

Web E-vangelization

Romans 10: 13-15, 17 (GNT)

13 As the scripture says, "Everyone who calls out to the Lord for help will be saved."

14 But how can they call to him for help if they have not believed?
And how can they believe if they have not heard the message?
And how can they hear if the message is not proclaimed?

15 And how can the message be proclaimed if the messengers are not sent out?
As the scripture says, "How wonderful is the coming of messengers who bring good news!" ...

17 So then, faith comes from hearing the message,
and the message comes through preaching Christ.

Imagine a burning building. A little girl is trapped on the 8th floor, screaming for help. The fire-truck arrives, extends the ladder. The firefighter climbs to the window, grabs the child and carries her down to safety. Notice ... every rung of that ladder is vital: not only to reach the trapped girl, but also to take her out of harm's way. If any rung had failed, the situation would have become even more desperate.

Paul sketches a similar "ladder" of rescue. Everyone who calls to the Lord for help will be saved. But – here's *Rung One*: How can they call if they have not *believed*? *Rung Two*: How can they believe if they have not *heard*? *Rung Three*: How can they hear if the Message is not *proclaimed*? *Rung Four*: And how can the Message be proclaimed if messengers are not *sent out*?

This presentation looks at evangelization and some of the ways we can use digital technology to become messengers, sent into cyberspace to proclaim the Message in ways people can hear, believe and respond to.

What is Evangelization?

In their recent tour-de-force, "*Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works*" (Baker Books 2002), Ron Sider, Phil Olson and Heidi Unruh look at fifteen metro Philadelphia churches that are marrying evangelism with social action, sharing the message of "the Whole Gospel, for the Whole Person, through Whole Churches."

In Chapter Three – "Making Evangelism Central" – they offer this working definition of evangelization:

Sharing Jesus' gospel by word and deed with non-Christians with the intention and hope that they will embrace the message and repent, accept and follow Christ, and join a Christian church community for ongoing discipleship (p. 64)

They go on to argue for a "holistic" approach to evangelization that offers compassion ministries serving people's emotional and material needs while pinpointing their spiritual needs; attending to broader social concerns while addressing the need for individuals to be transformed personally and incorporated collectively into the Church, the company of Christ-followers in every age and place.

Why Evangelize?

Christians evangelize because they love their neighbors. Knowing first-hand God's forgiveness and mercy in their own lives, they seek to share Christ's invitation to all people to become disciple-messengers of the same good news which they themselves have received. God is on a mission to rebuild the world the way God intended it, calling us to be residents of and witnesses to God's already-yet-still-to-come Kingdom.

Churches need to examine how they are evangelizing. Do they view non-Christians as unique, valuable creatures of God or as targets for church membership? Some helpful questions for churches to ask are:

- Do we train members to evangelize, equipping them to relate authentically with varied individuals and situations?
- Have we evaluated how each of our ministries relates to evangelization?
- Do we have materials at hand which introduce the gospel and our congregation?
- Do we make newcomers feel welcome?
- Do we offer small study groups teaching basic Christianity?

Evangelization is a way of life for all Christians, not a calling for only a few super-saints. Our daily lives must rely on least **three disciplines** if our evangelization is to be fruitful:

- **Pray** in advance, asking God to place in your path specific persons the Spirit is drawing to faith.
- **Listen** to people's questions and opinions without having an agenda.
- **Look** for ways to connect to and serve the people you're trying to reach.

What About the Web?

Here are some ways your site can address the "paradox of evangelization": being prepared and skillful in telling others about Christ, and at the same time, relying totally on the Holy Spirit:

- **Feature testimonies** of people who have come to faith through your ministries.
- **Post FAQs** to address misunderstandings about Christianity and concerns that spiritual seekers have.
- **Support "life-event" evangelism:** share online the faith stories behind major milestones in your congregation: weddings and anniversaries; births, baptisms, confirmations and new members joining; graduations, departures and funerals.

Types of Evangelization

Sider, Olson and Unruh outline the following kinds of evangelism:

Network evangelism:	connecting with others in your natural web of relationships – school, work, family, friends ...
Contact evangelism:	connecting with others with whom you have little or no prior relationship ...
Service evangelism:	sharing the Gospel in the context of providing help, offering compassion, doing community development ...
Sanctuary evangelism:	in the context of regular church services and activities ...
Special Event evangelism:	such as a crusade, a concert, a series of revival meetings ...
Media evangelism:	via radio, TV and the Internet
Prayer evangelism:	intercession, prayer walks, Lighthouses of Prayer...

Evangelization on Your Site

Your church Web site can support all these forms of evangelization:

Network evangelism:	Provide coaching and content online that your members can adapt to share with their coworkers, classmates, family, and friends.
Contact evangelism:	Place a Gospel presentation on your site aimed at site visitors. Provide a FAQ section with answers to frequently asked questions about the Christian faith.
Service evangelism:	Organize and mobilize your church online for works of mercy and show that you take an interest in your community.
Sanctuary evangelism:	Offer follow-up materials to your services, including the sermon online, a way to ask questions, invitations to contact the church staff.
Special Event evangelism:	Supply your members with electronic invitations they can distribute to people they know, and above all, network with other congregations to support these events together.

- Media evangelism:** Web-casts can complement radio/TV and offer follow-up access – e.g. your radio show should include your church Web address.
- Prayer evangelism:** Make requests known and report answers to prayer; mobilize and organize your members to pray systematically “for the good of your cities” (Jer. 29:7 GNT) and for those who are not yet part of the household of faith.

The Challenges of E-vangelism

Disembodied media, whether broadcast TV or Internet messaging, pose genuine difficulties for sharing the Gospel authentically.

Being Virtual - even though technology can greatly extend our reach and the Holy Spirit can move in cyberspace as well as physical space, there is real danger in the lack of actual face-to-face contact. Bits alone are not enough to validate an online exchange.

For example: how do you know the person on the other end of that email isn't just playing a prank and stringing you along? How do you respond if someone with whom you've been sharing the Good News in a chat room suggests that you two meet for a cup of coffee to talk more? How do you use your time wisely when it's a choice between praying for (or better, with) someone you know personally vs. responding to a prayer request forwarded from a stranger about someone *they* don't even know?

Being Superficial – we have all sent email without really thinking about what we're saying or the impact it might have. We've received such email, too. And we certainly know how annoying unsolicited commercial email is. It is very easy to mass-email a pre-packaged Gospel “bomb” without even a prayer, if all it takes is a mouse-click.

But there's a thin line between witnessing online and “spiritual spam.” In fact, the whole digital medium drives us in the direction of the banal, the trite, and the artificial. For a profound critique of our digital practices, especially in the service of ministry, read “*Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age*” by Dr. Quentin Schultze (Baker Academic, 2002)

Being Disconnected – “Evangelism does not stop when someone accepts Christ,” write Sider, Olson, and Unruh. That's true in physical space and even truer online. To put it bluntly:

Decisions without Discipleship Equal Diddly

The goal of the Great Commission is to make disciples and that means connecting people to a local body of Christians. Whether it's a city crusade or a Web-cast, “if you make converts but fail to help them connect with a biblical, supportive, worshipping congregation, then you have not completed the evangelistic mandate.” (Sider, et al., p. 67)

Of course, this does NOT necessarily mean bringing these folks into YOUR church; especially if they live across the country and have been touched digitally with the Gospel. You need to be ready to take the next step and help those you've evangelized to find a local church to make their home.