

Crossing the Digital Divide

How the church is spreading the gospel and leading the way in an online revolution



Every April at the Las Vegas Convention Center, the world's most creative minds converge with a legion of tech-heads to talk shop and plan world domination. The NAB Show, as the National Association of Broadcasters' annual convention is called, is a utopia for those who work with content production—one of those rare can't-miss events for Hollywood movers and Internet shapers alike. It's where 100,000 people gather to find out how to cross the great digital divide in the ever-shifting world of communication and technology, and how to bridge the gap between old-school media and an online revolution that operates at light speed.

It's also where the church became a leader—again.

Jono Hall, director of media at the International House of Prayer (IHOP-KC) in Kansas City, Mo., has sensed this shift in recent years while walking the floor with industry leaders. And this year's show placed the body of Christ on full display, especially when it came to one of the conference's main themes: live streaming.

Hall leads a media team that streams 24/7 live prayer and worship from IHOP-KC. His convergence of technology, communication and spirituality is framed continuously via the ministry's various online vehicles that stream more than 1 million hours of video each month. What Hall's team produces online—and the tools they use to create such content—isn't the lo-fi stuff that critics of the church often clump in with past generations. There's nothing embarrassing about the technical quality of IHOP-KC's content, nor is there a hint of

miniscule budgets that can't compete with professional studios.

No, even among the "big boys" represented at the Vegas show, IHOP-KC is leading the pack alongside other ministries and churches. Hall says even vendors and providers noticed how the faith community was leading the way in live streaming this year.

Of course, piloting the technology path is nothing new for the church, which has pioneered everything from the printing press to satellite TV. Hall saw this innovation up-close last year while visiting Heritage USA in Fort Mill, S.C., where Jim Bakker's PTL Satellite Network once blazed a trail in global communications.

"It was phenomenal what they were doing back in the early 1980s," Hall says, adding how Heritage USA was completely "fibered" and could operate remote cameras anywhere on site through a central control room. While cable TV was just starting, a handful of today's cable giants, including CNN, visited the PTL site to glean from the ground-breaking Christian ministry.

"Christianity has always been at the forefront of technology," Hall says. "Here was a case, 30 years ago, where they were at the forefront of cable TV, they were leading the way. Often we think we need to be at the forefront of Christian media, but I believe the Lord wants us to be at the forefront of media-period."

To establish that leading position, however, takes resources believers often lack. "Technology costs money, and if you don't have those resources, you're not going to be at the cutting edge. At least in the churches I've been a part of, money has always been the challenge. As a result, there's always been a little more creativity on how we actually achieved things technologically."

That creativity is emphasized more often in the church these days given a digital world in which constant change is the norm and connecting with audiences is king. The common user now understands the seasonal, trending nature of the online arena: how for every Facebook today (yes, even with 750 million active users) there's a MySpace left in its wake. And like everyone else, believers recognize the great mobile shift occurring: This year smartphones and tablets surpassed PCs in sales for the first time. A staggering 5.3 billion people—77 percent of the world's population—are mobile subscribers, while the percentage of mobile-only Internet users continues to rise dramatically.

But as the world goes mobile, our faith is changing too—not necessarily the foundations of our faith, but how we live out our beliefs within the context of communities that have URL addresses rather than street addresses. Today the kingdom of God is being established as frequently on Facebook and Twitter as in person—and with results suggesting the harvest online may be the greatest yet. What used to take years of sowing to yield a few hundred lives changed can now “go viral” and, through social networking, affect millions within moments.

“This is the Internet moment in human history,” says Walt Wilson, a former Apple Computer executive and one-time senior vice president at Computer Sciences Corp who founded the online evangelistic ministry Global Media Outreach (GMO). “We have the technology to reach every man, woman and child on earth. We're the first generation in all human history to have this capacity.”

Amid such astounding potential comes a hopeful reality: The church is regaining its footing as a pioneer on the technological trail, as “the head and not the tail” (Deut. 28:13). Yet as believers adjust to this new environment of innovation, are we ready to fully cross the digital divide for the sake of the gospel?

Meet Me at the Crisis Point

Few churches value innovation in technology like Edmond, . A multisite church that relies heavily on satellite video teaching, has been a giant among innovative churches for the past decade. In 2006, it was the first church to hold real-life worship services within the online game *Second Life*, exposing millions of “avatars” (and the people behind those virtual beings) to the gospel. Two years later, the church introduced the world’s most popular mobile phone Bible software, YouVersion, which has reached an astounding 13 million people and still ranks among the top-10 most downloaded apps on Apple’s iTunes.

Through all its innovation, the church hasn’t veered from its mission of sharing the gospel anywhere it can; in fact, the digital arena has simply opened up ministry avenues never imagined before. In December 2007, for example, began running Google ads amid pornographic search words. “Looking for pornography? God has a better plan. Try Church Online,” reads one of the text ads that shows up amid a list of smutty sites. Once clicked, the ads take users to a live videocast of a worship service, as well as a lively chat room with volunteers who are ready to answer questions, pray and lead people to Christ.

“We’re trying to connect with people at a point of need, a point of hurt, a point of searching—literally on Google—for something that we know is trying to fill something in their lives that’s just not going to do it,” says Troy Steward, ’s pastor of technology.

This year alone, more than 2 million people have visited the church’s website via the ads, with 9,000 people responding to the gospel as a result. The ads, which also appear in searches related to divorce, suicide, depression and similar crisis topics, run only during live worship services, and between two to 15 volunteers monitor and participate in the chat room.

“That type of intelligent interaction or intersection is something that couldn’t even exist in ministry five or 10 years ago,” says Bobby Gruenewald, pastor of innovation at and the creator of YouVersion. “That ability to intersect someone in the moment of sin or in a moment of temptation ... in that moment they can obviously be presented with the gospel and with truth.”

A tech industry veteran, Gruenewald is a rock star among Christian media leaders, having made *Fast Company*’s “100 Most Creative People in Business” list earlier this year. Yet his kingdom-minded approach to technology and innovation doesn’t just stand out in secular circles, it’s also a common denominator among those leading the church’s transition from old methodologies to new vehicles of delivering the Good News.

Serving the Nations

At the height of the dot-com boom, Tim Jenné couldn’t have had it any better. The IT manager had been a part of several fast-growing companies and, in 2001, was on his way to being the chief information officer for a \$60 billion bank in Seattle. But after God captured his heart through a Jack Frost “Father Loves You” conference in Toronto, Jenné moved to tiny Redding, Calif., and, following years of consulting for Bethel Church, became the church’s media director.

Few congregations have crossed the digital divide as successfully as Bethel. Only three years ago, the church leapfrogged an entire generation of technology, moving from tapes and CDs straight into HD cameras, on-demand videos and live streaming. Using his entrepreneurial experience, Jenné created a \$450,000-investment business plan that took Bethel, a community that had already spawned a global movement, to a new level online. , which streams Bethel’s services, conferences and the like, launched on Dec. 14, 2008, and by the end of the night already had 100 subscribers—with 100 more added each day for the following weeks. Today more than 95,000

subscribers a month log in to join live worship or view archived content.

Yet Jenné is quick to point out that the message and mission of Bethel are what people connect with, not technology itself: “Technology is like the Roman roads: They were built for commerce, but the gospel went out on them. When it really needed to be there, we didn’t have to build roads, they were there. The same thing is true with the Internet; it was built for us. And social networking was built for us.

“It’s easy to get bogged down with the details, as important as they can be,” he adds. “But we’re serving the nations, we’re hosting the nations—and we don’t want anything to get in the way of that.”

To remind his media team of that truth while they labor in the trenches, Jenné will often share healing testimonies—a major part of Bethel’s corporate culture—that relate directly to . His favorite involves a wheelchair-bound woman in Alaska who had, among other major diseases, multiple sclerosis that had left her paralyzed and unable to go to church. As she watched with a friend one night, the friend felt led to pray for her, upon which she was instantly healed—and later proved this by traveling to Redding and standing onstage next to Bethel Senior Pastor Bill Johnson.

Even a missionary couple in China who work with “castaway” disabled children—from catatonic to quadriplegics to mentally disabled—said they couldn’t continue their ministry if it weren’t for .

“All they need is a little pinhole, and I can get life to somebody,” Jenné says with tear-filled passion that’s rarely found in someone so heavily entrenched in the tech world. “All it takes is a little Internet connection and they’ve got it.”

The Mission Field Redefined

If fact, it's that simple Internet connection that is altering the global church's expansion. About 2 billion people use the Internet, yet because 90 percent of the world now lives in places that are accessible to a mobile network, more than half a billion people go online using a mobile device. Even in rural areas, where mobile coverage drops to 80 percent, Internet connections often run faster than in the U.S., thanks in part to pure fiber optic connections (and the lack of legacy systems).

Clearly, the mission field is no longer just physical locations, but an online landscape that could yield the greatest spiritual harvest in history. According to Global Media Outreach, 2 million people a day go online to search for spiritual truth or guidance. The online evangelistic ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ recognized this and established a lofty goal: to reach the entire world with the gospel by 2020.

Using more than 100 different websites, GMO presents a basic gospel message to those already searching. The ministry recruits volunteer online missionaries—a worldwide army now 4,300 strong—to correspond with those who make a decision for Christ, answering questions they may have and helping to connect them with a local church body. In this sense, every Christian can establish his own ministry and mission field—a concept GMO says is revolutionizing the way the church views evangelism. Last year GMO reported more than 15 million decisions for Christ.

“This is one of the most exciting things I have ever been a part of in my 40 years of ministry,” says Joel Hunter, senior pastor of Northland: A Church Distributed in Longwood, Fla., which partners with GMO. Hunter's church has long integrated online worship and community as part of its own corporate body life. In fact, of its 15,000 members, a full one-third attend a service each week via the church's website, smartphones, Roku set-top boxes or Facebook.

In March 2010, Northland launched the first live-church Facebook app, which allows users to invite Facebook friends to join in a streaming service with a single click. The megachurch was also the first to create a dedicated channel for the Roku set-top box, an open-platform device that allows users to access exclusive Internet-based television channels. Northland holds entire services on Roku, which has been uniquely used to establish and resource house churches.

“The motivation behind these tools is to take the church where people live,” says Robert Andrescik, Northland’s director of public relations. “Our hope is that online worshippers will join a community with other believers ... or start one.”

Viral Church

If the church hopes to follow the lead of innovative congregations such as Northland and shine a light in every corner of everyday life, we must fully realize—and seize—the opportunity for unprecedented exponential growth that technology provides. For example, a recent evangelistic crusade in Anaheim, Calif., with Harvest Church Pastor Greg Laurie drew an impressive 115,000 people to Angel Stadium over a three-day period. Yet online, the outreach event was viewed more than 1.3 million times in all 50 U.S. states and 63 countries, marking a 500 percent increase over the previous year.

What made the difference? The church’s concerted marketing effort to tell an online audience about the event. Within one weekend, 26,000 people “liked” the Facebook promotional page, which means 26,000 visitors posted a promotional video and poster on their own Facebook walls for all their friends to see. Paul Eaton, pastor of communications at Harvest, estimates that 12 million people had access to see the promotions, which may have resulted in the number of people who viewed the event.

“People are spending a lot more time looking at their computers as opposed to looking at their televisions and other areas of media,” Eaton says. “It has really grown, and we recognize that. As we see people going into this space, we’ve really been motivated to go in to the space too.”

That space is no longer a single medium. The smartphone age is upon us. As of this summer, 12 percent of American adults owned an e-reader such as Amazon’s Kindle or Barnes and Noble’s Nook. And the tablet era is emerging—Goldman Sachs estimates almost 80 million tablets will be sold in 2012.

For IHOP-KC’s Hall, such rapid and sweeping technological changes naturally bring to mind a prophecy IHOP-KC founder Mike Bickle received almost 30 years ago. In 1983, Bob Jones envisioned people in Asia carrying “unplugged TV sets in their hands and even on their wristwatches” who would be able to watch “songbirds” from the Kansas City prayer community.

With its 24/7 streaming of prayer and worship, this has not only been fulfilled in Asia, but throughout the world—including areas previously impenetrable with the gospel.

“Before, people might get a CD and be able to listen to us,” Hall says. “Now, no matter where they are in the earth, they can actually link in. It’s pretty amazing for us to see that. Because it’s one thing for someone in Kansas City to feel a bit lazy one day and, rather than coming into the prayer room, decide to watch us online; it’s another thing to have people tuning in from Muslim nations and see their lives transformed.

“The message hasn’t changed, but the way we communicate has definitely changed. And if we’re burning with the Great Commission and we want to reach the world for Jesus, then we’re going to find creative ways of reaching audiences.”

Charisma Editor **Marcus Yoars** crossed a digital divide of sorts

two years ago when he bit the cost bullet and converted to all-Apple devices. He doesn't plan on returning to the "other side" anytime soon. Associate Editor **Felicia Abraham** also contributed to this story.

Young@Heart

How veteran ministry leaders are adjusting to the new digital world

Digital media isn't just for Gen-Y preachers who wear jeans and untucked shirts, stand behind ultra-modern pulpits, and go heavy on the audio-visual aids during Sunday service. No,  some of the kingdom's more mature charismatic personalities are young at heart—rocking the social media world with hundreds of thousands of followers.

Joyce Meyer is perhaps the epitome of Christian social media rock stars. At 68 years old, Joyce has more than 1.5 million Facebook fans and another 375,000-plus Twitter followers. Every day, Joyce encourages her social media fans with quips such as, "Your weakness is God's opportunity to show His power!"

Reinhard Bonnke, 71, has 350,000 Facebook followers in his own right and offers words of wisdom such as: "The man or woman moved by the Holy Spirit is immovable!"

Meanwhile, megachurch pastor John Hagee, 71, has more than 50,000 Facebook fans and Marilyn Hickey—who recently celebrated her 80th birthday—just crossed the 5,000 mark.

And despite possibly being the oldest voice of evangelism on Facebook, 92-year-old Billy Graham has more than 300,000 fans.

Even generals of the faith from days gone have a voice in social media. Kathryn Kuhlman, Kenneth Hagin and Smith Wigglesworth, among others, are with us in spirit through

Facebook. Page organizers often draw from classic sermons to remind believers of what these impactful messengers preached.

Kuhlman's official page, for example, recently posted: "When Jesus died on the cross and cried out, 'It is finished!' He not only died for our sins, but for our diseases too."

—Jennifer LeClaire

Innovation in the Church

The pioneers behind YouVersion, GloBible and explain why digital creativity is imperative for believers today

THE INNOVATORS

Charisma: *Christians are often tagged as being 10 years behind the technology curve, but you guys obviously aren't. Why is it so important for believers to be on the forefront of new technology?*



Bobby Gruenewald: We really believe that we're alive at a unique time in history when the population is obviously booming. Nearly 7 billion people [are] alive today. We're not here by accident because at this exact same time in history that the population's booming, we have tools and technology and things that connect us together like never before. So we as Christians and as the church look at that and really believe it's not just an opportunity to share the gospel with this world, but it's actually a responsibility we have.



Troy Carl: One of the most exciting things about this day and age is that the 21st century Roman road really is technology. When Jesus gave the Great Commission in Matthew 28, for us to go into all the world and make disciples, they went out on a Roman road system. Never has there been an opportunity like this. That's why it's so important that Christians be plugged in and engaged and aware of this unprecedented opportunity.



Nelson Saba: [Many young people were] born in a digital world and use digital technology as their primary media. Many of them don't engage very well with traditional media, traditional newspapers and even television, but they do use digital as their primary way of consuming information. To me, that makes it very urgent for us to have the Bible in that media pipe. Just as we translate the Bible into many different languages, it's like translating the Bible into the language of this digital age.

Charisma: *How do you see digital changing the personal relationship Christians have with Christ?*

Carl: I wouldn't say that it's changed it, but I do think that it's made the opportunity to engage in God's Word much more readily available. It's enhanced the opportunity to be conscious and aware and plugged in to what God is saying every day. Since we're plugged in to Facebook [and] plugged in to social networks, we should also be as equally plugged in to God's Word.

Gruenewald: You basically create a more frequent opportunity to intersect God's Word—that being one part of a personal relationship that we have with God. It can have a positive impact on our relationship because it increases the frequency of intersection. You certainly don't have to have only that.

You can do it through prayer and other things outside of simply reading and understanding God's Word. However, that's one more way that technology enables you to intersect who Jesus is and have God speak to you through His Word.

Charisma: *What does the future look like with regard to technology's impact on the gospel?*

Carl: I believe that with cloud-based distribution technology ... everything will be interconnected. From your car to your bathroom mirror to the countertops in your home to the desk you interact with to billboards and signs—all of it will be interconnected through cloud-based digital distribution. If the Scripture can be normalized and put into a cloud-based ecosystem, then ... in the very near future we will see God's Word available anywhere, anytime to anyone, accessible in any place. That's where I see the future going.

Gruenewald: I definitely see the picture that Troy's painting. You don't have to look very far to know what the near future looks like. I believe you're going to see a more socially interconnected population of people globally than even there are today. I think that technology in the future is going to be more and more intelligent, and [so will] our ability to share the gospel in a very targeted way.

Saba: The use of technology for the Bible is going to evolve in not only making it more *accessible*, but also making it more *effective* in terms of helping people understand Scripture.

—*Felicia Abraham*

There's a (Christian) App for That

10 apps created specifically for believers



1) God Tools Campus Crusade for Christ's app provides users with tools to easily begin evangelizing others. *iPhone / iPad / iPod Touch / Android / free*



2) CBD Reader App E-book reading platform provides the largest selection of Christian e-books on the market. *iPhone / iPad / iPod Touch / Android & more / free*



3) Fish and Loaves Help Jesus feed the 5,000 by catching the fish and loaves in your basket. The game speeds up as you play, so don't let the fishies flop away! *iPhone / iPad / iPod Touch / 99 cents*



4) iBibleapps–Bible Reading Tweet and share your Bible study notes with others all over the world. *iPhone / Android / any Web browser / free*



5) charisma news Get up-to-the-minute breaking news, amazing reports of what the Holy Spirit is doing around the world and prophetic insight into today's current events—all from a Spirit-filled perspective. *iPhone / iPad / iPod Touch / Android & more / free*



6) Granny's Bible Dojo Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus ... wait, what comes next? Step into Granny's martial-arts training facility and find out as you karate-chop through the books of the Bible. Just don't break your hand! *iPhone / iPad / iPod Touch / 99 cents*



7) Christian Karaoke

for Android With more than 100 Christian songs, this app helps you praise God *and* improve your vocal chops on the go. *Android / free*



8) Romans Road to Salvation The Bible's GPS, Romans Road uses verses from the book of Romans to help you provide directions to anyone looking for Destination: Salvation. *Android / free*



9) rio Family Currents Introduced by David C. Cook, this app is designed to help families incorporate Sunday school lessons from the Rio curriculum throughout the week. You get all the take-home pages—without the paper. *iPhone / iPad / iPod Touch / Android / free*



10) As the name implies, you'll be able to access the most popular Christian teachings and broadcasts all in one place! *iPhone / iPod touch / iPad / free*

—Stefanie Schartel

How a Blog Changed My Life

For Jon Acuff, 'Stuff Christians Like' isn't just funny stuff



All Jon Acuff wanted to do was rant. Fueled by his frustration with Christians' lack of creativity, he thought he'd post a few thoughts online for a week or two to get it out of his system.

Since that time—March 21, 2008—he's become a best-selling author of three books, a nationally sought-after speaker and writes stories read online by 97 percent of the countries in the world. And he owes it all to a little blog.

Growing up as a pastor's son, Acuff was always struck by how uncreative the church was in celebrating the Creator of everything. So when Christian Lander started his blog "Stuff White People Like," Acuff created a spin-off, "Stuff Christians Like" (SCL), in which his first entry was about—you guessed it—why Christians rip off popular culture.

"I thought, 'Why don't I talk about that problem by committing that problem? Why don't I create a Christian version of that site to talk about 'Why do we create Christian versions of things?'" Acuff explains.

Though the site started as an experiment and a way to converse, things quickly began to change. The often-hilarious, always-insightful blog drew 4,000 readers on its ninth day, and people were soon talking about it. Acuff's mind started changing when a nonbeliever commented on the blog: "'I've never seen faith talked about this honestly. No offense, but if I ever become a Christian, this is the type of Christian I'd like to become,'" the visitor posted.

That was the first time Acuff realized “this could be a ministry, not just sort of a sarcastic or silly conversation.” Which may explain why SCL has become more of a community than just another blog.

“The benefits of the community, I think, have been a place where you can talk about some of these issues hopefully without getting judged.”

Readers of the blog (an army more than 2 million strong), have even donated more than \$90,000 to different causes. Prompted by his 5-year-old daughter’s gut-wrenching question after seeing a famished child (“Are you doing anything about that, Dad?”), Acuff teamed up with Samaritan’s Purse and set out to raise \$30,000 to build a kindergarten in Vietnam. He expected it to take weeks; instead, the goal was met in 18 hours. For his most recent project, SCL fans raised \$30,000—in 24 hours—to save more than 3,000 lives in Uganda by purchasing mosquito nets.

“The surprising thing is that I get to do this,” Acuff says sincerely. “Every time I step on stage, I think, ‘Did this start with a blog?’”

—Gina Meeks