How The Internet Is Changing Evangelism And Missions

There are currently 1.7 billion active Internet users, another 3 billion active Internet users are expected to be added in the next five years or so. The developing world will soon go online as cellphones become smartphones and as cheap digital devices such as netbooks and e-readers proliferate. The roll-out of fiber-optic cable in Africa and massive satellite communications projects will also mean that bandwidth availability and reach will increase. Within five years at least half the globe should be online, and within fifteen years Internet reach should be almost universal. Global proclamation will soon be within the reach of any Christian with a computer.

The changes are not only quantitative, they are also qualitative. The very nature and dynamics of Christian ministry are being fundamentally altered due to the new possibilities for relationship, connectivity and information delivery that the Internet has brought about. The very heart of how we minister is being changed forever in at least ten significant areas:

1. **Information:** The Internet is bringing an enormous amount of timely strategic information into the hands of even the smallest church or mission agency. These include religious and cultural statistics, demographics, compilations such as Operation World, and research websites such as Joshua Project, Caleb Project, and StrategicNetwork. This is allowing us to see the big picture better than before and even to drill down to the small details that affect how we implement our evangelism strategies.

2. **Ratiocination:** People "think aloud" in cyberspace. The theology and practice (including ecclesiology and missiology) of most Christians is now mainly formed as a peer-to-peer online process with occasional expert input. There is less and less reference to decisions promulgated by the central governing ecclesiastical bodies of the major world religions. People do their own thinking, and they do so increasingly online - through sources such as Wikipedia, old out-of-copyright commentaries, and through browsing various websites, egroups and postings on social networks. Those ministries who wish to influence opinion need to start doing so in cyberspace because that is where Christian opinion is largely now being formed.

3. **Exploration:** People do their private, personal and controversial thinking online. If a person wants to find out about a suspected medical matter or investigate a forbidden political opinion they first check it out online. A Muslim wishing to find out about Christianity is not going to ask their family or their imam, rather he or she will look at Christian websites. About a quarter of all Internet users make regular queries about religious matters. They are exploring their own and other faiths. The Church needs to have an evangelistic, apologetic and missionary presence in this new global marketplace of ideas.

4. **Collaboration:** The Internet is facilitating collaboration across denominational boundaries, and across national borders. Experts and now able to link up with other experts in fields such as church-planting and theological education. This collaboration is making the denomination almost obsolete. Most Christian workers now operate in networks rather than in denominational silos. People are now partnering with like-minded specialists in their area of interest rather than with people who totally agree with their formal belief system.

5. **Validation:** People use the Internet to check things out. This applies to everything from a "too good to be true" investment scam to the local church they plan to attend when they move to a new city. One oft-quoted statistic is that 85% of young people check out a church's website before deciding whether or not to even visit that church in the first place. They won't even walk though your door until they have clicked through your website! Churches and organizations that are easy to validate online have a huge competitive advantage. This includes having a clear statement of faith and making your ethos, programs, times of meetings, address, contact information, operating principles and finances clear and above board to the honest online enquirer.

6. **Allocation of Resources:** The Internet is allowing donors, foundations and churches to efficiently assess projects and receive applications for funding across national boundaries. Groups such as JIMI (the Joint Information Management Initiative of the WEA-MC) and the Global Missions Fund are trying to refine this process of allocation so that the ministries who are most worthy are most funded. A big part of this is having trusted mission information facilitators who regularly supply quality information in a secure format so that it can be used for resource allocation purposes.

7. **Proclamation:** The gospel is being proclaimed on websites, in chat rooms, on YouTube, on cellphones and on numerous Internet-connected devices. Evangelistic crusades are using the internet both as a decision mechanism and as a follow-up mechanism. Organizations such as Global Media Outreach, Jesus Central, TopChretien and GodRev specialize in purely online outreach while many churches and organizations use the Internet as an augmentation of existing outreach strategies. The Internet is an economical means of proclamation and Internet missionaries do not need visas!

8. **Education:** Online education has been a huge success and has revitalized TEE and distance education. Groups such as MAF Learning technologies are working at developing highly effective Internet based pedagogy. Many masters and Ph.D. Programs are now partly or wholly via Internet-based distance education.

9. **Mobilization:** The Internet facilitates making the connections and the imparting of the information and motivation necessary for effective mobilization of pastors, evangelists and missionaries into the global harvest. ChristianVolunteering.org matches tens of thousands of volunteers with Christian agencies. A ministry without an online presence will soon find it very challenging to gain new recruits since for many people the ministry simply will "not exist".

10. **Multiplication:** The Internet brings leverage to networks and enables contacts to be made for the multiplication of house and cell churches, church-planting movements and small TEE based bible colleges that are resourced via an Internet-based curriculum.

People start searching for a new church by going online, people first start their search for information about God online, and people start forming their theology online. Missionaries deciding which organization they will serve with, or students deciding on which bible college to attend - will use online information to narrow down their choices. The Internet is not the be all and end all of ministry. But it is quickly becoming the starting point for all ministry. And without the starting point there are not many other points! I used to think of the Internet as a tool for outreach, much like having your own radio program. Now I see the internet as an ocean in which we must sink or swim.