

## How visible are our churches in the digital world ?

Michel Kocher, CEPPLÉ Forum, Lisbon, October 2018

### A. Introduction

How should we be considering the fundamental schemes or analysing, in our churches, the digital world, its effects and limitations? That's the question we examined with the communicators at the CEPPLÉ Forum in April 2018 in Madrid. We proposed a *media-angled and theological analysis of these schemes* – that of worlds of speech coupled with a *digital application, in other words interactive and transversal*: the ContactGPS. It is at the same time a website and an application that can be downloaded to tablets and mobile phones (via Android and AppStore).

Both need to remain separate, even if they are both integrated in the project we developed for the CEPPLÉ. Both can be critiqued or developed outside of the project. The ContactGPS app is still at an early stage and in the process of open-sharing with the churches. It is being developed in various fields, with different partners. There is a version for young people too, called PassagesGPS.

Here are the 4 schemes that we identified with the communicators. On the video we created (translated into four languages), they have been linked to one person, in order to demonstrate that we are each time showing a specific world of speech.



That of interpersonal interaction: it's the fundamental basis we are working from. (the Gospel is relational.)



That of the media: digital media is a new social media, after radio and TV. (The transmission of the Gospel goes via the media, guaranteeing its orality.)



That of a social body becoming digital: in a digital society, institutions are evolving. (The church is transformed by culture.)



That of words that express faith: there are things that are written that need to be translated into the digital. If scripture is meant to reprogramme the conscience of a believer, as we see in the New Testament, with the spoken proclamation of the Kingdom of God by Jesus, which becomes a sermon for the justification by faith in Paul's letters, digitalisation will rework it in the same way.

As you see, with the GPS we are not working initially with a psychological pattern (your profile) or a sociological one (your church), but *mediological* and *anthropological* (general syntax that oversees digital integration and reflexion), albeit using an angle of practical theology (the worlds of transmission of the Word).

### B. The results

At the time of showing the results, 115 tests were carried out: 45% of them by women, 77% by Swiss people, 17% by French people. The targeted participants are deacons and pastors in our

networks. As a consequence, the results point to the worlds of speech, the priority schemes that our participants relate to, here and now. Where do we situate ourselves primarily?



institutional communication 63%



new church formats 22%



an impacted, transformed faith 10%



a new form of pastoring 5%

### C. Interpretation of the results

How should we interpret these results? We could first analyse what lies behind our primary choices. We see two dominant convictions. Next, we can question what isn't a priority, what these choices mean, generally-speaking, when it comes to our position and perception of the digital world. This gives us two strategic questions.

#### Conviction 1

**“Nowadays, our communities need to be better (re)presented in the public sphere” (85%)**

Evidently, we consider that the digital world (the web, social networks) is an opportunity to be seized as a way of presenting ourselves in a virtual space. This is a priority. Effectively, we realise that we are suffering from a lack of visibility in society and that it needs to be compensated by a commitment to “go out on stage” in the digital world. As a matter of fact, the videos we saw at the forum in Lisbon illustrate this priority, and make them real as shown in the clips.

#### Conviction 2

**“Being committed to transmitting our theological and spiritual resources gives us a good toolkit.” (69%)**

We have assets, a backbone we can stand on, and those are the theological and spiritual resources we get from our denominational traditions. That is where we can look for ways to transmit the Gospel in a digital society. For example, we could cite the MOOC<sup>1</sup> organised by the Faculty of Theology of Geneva on violence and religions.

Theological and spiritual resources are a powerful motor, but mounted onto a relatively heavy framework. These resources need primarily to be deployed via coms (as in the video series in French, “*Ma femme est Pasteur*” [My wife is a pastor]) and interpersonal relationships. We can add that the cited examples (“My wife is a pastor” or the MOOC) have trans-territorial and trans-ecclesial dimensions.

#### Question 1

**The transmission of *personal* faith is secondary. (15%) Why?**

We prioritise the reinforcement of how visible the community is over that of the expression of personal faith. It doesn't mean that it gets excluded, but it becomes secondary. Why?

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<sup>1</sup> Massive Open Online Course

The GPS doesn't answer this question, but nothing prevents us from seeking a response in other areas.

- Could this only be about the digital sphere or is it a general thought?
- Do we think it isn't necessary?
- Maybe it doesn't fit in with our church culture?
- Have we decided to leave it to others? Really?
- Is it not a priority? Why? Is the main focus the institutional, the collective?
- Are we maybe not trained or equipped to do it?
- Maybe we don't realise the importance of *individuals* in digital society, those who are empowered by it.

## Question 2

### **Beginning by immersing ourselves in digital culture is secondary. (32%) Why?**

Missionaries used to begin by learning the language of the countries they were sent to. It took time, years even. Next, they would translate the Bible into the indigenous language, needing, most of the time, to engage in processes of interpretation, as complex as they were risky, yet done with passion. When it comes to digital culture, we don't have this kind of patience and don't approach things in the same way (yet). Why?

Again, the GPS doesn't provide the answer, but it encourages us to ask ourselves a few questions. Here are some for us:

- Does digital culture remove our denominational personality? Does this trouble or threaten us?
- Are we more inclined to think it on the outside... rather than live it on the inside?
- Maybe there is nobody to train us in this type of grammar?
- Does digital grammar (fluid and on demand) possibly come second to linear grammar (reading material, services...)?

## D. Further thoughts

### **A consideration:**

With the mutations linked to new technologies and globalisation, *space loses its importance to time*. Translated into a Christian context, this means that "*the mission goes from distances to be overcome... to a time for living in a human way, in a new way (spirituality, ecology, silence...)*".

### **A challenge:**

To deploy actions that are clearly trans-territorial and trans-ecclesial, but anchored in a personal faith open to diversity.

### **A point of focus for the CEPPLE:**

To find a *theme* that matches the common testimony that we can all give within our European and Latin contexts.

- A Christian Europe or European Christians?
- Migrants – how to put into practice welcoming others
- Minorities – allowing them to speak without complex
- After the 500 years – another Reformation?