

“The Ichthus and the Internet”

What began as a piece of a practicum for my Masters of Theology degree has become a battle cry for ministers and churches to turn their attention to a powerful ministry tool: the Internet.

The book I read that has sounded this call-to-arms is *eMinistry: Connecting with the Net Generation*¹ by Andrew Careaga. In summary fashion, I will pass along some of the content of his book, but also my application of that content. Much has changed since he wrote his book in 2001, both in the world and on the Internet.

Perhaps I give away the ending when I say that the Church universal and the church local must include the web as one of its vehicles of ministry. However, the “how” and “why” are so broad in scope, that I believe I can do so and still keep your attention for the duration of this article.

I believe the first thing we must do as ministers is realize that the Web is not inherently evil. It conveys evil as well as good, but to say it is evil is like saying a chair is evil because it is in a strip club rather than a church Sunday School room. Why do I start there? Because many ministers still look at the Internet as a tool of the Devil exclusively. Any good it might do is negated by the vast evil it propagates.

In my own experience, I had a pastor tell me he was certain the Internet was the primary tool that the Anti-Christ was going to use to bring about the one-world government prophesied about in Revelation. For that reason, he wanted nothing do to with it. In response to that, I remember the words of Rick Warren. What he said of music is true of the Web also; there is no Christian or heathen Internet, only Christian or heathen content.²

¹ Careaga, Andrew. *eMinistry: Connecting with the Net Generation*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001.

² Warren said, “There is no Christian music, only Christian lyrics” in his book *The Purpose Driven Life*.

It is true that the Web is fraught with dangers. It is also true that it contains much that is holy and being used of God to advance the Kingdom. Our problem is that there is far more of the former than the latter. Why? Because the Web has been largely ignored by the Church as a legitimate means of ministry. And when you ignore the Web, you are ignoring the millions of people who are using it daily; and some of those are simply searching for something to grab their interest.

This is true despite the fact that thousands of churches have their own websites and thousands of ministries have sites online addressing various issues that might be as simple as a presentation of the Gospel. For good or ill, the former could be little more than a digital classified ad and the latter may not allow for adequate (physical or electronic) follow-up. Unfortunately, the growth of biblically-based ministries is not keeping pace with the growth of the web itself.

Additionally, I see a lack of what I call integration on the Web. By that I mean businesses and individuals with websites are not integrating their faith with their web presence. While it is not uncommon to see billboards and business cards with an Ichthus (Christian fish symbol) on them, these seem largely lacking on the Internet. And what a missed opportunity that it because, unlike the billboard and business card, one can easily link Christian symbols on one website to another that explains what they represent.

Careaga provides a number of examples of how the Web is being used in creative ways. His primary reference is to chat rooms where Christians (especially teens) “meet” and discuss various faith issues. Now, eight years later, advances in technology are allowing different opportunities. Examples include listening to the Bible (www.audiobible.com), watching an

animated Gospel presentation (www.thekristo.com) and listening to your favorite “media minister” online or by downloading a file (www.oneplace.com).

Aware of the Web demographics, Careaga maps the three generations most heavily involved with the Internet: Baby Boomers, Busters, and the group he calls the Net Generation. The latter group is a mixture of young Busters and new teens that have never known a world without the Web. The Boomers invented it and, together with their children and grandchildren, are integrating into the fabric of 21st century life.

Because the Web is where so many people live today, it is critical that church leaders at all levels concern themselves with cultural and social matters. We are, after all, charged to be “in the world, but not of the world.” This includes the technology of the day. Remember, the Internet is no surprise to God. From His vantage point outside of space and time, He knew it was coming and, in His sovereignty, allowed it. Therefore, I am convicted of its usefulness as a tool to spread His story.

The cultural and social matters that confront us as we seek to minister to an online people go beyond the mere existence of the Web. They include the influences that are shaping the minds of those that use it. Post-modernism has destroyed absolute truth, devalued Christianity (while empowering a new smorgasbord spirituality), and derailed the authority of the Scripture.

These are the issues, among others, that ministers and churches are going to have to address in a variety of ways, including electronically (i.e. The Internet). People need no help when it comes to seeing the church as irrelevant today. Yet when the Church ignores the technology, it only affirms what people think.

How do ministers and churches connect with the Net Generation? Careaga suggests a variety of ways in the final section of his book, aptly named “Digital Discipleship.” First, we

acknowledge that the Web is a viable means of studying the Bible. Second, we promote its use as such. Third, we color outside the lines by going to secular sites and pointing to ministry sites.

Based on this reading, I am convinced that the Church will have to accept a blending of on and off-line faith in the Web age. It is not an issue of “either/or”, but “both/and”. More and more people are opting to practice and share their faith in both the physical and electronic realms. And what a blessing this can be! People who might never sit down with a stranger at Starbucks and begin a conversation about faith and Christ will chat with a stranger across the planet about the very same. Careaga shares several “success stories” of how online encounters with Christians have led the lost to Christ and local brick and mortar churches.

The challenge I see the local Church facing is how it will encourage people to strike a balance between physical and electronic ministry. Commitment to a local church is certainly not what it once was and as busy as people are, it has become very easy to stay home when the church is physically worshiping. However, we need not fear total abandonment of the local church for the computer, despite its interactive nature. If that were the case, then televised church services would have done so years ago.

Our expectations, as church leaders, need to under go a shift. For example, I quit fussing about those who do not attend Sunday night and mid-week meetings at the churches I pastor. While certainly beneficial to the body and the individual, there is no biblical mandate for those meetings. Perhaps when it comes to the Web, the issue becomes one of legitimacy. What constitutes a legitimate worship experience and in whose eyes? Mine? God's?

As a bivocational pastor of a small, rural church, I see the Internet as a powerful tool for communicating our message of God's love to a people we could never reach otherwise. Compared to the cost of advertising on TV and radio, the Web is very affordable. With

broadband and digital video becoming more the norm, smaller churches can more easily get their message out.

That said, we must ensure that we provide a quality product. People are spoiled with high tech and now expect it. If you put a shoddy product before them, they will ignore it at best and mock it at worst. Quality does not have to mean expense or flashy or gaudy. It means that content, sight and sound are the best they can be within your budget.

Beyond our thoughts, feelings, and convictions about worship, ministry, and the Internet is the practical issue of what can we do. Summarizing Careaga, I suggest the following:

- **Support Existing Ministries** – Find and promote those sites that meet the needs of those you are trying to reach. This saves time and money. Why reinvent the wheel? Don't limit your promotion to electronic means; put the links in your bulletins and on the monitors/screens in your services.
- **Develop New Ministries** – Offer online Bible studies to various groups (at-home mothers or busy teens) at varied times (early morning, late night). Create an interactive prayer list. Again, the technology is amazingly affordable. Many website hosts provide the technology resources for these services/programs in their hosting packages.
- **Be Subtle and Intentional** – You can provide anything from recipes to car care tips on a website while framing them with Scripture, quotes, and links to other ministry sites or contact information. Another way of being intentional is to have a team of church members brainstorming for ways to use the Web to promote the Gospel and the ministries of your church.
- **Be Creative** – Have your church provide the Web version of the “Welcome Wagon” for your community with information and links to assist new residents. Determine who in

your congregation is good at what and promote it as a help/support desk program. Put your church's cookbook online. If funds allow, advertise your ministry (and its website) on your city's website.

- **Be Brief** – Our attention spans are quite short. When offering biblical content, short duration/high impact material has the best chance of reaching the target audience. Also, the Web offers easy means for allowing the user to go deeper if he or she desires.

By far, the greatest challenge for churches and ministers in cyberspace is providing biblically sound content in formats that appeal to the many different types of persons using the Web. Also, we must recognize the critical opportunity we have to saturate the Web with content that centers on Christ so that when anyone goes seeking, they will find Him.

Let ministers and churches look to the Internet as a powerful tool for ministry and look to the Holy Spirit for wisdom with which to use that tool.