

7 *The discipleship challenge:* Since Gospel messages delivered by mass media will create believers in widely dispersed locations, how can these new Christians be “gathered” and nourished in their new faith?

- Is a “virtual” or “online” congregation a viable option?
- What theological issues are involved in administering Word and Sacraments “online”?
- What are other religious groups doing with media in [location] and how?

Ugis Sildegs wrote:

The aim of Christian media witness is making disciples. The biggest problem in this regard is that mass communication has created a particular kind of environment where media is ever present in people's lives, but its reception is very superficial. Even though many people spend long hours each day using media, they get very little out of it. The reason: because it is a very passive mode of communication and there is a great distance between a "media consumer" and the "media message."

The great relational distance while communicating via media makes Christian discipleship very difficult and problematic. For instance, if unbelievers are struck by our media message on some occasion, they usually don't have any further direct and personal relationships to rely on. We hope they will have some Christian friends, or they will be so excited that they can come and seek out our congregations and attend our worship services.

However, in our newspaper experience there were very few direct results. Of course, we have gained a few members directly through *Latvian Lutheran*, but not as many as we could expect (having a couple thousand subscribers). Perhaps Latvians are too passive and shy, which limits communication possibilities. But maybe that is the special nature of media consumption which doesn't produce active disciples, but mostly passive spectators and mild sympathizers.

We heard a lot of stories from our members and readers from which we gathered that our paper has been beneficial for both believers and unbelievers. For example, we heard an anecdotal story about a Catholic priest, a regular reader, who even used our sermons in his preaching. We received many compliments and we had plenty of devoted readers who appreciated the clear

Gospel presentation, but unfortunately most of them didn't become members of our Church.

Thus our conclusion was that our media mission didn't reach deep enough, and by no means could it substitute for a face-to-face Christian witness. True, media can serve very well for pre-evangelization, education about the Bible and faith, an introduction to Christianity, etc., but the fact of the matter is that media can only be a supplement for direct communication, for the personal address which always is the best means for inviting and proclaiming the salvific message of our Saviour.

Questions:

In this age of rugged individualism many prefer a virtual reality to an actual face-to-face reality; they prefer a virtual community to a real human community. How can we use media in such a way which overcomes the distance of passive consumption and encourage people to meet and join in the living community of the Christian congregation?

**

Terry Schultz wrote:

Deep in the Peruvian Amazon, tribal communities usually contain no more than 50 villagers and are located about a day's walk from each other. How are we discipling believers residing in such widely-dispersed locations? We first needed to develop a deep trust between the villagers and us. Our invitation for one or two elders from each village to spend a week in Bible classes with us at a centrally located town at the edge of the jungle was eagerly accepted. Transportation, food, and lodging were all provided. Our course offerings progressed from adult instruction and Bible classes to lay leadership classes to pre-seminary and seminary classes.

Discipleship training must be compatible with the host culture. Tribal students are given many classes that incorporate storytelling. Classes that respond to students' specific spiritual concerns (black magic, white magic, jungle spirits, souls of the dead) have evolved into a "Dogmatics for Daily Living" course. Poster-size drawings and diagrams are used to illustrate bible stories, village situations, and fundamental Christian doctrines. These are tremendously popular. During class, students practice the presentations they will give in their villages.

In Haiti we follow a similar strategy, working with nearly a dozen orphanage directors who gather for a week of classes once a month. The directors crave story-based religion curriculum for their children. Classes that analyze Vodou beliefs in the light of Scripture are extremely popular. Posters and diagrams are eagerly received.

The discipleship models above are compatible with a missiological strategy of indigenity. No Peruvian or Haitian student is removed from his or her village for an extended period of time. Pastors and students continue to support themselves as they did before starting their education. The obvious drawback to this approach is that it takes a long time to complete a seminary education. Residential seminary programs have their advantages. The use of online education opens up entirely new avenues for delivering worship services, ongoing discipleship courses, and seminary education to widely dispersed communities.

**

Jas Lonquist and Mike Klebig wrote:

As we don't work in the mission field, we'll discuss another angle - the discipleship challenge of recruiting and connecting the necessary media technology professionals to support missions. - M & J

When I was in the fourth grade at Mt. Calvary Lutheran School, a group came from New Ulm to share information about Martin Luther College. Following their presentation, the leader of the group asked students to say what they planned

to be when they grew up. Inspired, the children answered one by one: "Lutheran teacher." "Lutheran pastor." "Lutheran pastor." "Lutheran teacher." It was my turn. "Go-go dancer," I loudly announced. Seeing my teacher's horrified face, I quickly added "*Lutheran go-go dancer.*"

Later I puzzled, head down on my desk during recess, what I'd said wrong. I didn't want to be a teacher! Chalk made me cringe and I badly wanted a pair of white vinyl boots. And frankly, naïve though I was, I was on to something. God does not endow each person with the skills to be an effective pastor, teacher, or missionary. People from many disciplines are needed to work cooperatively in sharing the gospel.

Gospel outreach needs dedicated people skilled in technology, medicine, politics, scientific research, statistical analysis, engineering, construction, software development, international relations, art, music, media, and the entertainment industry. It requires people who simply earn money at jobs where they excel to help support those in the mission field. There are roles for everyone, and every Christian should play a role. We're compelled to use everything in our power – talents, resources, skills, time.

Ideas to consider: (a) Parents and teachers should strive to see children's **natural talents** and gifts, encourage them, educate them, and make it clear we all are needed and responsible for sharing the gospel. (b) **Don't burn out** volunteers. Make sure all are well-supported. (c) Look **beyond the obvious**. The best media technology volunteers in our church are the retired seniors. While training took longer for some because they were less familiar with the devices and software, they are unmatched in their commitment. They can also work hours other volunteers who are still in the workforce cannot. They inspire the younger volunteers and they've rewritten our vision of retirement. (d) Create **excellent training** materials to support new volunteers. (e) Find people who will consider **tithing on time** and career skills – four hours of volunteering their professional skills for every forty hours in the workplace. (f) **Focus on purpose** – not self-fulfillment although the

work can be fulfilling. Not to feel good about ourselves (although serving others is probably one of the best paths out of depression or grief) but because of our powerful mandate: *“Rescue those being led away to death, hold back those staggering toward slaughter. If you say, ‘But we knew nothing about this,’ does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?”* Proverbs 24:11-12 Can’t say it more plainly than that.

SAMPLES OF WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING (For information only – not an endorsement of services or content)

- **Time Management Applications**
<http://blog.intuit.com/trends/top-10-time-management-ipad-and-iphone-apps>
2011 article featuring top time management apps for iPad and iPhone. Affiliation: Secular
- **LifeChurch.tv**
www.lifechurch.tv/leadership-development
Christian leadership development. Tools to discover strengths. Affiliation: Values statement on website
- **Vintage Life Church**
www.spiritualgiftstest.com
Assessment tool to discover gifts and strengths for ministry, church work. Affiliation: Statement of faith on website
- **The Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development**
www.churchleadership.org
Development programs. Mission strategies. Affiliation: Protestant Evangelical

**

Gonzalo Delgadillo wrote:

Multi Language Publications has experience in gathering Christians by Internet.

**

Paul Hartman wrote:

The MLP Coordinator for Latin America, Gonzalo Delgadillo, has much experience in developing a “virtual” or “online” church. The Spanish version

is sponsored by the WELS related congregation in Medellin, Colombia. While the Lord’s Supper has not been distributed in the setting of the “online” church, I personally think that it could be. Small groups meet via Skype in a variety of locations. A believing male who belongs to a congregation of our fellowship could administer the elements while a pastor leads the worship online.

Closely associated with online worship is the distance learning program at the discipleship level. The self-study materials entitled the *Bible Teachings Series* have involved more than 50,000 adults and children in South Asia and Latin America.

**

John Lawrenz wrote:

Today we have a mass of humanity before us. There are more people alive today, arguably, than the sum total of all who have lived and died before us. All are souls for whom Christ died. All are objects of the Great Commission. It is an understatement to say that the mass of humanity demands the careful consideration of mass media to reach many.

Jesus mentioned that his presence would be wherever two or three are gathered in his name. If that name comes through a book having been read, a film having been seen, or an Internet blog having been joined, a small number of meters and inches between individuals is not essential to the concept of “congregation,” no more than many miles or hundreds of kilometers. Christ is the head of the true church which exists everywhere. It is our Lord’s intent that the Gospel be preached everywhere before the end comes. Isolated cells that form around the Gospel will seek out like-minded cells and gravitate toward each other wherever the Word is sown. Today that Word can be spoken in person, through print, over airwaves, and in digital form.

The theological question is one of nurture. The first Christian congregation in Jerusalem gathered regularly to hear the apostles’ doctrine,

in the breaking of bread, and to pray. Baptisms were part of this. We know the Lord's Supper, too, was part of this early church in Jerusalem. Later on Antioch, Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, and many more were stirred in Word and sacrament to care for each other in all things sanctified by the Word and prayer. All strengthened and encouraged each other in the face of persecution.

Getting the Word out in Paul's time meant walking mega-miles on foot. It meant carefully written letters sent to the churches. It meant raising funds for the less fortunate. Disciples sorted out from among their midst new evangelists, preachers and teachers. The Lord who ascended gave gifts to the church then. We can be confident he will do the same to us today. With mass outreach through media must come a massive recruitment, training, and deployment of disciples to follow up the cells that the Holy Spirit creates.

I will venture an educated guess on what faces us. The sheer need for disciples will cause a crisis because the inherited institutions of the church have arisen, and are still maintained, in smaller contexts of scale. The Spirit knows this and will work to create new forms of the Gospel ministry, every bit as orderly and adequate as those that have come down from the past. The Spirit will do this among those who are into the Word and simultaneously pray in the Word and gather about the Sacraments. They will lay hands on those who know Jesus and are full of the Holy Spirit and they will go out to strengthen cells spawned by mass media. Baptisms will happen. The Lord's Supper will be celebrated. And the technology that made it possible in the first place will keep things in good Christian order. Some will resist the changes that occur. They will need to be won over patiently. It is my prayer that many will not resist and that some of us will live to see the day.

In East Asia young people from ELS and WELS are recreating a New Testament "atmosphere" in China. Theologically trained mentors are doing training using a mixture of blogs, personal visits, and on-line follow-up. Other Christian groups are doing similar things. It is a testimony to the Holy Spirit's own wisdom that God surprised us

when congregations sprung up almost spontaneously in several Chinese cities. This happened at a time when we thought seed sowing ministry was all that could be possible.

Time of Grace out of Milwaukee's St. Marcus congregation is on satellite TV. Currently the time slots are not ideal, but these can change, and we are working to have them change. We are making use of the Bible Teaching Series that was first written for prison inmates in the USA. Most of the booklets are now in Chinese. We are hopeful that all of them will eventually find themselves into bookstores with the knowledge and okay of the government. The more these and other things happen, the more we will hear of congregational cells forming and amalgamating. In anticipation we are equipping leaders for the groups that are forming, working around all the challenges that impede. If mistakes are made, they will be corrected and safeguards put in place to remove obstacles to the spread of the unconditional Gospel. If successes are experienced, they will all be to the glory of God!

##