

AUGMENTED RELEVANCE: CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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A Reality Check

Even if you are not familiar with “augmented reality”, you are most likely already living in its world. The way we learn, interact, socialize, work, produce, experience, and live has changed dramatically; and our Sabbath School experience is due for a major upgrade to take it out of the 2D world.

Reality is not what it used to be, and if you are not convinced, just wait to see some Pokémon chasers pass nearby. Mixing the real world with the digital one opens up dimensions unexplored before. You have probably heard of Google glasses, but if you haven’t checked Microsoft’s HoloLens, I urge you to do it. “Your world is the canvas”¹, as they like to say.

While entertainment and games with creatures coming out of the walls and crawling on your couch, may not be everyone’s cup of tea, just think about a live hologram or video skype call connecting you to someone that can help you fix your plumbing problem by guiding your moves and pointing you to the right places. Imagine being able to digitally extract the physical piece, to look at it from any angle, quickly find all relevant data about it, experiment with it, and then apply the best approach on the physical item. What if you were able to physically see the actual kitchen cabinet in its real space, before you bought it or built it? How about looking at a human brain, or studying the human nervous system through a realistic hologram superimposed on your real world, along with all relevant data, pictures, videos, etc. to empower your experience and decision making? How much more would you appreciate a place that you are visiting, if you can visualize the culture and history surrounding it?

This is the world in front of us; this is the world where reality is augmented with the power of data, accumulated knowledge, artificial intelligence, and the capabilities of technology. The Sabbath School may be considered as an example of spiritual augmented reality, where our real world is superimposed with the spiritual experience and the super natural that God is bringing into our lives. It is powerful and no technology will ever be capable to match that. However, through the way we do Sabbath School, we are augmenting either its relevance or irrelevance for those involved and therefore I believe that it is time for a general makeover.

The Study

The main purpose of the Sabbath School is education and study of Scripture. What I dislike most in a Sabbath School group is when the “teacher” assumes the role of “teaching”. In the same time my best memories from my church life are from Sabbath School, because it was not about someone teaching, but about us all researching, brainstorming, discussing. I remember carrying a heavy

briefcase with big books: bible dictionary, concordance, commentaries, different Bible translations... to our Sabbath School meetings and how fun it was to dig deep into the study. Looking at the issues from different angles, challenging our understandings to make sure that they make sense, and enriching them with individual personal perspectives – this is what excited us and stimulated us to study during the week. If Sabbath School is limited to a Saturday morning encounter, without personal study, it's losing its heart.

One of the main challenges for Sabbath School today, the way I see it, is the study format. We learn differently today. Compare the excitement of looking at the world through HoloLens to what we currently have as study guides. They need to be able to compete for our limited time with lots of other distractions. We could always blame the “students” for not making time for the serious things, for not being serious enough to study, but this should not be our excuse. The spiritual journey is the most exciting adventure ever, it is life transforming, and the walk with God is never boring. It is our privilege and responsibility to create and maintain an environment to stimulate and nurture growth. We need to tap onto the technologies available and accommodate to the way we process and digest information.

The Fellowship

Sabbath School is the favorite church time for many, because this is the time when you are not just a spectator, but a participant and you can share your thoughts, questions, experience and you can listen to what your friends or other church members think. This is where church becomes more personal and relational. However, it could also be a very awkward time when there is nothing to say or share, or when someone takes over and drives his own views.

The reason why people can be passive or seem disengaged, is not always because they don't have anything to say, or because they are not interested. They may interact better and participate more through other means, like social media, trivia style games, or just when they are in different setting. It makes a difference when the conversation is built through the week, through the study, rather than just once a week in a formal setting. The Sabbath School should provide resources and means for facilitating such conversations.

The local Sabbath School leaders have a crucial role to play in building such discussions and engagement, but they need to see and understand the vision. They also need support and resources: applications to streamline the conversations; resources to enrich them; tools to track, motivate, evaluate; and creativity to make the experience engaging and to augment it. Such things can make a difference between wanting to skip the Sabbath School segment of the church service and not being able to wait for the next encounter.

Outreach

The post-modern person is not interested in what our religion teaches, he/she is interested in our personal experience and our story. Sabbath School is the best avenue where he can learn about us, about our values, and about our beliefs. However, it can't happen if it looks and smells like a religious school or religious exercise. If we can build the study and fellowship as discussed earlier, we will also reshape Sabbath School and open it for everyone around us. There is hunger for meaningful conversations, for deeper engagement, for spiritual motivation, and for people that you can trust and share with. Sabbath School

is a powerful outreach tool, but if it loses its relevance and feels outdated, it becomes just a tradition and religious practice that is not only unattractive, but cultivates the wrong fruits.

Technology

Technology has reshaped our lives and transformed our culture, but our mentality as church is slow to adapt. We have a powerful message, an important testimony, and the greatest relationship that exceeds the boundaries of our world, but we need the help of the Holy Spirit to help us speak and understand the language of our time.

It's not just about creating software and contemporary media, but about building a mentality for the new augmented reality. The church has people skilled in technology, with love and passion for it, but there is a huge gap between those that can help build technical tools, and those that strategize how we live, portray, and grow our spiritual experience. To build the right technology that can help us excel in new dimensions, we need to be building solutions for specific problems and engines that overcome current limitations. It's an exciting time to live in.

Infrastructure and Operations

The way the church operates and functions needs to adapt. We should not “pour new wine into old wineskins”² (*New International Version*, Matthew 9:17). There is a need for a new way of budgeting and identifying priorities. Building the right technology is not cheap. It requires time, agility, determination, and funds. The prism through which costs are evaluated though, is often distorted. It may seem too expensive to build certain app or another tool, but we fail to compare it to the amounts currently spent with their level of effectiveness. The current administrative structure in our organizations is built around the concept to provide the product, support, or service in house. We hire directors with support staff and assign them budgets for travel and few resources and ask them to go and serve. Instead, we need to hire visionaries that can be assigned budgets to build solutions through outsourcing. Solutions that can serve and empower employees, pastors, and volunteers. It's a shift, but it's not about us, it's about being builders in ministry, shaping a mentality, growing and developing with the opportunities of our time.

Relevance

I feel privileged to live in the present. Seeing and experiencing how God works in our world every day fills my heart and lifts me closer to Him. The ugly face of evil is everywhere, but God's touch makes a difference and there is nothing more powerful than sharing this experience. We are not reading fables or cold doctrines. What we have is not just for the poor, the uneducated, and the naïve. We are given access to a reality that our mind can't grasp, and we are obliged to do our best testifying about it and growing in understanding about it. It has to make sense. It has to be relevant.

The Sabbath School is not a segment of the church program. It's not a place or time. It's the church in study, fellowship, and mission. This is us conversing, digging deep in spiritual matters, learning more about each other, and growing together. The doors of a world different than the surrounding mere reality

are being opened for us. Will we let some traditions or fear of change to keep us prisoners of low dimensional restrictions?

Endnotes

- 1 Microsoft, "Microsoft HoloLens", 7 Feb. 2017, <<https://www.microsoft.com/microsoft-hololens/en-us>>
 - 2 *New International Version*, Bible Gateway. Web. 7 Feb. 2017.
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