

Designing and Implementing an Internet Evangelism Strategy for Your Church

The purpose of this manual is to provide a step-by-step approach to developing an Internet evangelism strategy for your church. Although the large view of the task ahead of you may seem overwhelming, consider that all large tasks are really a collection of smaller steps taken in a sequence which leads to the realization of the ultimate task. By planning and taking small steps, a church of **any** size can develop a strategy and an Internet presence that exposes people in the Internet world to the claims of Christ.

This is important. If all Christian evangelical churches were to establish outreach sites, the Internet would become a tremendous reaching tool in the Kingdom of Christ. Will you allow yourself to catch the vision?

Some churches relegate their Internet presence to one person, webmaster. It is up to that person to strategize, develop and resource the church's Web site. This manual is based upon the idea that the congregation should have an opportunity to invest directly in Internet evangelism. For that reason, this manual can be used by a webmaster or any individual with a felt call to lead his or her church into active Internet evangelism.

Read over the steps to get an overview of the plan. Avoid jumping to conclusions, pray about it, and ask God's wisdom and guidance. This work is new to most churches, so don't be surprised if the concepts feel foreign or awkward, but feelings should not be what determine our choices when it comes to opportunities to share Jesus Christ.

The Steps

1. Establish a Kingdom worldview and atmosphere in your church. An Internet evangelism strategy should ideally flow out of the overall evangelism strategy of the church. Many churches think about local strategy but do little beyond missions giving to fulfill the challenge given in Acts 1:8. An Internet evangelism strategy can help a church be involved in all aspects of the challenge. It can provide a vehicle for individual church members to use their God-given skills and talents in the sowing and harvesting beyond their own area. For that reason developing a strategy should begin with a Kingdom mindset and a decision to avoid creating another program for the church's own consumption.

You do not want your church's World Wide Web (WWW) presence to be an electronic version of your newsletter or telephone book listing. Your goal is to design a tool your members can use to reach lost people on the Internet. At each stage in the strategy design process you should ask, "Is this something which targets lost people rather than church people?" As you keep that question in mind, you will keep the design process and the ultimate tools focused on evangelism. Rest assured in the knowledge that as you minister to people at the point of their needs and interests and expose them to the claims of Christ in the context of your ministering, your church will definitely establish an identity! It

will be an identity that communicates you care and that illustrates how your message is relevant to the world today.

The backing and support of the pastor and key leadership is critical in this step. In an ideal situation these leaders will be willing to share a vision of Internet evangelism with the congregation. If the church has an evangelism and/or missions committee, try to enlist their help in talking about and educating the congregation about the possibilities for Internet evangelism. Be creative. Share statistics about the people who use the Internet and who respond to invitations to trust Christ. Contact the Evangelism Response Center at erc@namb.net to request some current stories.

Calendar an Internet Evangelism Day for your church. Excellent resources are available at www.InternetEvangelismDay.com.

The reason for creating Internet evangelism awareness in the church will become apparent in the steps following.

A Word About Budget: Budgeting is obviously necessary. However, many churches plan their ministries based upon a budget rather than budgeting for the ministries God wants them to have. This manual uses a “ministry budget” approach. Once a church has sought God about the kind of Internet evangelism tools it should be using, it can confidently ask God for the funding to do what God has directed it to do. One good thing about Internet evangelism tools is that each tool can be developed as funds are available, but planning will be more efficient if it proceeds out of an overall strategy. If you are going to use a ministry budget approach, you will need to address budgeting at Step 8 rather than now.

2. Survey the gifts, skills and talents God has placed in your church. It is important to know what God has provided in order to help you identify human needs God may be equipping your congregation to meet within an evangelism context. Even people who are not interested in evangelism on the Internet can contribute to building the tools you can use (more about this later). Explain to the congregation why you need the information. Make good use of the awareness you have created in the first step.

You could research some evangelistic church web sites and develop a display that helps people begin to catch a vision with you. Give people plenty of time to get used to the idea and return their completed surveys. Emphasize that the survey is not just for people who have computers.

Here is a sample skill and talent survey. Copy and modify it to fit your needs.

Gifts, Skills, and Talents God Has Given to
Horse Falls Baptist Church
1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

E-mail Address _____

Please list the spiritual gifts God has given you.

Please list the skills God has given you. List everything, even if some of them seem out of context in church.

Please list the subjects you have advanced knowledge about.

Please list the talents you have. Again, anything can be helpful if used in God's service.

Do you have moderate to advanced knowledge of:

Computers?

The Internet?

World Wide Web?

Are you interested in learning how to use the Internet as an evangelism tool?

You should also survey committees or groups in the church who are already providing focused ministries such as divorce care, marriage enrichment, topical Bible studies, recovery ministries, homeless ministry, or anything else that ministers to people needs. Another group of people you can identify is the prayer warriors in your church. You will want to enlist them in the next step to pray for the church's future Web presence and those who will be directly involved in it. Your church may already have an excellent prayer strategy you can utilize.

3. Try to form a task force out of the people who on the survey indicated advanced Internet knowledge and interest in evangelism on the Internet. In smaller churches there may not be anyone other than yourself. That's OK. You can still continue with the strategy process. Just consider you and the Holy Spirit as the task force.

Present an overview of this plan to your new task force. Remember that people are willing to work toward a goal when the purpose is clear, the plan allows for personal investment, and the goal is worthy.

Have the task force enlist the prayer warriors to begin praying. These people do not necessarily have to meet with the task force, but the task force will need to establish clear communication lines with them. Keep the prayer warriors updated and active.

4. Ask everyone on the task force to register for and complete the Online Training for Online Evangelists available at <http://bgc.gospelcom.net/iec/otoe/index.php>. Schedule meetings of the task force for the purpose of talking about the training, sharing what each person has learned, talking about philosophy and direction, and compiling a list of resources discovered during the training.

5. If no one on the task force is doing Web site developing, consider finding a developer who will meet with the task force to answer questions and offer ideas and information. If no developer lives in your area, contact a developer on the WWW who has experience with church sites. Correspond with that person and share info with the task force. Avoid making a contract with a developer at this point. You are doing research for now. Have the task force members subscribe to lists or forums that provide information to people developing church Web sites. A good one is <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/churchsite-chat/>.

The task force should do research to determine what are the possible contact points with lost people on the Internet. Visit as many Christian evangelical Web sites as you can. Where are others finding the accessible doors behind which there are people with whom you could also communicate? Specifically take note of how sites build a bridge to sharing the gospel (See "Bridge Strategy" on <http://www.gospelcom.net/guide/index.php#4>). The tools these sites use are also your potential Internet tools for evangelism. Remember, you are looking for sites that are deliberately reaching lost people. An example is <http://www.southeastchristian.org/index.cfm> (be sure to look throughout this great site).

Here is a possible list of tools, but keep looking with a creative eye, and use your imagination. You will likely come up with even more. If you do not know what these items are or how to access them, find web pages that give that information. A great, helpful site is <http://www.gospelcom.net/guide/index.php>.

Web pages addressing human needs
Web pages using humor
Web pages focused on a special interest
Web pages with links to helpful sites
Chat Rooms
Public Forums
Private Forums
E-mail Lists
Instant messaging

6. Convene the task force for prayer asking for vision and wisdom about your church's specific web presence. Depending upon your church member participation, this step may require multiple sessions over several months' time.

After your prayer time at each session, put a large erasable marker board on a wall, or cover a wall with a large sheet of blank paper. On one end list the information gleaned from the skills and talents survey. On the other end, list the Internet tools for evangelism the task force has become familiar with. Look for ways to match the two lists into the Internet evangelism toolbox he wants you to use as a church.

The result of this step should be a list of Internet tools and the topics related to them you feel God wants you to consider. Again, do not assume something is out of reach for any reason at this point.

THIS IS IMPORTANT! Your goal for the work at this stage is in three parts:

1. Identify ways to attract people to your web pages or identify forums that match interests.
2. Identify how each of these tools can be used to build a bridge to opportunities to share Christ.
3. Identify an appropriate channel for follow-up once contact is made and a bridge is built.

Now begin to brainstorm about the possibilities. Anything is possible at this point. Do not assume that anything is not doable. Work toward coming up with all the possible connections. For instance, someone in your church has advanced knowledge of something. It is likely there will be many people on the Internet interested in that same thing. Might there be a way to build a web site that includes a page devoted to that subject? How might that page look? What would it offer? What mechanism for contact with visitors would fit?

The Attraction: Try to come up with a basic list of Internet tools and the topics associated with them that seem to fit the skill and talent pool of your church. Again, people who do not want to actually use the Internet are still sources for the content you can use in your strategy. Also, focused ministries already in your church are sources. The topic and picture sources are limited only by the imagination. Perhaps your church can host a forum for quilters, or antique tractor restorers, or nose flute collectors, or gardeners, or cat lovers. You might have a physician, or counselor, or other specialist in your church who could provide useful human issue documents for a web page. Any of these things can work, because people are on the Internet to look for information and to interact.

Building a Bridge to Share: Provide ways people can contact you or interact with you in all of your tools. The ways can include e-mail links, guest books, e-mail listserve, offers of free info or newsletters, etc. Research other sites to see how contacts are made. When you provide for contact, keep in mind you should avoid anything that seems disingenuous or comes across as “bait and switch.” Be upfront and open about what you are offering. As an example, if you are using information articles on a web page, think of ways the articles can lead into an offer to share Christ or lead to a link to a gospel presentation. This is a common technique on many evangelistic web sites. See www.namb.net/helplink as one example that generates about 8,000 visits per month. But there may be other ways more suitable to the tools you decide to use. Whatever contact mechanism you use, determine now to arrange for timely responses. Again, the Web Guide is another good source for ideas and things to avoid, <http://www.gospelcom.net/guide/index.php>.

Providing for Follow-up: Many churches do not utilize media evangelism of any kind, because they cannot figure out a way to handle contacts they might make. Many times contacts come from areas outside the church’s ministry field. This will be particularly true with Internet evangelism. The good news for Southern Baptist Churches is the Evangelism Response Center (ERC). Every SBC church owns the ERC. The ERC includes a Follow-up Network for referring people to local churches all over North America and to the International Mission Board for follow-up anywhere else in the world.

The ERC could be your tool in two ways: 1. When you have a contact out of your area that needs follow-up, simply send information about that contact to erc@namb.net. Make sure to identify yourself and give the physical, phone, or e-mail addresses of the contact needing follow-up. Any information about the source of the contact or whether the person is a seeker or making a decision, etc. would be helpful to the church that will be doing the follow-up. The ERC makes hundreds of these referrals per month on a daily basis. 2. Include links in your web pages to www.thegoodnews.org. You can also copy and paste the link into your messages in forums, etc. People visiting that site can choose to experience a variety of presentations of the gospel and to submit some kind of response. Those responses are routed to the ERC where they receive appropriate contact or follow-up by an SBC church local to the respondent.

Your church can be a part of the ERC Follow-up Network by registering as an ERC Covenant Church. In the same way other churches would receive follow-up referrals from your contacts, you would receive follow-up referrals from contacts in your area with other churches and sources. There are no long distances on the Internet. To register, send e-mail to erc@namb.net and request the ERC Covenant Church registration packet.

7. You should not start this step until you have the list of Internet tools you believe God wants you to consider. This list includes the name of the tools, the topics that might be related to each tool, and the names of people who can contribute to the content or the use of the tools. When you settle on the list, you can begin to explore possible resources for each tool. If you are the only one working on this, you will have the same thing except your name and interests will be related to each tool. Unless you have a lot of time, just concentrating on one tool may be the best thing to do. Even a task force may determine that God is leading it to use one tool.

Contact each person you have named as a contributor to or user of each tool. Cast the vision for the work and how your contributor or user can help fulfill the vision God has planned for the church in Internet evangelism. Depending upon the size of your person pool, you might think about enlisting some to enlist others. Ask them to meet with the task force. At this meeting the task force will be trying to clarify what content would be available, i.e., pictures, graphics, articles, manuscripts, lists, manuals, or other non-copyrighted materials related to the web pages or forums on the list. Ask contributors what things would attract people with like interests. Ask some to do research to help out. Begin to compile lists of resources already on the Internet to which you can link on a web page or provide in an e-mail or forum or chat. Let people “buy into” the strategy.

Special Forces Team: You may uncover special opportunities at this stage. In your talent and skill survey you may have discovered people who just like to share Christ, and they do it well. When you have people like this, it would be good to train them to visit chat rooms and forums where they can strike up relationships with lost people. This approach does not necessarily depend upon the church’s providing a tool. Folks such as this can be the inner-city kind of witnesses. They just have the gift of exposing the claims of Christ to people who are usually not open. Why not just send them out there to visit existing chat rooms and lead people to Christ? Here are some considerations you should keep in mind when enlisting these cutting edge witnesses. These people should be people who:

- Do not get agitated when lost people act like lost people.
- Do exhibit patience when dealing with all kinds of people.
- Do not feel the need to defend God, Jesus Christ, or the Bible.
- Do not enjoy debating theological issues.
- Are not argumentative.
- Have a passion for sharing Christ with lost people.

Some Christians close many doors to sharing Christ over the Internet because their attitudes and approaches are wrong for the task. This is an important issue on the

Internet. The Internet has a tradition of being an open forum for the exchange of ideas. People will not tolerate attempts to dominate or coerce on the Internet. Christians witnessing on the Internet have to trust God's faithfulness to his Word and to the witness of his people. If we build contact relationships with people, willingly meet them at the point of their needs rather than ours, humbly share the claims of Christ with them, and then invite them to trust Jesus Christ, God will be faithful to do his work in their hearts.

If you have someone who fits this profile, provide training for him or her. The Web Guide has links to several online training sites, <http://www.gospelcom.net/guide/index.php>. Have this person go through the Online Training for Online Evangelists course, <http://bgc.gospelcom.net/iec/otoe/index.php>. Make sure your online evangelists understand how to route contacts out of your area to the Evangelism Response Center for follow-up.

8. After you complete Step 6 your task force will begin to see which tools may work and which may not as far as contributors and users are concerned. Asking for God's wisdom the task force should meet with the goal of setting the final list of tools to use. When the task force decides on the list, it should assign each tool to a facilitator, and decide on a timeline for implementing each tool. The Task Force may decide to just develop one tool at a time beginning with a web site to which the other tools can be added later.

The facilitators may be the individual members of the task force or others. Facilitators will design the workflow for the creation of the tools, establish coordination of the contributors to the content of the tools, and provide the training to users. Again, sessions using a marker board or white paper on the wall can help the task force visualize the creation process.

The task force should probably ask the facilitators to come up with an expected creation and operating budget for each tool. At this point it may be necessary to talk to a web developer about the costs. Many people and companies provide web site development and hosting resources. Someone in your church may be a developer and would be happy to work with you in creating a tool and in finding a host such as www.lifewaylink.com or www.christianhosting.com. If you need to find help, do a Google search on "Christian web development," etc., to locate possible resources such as <http://www.lynncumings.com/home.php>. Check the Web Guide for info, <http://www.gospelcom.net/guide/index.php>. Research the Internet for free resources or links you can appropriately incorporate into your tools. The North American Mission Board has two great gospel presentations you can download, modify, and upload to your web site, <http://www.namb.net/root/evangelismkit/default.asp>.

When the task force has a development plan and a projected budget for all of the tools, it can make a presentation to the church. The budget presentation should feature the tools, how they will be used, who will be directly involved with them, and the potential for reaching people with the gospel. This is the point when all the hard work begins to pay off. The church members will be invested spiritually and creatively. Because the task force will have a specific plan with the results in view, the church will be more willing to

give. Once the budget is in place, begin to implement the steps necessary to begin building your church's Internet evangelism tools based upon the task force's plan.

Creating the tools: Always keep the question in mind, "Is this something which targets church people rather than lost people?" Follow this question throughout the creation process. Make sure there is provision for contact with people. Make sure there is provision for providing follow-up.

Coordinating contributors: Work with your volunteers to obtain text, graphics, and/or pictures related to the topics you will address in your tools. Decide with your volunteers when there should be periodic updates to the content and arrange for times and ways for that to happen.

Training users: Research training resources for your users. The Web Guide has information and links, <http://www.gospelcom.net/guide/index.php>. You may have someone in your church who is knowledgeable enough to train others. You may also need to provide witness training and witness tools to your people as they correspond with the contacts your tools generate.

9. Begin to launch your new Internet evangelism tools with prayer and the commissioning of the church as part of its overall evangelism strategy. Let the church's investment in sharing Christ via the Internet become part of the fabric of the church's identity. Make regular reports to keep the congregation aware of what its Internet evangelism efforts accomplish. Find out how to access statistics related to your site.

Keep specific prayer requests in front of your prayer warriors. An ongoing request would be for protection for everyone involved.

10. The Task Force should meet periodically to pray, share updates on the work, coordinate updates to the site, evaluate how the tools are working, and form action plans for modifications as needed. Keep in mind that it takes time to establish an identity on the Internet. You may not have many visitors to your site for several months. If you have worked your plan well, however, you will begin to see more and more visitors as time passes. If visits never do increase, you may need to evaluate whether you have content that speaks to the needs or interests of people. You may need to tweak your tools in ways that will increase the chances search engines will find them for listing. Your web developer should be able to help with this. There is also good information in the Web Guide <http://www.gospelcom.net/guide/index.php>.

11. Send the URL of your church's Web site to the ERC at erc@namb.net. The ERC will list your site in the ERC Web Community, <http://erc.sbclink.com>.

John 4:34-38

Evangelism Response Center
erc@namb.net