

New Media Ministry Challenges

(c) 2002 - D. Gilliland

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
History Lessons We Can Learn From or Ignore.....	1
Goals of Christian Communication.....	4
Axis of Analysis.....	4
Methods of Interaction	5
Instant Messaging (IM)/Chat Rooms (IRC)	5
World Wide Web	8
E-Mail.....	12
Listserves	13
USENET.....	13
Conclusions.....	18
Bibliography	20

Challenges of New Media Ministries

Introduction

The Internet has brought along with it an incredible increase in the speed of communications. Not since the invention of the printing press, has there been as dramatic reduction in the cost in terms of both dollars and days, of transmitting information between individuals. However, the change represented by the Internet is, in some ways, more than an evolutionary increase.

This paper outlines various forms of ministry on the Internet as they are presently practiced as well as makes some projections about future ministry opportunities.

History Lessons We Can Learn From or Ignore

The challenge of the Internet can best be understood by placing it into its historical context. The history of the communications problem goes back since the dawn of time. Writing probably developed somewhere around 3000 BC in response to a need to record accounting information. Initially, it was no more than a single mark for a single object. Later it developed into a representation of the sounds themselves. Soon the use of writing expanded to include much more information such as genealogical records of the Pharaohs. Even in such early examples, there is evidence of suppression of information being as important to political stability as what was preserved¹. This “communications

¹ On occasion a Pharaoh would “erase” the name of his predecessor from the record which was carved in stone.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

revolution” continues down to this day and the Internet is an extension of that initial revolution. The permanence of records with an eye towards posterity was clearly in mind when foundation cylinders were buried at the corners of palaces and temples in ancient times. More than a few analogies can be seen with our present day.

The use of paper and pen was a big step. The apostles who wrote the New Testament made use of pen and paper. Much of the New Testament was letters sent from the Apostle to a particular church addressing their problems. The response time on such messages would probably be in the timeframe of many months. The letter could not be sent through a public system but had to be sent through a trusted source. The Apostles clearly used the most sophisticated means of communications available to them at the time.

Breaking up rolls of paper and binding them into the codex form is believed to be an invention of the Christian church for binding together books of the Scriptures².

Arguably, the next big step had to wait over 1000 years until the invention of the printing press. With the printing press the cost of having information at the fingertips of the curious investigator was greatly reduced. Books became much more commonplace and information was easily shared with larger and larger audiences. Newspapers also became technically possible. The Protestant Reformation’s emphasis on the Scripture in the

² An excellent example of this is the mid fourth century Codex Alexandrinus which can be seen at the British Library in London. This manuscript is a codex form.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

vernacular would not have been possible without this important invention. Printing of Gospel tracts and disputations allowed the general public to become conversant with doctrinal issues that had been behind closed doors in the past.

Several inventions of the past century greatly sped up this process. The invention of telegraph, radio and television each brought increases in the ease of communications. Telegraph allowed transcontinental and even intercontinental messages to be sent in minutes. Radio allowed the listener to hear with fidelity the actual speaker's voice³. In order to keep in touch with their families at home Christian missionaries have used Amateur Radio⁴. Television finished the process by allowing the image and sound both to be viewed. All of these new forms of media found use in Christian Ministry with varying degrees of success and infamy⁵.

The Internet was developed by the US Government for the purpose of keeping the National Labs in communication with each other. It was eventually expanded to include private citizens. Today, Internet ministry combines each of the media forms (written

³ The founder of Fuller Seminary, Charles Fuller, was a radio preacher.

⁴ The author was involved with this ministry in the past and set up radio stations at several missionary locations. This method is still useful for missionaries in locations where the Internet connectivity is poor. A hybrid service known as a "relay service" can allow the Christian Missionary to check their email over the Amateur Radio and send mail.

⁵ Infamy in the case of "televangelists" who have become synonymous with "swindlers" in our time.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

word, spoken word, images). The revolutionary aspect is that the listener is much more in charge of what he chooses to interact with than at any point in the past.

Goals of Christian Communication

There are two main goals of Christian communications. These are:

- To get the word of God out to the hearer that has ears to hear.
- Build up the community of faith.

Axis of Analysis

The dimensions of analysis in this paper are:

- Methods of interaction
- Connectivity issues
- Cost issues
- Us vs. Them ism
- Mixed media content
- Utilization by traditional resources

Challenges of New Media Ministries

Methods of Interaction

Probably, the part of the Internet that most people are familiar with is e-mail. Many others are familiar with the World Wide Web. A smaller group is familiar with Instant Messaging and/or Chat Rooms. An even smaller group is familiar with USENET. These methods are compared as follows:

Internet Service (Method)	Speed (YMMV⁶)	Typical Characteristics	Single/Multiple Destinations
Instant Messenger / Chat Rooms	Seconds	Two way conversations.	Single (private) or multiple (group)
E-Mail	Minutes	Each side sends discrete message.	Single or multiple destinations
Moderated Listserve	Hours - Day	Each side sends discrete message which is approved by moderator.	Multiple semi-anonymous subscribers
USENET Services	Hours	Each side posts messages.	Multiple anonymous lurkers ⁷
Web pages	Days	Like conventional authorship.	Multiple

Instant Messaging (IM)/Chat Rooms (IRC)

Currently, Instant Messaging (IM) is most popular with teenagers. Instead of tying up their parent's phones talking with their friends, they spend hours on-line with their friends in instant messaging sessions. One of the features of these chat rooms is that one person can communicate with many people at the same time, establish a private communications channel or do both at the same time. It's possible to have several people in a group with some of them having side conversations with each other at the same time.

⁶ Internet jargon for "Your Mileage May Vary."

⁷ A "lurker" is someone who listens but does not participate in an Internet USENET group.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

This fits well into the teenager mentality. They can communicate as a group with each other (without call waiting interruptions of the phone). They can also have side conversations where they make fun of other people in the group without the person hearing it. This is the clique mentality. Filters can be applied to people who someone doesn't want to communicate with. The most effective means of Christian witness into an IM conversation is to have a Christian in the group who can interject her Christian viewpoint into the conversation. This is just the same as any other conversation.

IRC groups are actually different than Instant Messaging. Chat Rooms are typically part of an Internet Service known as "Internet Relay Chat", or IRC. The main differences are the duration of the groups as well as the people who go into the groups. IM groups are created when people first start to use a group and they cease to exist when people leave the IM chat. For IM, a person has to know the screen name of the other person(s) that they want to talk with.

IRC groups are initially created by a central authority, which requires 10 individual petitioners request the group be created. There are literally tens of thousands of IRC channels that have already been established⁸. Many of these have Christian themes⁹. Moderators are typically assigned from the people who created the groups initially. One

⁸ Getting found in the midst of the sheer number is difficult. IRC directory services are poor. Typically, they end up being by invitation.

⁹ Some are directed towards a particular church or denomination. Others are directed towards age groups, particular youth groups. Still others are oriented around Bible study.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

moderator has ultimate power to disallow the other moderators from being moderator.

Bots¹⁰ can be added to groups. IRC has useful applications in the church. Today, church youth are already meeting on IRC channels to talk about their activities.

One advantage of IRC channels is that you get whoever is there. If someone wanted prayer at 2 AM, but didn't want to call someone on the phone for fear of waking them up, they could check the IRC channel for participants and their last time of activity. It's generally good netiquette¹¹ to say "Hello" when arriving in an IRC channel. Like IM, oftentimes there are private conversations going on the side on for public groups. IRC Groups tend to get regular participants who enjoy communicating with each other.

One difficulty of IRC is that it can be a many-on-the-one situation¹². One hyper-Calvinist IRC channel¹³ is well known for this technique. Also, IRC channels seem to be plagued

¹⁰ Bots are computer programs that are run on a computer associated with the IRC service provider (typically a university) and not on a particular users computer. For instance, a "Bible Bot" can be tied to a theology group so that people can simple type a reference (such as: "!Jn 1:1") and the passage will be typed out.

¹¹ Etiquette on the Internet.

¹² This happens when a group of people all "gang up" on one poor soul who is not used to carrying on multiple conversations at the same time. Each sender is identified at the beginning of the message line, but sometimes it gets tough to figure out who's talking to whom.

¹³ The #prosapologian IRC channel. James White's IRC channel where his disciples congregate. Refute them and you will earn a permanent ban from their channel.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

with cultists trying to convert people¹⁴. For the same reasons that the cultists find IRC appealing, IRC should also be attractive to Christians. It is a point of anonymous contact. However, like much written communications it lacks the face-to-face element and one side can easily misinterpret zealousness for hostility.

Access is done with a standard IRC client. Microsoft Windows has one of these called CHAT. On Windows 98 It can be found under the “Program Files” subdirectory in the “CHAT” subdirectory. Setup of the client and selection of an IRC server is somewhat complicated. A better choice for the PC would be to download the shareware version called “MIRC”. This can be found on any shareware distribution site¹⁵.

An easy suggestion is that the local church have an IRC channel allocated for the church and get the word in the church bulletin or Web site about the channel. This is like opening a phone line between all of the church members where anyone who wants to talk with whoever is on can talk.

World Wide Web

The worldwide web has several traditional analogies. One practical contribution is the ability to get a map of where the church is located to someone.

¹⁴ Particularly Jehovah’s Witnesses although the Watchtower recently published a warning against JW’s exercising this practice.

¹⁵ <http://download.cnet.com/> is one popular location. Typing mirc into the search engine will yield more than 10 IRC client applications.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

Also, special events can be added to the site, but this requires site maintenance. Larger churches have Internet Service Organizations (ISOs) with paid staff.

Another is to add the sermons of the pastor as Real Audio files and allow a prospective visitor to “sample” the pastor and see if they like what they hear¹⁶. This allows someone to find out if it’s a dangerous cult, or if the church appears “safe.”

Churches can place their statement of beliefs onto their websites. This also increases the comfort of prospective attendees who are concerned with the soundness of the teaching of the church¹⁷.

Churches can place the email address of their staff onto their websites (depending upon the expected volume of email.) For many connected people, email is preferred over other forms of communication since it can be read at the convenience of the reader rather than the sender.

¹⁶ As an anecdotal example, the author of this page set up a webpage for his church at <http://tapestrychurch.org> where he placed the sermons of the Lead Pastor of Tapestry, Ed Salas. This brought at least one new member to the church that just happens to now attend a Bible study taught by the author of this page. This method is effective and important. One of the other [unconnected] members of the church questioned the usefulness of this method and the woman who started attending Tapestry due to the web page spoke up.

¹⁷ Sadly, this may be a minority of people today.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

An important question to consider is the style vs. substance issue¹⁸. Historically, the web has stressed substance and content over style. With the intrusion of commercial advertising onto the web, this has all changed. Practically, it is important to have a web page that is visually appealing.

Web counters can be added to a page to determine the usage of the page. Additional statistical information can easily be determined (time of day of visitors, general location due to ISP name, etc.).

Pages can be advertised in a number of ways. The most effective way is place the URL¹⁹ for the page onto the many search engines. There are two basic sorts. One of these is the hierarchical form of search engine where the church may be found under a heirarchy. For this sort of a search, the seeker has to know what they want to find. For instance, to find the local covenant church in a new area they could go to the Evangelical Covenant Church homepage and look at the directory or they could go to yahoo.com and look under Home, Society and Culture, Religion and Spirituality, Faiths and Practices, Christianity, Denominations and Secs, and finally look under Evangelical Covenant Church. If the particular church were located there they'd find what they wanted.

¹⁸ For the author of this paper this has particular interest. While the author was the initial creator of the webpage, the content was greater than the style. For a church that stresses both substance and style it may be necessary to draft a professional from the congregation for this purpose. There are typically at least a few people in any church which have the ability to produce visually high-quality communications.

¹⁹ Universal Resource Locator – the address of the web page. Such as <http://www.mypage.com>.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

Hierarchical structures are created by someone submitting the site to the listing agent who then looks at the site and classifies it along with a short description. In the case of the Evangelical Covenant Church, this process would lead to the Evangelical Covenant Church homepage where churches can be identified by states.

The other sort of search engine is easier, but takes more information. One of the best examples of this is google.com where they claim to know about over 1.3 billion webpages. The person doing the search types in what they want to search for and the search engine returns the information that was requested. These sites are getting more and more “intelligent” and return better results than in the past²⁰.

The web is not limited to text and pictures. Streaming graphics (movies) can also be sent from homepages and websites. Churches can send out video of their church services live to connected shut-ins and hospitalized.

Christian apologetics organizations have gotten hold of the Internet and have a wide

²⁰ Typing “Evangelical Covenant Church” into <http://www.google.com> yields about 52,900 hits and places at the top of the list the denominational homepage. This is a useful result. More than 90 of the first 100 return results are homepages for Covenant Churches. But if the seeker wanted “Tapestry” they would have had to search for Tapestry Covenant Church. If the seeker had typed in Tapestry Covenant church, they would have gotten Tapestry at the top of the list.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

range of sites that provide reasons for the faith. Research on the cults has never been easier²¹.

Webpages need to be designed for the lowest common denominator of screen resolution which is still somewhere near 640x480. Sites that have too much graphics still take too long to load since most people are still connected through modems.

E-Mail

Email is typically used for communications between two people but one person can send a message to multiple people²². Email is a great way for one person to touch the life of another person. Church announcements can be easily made through email. Prayer chains are also a well established use of email.

Internet Cafés exist in many of the large cities of the world. For a pound sterling (\$1.55) an Internet user can step into an internet café in London near the Earl's Court Tube station along with about 70 other people and use the PC for checking his email and keeping up with family at home. These Internet Cafés are not like traditional cafés where people come to talk to each other. Here people come to send email and maybe have an

²¹ For instance, the author of this paper was looking for information about the LDS belief that they will be gods and found that information easily on the LDS homepage. Also, it can be easily demonstrated that the Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus is Michael the archangel from the documentation on their own homepage as well. It used to be difficult to demonstrate these things to a cult evangelist on the doorstep.

²² The author seems to be on the list for several urban legend propagators at his local church.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

IM conversation with the folks at home. These are very popular with European travelers. Talking with someone in these cafés is considered to be rude. However, it's a great place to meet homesick people.

Listerves

Listerves are services that run on top of email. Instead of emailing someone directly, or a group of people, a listserve keeps track of the people who are subscribed to a list. These lists are typically moderated. The moderator will screen unwanted or undesirable messages from the group. This is an excellent way to propagate information about upcoming church events very cheaply. Churches that conventionally send out paper bulletins via snail mail and such should give people the choice of only being contacted via email. Similarly, a clear method of allowing someone to remove themselves from a listserve as well as a privacy policy need to be established and communicated. The goals of the list need to be clearly defined and when the list veers too far off from the goals, the moderator should move the subject back or create a new list for the subject. People don't like getting spam²³.

USENET

USENET has been around a long time. It's analogous to a Bulletin Board. People leave messages that anyone else can read. In the case of the alt. domain this can mean that the content can even be obscene at times. However, there are many hurting and lonely people

²³ Email that they didn't solicit.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

on USENET. There are well over 30,000 USENET with subjects ranging from alt.atheism to alt.sex.beastiality.hampster.duct-tape²⁴.

There are quite a few Christian USENET groups, but the participants are rarely ever Christians. Some Christians try to preach the Gospel in groups like alt.atheism with generally poor results. These are people who are generally hardened to the Christian Gospel and most Christians get frustrated quite quickly when they see no results and move along. Others strike more surgically at specific targets, such as outdated atheistic apologetical arguments.

The historical analogy to e-mail would be the snail mail²⁵ service of the particular country. A letter is sent and gets routed through the public mail system until it reaches the mailbox of the recipient.

Areas of Concern

There are some areas of concern in the new digital age. These are described in the following sections.

Freedom and License

The subject that gets the most negative press is those who are predators against children using the Internet to lure children into illegal situations with sex and drugs. These

²⁴ Perhaps these are not so far apart?

²⁵ Called snail mail due to the relative delivery speed of conventional mail (24 hour minimum) to email, which is typically taken from source to destination in minutes.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

concerns initially lead some Christians into isolation from the technology of the Internet. There are some shields that can help against these potential problem areas, but the most effective is parental monitoring²⁶. Parents learn to check and regularly check the Internet History File on their child's computer to ensure that the children are not going somewhere that the parents don't want them to go. Additionally, filtering software can be installed to limit access to many of the known bad sites²⁷. There are also Internet Service Providers such as Integrity On-line which provide filtering on the host side.

The Digital Haves and the Have Nots

A greater area of concern is the digital divide between the connected and those who are not connected²⁸. This ranges from the initial level of owning a computer to not owning a computer.

The historical analogy is literacy²⁹. If a person could not read, they were grossly limited in their career choices. As society becomes more technologically based, this distinction becomes even greater. No longer are computers the tool of the few, but the stock clerk is expected to be able to use a computer to keep track of material flow. The machinist who used to get a drawing and was told to make the item now gets an Autocad file and is told to program the NC machine to make a part.

²⁶ On the PC with Internet Explorer simply click the "history" button" to see which sites have been viewed on the computer. Other sites have similar features. Other services also have similar features.

²⁷ AKA, Cybernanny software.

²⁸ Even the language chosen is prejudicial.

²⁹ The term used is computer literacy.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

In the first third world, the issue is not always of dollars and cents since Internet services are available in many schools and libraries. The issue is literacy doubled. Reading is now the basic skill that is required to be able to use a computer that involves even more skills such as typing, etc.

For the church, which should be concerned about leaving behind anyone, this is a live issue. For instance, the author of this paper has a weekly Bible study he is teaching on the life of Jesus for his church home group. The materials for the study are distributed both electronically (via a webpage that is updated weekly) and paper copies that he brings to the study. The greatness of this method is that the study can have a sort of permanence and greater audience than the half a dozen or so people who attend the study every week and the scraps of paper that they carry away with them (and probably lose). For the unconnected members of the Bible Study it's no loss that the materials are on-line. For those who are connected, they can preview the study materials and look at related links. For instance, when the study group looked at the Jesus Seminar, the page had links added to the Jesus Seminar homepages as well as pages that are critical of the Jesus Seminar.

Another level of have and have not is the speed of one's connectivity. Modem speeds increased rapidly to the point where the phone line could not support higher bandwidths³⁰. Faster methods of connecting have become available such as Cable

³⁰ This rate is about 56,000 b/s or about 5600 characters per second.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

Modems³¹ and DSL lines³². This leads to a further separation. Sites that have larger images and more intense graphics take longer to load with slower connections. Interestingly, DSL lines tend to be located away from suburbs and at city centers. The reason is technical, but basically the Central Office (CO) for a city is where the equipment is located and this needs to be close to the customer. Houses built further from city centers tend to have their CO further away. Living in an older part of an older city increases the chance of having DSL connectivity. Cable Modems tend to be the reverse. Newer cable systems support bidirectional connections (needed to send email and search requests to servers). This means that an area that is very new will probably be served by Cable Modems. Again, this is a have-have not issue partly since the cost is about \$49 a month and partly because of deployment of bandwidth.

It's important that the church both accommodate those who prefer to be communicated with electronically rather than the more traditional means (phone or snail mail), but as a balance it's also important that there be no things that are ONLY provided by electronic means. As an example, church prayer chains should probably have both components³³.

³¹ This rate is about 10,000,000 b/s or about 1,000,000 characters per second. 200x the speed of modem lines.

³² This rate is about 1,500,000 b/s or about 150,000 characters per second. 30x the speed of modem lines.

³³ Not sure if these are still used much as they tend to be gossip chains more than prayer chains.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

Nowhere is the gap wider between the haves and the have-nots than in the two-thirds world. People that are too poor to buy food don't invest in computers. Dictators have censorship on the Internet Services for their countries³⁴.

Where's It All Going From Here?

First out, if anyone really knew where it was going they should buy stock in the companies that will get us all there. Microsoft went from nothing 30 years ago to a dominating world presence in that time. Here are some guesses that appear to be safe:

1. More bandwidth. The desire for bandwidth is increasing and shows no signs of slowing. People want faster connections that allow faster movement of data. Streaming video media today is in its infancy. Church ministries that do live broadcasts are at the cutting edge of this technology. Churches resist this since they have little knowledge or control of who sees what and when.
2. People want wireless connectivity. They want their laptop, palm or even wristwatch to give them all of the information that they want, when they want it, and where they want it.
3. The digital divide will grow wider and wider. This divide will cut broadly and permanently. Ninety year old, Great-grandma will never learn to use a PC to keep up

³⁴ For instance, until recently Syria had only one Internet connection, which was a dial-up line into a Jordan Internet Service Provider (ISP). The computer was at the Damascus library and was watched by an armed guard.

Challenges of New Media Ministries

with the grandkids. She will still want a letter thanking her for the \$1 she sends the kids for every holiday and not want that via email.

Conclusions

The Internet provides some unique challenges to the church. In a world that is already disconnected and fractured, it can both add to that fracturing and decrease it.

Bibliography