Internet:
It's not just the World Wide Web any more

Effective communication has been the greatest tool of the church since the first century and for much of the last two thousand years the methods of communicating have remained the same. It's little wonder that many churches struggle with successful communication in the new millennium where time tested methods seem not only ineffective but barely functional. Technology has made communication on a global level easier than we once ever thought possible and one of the greatest tools for evangelism lies in the internet. But the effectiveness of any tool is limited by one's knowledge of how to use it. Without an understanding of what the internet is, how it functions and how best to access it, its use as an effective ministry tool is limited. A basic understanding of the internet and how it's structured is the first step to effective technology based evangelism.

In most discussions of internet as a ministry tool the focus tends to gravitate toward the church website. In fact, when the term internet comes up in conversation most people automatically associate the word with web sites and the world wide web. This is largely because at the moment the web is the single most active aspect of the internet. It's important, however, to understand the scope of the internet and not to limit one's thinking in regard to internet ministry. The internet is a global computer network composed of thousands of machines in hundreds of countries. Many of those machines host web sites while others host e-mail, or any of a number of other internet functions such as VoIP, or Internet phone. When the internet first went public in the mid 1990's it's scope was limited to e-mail and simple text pages that soon gave way to complex web sites. Today's internet is composed of literally thousands of features that can be molded to fit the specific needs of any church or ministry.

One of the most underutilized Internet features is e-mail. Most churches have a plethora of e-mail based communication tools at their fingertips and are hardly aware of their existence. The true beauty of e-mail is that it requires little technological know-how to use effectively and most of the related software is available for free. With very little effort even a standard e-mail account can be used to set up a mass electronic mailing list that can serve nearly any purpose from distributing the church newsletter to updating committees and study groups on meetings and coming events. E-mail is also a powerful tool for group communication through the use of listservs or 'mail groups' These sorts of groups use one e-mail address to send mail to an entire group of people at once who can then reply to the entire group. Listservs are most practical for educational uses and make excellent tools for online Bible studies. What normally stands in the way of most churches in regard to e-mail ministry is a lack of knowledge in set up skills. Often times someone in the congregation has recreational experience running some form of mail list or listserv but if no volunteers are forthcoming contact your website administrator. They can often provide you advice or even set up depending on your specific situation.

Among the first forerunners of internet expansion was Instant messaging chat, or IM. Like e-mail it provided communication directly with individuals through text but at an almost instantaneous

rate of exchange. IM has become a powerful communication tool for allowing pairs or even small groups of people to collaborate and can potentially be utilized by churches for small group ministry. Most IM services are developing VideoIM where IM users can now see and speak to each other through the use of a small computer camera or 'webcam' While the technology has not currently advanced enough to provide crystal clear images it can be accessed by virtually anyone for the price of the hardware. IM's advantages over e-mail are it's high speed transmission and it's ease of use. The software is available for free and most IM services have easy to access features that make setting up a group discussion simple.

In addition to the web, e-mail and IM the Internet is also a conduit for many other communication tools such as WAP, or phone internet. Most cell phone users can now access information on their phones that exist on a kind of mini web written in a programing language specifically for cellular transmission. Sadly it will probably be some time before cell phones advance far enough to access the Web directly but until then WAP can be hosted from an existing server and allow church members to stay informed on important events. WAP is still in its development stage and doesn't allow for complex data but the potential is certainly worth exploring.

One of the newest Internet developments has been in tiny software modules called 'widgets' or 'Gadgets' This software is almost always free and is provided by any number of businesses and organizations to provide very specific information. For instance you may be able to obtain a Widget from your stock broker that will send you continuous updates on your portfolio or storm warnings from the national weather service. Depending on your computer and the type, a Widget can reside on your desktop or on a special Widget organizer. Widgets are easily utilized as event calendars. Though not as widely used as some other aspects of the Internet Widgets can be an effective tool for a church who already has an effective internet ministry and is searching for new avenues of expansion.

While a well conceived web site is a necessary foundation to any technology based outreach, no church should limit their thinking to the web alone. The internet provides a vast array of evangelism tools and will continue to grow in the future in ways we likely have yet to conceive. The important thing is to think ahead and to be prepared to embrace new changes as well as plan for future expansion.