

Field-Governed Mission Structures Missions in Cyberspace

The Strategic Front-Line Use of the Internet in Missions

by John Edmiston

Frontier mission is always an adventure. It is also a calling, in the words of William Carey, to “use means” for the completion of the Great Commission. One of these means is the use of the Internet. And one of the most exhilarating frontiers of mission today is cyber-missions; the frontline use of IT to evangelize and disciple the nations. In this article we will keep the focus on cross-cultural mission web sites and strategic approaches to ministry online such as web-evangelism, email discipleship, web-based TEE and icafé’s as a church-planting strategy. This paper will review the potential, the actual uses and the successful implementation of Internet-based missionary outreach and put the case for missionary societies to have an Internet evangelism department headed by a Field Director-Cyberspace. I have intentionally excluded the traditional uses of computing in missions or the use of the Internet for mono-cultural ministry as this has already been extensively reviewed elsewhere (for instance in the work of Leonard Sweet).

	eMarketer	Computer Industry Almanac
Worldwide Internet Population	445.9 million	533 million
Projection for 2004	709.1 million	945 million

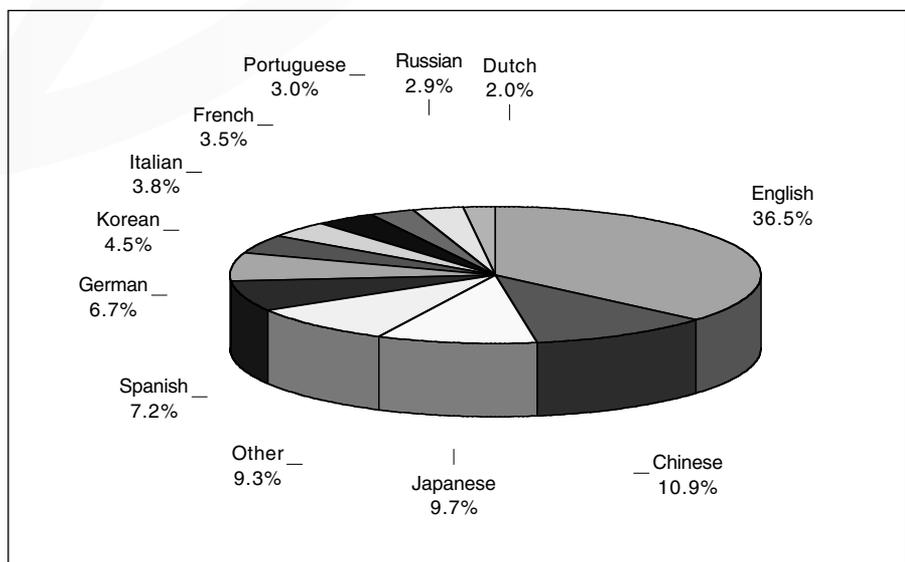


Table 1. Online Language Populations and Distribution by Language (September 2002). Source: Global Reach.

John Edmiston is Field Director-Philippines of Frontier Servants and the President of the Asian Internet Bible Institute. He has been in Internet ministry since 1989 and was formerly editor of Eternity Online Magazine. He is an Australian and lives in Manila with his wife Minda, who is a botanist.

From the above statistics it is clear that the Internet is no longer predominantly an English speaking medium and that Asian languages such as Chinese, Japanese and Korean now occupy a significant portion of cyberspace along with major European languages such as Spanish, Portuguese and French.

There are over 275 million Internet searches each day and 80% of all Internet sessions begin at a search engine (Internetstatistics.com). Religion is one of the main topics people search for. Pew Internet surveys found that 28 million Americans get religion information online, that three million do so daily, and that 25 % of net users search for religion-related topics. Barna Research estimates that up to 50 million Americans may worship solely over the Internet by 2010. There is every indication that the Internet is a major source of religious information where people of many cultures and languages collect their spiritual facts and opinions in private. Thus it's a place where missionaries must be.

Part One—The Concept, Opportunities And Strategic Use of Cyber-Missions

Despite the obvious potential for online evangelism mission computing is still largely seen as mission databases, accounting, fund-raising, email and publicity. Large “computing in missions” conferences debate security issues and networking but do not touch on how the IT staff can plant churches and reach unreached people groups for Jesus. That is left to “real missionaries”! This paper is about how geeks can spread the gospel and how cyber-missionaries can go places where conventional missionaries cannot. It will cover how the Internet is being used for theological education by extension, how chat rooms are being used for online evangelism in creative access countries, and how Internet cafés are proving a useful strategy in reaching unreached people groups. This paper presents the radical idea of IT as a frontline pioneer church-planting and evangelistic ministry.

Personal Involvement

My personal involvement with computers and mission began in 1988

with an ancient Microbee personal computer that did not even have a hard drive! By 1991 I had helped start Australian BibleNet, which was part of the old FidoNet bulletin board groups. In early 1994 as the web was just starting, I set up one of the first Christian websites “The Prayer Page”, the first site to allow people to put their prayer points online and give lessons on how to pray. This eventually developed (in mid 1994) into Eternity Online Magazine, which ran until the end of 1998 when funding ceased. At its peak in 1997 Eternity Online Magazine had over one million readers and around five hundred people per year wrote in reporting they had found Christ through its pages. In late 2001 I took up the challenge of the Asian Internet Bible Institute (www.aibi.ph), which runs twelve free online courses including the 21 module Harvestime church-planting course, in an effort to equip (via icalafés and church computers) the 70% of Asian pastors who have no formal ministry training. In combination with key missionaries I am currently also working on a strategy of planting internet cafés, staffed by Filipino missionaries, in unreached people groups in Asia.

The Word In Cyber-Space

Cyber-surfers mainly do just two things, read words and write words. Despite the graphics and sound bites of the WWW, the Internet is still mainly a text-based medium, and this is especially so in the developing world. But is this adequate? Can text transform the world? The answer is yes, people can be, and are often, changed by the written word addressing a real spiritual or personal need. The Internet simply places such material in an environment where people, who are interested in it, can easily access it through hyper-links and search engines. As I sleep or work, people read an article and are changed, or they go to the “How To Become A Christian” page and make a real commitment to Christ while sitting at their computer. They are transformed by the written word quite apart from my presence, appearance or charm. Thus cyber-ministry is far less dependent on personality, location, build-ings, clothing or cultural cues than

most missionary activity. Cyber-ministry however is highly dependent on writing and counselling skills, extensive networking between sites and on clarity and ease of use. The idea is to get the seeking person to the word that can transform their life (within three or four clicks of the mouse) and then to facilitate and follow up the encounter between the seeker and the Word of God and to build such people into encouraging online communities.

Understanding The WWW

Ok so you want to be a cyber-missionary? This requires a deep and intimate knowledge of the nature of cyberspace and particularly these four foundational concepts:

Firstly, the WWW is not a broadcast medium. When content is placed on the WWW it is not “sent out”. The content stays where it is, on the computer it was put on and visitors arrive at that content via a vast web of interconnections. In fact the WWW can be private, semi-public or public. It is not like a radio station, that anyone can listen in on. Content can be restricted to people with passwords or put on obscure and unlisted pages that ‘robots’ and search engines are prevented from finding and web pages can even be encrypted. Thus the WWW is not designed to send out general information to a random audience, but to draw selected people to specific information. The difference is critical. There is no automatic audience. Unless you understand how to draw people through the network of links to your website you can end up with zero visitors.

Secondly, in drawing people to the gospel on the Internet it is essential to understand how people navigate their way to a web site. The WWW is actually most like a vast library and generally surfers do not visit web pages by accident any more than they take out a library book by accident. They mainly arrive at a web page on the basis of a relevant, particular and specific interest, via a search engine or a link from a related web page or an email. The Internet is not passive like listening to radio, rather the surfer is always active, clicking, searching, reading, browsing and intentionally navigating through cyber-space. Thus the web surfer is a self-directed seeker driven by curios-

ity traveling through a community of hyper-links. So you have somehow to be connected to where that person is now if they are ever to reach you. The idea is to position your website within one or two clicks of millions of people. You need to be part of the network, woven into cyberspace so people “bump into” links to your site in all sorts of places. You also must be able to offer them a reason to go to your page. Surfers are mainly in search of two things: human contact and relevant information. Curiosity and community are the driving forces of the WWW and cyber-ministries need to harness the power of these forces if they are to succeed.

Thirdly, the WWW was designed for scientists and military personnel to share data and is designed to share highly specific information with a widely dispersed audience. Thus, in a counter-intuitive way, the more specific your information, the more visitors your mission website will get! If your site is on a broad topic like “Christianity” or “the gospel” you will find that it is one among millions—and yours is number 34,218 in the search engine. So your site will get very few visitors. My most specific and unusual articles, such as articles on human cloning, Theophostic counselling, or blessings and curses attract more visitors than articles on general discipleship topics. You can also see this principle operating in the commercial websites. General shopping sites on the Internet have failed by the thousands - while rare booksellers; antique shops, vintage wine and art sales have flourished. The trick is to have up-to-date topics that are highly specific. So when Dolly the sheep was cloned, I immediately wrote a Christian view of human cloning. It was about the only Christian article on the topic (in cyberspace) that week and was a huge success. Thus, to draw people to a cyber-ministry it is important to build on your special knowledge and specific strengths. Forget about appealing to all, instead be relevant, be unique and be specific.

Fourthly, the WWW is more about relevance to needs than it is about image. Content is King. So have good content that meets real needs. People will come even to a really ugly

website if it offers free software that they want. The key “click factor” that causes people to decide to follow a link is the visitor’s perception of the



site’s relevance to their immediate needs. Mainly these are relational and informational needs. Clicks are made “site unseen”. Visitors have not seen your site when they click on a link to it. So your graphics don’t matter a hoot. The decision (to click) is made, and can only be made, on the basis of information about the site’s content—not its appearance. Thus “cool” is not as important as connection, content, and clarity. Yahoo is one of the largest Internet portals yet it is quite ordinary in its layout. Some of the most visited sites on the web are just plain text. However all successful web sites have great content, are fast, useful, clear and easy to use and navigate. Great websites “connect” with and meet the needs of their target audience. So an effective ministry web page is relevant, unique, clear, fast loading, useful, easily searched, interactive and full of highly specific information and resources that draw people in to use, re-use and explore the website.

The Internet In Creative Access Countries

A recent Chinese government decision to block access to Google shows that governments can and do censor the Internet and they generally block websites for political reasons. Governments generally seem to be less concerned about religious websites that are politically neutral. The AIBI has students in many creative access countries and there is no sign of interference so far.

Though an Internet ministry will only reach a small percentage of people in creative access countries, these tend to be businessmen or leaders. These leaders can download training material that they can then share with others. This is what I call the “tunnel and blast” strategy in that you “tunnel into” a creative access country and find a person who is widely networked who then organizes others and the ministry spreads. While caution needs to be exercised it is quite possible to minister effectively even in countries like Myanmar which has severe restrictions on the Internet.

It is important for websites hoping to minister in creative access countries to be politically neutral, culturally sensitive, free of damaging information and cautious about the image that is presented and the terms used. Also bandwidth needs to be conserved (as connections are frequently slow and sometimes people pay per MB for downloads and surfing) and the use of large graphics, sound or video needs to be carefully thought through. With these caveats the Internet is a great means of praying for, encouraging and training isolated Christian believers in creative access countries. The “how to” of this will unfold later in this paper.

Internet Evangelism In The Missions Context

Evangelism can effectively take place in chat rooms, by email, through friendship evangelism in email discussion groups, and through the gospel presented on web pages and in dozens of other online avenues. Tony Whittaker of web-evangelism.com has extensive resources and his web-evangelism guide can be found at <http://www.aibi.ph/aibi/webguide.htm>.

The use of anonymous or pseudonymous email addresses makes web evangelism possible even in creative access countries. Follow-up can be done by sending lessons through email and enabling converts to download a Bible and discipleship resources. (see <http://www.aibi.ph/abi/gospel1.htm>). As with all evangelism, integrity is a must. “Spamming”, aggressive pop-ups, and other approaches are unappreciated by most visitors and should not be part of web-evangelism.

The unique thing about web-evangelism is how specific and focussed it can be. Years ago I heard a statistic that, at any one moment in time, generally two-percent of any audience is at the point of conversion and ready to receive Jesus. I have found this true in my own evangelistic preaching and recently found that same two percent holds for Billy Graham crusades as well. Now two-percent of the Internet is a LOT of people. That means that on any given day ten million people online are at the point of conversion. By the strategic use of the self-selecting nature of Internet audiences you can reach just this “two-percent”.

By titling your page so that it only appeals to people who want to make a decision and making sure it comes up well in the search engines you can communicate solely to those about to make a decision for Jesus. My evangelism page is simply called “How To Become A Christian” and targets those who want to become a Christian but don’t know how. It is read by thousands of people each year who have typed “how to become a Christian” in a search engine and dozens give their life to Jesus (in 1997-98, 500 people a year made decisions for Christ on this simple web page). You can even target very specific groups e.g. with a web page in Hindi with a testimony and a specific title that will show up in the search engines and attract those on the point of conversion. The Internet has also begun to be much more supportive of non-English scripts such as Tamil, Japanese and Chinese. It is quite possible to be a full-time and very productive Internet-based personal evangelist working solely with “ready to convert” enquirers after the gospel!

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The Internet As Missions Exposure

Do you want to safely expose some Bible college students to dialogue with Muslim clerics? Give them an anonymous email address and let them loose on the sites run by Muslim apologists. Do you want to teach tact in witnessing? Put your students in chat rooms. Do you want a youth group to dig into the Scriptures? Set them the task of answering questions online and they will be forced into doing the research for the answers.

On the Internet, missions candidates and Bible college students can be involved with people from all cultures and belief systems and get exposure to both the friendly and the hostile with little risk of actual physical harm and in an environment where the mistakes won’t ruin the ministry. Like all forms of mission exposure it needs to be supervised by an experienced missionary and planned in advance. It can also be integrated into traditional mission exposure trips as part of the preparation before arriving in the foreign country.

Study Cells, Email Groups and Online Communities of Interest

One of the great challenges of cyber-ministry is to bring people out of individual isolation into online groups and eventually into face-to-face communities of faith. Students at the Asian Internet Bible Institute are encouraged to find other students in their area and to form study cells discussing the material together and praying for each other. Generally one individual will be the facilitator and motivator in gathering the others together.

Communities can be intentionally formed through online discussion such as YahooGroups and the new Christian-based InJesus.com, which among other things provides the online classrooms for the AIBI. Such discussion groups can be used for a wide variety of purposes such as theological discussion, personal sharing and prayer points, a discipleship group, online classrooms, coordinating a geographically dispersed project or team, sharing information among churches in a local area, community organizing around a cause, policy formation, etc.

Most successful online communities have between 40 members and 600 members. Below 40 members discussion tends to be occasional. Beyond 600 members the traffic is so large that people start unsubscribing. Good communities are managed by “moderators” who are tactful and wise and know how to start, guide and terminate discussions.

There are many testimonies to how such online discussion groups have proved an enormous source of support and encouragement to isolated missionaries, lonely clergy and busy believers. [Technical notes: By using CGI and Perl scripts it is quite easy to set up guestbooks, chat rooms, discussion boards. Reliable secure scripts can be found at: <http://nms-cgi.sourceforge.net>. The latest community trend is the weblog commonly known as “Blogs” see www.blogger.com. If you really get into blogs you can use Movable Type for a dynamic weblog experience. For larger communities Xoops (xoops.org) is a free, easy to install PHP/MySQL web portal system that has proved very useful for the AIBI Student Center.]

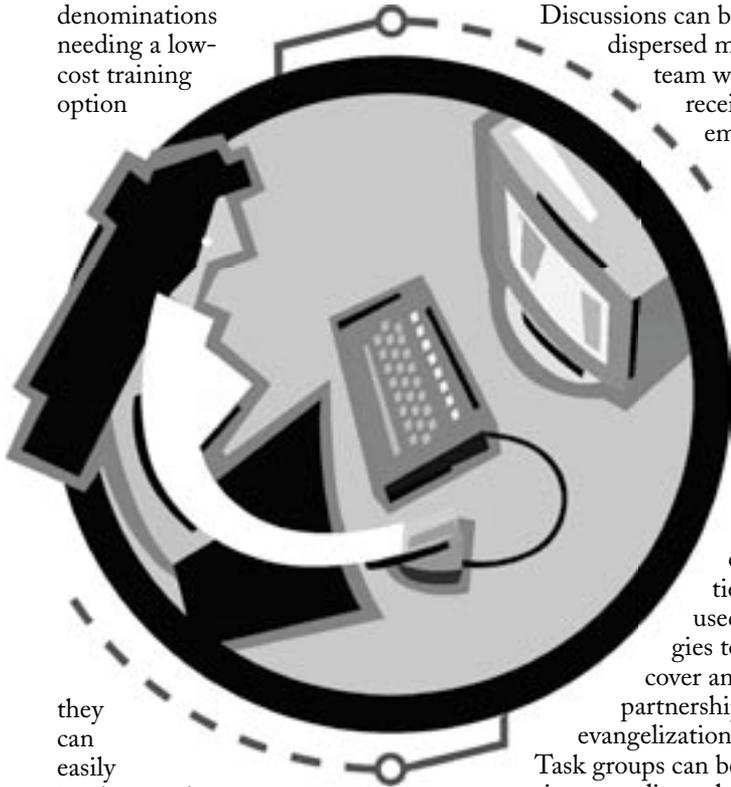
Online TEE and Pastor Training

Theological education by extension has been around for many years in the missions context, in correspondence schools like ICI and through missionary radio follow-up from FEBC and HJCB. The logical next step is to create online bible colleges. This is what I am doing with the Asian Internet Bible Institute (www.aibi.ph).

The proliferation of Internet cafés in the developing nations means that web-based training is now accessible by pastors in practically every small town in Asia, without them having to own a computer. Compressing study material into zip files and ebooks can minimize the cost of using icafé. This enables a 300-page training module to be downloaded in five minutes or less. Study materials can be printed out in the icafé or just read offline on the computer screen.

The AIBI produces a CD of the materials as well as distributing them online. AIBI students seem to fall into a number of categories: pastors in remote areas who cannot access conventional forms of training, small

denominations needing a low-cost training option



they can easily

implement, busy Christians who want to study at their own pace and time and who are comfortable with the Internet and Bible students using AIBI material to supplement their studies.

Another category is also emerging, Christians who simply don't want to fight the traffic in Manila for two hours to get to a conventional classroom! This is an increasing reality in Asia's mega-cities. Cyber-learning is still relatively new and many are cautious or fearful of the technology but it has the potential to provide a low-cost and very practical educational alternative for Christians, particularly in developing nations. The challenges of web-based TEE are student management, databases, and making effective use of online classrooms. Good database programmers, and a web-savvy Christian educator are the essential parts of the team.

Networking Missions Specialists

Missions specialists and project teams can be coordinated using email lists, discussion groups, groupware and web-portal software. For example a linguist in Pakistan can co-ordinate with a printer in Hong Kong and a funding church in the USA to produce a gospel tract in a tribal language.

Discussions can be held among dispersed members of a team with each member receiving a copy of the emails that fly back and forth, so that highly specialized personnel can consult on numerous projects without leaving home.

These technologies can be made secure through strict membership criteria and in some cases, by encryption of emails. I have used these technologies to coordinate prayer cover and to facilitate partnerships such as in the evangelization of a certain UPG.

Task groups can be coordinated by using an online calendar with project events and deadlines. [Technical note: If you don't like CGI calendar scripts try using www.calendars.net. TUTOS at www.sourceforge.net is a good free groupware package.] Email groups are particularly useful when they are focussed on a specific topic e.g. "missionary member care" or a specific project, "reaching the XYZ tribe". Successful lists have a very clear purpose, are factual and concise and have a positive tone, which is set by a committed team coordinator. In addition to email groups there are numerous networking and resource sites for missions that can be of enormous help in finding partners, information, and even funding for initiatives. *Brigada* is perhaps the best known of these (<http://www.brigada.org>) and a helpful list of mission links can be found at: <http://www.aibi.ph/aibi/misslinks.htm>

Online Mentoring, Counselling And Discipleship

The power of IT to connect people with common interests assists in mentoring missionaries and pastors and in online counselling and discipleship. A young missionary in a remote area can develop an email mentoring friendship with a more senior missionary, which can be a

significant boost to the pastoral care of that missionary. Online leadership development has been attempted by organizations such as mentorlink.org and church-task-force.org among others. My observation is that in cyber-space more informal mentoring takes place, than formal structured mentoring, and mentoring tends to emerge out of a rapport that develops between two people online and then this extends into a deeper and more structured relationship.

Online counselling and discipleship has been a controversial issue with some saying it should not even be attempted. Proponents of brief therapy, solution-focused therapy and cognitive therapy seem to be open to the possibilities; while more talk-intensive psychotherapies remain generally opposed to online counselling. Various New Age therapies, personal coaching and motivational seminar speakers have adopted the Internet, even offering individual spiritual mentoring online. One coaching and training email list has over 1700 members. Career counselling has made extensive use of computers and online testing and counselling and is probably the most computerized segment of the counselling profession. Myers-Briggs and other personality tests can be administered online and thus staff selection procedures can be streamlined.

In the missions context a missionary can raise a personal issue with the mission counselor and get some online advice, and then, if needed, arrange for a visit to or from the counselor. Thus email access to competent counselors can help a missionary to deal with issues and irritations without accumulating the stress until a face-to-face meeting at the next staff conference. This is very valuable in and of itself. The mentoring functions can be used in leadership development programs, pastoral training and in discipling new converts in creative access countries. Cyber-counselling is not a full replacement for face-to-face counselling but in many situations it will be a much welcome relief and better than no counselling or support at all.

Christian Community Internet Cafés

The community Internet café is gaining acceptance as a mission strategy

and a form of holistic development ministry in bridging the digital divide. Andrew Sears of AC4 and Dr. Josias Conradie of WIN International are known as innovators in this area. The Association of Christian Community Computer Centers (<http://www.ac4.org>) is an organization founded to assist in the use of icafé by churches and missions, among others. In missions, icafé have been used as outreaches and teaching centers with considerable success in creative access countries where they provide community Internet access and teach English and various computer courses. This strategy seems to work best in small to mid-sized urban communities in remote areas where there are enough people to keep the icafé busy and yet where the icafé is still novel enough to be a welcome addition to their infrastructure.

I am attempting to take this one step further and use icafé as a self-funding sending strategy for teams of Asian missionaries. An Internet café of twenty computers can support between 4-6 Asian missionaries at an acceptable living standard for their area of ministry (\$200 a month). Donated second-hand computers will be used to set up three such icafé initially with a further 27 icafé envisaged over a five year period, Lord willing and providing. The icafé provides a point of community contact, a venue for web-based distance education and income for the team (as in Asia support levels from traditional sources are often inconsistent). All members of the team are expected to be computer-literate but only one will be an actual IT specialist looking after the computers. The others will be church planters, community workers and educators. This requires team based, on-field decision-making structures which will be outlined later in this paper. Further information can be obtained by emailing <johnded@aibi.ph> and readers of IJFM can subscribe to an online discussion group on the use of icafé in missions by sending a blank email to: <strategic_cafes-subscribe@MyInJesus.com>.

Other Applications

There are numerous other applications being explored. These include distributing Palm PC's, loaded

with development and educational material to remote communities (p3international.org), justice and community organizing via email, mercy ministries and relief efforts coordinated through a web-site, computer distribution to bridge the digital divide, online church consulting and so forth. The fertile



imaginings of mission-minded Great Commission Christians are finding innumerable ways to minister to the nations using computers.

Part Two—Moving Into Cyber-Missions

What then should a missionary society do to take advantage of the strategic opportunities and low-cost advantages of cyber-ministry? This next section is how I think cyber-missions can best be implemented within the operating procedures of a contemporary missionary society.

Integrating Cyber-Missions With Conventional Missions

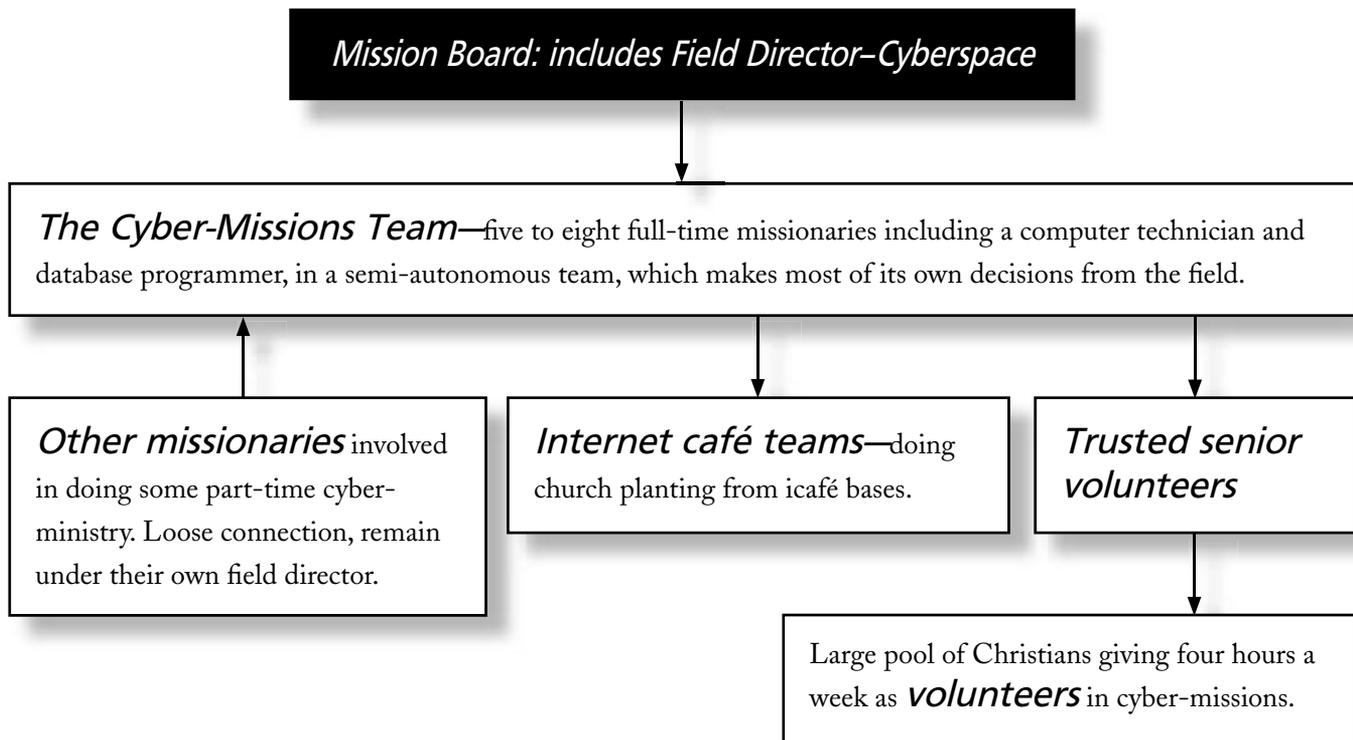
Cyber-mission works best when it is in active synergy with more conventional forms of mission. For instance, a convert via web evangelism can be referred to a church in his or her area, or a student at the AIBI may want to articulate into a local Bible college. Taking care of these transition points is a critical part of the task of the cyber-missionary.

The best way this synergy can happen is if cyber-ministries are a department of a larger mission and are headed by a Field Director—Cyberspace. Since the Internet has its own unique working conditions, sub-culture and approach

to ministry it should be considered as a separate field for front-line ministry. It is granted that it is possible that cyber-missionaries could simply be incorporated into existing teams. A team reaching Thailand could contain a cyber-missionary doing web-evangelism in Thai. But this would probably lead to much unnecessary duplication with each field area setting up its own computers and cyber-outreach. Thus cyber-mission is probably best organized as a separate department within the mission, but with extensive links to all the more traditional fields.

Cyber-ministry also defies traditional boundaries and definitions of whose field is whose. An evangelistic website may deal with people from Kenya, Myanmar and Brazil all on the same day. Except for websites in a particular local language, it is almost impossible to geographically confine such a ministry. Hyperlinks create partners, and alliances are formed on the Internet that would seldom exist on the field. Thus the Cyber-Missions Department will be the “fuzzy boundary” of the organization and the place where many of its possible linkages to other churches and missions may well first develop.

A Cyber-Missions department does not just need computer technicians. It also needs passionate evangelists, careful Bible teachers and sensitive prayer warriors. The Internet is simply a medium for the expression of all the gifts of the Spirit, not a “gift” itself. That said, the WWW is a unique ministry space with a unique sub-culture and conditions of service. Cyber-missionaries need a definite calling and the ability to sit in front of a computer eight hours a day, three hundred days a year. Cyber-ministry looks easy at first but few people last more than three months in “full-time service” online. The requirements on human concentration and patience are immense and discouragements and weariness abound. Results rarely come as quickly as initially expected and people occasionally disparage cyber-ministry saying, “you aren't a real missionary, you just play with computers”. The online environment can be emotionally hostile, and there are technical breakdowns. In fact it is just like any other form of missionary service! I advise cyber-missionaries



to have some face-to-face ministry as well, as the lack of warm human contact can also be a very draining part of the challenge, especially for extroverts.

A Cyber-Missions team should contain, or have access to, a computer technician and a database programmer. Most of the other staff should be computer literate ministry personnel whose primary calling is non-technical (evangelism, teaching, mercy). The Cyber-Missions Team should have its own goals, budget, vision statement, and planning and be semi-autonomous. Where possible it should have its own physical space and be sufficiently separate so it is not invaded by other staff wanting their computers repaired. I spend a lot of time saying to people “No, I don’t fix computers” and this needs almost to be a sign outside the door!

Cyber-mission *should not* be set up as part of the administration department handling donor databases, etc. While administration and cyber-mission both use computers they have little else in common and are very different in ethos and vision. Ministry in cyberspace needs its own space and recognition as a pioneer frontline ministry. Staff should be selected carefully and

should be biblically trained pioneer missionaries and have at least two years of extensive experience with the Internet.

A note of caution: There is some danger in the Cyber-Missions department being portrayed as the “glamour team”. Firstly, glamour tends to attract people who are there for the image, and who leave after a few months when reality sets in. Secondly, it will tend to develop jealousies among other mission staff, who may believe that money spent on technology is wasted. This tension can be minimized by getting donated equipment (and letting people know its donated) and also by giving cyber-missions the flavour of a vigorous pioneer ministry with a spiritual and evangelistic emphasis that serves the real needs of the field.

What about the alternative of making the entire mission a cyber-mission? At the moment there are certain disadvantages to this especially in applying for funding and in recognition among peers as cyber-mission has not yet been validated and accepted. I think cyber-missions are best nurtured inside conventional missionary societies for another five years or so before cyber-missionary societies are formed on a

wider scale. Specialist cyber-missions can be set up just like there are specialist radio ministries and specialist tract distribution societies. It is a valid way forward. However anyone setting up such a mission should be passionate about networking the ministry into other efforts in the Kingdom or much of its effectiveness will be lost.

Implication For Mission Structures

The connected, egalitarian, self-navigating world of the WWW creates a culture that is highly independent, so most cyber-missionaries will not fit easily into a traditional missions bureaucracy. On the other hand, cyber-missions is technical, somewhat fixed in a physical place where the computers are, and demands continuous steady daily application to the task. You can spend a day looking for a missing comma in a script that runs the website. Cyber-mission is a free wheeling pizza and coffee world that keeps strange hours, but it is also a technical and precise world. It is too unconventional for the administrative types and too nerdy for the gung-ho radicals and thus falls somewhere between the two main types of mission structures today.

Good cyber-missionaries tend to be highly independent, focussed, disciplined, intelligent, technically minded and sometimes quite nerdy. They tend to be the NT type category of the Myers-Briggs test—particularly the INTJs. They have their own wavelength and when this is respected, by giving them freedom and acknowledging their unique gifts and needs, they can be built into exciting and highly productive teams.

Because of the current popularity of the Internet there is the possibility for a structure involving hundreds of volunteers coordinated by a central team of permanent staff. The central staff team would strategize and direct the cyber-ministry as a core group, other missionaries in the same mission who were interested could do “some Internet ministry” and perhaps lead a Bible class online, and a large team of volunteers could do web graphics, man chat rooms, help with translation and answer enquiry emails, forwarding more complex matters to mission staff. I envisage a Cyber-Missions Department looking a bit like the flow-chart above.

Such a structure is also well adapted to the Two-Thirds World context and the sending of national missionaries. Here in Asia missionary applicants sometimes find themselves alienated by the traditional selection process, with its devastating possibility of personal rejection. With a large pool of volunteers the cyber-missions team can operate by invitation, rather than by “selection”. Volunteers who prove their mettle would be invited to further responsibility and finally onto full-time staff as colleagues in the ministry. Operating by invitation is more relational and accepting and generally more suited to the Asian context. Thus the ideal structure for a cyber-missions department would be a semi-autonomous team, consisting of full-time staff, part-time contributors and numerous volunteers, and operating by invitation on a relational basis, with its own budget, vision statement and planning. But who should lead such an enterprise?

The Field Director-Cyberspace

The Field Director-Cyberspace should be a mature missionary with high-

level leadership and networking skills and a good technical and theological background. He or she should be able to keep the team together and focused on the task, not lost in making minor technological improvements or absorbed in online theological



disputes. He or she would also be a champion for cyber-ministry in the organization. The Field Director-Cyberspace has to have a detailed on-the-ground awareness of conditions in the area of ministry and the needs of the local churches. This enables the most relevant and useful online materials to be developed ensuring that the Cyber-Missions department is a servant of the national church.

This requirement for local knowledge means that an ideal location for a cyber-mission would be in Singapore or a similarly well-wired city in Asia. In such a location field conditions and local culture are more immediately obvious. If the team were located in the USA, with easy broadband access, first-world assumptions and a culture of having to acquire the latest technology, there would tend to be pressure to be a high-end, high-band-width ministry that would gradually become alienated from the reality of conditions on the field and the technological challenges of the recipients.

It is not absolutely necessary for the Field Director-Cyberspace to have a computing degree, as that is more the province of the technical staff. First and foremost, the Field Director-Cyberspace must be a visionary with a huge missionary heart and the ability to manage, delegate to, and receive advice from field missionaries and IT experts.

Finally, the Field Director needs to be focussed on the church, and on the unreached, not on the Internet. The people visiting the website have a face and a culture and are Tibetans or Sikhs or Malay Muslims and it is these people who are the object of the ministry—not the technology. The Field Director needs to see the role as not just running a computer department, but being a pioneer missionary to unreached people groups.

Conclusion

Cyber-mission is going to happen. In fact it has begun to happen in the far-flung corners and on the innovative edges of mission. The mustard-seed has been planted. How then can it grow best? I would like to see a consultation held among missions on how to best structure, fund, plan and implement cyber-missions as a form of front-line pioneer ministry. Out of that conference I would like the major missions to set up cyber-missions departments, linked and networked to each other with high-levels of external and internal cooperation. Also specialist cyber-missions should be set up and take their place along with the other specialist missionary societies and hopefully in cooperation with other church and mission agencies. Cyber-missions is an adventure, and like all real adventure it has an uncertain outcome, and lots of risks, challenges and question marks. But the Internet is a great way to share the gospel, is incredibly effective and astonishingly inexpensive. Cyber-mission is complex, but it can be done and is being done successfully. Cyber-mission delivers results, and it can deliver those results in places where we cannot get any by conventional means. To use a saying from solution-focused brief therapy: “If it works—do more of it!” **UJFM**