Can You Really Have An Internet Church?

Introduction: A Few Provocative Thoughts..

Part 1: The Nature Of The Church In Cyberspace

Part 2: Cyberchurches – Their Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

Part 3: Building Christian Community Online

Part 4: Free and Low Cost Community Building Software

This presentation will be available online at:
www.cybermissions.org/training/articles/

Provocative Thoughts

- **50% of American Christians will worship solely online by 2010?? (Barna Research)**

- **Churches will go the way the same way as the retail shopping world. The local "mom and pop" general grocery store (local church) will be replaced by:**

Mega-churches (Big Box)

House churches, ethnic churches, niche churches (Boutique / specialty stores)

Cyberchurches (Internet commerce)

The Unchurched Church

- **Many Christians are drifting around without regular participation in a local church**

- **Disillusioned – those burned by church**
- **Disabled – those physically unable to get there**
- **Disobedient – avoiding God**
- **Discarded – rejected by churches, unable to cope with large groups socially etc.**

- **Some of these actively seek fellowship online**
- **We need to help these people find a spiritual home where they can (online)**
- **Will this be adequate..?**
- **Can it help them at all?**

Heresy!

- **The Rev. Ian Paisley condemned Mel Gibson's "The Passion" saying : "the gospel should only be preached from the Bible, in a registered local church and by an ordained minister".**

- **Many people think that the gospel should be not be proclaimed online**

- **Cyberchurch is seen as a threat to "real church" which is seen as the neighborhood (parish) church alone**

The Cyberchurch Is
The Constant Church

- People do not leave the neighborhood church for a cyberchurch
- People ADD the cyberchurch to their neighborhood church Christian experience
- Then they move, or change churches, or fall ill and thus leave the parish church
- The cyberchurch remains constant while the neighborhood church changes
- CLF has been a "constant" in my life since 1995 – through three different countries and five different churches

Part 1
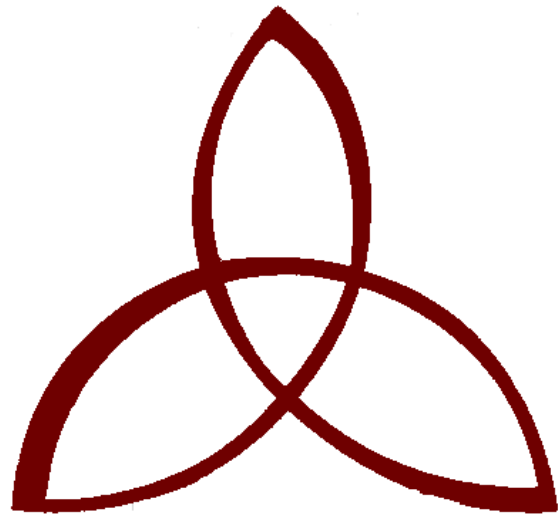
The Nature Of

The Church

In Cyberspace

What Is A Church?

- **From Wayne Grudem "Systematic Theology"**

- **The Church is the community of all true believers for all time. (p.853)**

- **We may conclude that the group of God's people considered at any level from local to universal may rightly be called a "church". We should not make the mistake of saying that only a church meeting in houses expresses the true nature of the church, or only a church meeting at a city-wide level can rightly be called a church, or only the church universal can rightly be called by the name "church". Rather the community of God's people meeting at any level can be rightly called a church. (p. 857)**

What Is An Online Community?

- "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to forms webs of personal relationships in cyberspace

- Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community* (revised ed.) p. xx

What Is A Cyber-Church?

- **A church on the Internet emerges when a number of true Christian believers meet online in Christ's name, for long enough, and with sufficient human feeling, to forms webs of sanctified personal relationships in cyberspace that reflect the common presence of the Holy Spirit.**

Emerges….

- Church arises out of real human connections
- It is not identical to a particular web site, online forum or e-group
- It takes time
- It takes persistence in discussion
- There needs to be "sufficient human feeling"
- There needs to be a sense of "in Christ's name"
- The group recognizes that "something has emerged" from their interactions.

A Called-Out Gathering

- **The church is an ekklesia (a term originally used for a Greek democratic political assembly) which means "called out" as in "assembled by the call of the town crier"**
- **The church members are called out of the "world" (sinful areas of cyberspace?) into fellowship with one another.**
- **They are also specifically "gathered" around Christ**
- **It is a sanctified gathering – dedicated to God, and separated from worldliness and idolatry**

But What About...

- **Worship**
- **Baptism**
- **Communion**
- **The Laying On Of Hands**
- **Tithes and Offerings**
- **Healing & Exorcism**
- **Footwashing**
- **Hospitality**
- **Marriages**
- **Funerals**

Degrees of Community

- The fullest expression of community was between Jesus and the Twelve and later in the Jerusalem Church (Acts 1-8)

- Since then the degree of genuine Christian community in the local church has varied greatly (almost from zero to infinity) but it has still been " the church"

- A good cyber-church should aim to also meet physically from time to time to enhance Christian community.

- Such meetings (perhaps quarterly) could share communion, have baptisms etc.

Gathered….

- Is a person in the back row of a mega-church who comes and goes each week with no personal interaction with other Christians "gathered"?

- Is someone watching a TV evangelist "gathered" in community? [No - because the cannot interact with others]

- "Gathering" involves being able to practice some of the "one another" commands of the NT – love one another, encourage one another etc.

Gathering In Cyberspace

- Christians in an active online community can:
- Encourage one another
- Exhort one another
- Pray for one another
- Edify one another
- Teach one another
- Rebuke one another
- Love one another
- Give to one another

and sometimes they do these things MORE often than in a face to face fellowship..

Cyber - Equivalents?

- Is a YouTube video of a sermon equivalent to listening to one "in church"?

- What about a written sermon?

- Is the Bible read online "the same as" the Bible read in Church?

- Can you have communion together online?
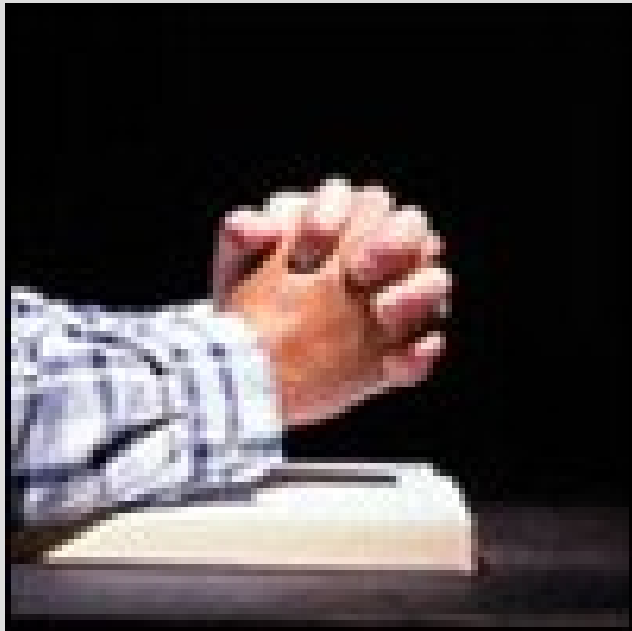
- Can you have Internet clergy?

In The Beginning Was The Word

- Salvation is via an encounter with the Living Word of God

- In Christ
- And in His Scriptures
- And through the Holy Spirit
- Or through the prophets

    The gospel is the power of God unto salvation, not our personalities, systems, or even our technology.

The Location Of The Word

- **Jesus showed that the Word could encountered outside of the Temple, outside of the priestly hierarchy and outside of the social boundaries of Judaism**

- **Jesus showed the Word was active and living among ordinary people in fishing boats, weddings, mountainsides, and the wilderness, even in homes of tax-collectors, and among lepers, demoniacs, Samaritans and Syrophoenicians**

The Word In Cyberspace

- **So God's Word can be living and active in cyberspace**

- **Salvation can and does occur in cyberspace**

- **The Internet liberates God's Word to act outside of normal ecclesiastical structures**

- **Thus the Internet may produce non-conventional forms of Church**

The Word In Cyberspace cont'd

- **The Internet allows God's Word to reach many people who would never encounter it by normal means**

- **Prayerful Internet ministry brings about encounters between religious surfers and the living, active Word of God.**

- **This is more than just sharing Bible verses**

The Seeker And The Word
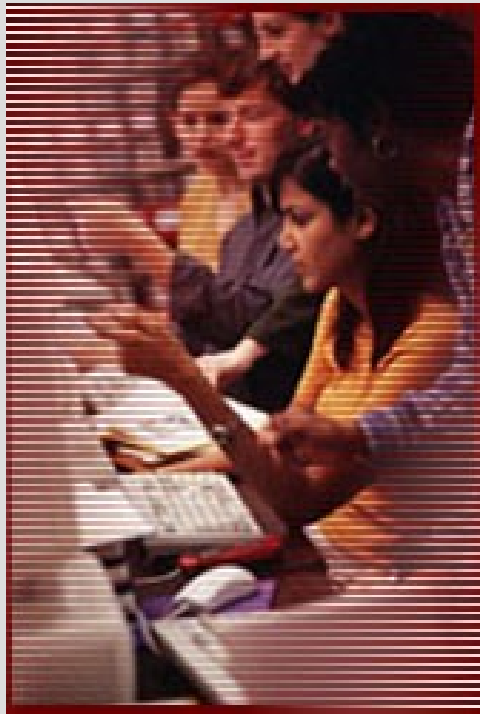
- People searching for religious information will often start by entering a query in the search engine.
- The search engine connects the religious seeker with information that promises to answer exactly that query
- So when someone arrives at a Christian website they are expecting an answer to their query that they typed in the search engine
- It is at this point that we must help them to encounter Christ the Living Word.
- The web is designed to assist people seeking information – including religious information and we must be there for these people!

The Word Forms Community

- The early Christian communities were the result of apostolic preaching

- The Church is formed by the Word

- Online communities form around a certain specialized 'message' – whether it be Star Trek fans or computer security geeks.

- To form community we need to have a clear declared message

Communities Form Beliefs

- **Most of our beliefs are formed in us by the communities that we belong to:**
- **Family**
- **School**
- **Church**
- **University**
- **Military**
- **Seminary**
- **Political Party**

Cyberchurches are places of shared stories, ideas and the formation of Christian beliefs

Emerging From The Word

- **Cyber-churches need to be online spiritual communities which emerge out of living encounters with God's Word online and which are centered around a gospel which is the power of God unto salvation.**

Liberated In Order To Emerge

- **God has liberated the gospel in cyberspace so that it might create new communities of faith which will emerge from the gospel's proclamation outside of the normal ecclesiastical structures and channels.**

Communities Vs. Converts

- **In Acts we see the apostles creating new communities of faith and appointing leaders for them**

- **The gospel creates communities of faith, not just individual converts**

- **We need to BOTH**

  a) get people saved online and

  b) form them into living, active, Spirit-filled cyber-communities of grace.

Cyberchurch to Neighborhood Church

- Can people converted online be channeled into local neighborhood churches?

- Not a matter of "either/or" but rather is "both/and"

- People can belong to both a cyberchurch and a neighborhood church

- Churches need to have websites that appeal to those seeking a neighborhood church experience

Web-Enabled House Churches

- House churches linked to a central website that provides teaching material, resources, discussion forums, etc.
- House church members can contribute to the website
- Enables house churches to benefit from a wider range of gifted people
- Intimacy of wide-ranging theological discussion online
- Intimacy of worship and personal ministry in house churches

Part 2

- **Cyberchurches**

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

Strength - Specialization

- The Internet allows geographically dispersed specialists to consult with one another

- Communities can be built around a single narrow topic e.g. Missionary work in a certain UPG (unreached people group)

- Cyberchurches can cater to specialized and neglected cultural and sub-cultural groups e.g. Filipinos working overseas, or people with a certain disability

Strength - Lack Of Forms

- People enjoy cyberchurch because they do not have to dress a certain way or act a certain way

- People are not judged by how they look but by how they interact with others

- Age, race and gender issues are far less prominent

Strength - Asynchronicity

- You do not have to meet all at the same time and in the same place.

- Shift workers can answer their emails when it suits them

- People can take time to think about an answer or response

- Church is "always on"

Strength – Anonymity / Security

- It is much easier to arrest a group meeting in a building than to round up twenty people known only as joe1234@yahoo.com

- While the Internet is never perfectly secure, it is more secure than practically any other alternative.

- China, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia may be exceptions to this rule

Strength – Seeker Driven

- Because most people who will arrive at your cyberchurch website will get there through a search engine they will be already somewhat interested.
- Thus you can tailor a cyberchurch to a very specific interest and rely on search engines to bring you people who seek that specific thing
- In fact the more unique and specific you are, in general, the more visitors you will receive.
- When this works it produces homogeneous groups of interested and motivated people

Strength - Good Content
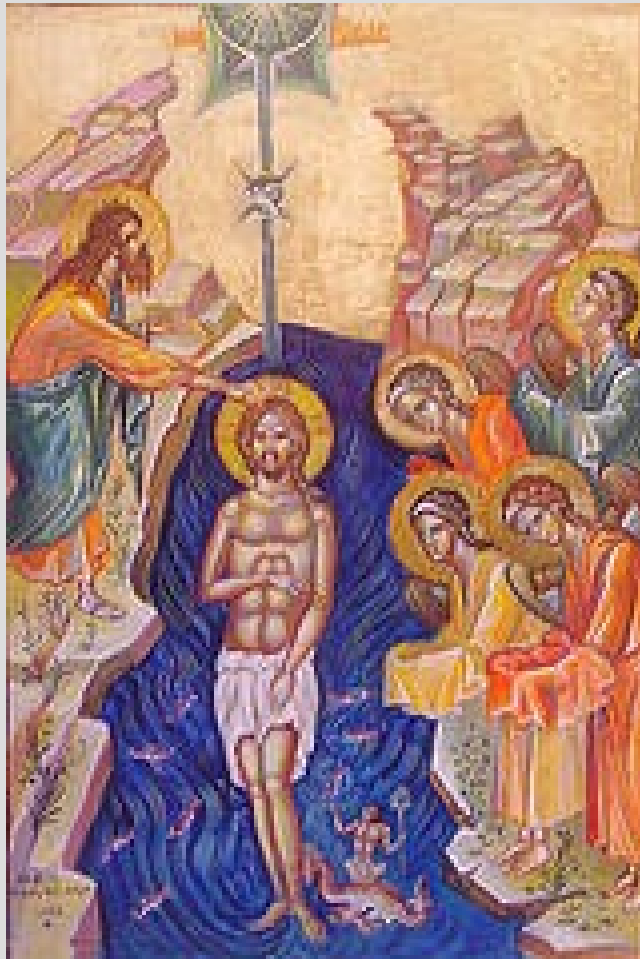
- A cyberchurch can have an **enormous** amount of high quality content available in articles, podcasts and videos

- Content can be created by all members not just a single minister

- People can access high quality content outside of "Sunday morning and Wednesday night"

- The content can be discussed all week long

Weaknesses – Lack of Commitment

- **Few people are as committed to life in a cyberchurch as they are to life in a neighbourhood church**

- **At this point the cyberchurch is still "virtual" and is "not really real" for most people.**

Weakness – The Word Is Not Made Flesh

- "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us..full of grace and truth..."

- This "word made flesh" aspect does not happen in a pure virtual cyberchurch. No one hugs you, anoints you with oil, baptizes you, or lays hands upon you in prayer

Weakness – Lack of Accountability

- **Cyberchurches cannot hold members accountable for their lifestyles**

- **There are few mechanisms for effective church discipline**

- **Cyber-Christians can effectively hide sinful and embarrassing parts of their lives from others.**

- **Accountability can be very helpful to Christian growth and is generally absent in cyberspace**

Weakness – Corporate Worship

- **Cyberchurches lack the corporate worship experience, sitting at the computer listening to an MP3 it is not quite the same as singing "How Great Thou Art" with hundreds of other believers!**

Dealing With The Weaknesses

- **Cyberchurches can hold quarterly "gatherings" or arrange neighborhood cell groups / house churches to bring the incarnational, personal, "one another" elements of the Christian faith.**

- **Cyberchurches can encourage people to become prayer partners by phone / Skype to encourage sharing and accountability**

Opportunities: Mission

- A cyberchurch can reach out to people in many countries of the world, sharing the gospel in a peer-to-peer manner without the encumbrance of having to get air tickets, visas, worry about diseases and security etc.

- A cyber-ministry can reach places closed to more traditional forms of mission.

- Can disciple people who otherwise could not be discipled: Muslim nations, remote areas, shut-ins, introverts, skeptics, etc.

Opportunities: Seniors

- **Those seniors who do use the Internet tend to spend more hours in cyberspace than anyone else - over twice the time of young people who "dive in and dive out"**

- **Many of these seniors do not have good health and do not enjoy going to a neighborhood church but have much wisdom and love the Lord**

Opportunities: The Unchurched Church
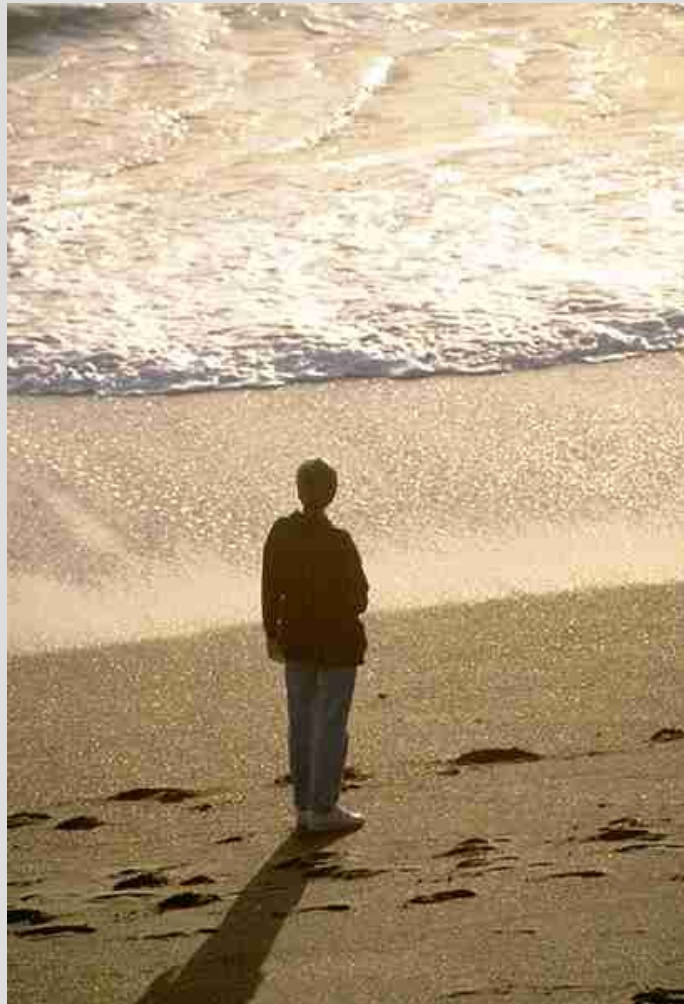
- **Many Christians have left the institutional church – for a wide variety of reasons and now "float around" seeking spiritual nourishment here and there.**

- **Unchurched Christians can benefit greatly from a friendly and accepting cyberchurch which can help them to rebuild their trust in the Christian community**

Opportunities: Micro-Churches

- **The Internet can draw together small groups of people around very specific doctrinal or practical interests**

- **You could set up an Internet church for HIV+ people, or for folk with a hearing disability**

Opportunities: Social Networking

- **Christian social networking**
- **Christian alternatives to MySpace**
- **Bringing friends together to meet Christ and enter into salvation together**

- www.boc.org
- www.mypraize.com
- www.mybattlecry.com
- www.storyspot.com
- www.meetfish.com

Opportunities: New Technologies

- **Podcasting**

- **Videocasting**

- **Cell phones**

- **Ebooks / Downloads**

- **Injecting web based content into normal Christian community**

Opportunities: Web To Local

- **Databases of local churches "Find A Church"**

- **Google local – church plus zip code**

- **Connect web communities to neighborhood churches that respect that paradigm**

- **Church based face to face events for web communities**

Opportunities: Game Communities

- Game communities - meet in the game, then form into Christian community

- Christian gaming communities

- Christian sub-communities in Second Life etc

- Use the game to teach values – teaching by participation

Threats: Technological

- A cyberchurch depends on reliable Internet access and people having computers to access it. If the server goes down, the church goes down.

- A cyberchurch can be hacked or spied on by malicious parties

- Some high-bandwidth applications (e.g video streaming) may not be accessible to members using dialup or in developing nations.

- VOIP e.g. Skype is illegal in some countries

Threats - Fakes, Impostors and Heretics

- **Fakes / Infiltrators: It can be difficult to ascertain that someone is "really a Christian" online? (This is vital in Muslim countries)**

- **Impostors: For instance someone who claims to be one gender but is really another e.g. a man pretending to be a woman?**

- **Heretics / Cults: Those who enter the group to argue or to "draw away disciples after themselves"**

Threats: Scam Artists & Online Predators

- **People who enter Christian groups because they are "so trusting" and peddle multi-level marketing, HYIPs (High Yield Investment Portfolios = Ponzi schemes) etc.**

- **People who try to ensnare youth, lonely people etc into sexual relationships**

- **Teach discernment skills**

- **Have an alert moderator**

Threats: Internal and External Conflict

- If moderation is too laissez-faire then internal conflict can tear the cyberchurch apart
- If moderation is too strict, many people will quietly (and sometimes loudly) leave
- Cyberchurches have the potential to cause resentment from other forms of ministry and can thus generate external conflict
- Cyberchurches can occasionally be accussed of the same sorts of things that social networking sites are accused of
- Have a clear, written code of conduct
- Have a usage policy and copyright policy
- Have fair and firm moderation

Part 3

- **Building Christian Community Online**

Focus

- An online community needs a central focus e.g. "Red Hat Linux User Group", or "Christian Bee-Keepers Association of Northern Alberta"
- The site policy document should reflect this focus and help people to stick within it
- For instance a Christian HIV+ recovery group may wish to include some people and exclude others and this should be plainly stated at sign-up

Forty to Four Hundred
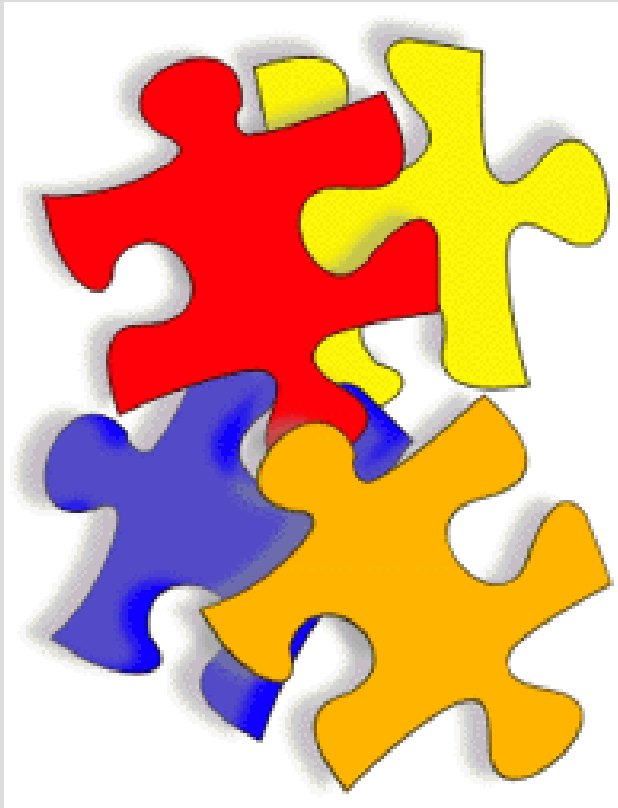
- 40 is the "magic number" of members at which an online community starts to "come alive"

- 400 members is approximately the number at which an online community begins to get too many messages and becomes "too large" for most people.

- Try and get 40 interested folk (or as close to it as possible) before you start your cyberchurch, divide the community at 400 or earlier

Facilitated

- Keep it simple and intuitive, write for outsiders not insiders, remember the non-techie

- Have help that is easy to access. Reminder emails each month

- If people are made to feel dumb they will stop participating

- If people are made to feel clever and cool they will tell others

- If people feel they are helped quickly they will be loyal

- If their problems are ignored they will resent you

Faith
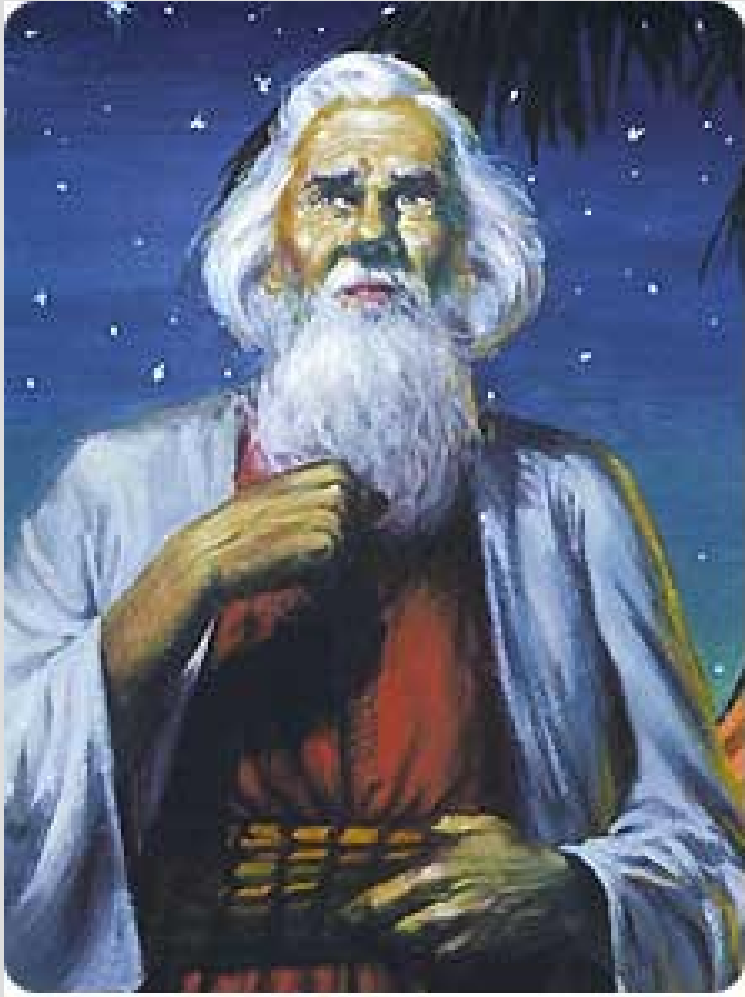
- A cyberchurch that is spiritually encouraging and full of faith will grow through the work of the Holy Spirit among its members

- Encourage positive Scriptural faith and simple Christian joy

- Use scriptures to encourage people and assure people that they are being prayed for

Fervent Prayer

- All ministry rises or falls on prayer - even cyberministry

- There is an enormous amount of spiritual warfare that happens in online ministry especially those that are breaking into territory once held by Satan.

- Pray daily for your online ministry and have it "covered" by some good intercessors

- Have a separate e-group of prayer partners and send them weekly updates

Fast & Friendly

- **Fast responses from a friendly moderator really help to build online community**

- **If a moderator can respond within 2-3 hours of most messages being posted it gives a sense of immediacy which encourages sharing**

- **Moderators should aim to "prime the pump" rather than dominate the discussion**

Fairness

- The moderation team (and it is best if it is a team of say 3-5 mature Christians) should be scrupulously fair when dealing with online disputes

- Cliques and favorites can develop online, just as they do offline and they are perhaps even more damaging

- Impartiality brings stability to online community

Fire Extinguishers!

- "Flames" are insults, aspersions and verbal assaults which occur in online debates

- If the "flames" are allowed to spread then the Christian community can be damaged

- It can be tempting to react angrily to someone who "flames" you – which only adds fuel to the fire.

- The goal is not to "win" but to preserve community

- Forbearance and turning the other cheek are essential

- Moderators should privately email those in the flame war and tell them to stop.

Freebies

- People will join an online community that has regular freebies – that relate to the group's purpose

- This can be as simple as a link to a useful piece of free software or to a bible search tool or other item: "This week's useful freebie: check out E-Sword's new module on..."

- Or it can be a "free tip" on Christian living or a free devotional

- Once they join they then can slowly become part of the other activities of the cyberchurch

Fine Folk

- **People want to be around "fine folk who are just like them"**

- **This is the homogenous unit principle of Donald McGavran**

- **People do not want to have to cross cultural, linguistic or social barriers to receive the gospel**

- **Since an online community can only contain about 400 people out of all Creation it can legitimately be limited to a certain demographic**

Features

- Have enough site features to encourage folk to participate in ways that suit them e.g discussion boards, e-groups, instant messenger, photo gallery, notices, downloads, sermons, prayer whiteboard etc

- Do not have so many features that they are underutilized and the site seems dead

- Add features by member demand, e.g. live chat is only suitable for very large groups

Few Irritants

- If a cyberchurch is full of irritants such as:

  Spam,
  Multi-level marketing
  Large attachments
  Flashing gifs
  Blatant advertising
  Financial appeals and
  "Pass-it-on" emails

  Then people will reach a certain limit of patience and either unsubscribe or cease participating in other ways

Finesse

- The most long-lived communities such as The Well have a certain "finesse" about them

- Develop a sense of poise and power and maintain it

- Don't be thrown by quiet spots or by a few members leaving

- Communicate a dynamic sense of "why you are there"

Follies (To Avoid)

- **False intimacy / rushing to commitment/ "gushiness"**

- **Intolerance of legitimate diversity**

- **Expecting too much, too soon from the cyberchurch**

- **Asking people to "do stuff" or to give financially before they are ready to do so.**

Part 4

- **Free Or Low Cost Software For Building Christian Communities Online**
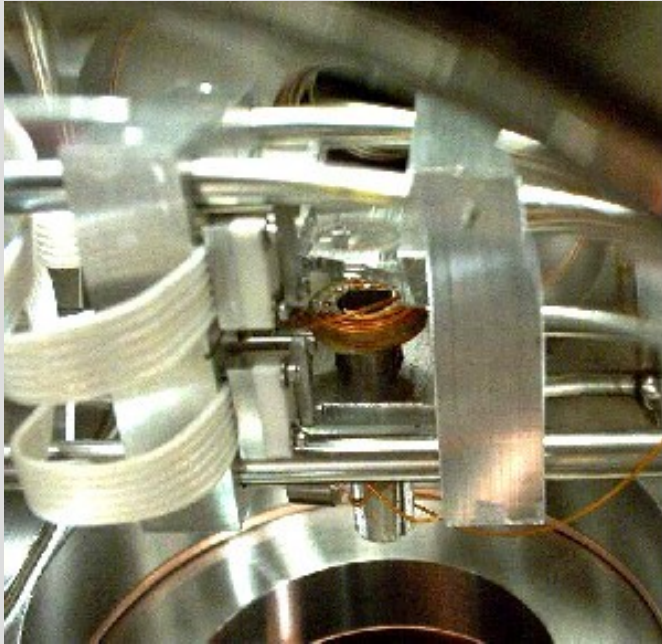
Content Management Systems

- E107
- Drupal
- CivicSpace
- Are database driven content management systems using PHP/MySql and generally running on Linux/Apache servers
- They have forums, blogs, email to members and many other features
- They take some configuration but it is now getting much easier to install and configure them
 Try them out at:
  http://www.opensourcecms.com/
- Compare them at: http://www.cmsmatrix.org/

Forums

- **Simple Machines Forum**

- **http://www.simplemachines.org/**

- **Do NOT use PHPBB as it has serious security issues**

- **It is wise NOT to turn on HTML for posts (with most forum software)**

- **Have clear forum rules**

- **Check the forum each day to ensure that inappropriate material is not being posted**

Blogs
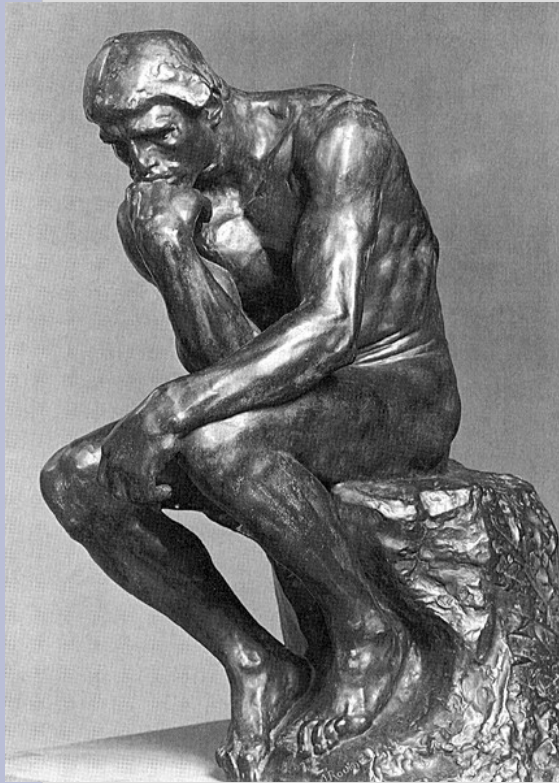
- Blog is the contraction universally used for weblog, a type of website where entries are made (such as in a journal or diary), displayed in a reverse chronological order.

- A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. Some focus on photographs (photoblog), videos (vlog), or audio (podcasting), and are part of a wider network of social media.

- Programs: WordPress, MovableType, Greymatter, Typepad
- Hosted Blogs: Blogger, Xanga, LiveJournal
- About.com list of free blog software and blog hosts

Dealing With "Blogspam"

- **"Blogspam" has become so common that it is making running a hosted blog (e.g. a Wordpress blog) very difficult**

- **If you do run a blog then run some "spam karma" software to catch comment spam and trackback spam**

- **Wikipedia has a good article on defeating spam in blogs: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spam_in_blogs**

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IM, VOIP & Internet radio

- **Scatterchat – secure IM client based on GAIM compatible with AOL, YM, ICQ etc. http://www.scatterchat.com/**
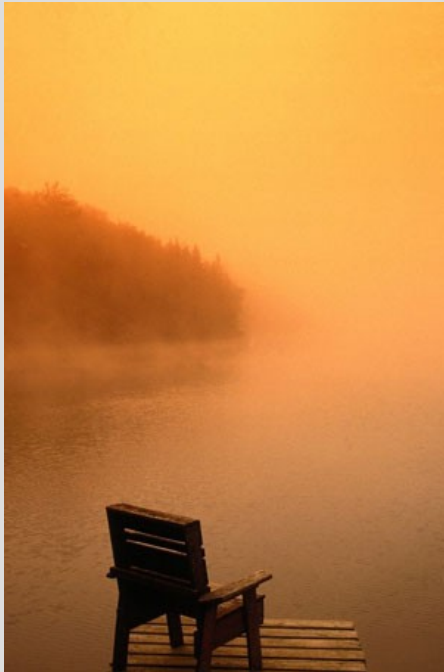
- **Skype: www.skype.com**
- **PalTalk: http://www.paltalk.com/**

  How to set up an Internet radio station:
  About.Com article
  WinAmp article
  Microsoft article

Education

- **Moodle - www.moodle.org**

- **Interact – hosted at Sourceforge http://sourceforge.net/projects/cce-interact**

- **Spaghetti Learning: www.spaghtettilearning.com**

- **UNESCO- Free and Open Software Portal - Courseware**

General Software

- **Sourceforge - www.sourceforge.net**
  Open source software repository

- **PHP Resource Index http://php.resourceindex.com/**
  Add functionality to your website

- **46 Best Freeware Utilities**
  www.techsupportalert.com/best_46_free_utilities.htm

- **CSS Play: http://www.cssplay.co.uk/menus/**
  CSS style sheets so you can look cool!

Christian Stuff
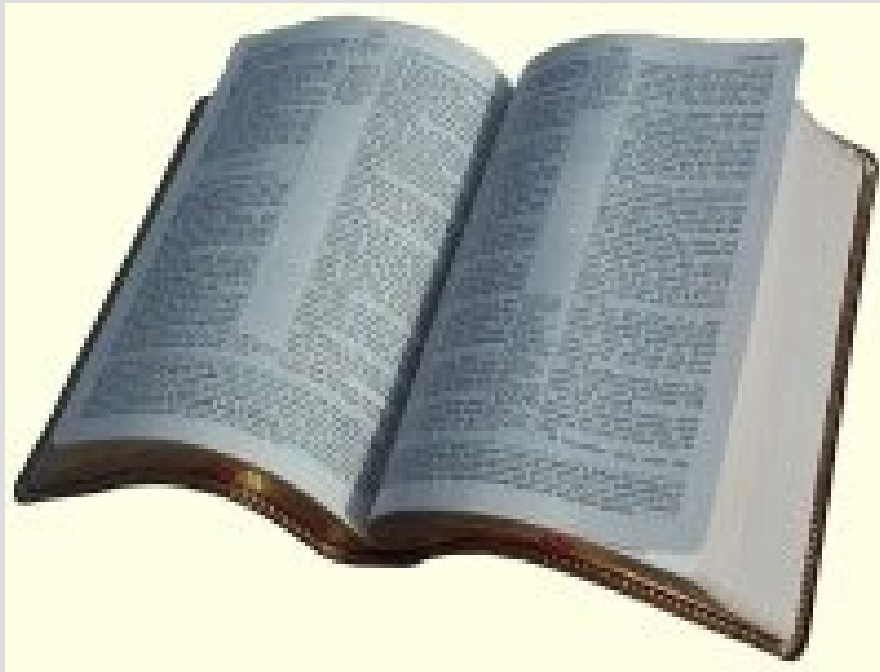
- **E—Sword: www.e-sword.net**

- **Net Bible: http://www.bible.org/ Bible with extensive study notes**

- **Bible Gateway http://www.biblegateway.com/**

- **Ebible (World English Bible) http://www.ebible.org/**

- **Thom Tapp – Christian cartoons http://www.thomtapp.com/**

Contact

- **Cybermissions: www.cybermissions.org**
- **AIBI: aibi.gospelcom.net**
- **Email: johned@aibi.ph**

- **AIBI**
  514 E. Desford St.
  Carson CA 9075
  Ph: 310-549-6791

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