

A report on
The Christian Mobile Phone Project

sponsored by
The Christ in Media Institute at Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato MN USA,
during the 2013-14 school year

Part One: brief summary of participating school's projects:

Northland Lutheran High School – about a large Asian country

...created an Android phone app enabling newcomers to Bible study to access internet materials to help them understand Christianity, learn more about the Bible, and enrich their devotional lives.

Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School – about India

...created a basics of Christianity presentation accessible via cellphone on Google and YouTube, directing viewers to a newly designed website, which in turn directs them to a congregation.

Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary – about Chile

...is creating a responsive website, addressing questions about Christianity and providing devotional material; the site can be a model for church websites everywhere.

Luther High School, Onalaska – about Mexico

...supported the website for the Mexican church by building a smartphone app that can access Christian materials on both the website and social media.

St. Croix Lutheran High School – about a south Asian country

...is creating a means for enabling Christians to share files phone-to-phone offline, and helping adapt materials already produced (Christian music videos, puppet shows, animations, Catechism lessons) to fit on phones.

Wisconsin Lutheran College – about Granada

...plans to produce video reports of the experiences of a Granadian student who is attending WLC, to be shown in our church in Granada, and possibly on Facebook and YouTube.

Bethany Lutheran College – about Zambia and Malawi

...proposed three strategies for spreading Christian messages: 1. Sending regular text (SMS) messages to lists of those who request them; 2. Creating libraries of Christian materials for phone-to-phone sharing by Bluetooth, micro-SD cards, or Wi-fi; 3. Setting up solar phone-charging stations where people will receive Christian materials while charging their phones.

Part Two: the Christian Mobile Phone Conference in detail

The Christian Mobile Phone Conference, held on March 21-23, 2014, on the campus of Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota, was the culminating event of the school-year-long Christian Mobile Phone Project. The Project began in the fall of 2013 when seven schools responded to an invitation to participate by creating student teams advised by a faculty member, and choosing a world mission field in which to specialize. On October 25-26, 2013, the school teams and their faculty advisers gathered at Wisconsin Lutheran College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for a Workshop at which they explored ways of understanding the cultures and people to whom they would be reaching out, and became acquainted with some of the technology available for outreach via mobile devices. At that Workshop, each team received a financial subsidy to support their research and production efforts over the coming school year. They were also put in touch with a mission church worker in the overseas field they had chosen, who would act as a consultant to their work.

Each team was tasked with, first, understanding the people they were trying to reach (their audience), and second, developing a strategy by which Gospel messages could be delivered to them on their mobile phones.

A spring Conference was held at Bethany Lutheran College, at which the teams met their overseas consultants, and reported on their work. 76 persons registered, and a number of additional guests raised the number of attendees to about 90. Each school team was given an hour to present their research into their chosen country's culture, and their suggested mobile phone strategies. The following summarizes especially the strategy aspects in each presentation.

Northland Lutheran High School – about a large Asian country

Students: Ivy Shaw, Sarah Whitson, Kaylee Turzinski, Jayme Brahmsteadt, Kim Mentink, Erica Mortenson, AJ Jensen, Seth Fenske. *Adviser:* Rick Grundman rgrundma@nlhs.org. *Consultant:* (name withheld)

This team researched the history and culture of their country, interviewed students from there currently attending NLHS, and conducted a survey of cultural factors, phone use, and preferences. On that basis they created an Android app, written in java, that can be given to newcomers to Bible study, enabling them to access internet materials via their phones to help them understand Christianity, learn more about the Bible, and enrich their devotional lives. This method can supply Christian materials to new believers without the need to carry printed publications into the country. Bilingual materials are being produced by WELS Multi-Language Publications, though it is a challenge to provide them in a format that can be used on mobile devices. The hosting website is easily-moved from server to server if necessary, with no log-in required, protecting the identity of users. While finding considerable student expertise in programming languages, the team in an important discovery found additional help with app building from freelancers in Croatia and India, contacted through www.odesk.com (programming for \$11/hr). The team is continuing its work on perfecting and improving the app, which can be downloaded from Google Play, search for “devotions grundman”.

Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School – about India

Students: Brie Bickford, Trent Campbell, Jacob Paul, Zach Schlittenhardt, Michael Uhlhorn, Ryan Uhlhorn, Caitlyn Williams. *Adviser:* Christopher Poetter thepoetters@mac.com. *Consultant:* Pastor Kalyan Gollipalli.

This team organized itself as a production company. Recognizing most of their audience will be people who have no idea what Christianity is, they developed this strategy: create a presentation of basics of the Christian faith (to make viewers “curious for Christ”), and make it accessible via cellphone on Google and YouTube, directing viewers to a website, which in turn directs them to a congregation. The presentation, prepared in both English and Hindi, starts by listing “problems” faced by humanity, then explains sin, what it is and why it is the greatest problem. The high suicide rate in India, especially among young people, illustrates their lack of hope. Jesus is presented as the solution to the problem of sin, and the source of hope. The team created a website to feature this message at christinindia.org. (They also purchased christinindia.com and christinindia.in.) The website features the “three solas,” offers a free Hindi Bible, describes the LMSI (Lutheran Mission of Salvation in India) with a gallery of photos, and directs viewers to a nearby congregation. The website is available in a mobile-friendly version (made with advice from GoDaddy.com), easily accessible on phones, and includes links to Facebook, Twitter, and other resources. Outreach via DVD (in PAL format), as well as distribution to phones by micro-SD cards, is also in the plans. Pastor Gollipalli will be taking back to India the means to advertise the website via cellphone (see Lightstream in Bethany presentation below).

Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary – about Chile

Student: Jeff Hendrix jhendrix@blc.edu. *Consultant:* Pastor Tim Erickson

Chile’s technology is a few years behind the US, but there are many smartphones, and high internet usage through them. The strategy in Chile will be a prototype website eventually available to churches throughout the CELC fellowship worldwide. The model website is “responsive” (contents displayable on any size screen – a concept that requires attention during webpage design). Website content is left to the Chilean mission; the strategy focuses on delivery, connecting people to the missionaries, and nurturing members by encouraging them to hunger for Word and Sacrament. The ultimate goal is to make an informational responsive website available to any congregation (in Chile and elsewhere). Site templates are to be designed with WordPress, with three levels, depending on how actively updated the site would be, and using the [nameofchurch].lutheranchurch.co [sic] domain. Crowdfunding using WordPress widgets could provide needed financing. Total cost is about \$800 to start, with participating churches paying \$15/month (google “free hosting” to find services providing non-profits with hosting at no cost). Plans for creating the Chile website are underway, addressing questions likely to be asked in that country, and providing devotional and informational material.

Luther High School, Onalaska – about Mexico

Students: Adam Schwartz, Griffin Finnestad, Julia Schibbelhut. *Adviser:* Greg Schibbelhut schigreg@luther.k12.wi.us. *Consultant:* Pastor Michael Hartman

What might have been the “best idea” of the Conference (distributing piñatas filled with paper slips containing the website address) was quickly rejected as impractical. The team then unveiled a possible YouTube item, a video in Spanish using a card trick to illustrate the Gospel. Technology is fairly advanced in Mexico, so an effective website for the Mexican church has been designed and is being maintained by WELS Multi-language Publications. To support it, the team created a smartphone app that can access both the website and social media, Facebook/Twitter. They learned that links to YouTube must be specific (using file numbers) to avoid having a search bring up unrelated material. A Lightstream Gospel Distribution System (see Bethany presentation below) may be provided later for delivering the app, as well as other materials (such as the “Come Follow Me” movie and Bible history story videos), to interested people on

their mobile phones. The team's consultant described in some detail how this team's work will support their overall outreach and education strategy in Mexico, and observed that similar strategies could be used to reach out to the huge and growing Hispanic population in the US, especially by linking to extended family members via mobile devices, through phone-to-phone file transfers and through inexpensive tablets for work with small groups.

St. Croix Lutheran High School – about a south Asian country

Students: Alexis Sievert, Marissa Sievert, Aaron Peters, Ken Ramirez. *Adviser:* Scott Sievert ssievert@stcroixlutheran.org. *Consultant:* (name withheld)

As all the teams, this one started their work by trying to learn about the culture, and to love the people, especially in light of how much we take our faith and freedom of worship for granted in the US. A brief background and history of the country was presented through news and video clips, and team members commented on the nature of the government, the country's demographics, and the arts, music and dance. They described the risk Christians face because of their faith, and the care that must be taken in speaking about it. Mobile phones are widespread, and SMS (texting) is common. Lutherans in the country are already producing Christian material both in print and video. The team's project is two-fold: 1. create an app that can be transferred phone-to-phone off-line, that will enable Christians to share materials and counter their sense of loneliness, and 2. enable the mobile phone sharing of materials already being produced, currently distributed by satellite television. Short music videos are already becoming popular, along with puppet shows and animations that convey the Gospel, as well as presentations on Luther's Catechism.

Wisconsin Lutheran College – about Granada

Students: Corey Plath, Jack Albert, Elizabeth Martin-Schnell. *Adviser:* Deborah Uecker deb.uecker@wlc.edu. *Consultant:* Pastor Steve Soukup (not present)

This school has had a longstanding relationship with Granada, and especially Grace Lutheran Church there. One member of this team traveled to Granada in January and brought back video of interviews with residents, commenting on their mobile phone habits, and of some of their worship practices. The interviews reflected a strong desire to solve the problems they face in using the technology already there. The team's first idea, developing a "phone jingle," was discarded for now, and they decided that their project would consist of making video reports of the experiences of a Granadian student who is attending WLC, to be shown in our church in Granada, and possibly on Facebook and YouTube. She plans to return home one day and, through social media, could possibly model for young people there the news that "there is a world out there" off the island. Possible future plans include work on the "jingle," and sending someone to Granada to teach them how to use technology.

Bethany Lutheran College – about Zambia and Malawi

Students: Joe Kinstler, Patrick Ernst, Kasenia Keller, Kristie Brown, Cassie Wierschke, Tyler Beagle. *Leader:* Heather Carmichael Heather.Carmichael@blc.edu. *Consultants:* Rob Wendland (Pastor Dan Sargent, not present)

After a brief survey of the history of the countries and of missions there, as well as a look at their music and art (a team member produced some Africa-themed visuals for possible digital use), the Bethany team proposed three strategies.

1. SMS message distribution. Most phones in Africa are still basic (not “smart”), but are capable of text (SMS) messaging. Invitations could be issued (“For a message of hope, text nnn”); then to the list of collected phone numbers could be sent, on a schedule, a variety of text messages, such as Scripture verses, short prayers, prayer requests, worship times and places, and so on. FRONTLINE is free software for a computer or phone that manages the sending of text messages to many phones at once. **This would be the “data base for mass messages.”**

<http://www.frontlinesms.com/technologies/frontlinesms-overview/>

2. Phone-to-phone viral transfers. Most phones in Africa use the Android operating system, and are capable of phone-to-phone file transfers via Bluetooth. They also usually have slots for micro-SD memory cards, another means for transferring files. This strategy involves creating libraries of digital materials (Bibles in both text and audio forms, the Catechism, Christian music both audio and videos, film clips from “Road to Emmaus” and “Come Follow Me,” Bible studies, etc.); these materials can be placed on phones, and users can transfer them, as appropriate, to relatives and friends phone-to-phone. Missionary Wendland was presented with an 8 gb micro-SD chip which contained two audio New Testaments (in Chichewa and Chitumbuka languages), 4 music files (African choirs), 6 music video files (African choirs), and 3 clips from the “Jesus” film (total of 1.6 gb used).

ESTANTE (by Mission Aviation Fellowship) is multi-language software for Android phones that makes phone-to-phone file transfers easy. <https://www.maf.org/estante#.UzSk517im1->

LIGHTSTREAM (from Renew Outreach, publicly available for sale in April 2014) is hardware that transfers files to phones in three ways: bluetooth, SD cards, and wi-fi. **This would be the foundation of a phone-to-phone transfer strategy.** A prototype version was at our Conference, and it seemed to be working well with both wi-fi and Bluetooth; lacking blanks, we did not try it with SD cards. LIGHTSTREAM comes in varying configurations (AC powered, battery powered, solar powered) with prices ranging from \$450 to \$720. The AC-powered unit we had was sent with Missionary Wendland to Malawi.

<http://www.mobileministrymagazine.com/2013/09/introduced-to-the-lightstream-gospel-sharing-system/>

see also the intro to LIGHTSTREAM on YouTube at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrEaTNDbBM>

3. The solar powered charging station. In many regions in Africa with limited and unreliable electrical service, people must go to vendors to recharge their phones. A church could set up a free phone charging station powered by the sun. While phones are charging, church workers could hand out Christian literature, ask if files (audio Bibles, etc.) could be transferred to the phones, and engage in conversation about Jesus.

SUNSTASH (from Gomadic) is a solar panel system for charging phones and computers. **This would be the basis of a phone-charging-station strategy.** It comes in a variety of powers and prices. The unit we had at the Conference was the most expensive at \$230 and was sent to Malawi.

<http://www.gomadic.com/sunvolt.html>

Finally, the team proposed combining all the above devices into a single kiosk.

Points made in the concluding “what’s next?” discussion

Think mobile phones! They are already out there; how can we make use of them? We produce fine print materials, and will continue to. But the future is wireless digital screens. How are we planning our publications for that – short videos, short messages, audio messages for the 70% of the world that can’t or won’t read? Rather than distributing materials ourselves, put them on people’s phones and let THEM distribute them to relatives and friends.

World mission work file sharing = Android.

There is still room in missions for the solar-powered portable projector, but it too needs digital material for it to show.

A good strategy for using technology is to use it to enhance and enable more Christian-to-person face-to-face conversations about Jesus.

Other tech challenges remain; for example, how can technology be used to GATHER people, who might be scattered believers, into groups for mutual support and edification? And then there is the task of converting the good material we already have in print, into phone-capable formats.

Since tech savvy varies among demographics (young use it, their parents don’t), preparing materials for both paper and screen is important.

The students involved in this Project all agreed with this: use them more!

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Before the Conference’s closing event Sunday morning, an hour was scheduled in which teams could meet once more with their overseas consultants to make further plans to work together bringing visions to life. Clearly the processes were beginning. One mission worker commented after the Conference: he had been involved in many projects intending to help missions; this was one that would have an immediate effect and impact in the field.

The concluding event of the Conference (and the Project) was an International Worship Service in Bethany’s Trinity Chapel. Chaplain Don Moldstad was liturgist, ELS Mission Coordinator Steve Peterson preached the sermon, the Bethany Choir sang, and Scripture texts were read in the Spanish, Chichewa, and a widely-used Asian language.

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Finally, the mission workers in the various countries will decide which, if any, of these proposed mobile strategies will be tried, and the Holy Spirit will determine which will succeed. For that we pray.

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