

**“What We’ve Learned So Far:  
A Sober Assessment of Web Evangelism in the Light of Seven Years’ Experience”**

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I am honored to be able to address the Internet Evangelism Coalition for the second time. Probably only a few of you attended my 1997 address, and most likely even fewer remember anything that I said. I was tempted to use the same speech, since that’s what college professors do with their course lectures! And as I reviewed that speech, I discovered some good thoughts that even I did not recall saying! Another senior moment?

But, alas, my title for this speech will not allow me to lift much material from the earlier one. With considerable pretension, I have agreed to consider what we have learned about Web evangelism in the last seven years. Why seven years? Because the Web really took off as an evangelistic medium in 1995. The “we” in my title is not just me. I surveyed informally dozens of Christians who have been involved in Web ministry since about 1995. And I did so off the record, as they say, so that they would feel free to share with me the reflections that they might not want to have publicly associated with them or with their ministry. I asked them one, open-ended question: “What have we learned about Internet-related ministry in the last seven years?” My job, then, was to craft a speech out of many pages of observations and experiences—to find the common themes and illuminate the points of joy and frustration. So rather than present a single-themed speech, I am going to offer ten points based on your observations. These points should give us plenty of material for discussion throughout the conference.

1.) Internet ministry is not nearly as easy as we thought it would be seven years ago. It is a lot of hard work that involves all kinds of different talents and gifts. We need writers and designers, programmers and marketers. And the competition for attention online is making it increasingly difficult to get through the noise. The corporate giants are now setting the standards for aesthetic quality and persuasive power. As you probably know, the five most popular Web sites get over 50% of all Web traffic. As one respondent put it, “Putting the 4 spiritual laws on 4 pages of a site will not bring the heathen Web-surfing masses to their knees.”

2.) The best Web evangelism is relational. There is no magic bullet in the technology, no technological end-run. As technological optimists we would like to think so. Maybe you saw Todd Hertz’s nice piece on christianitytoday.com titled, “The Next Billy Graham May Be a Robot.” The concept is creating a “bot” for instant messaging that would give pre-programmed “answers” to people’s questions based on particular key words in the questions. Moishe Rosen, founder of Jews for Jesus rightly says in the article, “I just don’t think I could use these automated things. It pretends an intimacy that is not there. Plus, when it comes to automated anything, you have to wonder where the Holy Spirit is.”

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3.) Even if the best Web evangelism is relational, God can work with just about anything we do online. The Web has taught us once again that the Holy Spirit really is more powerful than our imaginations. Talk with any online ministry and you will hear the stories of conversion that make no human sense. You will hear the amazing stories of people who discovered the Gospel and therefore Jesus Christ online, while in public libraries and schools, at work, at home late at night while searching for the next pornographic high, in the military and government, at the beach. And so many of the Gospel presentations were so inept, so glaringly garish or starkly ugly. Yet God’s Word nevertheless broke through the human noise.

I am tempted to say, and I guess I will say, that the Holy Spirit can and does rise above our meager abilities and even our foolishness. In this sense, we have to learn how to get out of God’s way and stick with the Gospel. Dare I say that we tend to put too much emphasis on our techniques and not enough on the Holy Spirit? What would happen if we prayed for conversions as much as we worked on Web sites? One respondent wrote, “God can work through anything. When I first began, I saw the Web as a way to funnel people to more conventional and relational outreaches like campus groups or churches. Evangelism happens primarily through people. Yet time and time again I’ve seen real change happen through online materials.”

At the same time, however, let me emphasize something that many respondents complained about: too many Christian Web sites are poorly designed. As one person asked, “Who lowered the bar on quality—and who will raise it?” One way of thinking about this issue is that the way we present the reality of Jesus Christ online is partly a matter of aesthetics, not just technique. How can we translate the spirit of Philippians 4 into our Web presentations of the Gospel? As one person put it, “Know your audience. Respect their intelligence.” The power of the Holy Spirit to work through even our foolish or inelegant Web work does not give us a license to be lazy, but it does free us to depend ultimately on God rather than on our own techniques.

4.) Web evangelism has become a deeply grass roots phenomenon. This is something that we have simply not addressed adequately, but which is very important to consider as part of the context for our organizational work. By and large we are here as representatives of official ministries. And I wish all of our organizations godly success. God does work through official corridors of institutional power, from denominations to parachurch groups. But Web evangelism is not contained solely and maybe not even primarily by our organizations.

Just type the word “Christian” into a search engine and look at the top 200 Web sites. You’ll see what I mean. Hundreds of thousands of Christians have their own little evangelism programs online. And that’s just in the English language. Add to that all of the chat rooms, instant messaging and email correspondence that involves sharing the Gospel, and we will rediscover once again that American Evangelicalism is deeply populist. So many of these mom-and-pop evangelism sites are corny. But the Holy Spirit works through such corn, or what my students now call “cheese.” Web-based cheesy evangelism is a remarkable phenomenon. I don’t like it, but God is not particularly interested in what you or I prefer.

5.) There is a tremendous amount of spiritual searching online. This is so important yet so hard to understand. When the history of the Internet is written I think any good historian will have to explain two especially significant human phenomena—the search for sex and the search for God. Some of you probably remember the days when the word “god” would bring more search-engine

returns than the word “sex.” Well, there is a lot more money in the online sex business than the online God business, so it should not surprise us that now there are more search-engine returns for the word “sex.” Nevertheless, google returns about 37 million links for the word “God”—just about half of the 81 million for “sex.”

We talk about how secular North American culture is becoming. We lament challenges to public displays of the Ten Commandments or prayer in school. But we really have to consider as well the level of thirst for God, for a relationship with someone who is more fulfilling and dependable than a mere human being. Does not our experience with the Web prove this to be the case? G.K. Chesterton once supposedly said, “The man who goes up to the brothel door and knocks is looking for God.” Perhaps the popularity of pornographic Web sites reflects something far deeper than artificial intimacy with exploited people.

6.) We don’t have a clue about how to measure effective online ministry. Many respondents mentioned how difficult it is to determine a Web ministry’s impact. They want to make sure that they are being good stewards of their limited resources, but they are very unsure about how to define success. Of course we all pretend to measure by resorting to hits, page views, email responses, reported decisions for Christ and the like. But the Web is like broadcasting in the biblical sense of scattering seed. Is it possible for us to work together to establish standards that we could apply across ministries?

7.) We have not done enough audience research. Much of our work is based on what we think is good communication, not what our intended audiences think is good communication. For instance, we simply do not do enough focus groups and other usability testing with our Web-based communication. Much of our Web design is seat-of-the-pants material that we might like, but which might not be particularly interesting, intriguing or engaging to non-believers.

Okay, now I am getting on shaky ground. Could it be that we are more concerned with how we present ourselves to people who are like us—even our constituencies—than with how to communicate with the broader world? I find so many evangelism sites dripping with God talk and tribal assumptions. Is it true that most of our efforts are fairly “standard” presentations of the Gospel to people who also might visit one of our churches, or who at least live in our neighborhoods? For instance, I do not run across many evangelistic Web sites that address the more challenging issues that seem to bother both believers and nonbelievers, such as, “Where is God in evil such as the 9/11 disaster?” or “Why doesn’t God speak directly to us—out loud?” or “If I am a sinner, why do I do so many good things?”

Let me ask the question this way: What would an evangelistic Web site look like if it were put together by unbelievers? So here is something to consider: What if we took every new evangelistic Web site and presented it to recent converts, who still have one foot in their before-Christ life, and asked them what *they* thought of the site?

One related thought: The most popular book in my communication courses at Calvin College is Anne Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies*. Nearly all of our students are Christians. Few of them have lived the kind of drug-and-alcohol-addicted and sexually active life that Lamott describes as her own journey. Yet these students tell me that Lamott’s autobiography seems genuine, whereas most Christian tales of conversion seem hackneyed. Of course there is probably not a Christian publishing house that would publish Lamott’s book because of the language. But maybe more of

our online communication needs to reach out with a kind of raw authenticity that captures the real muck of people's lives—or at least what people take to be the real muck of their lives.

8.) We should experiment more. One respondent wrote, “With failure comes learning, if we don't experiment, we will not grow on the I-way.” I heard many laments from people who feel that they don't have the time or the money or the right staff or the organizational support for experimentation. They apparently have little opportunity to try different things. Instead they are programmed to republish material from print media or simply make minor changes to pre-existing communication strategies and tactics. The picture here is not pretty: If we have the courage to look deep, we will discover a lot of Internet workers who themselves don't like a lot of the material that they are putting online. And they don't have the confidence that they know what works and what does not, and why. In short, they have little wisdom from experience because they are trapped in the tyranny of the informationally urgent.

I don't know about you, but when I run across a creative Christian approach to the Internet I am delighted because even if it goes belly-up it will contribute to our experience of a relatively new medium. For instance, InterVarsity Press has launched a new site called [questioningfaith.com](http://questioningfaith.com). On the site author Ruth Tucker will accept questions from readers and Web surfers. Dr. Tucker will then correspond with the person who has asked the question. When she feels the dialogue has concluded, she will ask the person for permission to post the dialogue on the site. I fear that this could take up too much of Dr. Tucker's time. But the email dialogues that the site generates could be enormously authentic and revealing—perhaps even wonderful material for all of us to consider in our Web work, like primary research.

9.) Web workers feel overworked and under-respected within their larger ministry organizations. I think we have to address this issue honestly and directly. If I understand the problem, evangelistic organizations that predate the Web have not been willing to shift adequate resources from older media to newer ones. The organizations want to be in the new media, but they do not have the new constituencies that are necessary to fund adequately such newer initiatives. So they expect a few people to do a tremendous amount of work and in many cases to learn new skills and to wear numerous hats.

So we can talk all we want about Web evangelism, but we ought also to discuss Web evangelists and their organizations. As one respondent put it, old dogs can learn new tricks. But these dogs have to have the resources to do so, such as time to study and learn, to network with others who know more, to attend conferences, and to think about what they are doing. The picture I get with most of the ministries is that busyness becomes a barrier to learning. Or to put it differently, learning is confined too much to immediate necessity rather than to strategy and evaluation.

10.) Collaboration is crucial. The Web is largely a collaborative medium. It requires a range of different skills and gifts. Moreover, people learn from those outside the organization—from email listservs, Web sites, conversations and conferences such as this one. As one respondent put it, “We've learned that collaborating with other ministries is more powerful than working alone.” From what I can tell, Web workers within ministries are far more likely to be in regular communication—even daily and hourly—with persons in other ministries than are other workers in an evangelistic organization.

This is a very strong argument in favor of organizations such as the Internet Evangelism Coalition and the Gospel Communications Network alliance. But as we all know, Christian

ministries are not always so quick to collaborate. Praise God when it happens! But with the Web, it appears that it must happen. The nature of the medium demands it.

Well, I could mention all kinds of other items that seem to be among the lessons of the last seven years, such as the fact that dealing with email has become a real hassle for a lot of Web evangelists, that Web work needs to be strategized and coordinated across a ministry rather than limited to one department, that we should hire people with a view of the future rather than the past, and so forth. Thanks to all of those who responded to my invitation. You have made me a better-informed person—or at least a bit less foolish (I am, after all, a Calvinist). I am also a happier person, because it warms my heart to hear so many incredible stories about the movement of the Holy Spirit in and through your efforts.

Our hopes for Internet evangelism might be big—really big. But as one respondent put it, “Be humble. Web ministry is a work in process—never think you’ve arrived.” To some extent our hardest task is to stay out of God’s way. And we do that by being faithful, always amazed at what God can do through our limited efforts, meager resources and incomplete knowledge. So let’s keep our hearts where they belong, in the everlasting love of Jesus Christ, the only one whose logos transcends every humanly devised medium. Technologies will come and go, but the Word of our Lord is eternal. Even if we’ve not learned much else over the last seven years, we’re still on the right path.

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