

The Age of E-vangelism

☒ Consumed with despair over her husband's leaving her for another woman, Debbie spent months thinking about taking her life. But one night in 2003, after deciding she would be better off dead, she accidentally logged on to .

"I had never seen you before, but I knew that you were speaking truth and love," she wrote in a recent email to host Bill Keller. "I emailed you shortly after that, and for almost five years you have been kind enough to keep in touch with me. Your kind attention and care and love have been a stronghold that I have clung to for all these years."

The heartfelt email is just one of 3.5 million praise reports Keller has received in recent years. As an Internet evangelist and the outspoken host of a program that reaches 40,000 daily Web visitors, Keller is one of a growing number of Christians taking advantage of the digital revolution to fulfill the Great Commission. Each day, his Web show ministers to more people than any megachurch in the United States, and his devotionals are sent to 2.4 million e-mail subscribers.

The program, a live call-in faith- and values-based program airing exclusively on the Internet, features 700 retired pastors who pray with those who log on. So far, more than 225,000 people have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior.

But Keller says the program is only scratching the surface of the profound power of the Internet to reach billions of unbelievers around the globe. Keller believes the Web is going to play a key part in a great worldwide outpouring of the Holy Spirit touching hundreds of millions of lives. Although most churches and ministries already have Web sites, Keller believes God is going to use the Internet in a new way as an interactive, evangelistic tool to unleash the power of the

Holy Spirit outside the walls of the church.

“Right now, with 1 billion-plus people online around the world, you can literally impact millions and millions of lives on a daily basis and see their lives changed,” Keller says. “I really believe as things continue to decline in the world ... people are going to be looking for spiritual answers as to what is going on. The Internet is going to play a pivotal role in being an oasis of hope for people in these times, bringing God’s truth into their lives and bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ.”

A Mass Uprising

Already, 45 million Americans regularly turn to Web sites or mobile devices to hear sermons and teachings and to pray and worship through online churches such as Keller’s . The number of Web pages dealing with “God,” “religion” and “churches” totals more than 1 billion, up exponentially from a decade ago and outnumbering “sex” at 835 million pages.

Technology experts say it won’t be long before televisions in most people’s living rooms are hooked up to the Internet, opening up a new world of Web-based viewing options. This presents an unprecedented opportunity for people to use cyberspace in highly innovative ways to evangelize a worldwide audience.

These culture-makers are upending old Hollywood paradigms that restricted entrance to those who owned a studio. Now, anyone with a computer and a digital camera can join the uprising, challenging what Christian leaders at a recent Biola Media Conference called the “tyranny of the ‘mass’ in mass media.”

“With the rise of YouTube, suddenly everyone can have their own network,” says Craig Detweiler, co-host of the conference dubbed Blueprint Hollywood: Designing for the Digital Age and head of Fuller Seminary’s film studies department.

Detweiler believes that in the same way the invention of the

printing press made the Protestant Reformation possible, the Internet may also set off a reformation. "I think we are going to see a profound explosion of creativity from Christians around the world, telling stories of faith and conviction that are available with one click of the computer mouse," he says.

As Internet evangelism is igniting, Christians are also using the Web to revolutionize how people hear the gospel. Filmmakers, ministers, comedians and others are using sites such as YouTube, GodTube, MySpace TV and FunnyorDie to post films, comedic shorts, Web serials, sermons and other spiritually uplifting content. The comedic shorts use a measure of humor to bring the gospel to millions of people already hooked on Internet comedy.

As the dawn of the digital revolution explodes worldwide, Christian comedians can lead the new media or leave it to those who prefer to use sex and coarse humor to get a laugh, says Dan Ruppel, chief executive officer of Seriously Funny Entertainment, a company that has posted more than 100 comedy shorts on .

Ruppel, who helped pioneer Christian comedy in 1977 with Isaac Air Freight and later worked on the Late Show With David Letterman and Thou Shalt Laugh, is encouraging Christian comedians to give their audiences an alternative to the raunchy humor in many Web videos. Instead of participating in what some describe as "the age of mockery," the comedic videos by Ruppel and others feature a wholesome message and tap into a more heavenly sense of humor.

"It's all clean humor," Ruppel says. "It's not offensive. ... It's stuff your kids can watch. It's just stuff that's funny."

Lauded as the next "breakout" star in family comedy and often compared to a young Bill Cosby, Michael Jr. is one of the most famous of the Christian comedians. With comedic shorts posted on YouTube and GodTube, Michael Jr. says the videos are

opening people's eyes to the fact that a relationship with the Creator of the universe is anything but boring. Faith is not only spiritually fulfilling; it's fun too.

"Christians are realizing it is OK to laugh," says Michael Jr., who regularly appears on The Tonight Show, Comedy Central and at comedy clubs and churches throughout the country. "The Bible says in Proverbs 17:22 that laughter is good medicine. God knew what He was doing. People need some medicine now and then, and I just happen to be blessed enough to be the doctor."

Another popular comedic series on YouTube and FunnyorDie is Jesus People, a Christian Spinal Tap that pokes fun at some of the shortcomings of American Christianity and its subculture of music and television, says director Jason Naumann.

"The Internet is the new popular medium," Naumann says. "When you go to Hollywood meetings, the people there aren't looking for movies and television shows. They are asking for Web series. It's the new medium that hasn't been filled with content yet. So for any Christians looking to get into the industry, this is the newest, hottest place to get in."

These online videos have become enormously popular in recent months. Currently, one-quarter of computer users watch online videos-twice as many as those who download music, according to a recent Barna Group survey. And nearly one in four adults said they had downloaded a church podcast in the last week. The phenomena is primarily driven by the Millennial generation, youth born between 1980 and 1995 who thrive on the Internet and subsist on a regular diet of Web headlines, quick facts and brief updates, according to a recent ethnographic study commissioned by the Associated Press.

"Young people, for instance, think of themselves as creators of content, not merely consumers of it," says David Kinnaman, the lead researcher on the Barna survey. "Technology, in

essence, gives them a voice and fuels their search for calling. The stewardship of technology as a force for good in culture is an important role for technologists, entrepreneurs, educators and Christian leaders.”

To reach this generation, Phil Cooke, co-host of the Biola conference and president of Cooke Pictures, says Christian ministries and media need to engage in a two-way conversation with a generation accustomed to weighing in with their opinions on Web sites.

“It’s far more than having a fancy Web site and cool graphics,” says Cooke, author of *Branding Faith*, a book about telling powerful stories in a media-dominated culture that transforms people’s lives. “The thing we have to understand is what is the story we are trying to tell. What is the audience that is interested in that story and how do we connect with that audience? Until we understand that, all the other things don’t matter.”

The first show of its kind in the faith market, a new Web series titled

, involves a compelling storyline. The serial is about a rich kid named Tyler who gets cut off from his dad’s money at age 23. He’s forced to find a job, a place to live and a vision for what he wants to do in life. He becomes friends with Jesse, played by Christian musician Jeremy Camp, who plays guitar at a local hangout and teaches Tyler not only about music but also about faith in God.

“It’s kind of like *The OC* meets *7th Heaven*,” says creator and producer Christine Park. “We wanted to create something that is more family- and faith-based so the teens who watch it really walk away with something substantive to their spiritual walk.”

Interactive Ministry

The exploding popularity of the Internet comes as the Piper

Jaffray & Co. Internet Media and Marketing research team estimates global online advertising revenues will reach \$81.1 billion by 2011. The magnitude of the online audience has Hollywood worried as their control of the marketplace diminishes.

John Ware, executive director of the 168 Hour Film Project, an annual Christian speed-filmmaking contest, says Hollywood studios don't want to get left behind in the digital revolution. "The Internet is definitely revolutionizing how we get our content," Ware says. "Ultimately, I think you are going to be able to watch anything on your living room television from any Web site you want. It won't be long before you can watch YouTube TV and punch up a channel on your remote control."

The recording industry, which has been decimated by music downloading, also is concerned about the rise of Web-based content. Likewise, the book, magazine and newspaper publishing industries are in upheaval. And even television is struggling for viewers. "So, into this void will arise whoever understands the new media, and I guess-and my hope-is that Christians will step into that void," Detweiler says.

One of the driving forces behind new media is the small amount of investment needed to produce Web videos. Creating films has never been more affordable or easier to distribute.

Mike Bowen, the youth pastor at the First Southern Baptist Church in Winton, California, zeroed in on the zeitgeist of the Web when he changed the lyrics of the rap song "Lean Like a Cholo" to "Act Like a Christian" and posted the parody on YouTube. At first, he received no response, but a month later he discovered about 1,000 e-mails in his inbox.

The video, featured on YouTube's home page, has now been viewed more than 229,000 times. Many viewers are teenagers who noticed Bowen is a youth pastor and asked him for help dealing

with tough problems in their lives. Now, Bowen is starting an online video chat room where he can minister to teenagers.

"I know there are many youth who will never step foot in my church or any other church," Bowen says. "So, I'm trying to bring the message to where they are. Young people naturally gravitate to technology, especially in this age. These kids have always known the Internet and cell phones. This is what they know and use. So we as a church have to be willing to adapt and shift to meet them where they are."

Martha Williamson, the executive producer and head writer of the hit TV show *Touched by an Angel*, which ran from 1994-2003 on CBS, is hosting a new video Web site called A Touch of Encouragement that meets people in their place of need. As the No. 1 video on , the segments feature Williamson telling stories touching on a wide range of inspirational topics, from families and relationships to grief and loss.

"It's a new way of exploring faith and encouraging people to believe that God exists, that God loves you and wants to be a part of your life," Williamson says. "Finally, people are waking up and discovering that maybe the highest and best use of the Internet is for inspiration."

One of the more innovative sites on the Web is , a Christian forum similar to The Drudge Report offering news, music, film premiers and a talk show. Mark Joseph, founder of MGM Entertainment and producer of the soundtrack for *The Passion of the Christ*, says the idea to create the Web site came when he was watching a Christian television station and realized that if nuclear war broke out there would be no means to offer a live update.

"I just wanted something relevant to our lives," Joseph says. "It's a forum where people can come and talk about faith and film, spirituality and news."

On , Nick Vujicic, a California-based evangelist and

motivational speaker who was born without limbs, is using the interactive Web site as a place for youth to gather and post their testimonials, short films, art, poetry, songs and literature. And as he goes on speaking tours around the globe, he can send updates to people using , a social networking and micro-blogging service that allows users to send and read brief messages known as "tweets."

"As I'm going through these countries ... people are going to be receiving text messages from me on their cell phones, Vujicic says. "We can actually communicate with each other on that Web site, like a live chat from your mobile phone. "

is working with Vujicic to build a prayer community around his evangelistic outreach. Robert Yang, founder of the social prayer Web site, says these kinds of Web sites serve to augment what traditional ministries provide and draw people who don't attend church. "I think more people are becoming comfortable worshiping online," Yang says.

Keller, who often appears on the *The O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity & Colmes* on Fox News, says the Internet is going to play a pivotal role in helping Christians reach the world in the 21st century through interactive Web sites, podcasts, live call-in shows, e-mail blasts and social networking.

"For 40 years now, we've created this Christian subculture of our own radio and television networks and left the world to the wolves," Keller says. "We need to reach the lost using vehicles like the Internet. People are hurting and longing for answers. We need to get out of the four walls of the church, get back into the marketplace and start competing for souls again."