch with our people as well. We may be online digitally, but I still need to as a leader sit down with my people and look them in the eye and say, "How are you doing?" So it's both, hopefully, that's what comes across.

Participant: I can't say it was a study, but in the business world when video communications first began, the prediction was that it would reduce travel because now we can meet. And the result was, though, that it increased travel for the same purpose. So there was a felt need for the personal face-to-face connection.

David: I'm not a social media expert, but I have read a bit, I've studied a bit. There are definitely ways where you can have much more interaction with your general group as well. Rather than just posting content online, how do you actually engage people? So the whole area is it's just not the creation of content; you possibly heard the phrase *content is king* online, which in many ways is true. But in many ways it's not true. It's the way that that content is delivered, and people are able to engage with it and with others. So you have the idea of content; then you have the idea of people engaging, a person engaging with the content. That's what you want; you want the person to engage with the content. But actually, the highest level is where the people are engaging with each other and the content, because that's where the learning, with you, with each other, so it's not just the one, you see the dynamic here. And so if you're just posting content that's one thing, but when somebody is engaging with it that's positive, and when they are engaging with this content with other people, then this person engages it somebody else, and that's how it grows.

So we have five minutes maybe. Maybe just in five minutes, anything that you want to think, one thing that you can do in your ministry that as a result of this hour of your life that you've invested. That you might go back to your team and say, "Hey, how about we do this, how about we think about this?" So let's get one takeaway if possible that you can actually do something about so that it becomes a useful brainstorming session. And then if anybody wants to then share it with us that would be great.