



Effective Church Websites for Emerging Generations

by Frank N. Johnson

Immigrants or Natives?

I'd like to begin this white paper by presenting a hypothetical situation. Suppose that I am a missionary and that I've been sent to a country whose population is made up of two primary segments:

- the majority of people are part of the native population
- there is also a relatively small group of immigrants or expatriate workers

This white paper is designed to provide local churches with a thought-provoking resource to help them make decisions regarding internet strategy in their local area.

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Each segment of the population has a very different culture. They have different traditions; their social systems are different; they communicate differently. For a variety of reasons, many of those in the immigrant population are nearing retirement age, and as they reach retirement age, they leave the country. And not long after I arrive in the country, the government, controlled by natives, reaches a decision to stop approving new visas for immigrants. And so the immigrant population begins to decrease over time. The native population, on the other hand, is increasing over time as new children are born. The native population is taking up a greater and greater percentage of the overall population, while the immigrant population is taking up a smaller and smaller percentage of the overall population.

Let's further suppose that although I was sent to this country to reach the native population with the gospel, I am more comfortable in the immigrant culture. Their traditions are my traditions. Their social systems are familiar to me. I am accustomed to their methods and patterns of communication. And because I am more comfortable in immigrant culture, I begin to direct more and more of my efforts towards reaching the immigrant population, and I begin to spend less and less time trying to reach the native population.

I hold evangelistic crusades, but I do so in areas of the country dominated by the immigrant culture. My messages are sprinkled with allusions to

things that only make sense to immigrants. I start a church which caters to immigrants rather than natives. The music played at evangelistic crusades and in church services is music which is familiar to immigrants. I speak in the mother tongue of the immigrants rather than in the native language.

Am I effectively reaching the country to which I have been sent? Why not?

If my objective is to effectively declare the gospel in a country and disciple a nation, it doesn't make sense, does it, for me to devote all my energies to reach a diminishing, minority segment of the country's population while ignoring the dominant, growing section of the population.

Leonard Sweet, the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey and an acknowledged expert on postmodernism, says that if you were born before 1962, you are an immigrant. Today's culture, with its emphasis on technology, is not your home. You're uncomfortable in a new place. You're learning a new language (gigabyte, megahertz, download, spam, etc.). You're learning new customs (email, surfing the web, shopping online, networking, chatting, linking, blogging, googling).

According to Sweet, if you were born after 1962, you're a native. You're at home in a new world of technology. You are comfortable utilizing new methods and patterns of communication. Your culture is inextricably entwined with the internet and the new digital arena.

It should be noted that Sweet admits that this distinction between immigrants and natives is somewhat artificial. There are people born before 1962 who have the characteristics of "natives" and there are people born after 1962 who seem more like "immigrants". But in general, it is a helpful distinction.

Like the mythical country I told you about earlier, natives are increasing in their dominance in today's culture. Listen to these examples Sweet cites:

- The "Love Bug," a computer virus which wreaked havoc with government agencies, corporations and individuals, causing billions of dollars in damage, was created by two college students living in the slums of Manila in the Philippines.
- In February 2000, "denial of service" attacks were launched against Amazon.com, Yahoo! and CNN.com by a 15-year-old Canadian teenager.



Immigrants



Natives

- In early 2000, Cameron Johnson started his second company – SurfingPrizes.com – which, at last report, averages \$15,000 per day in revenue. At the time he founded the company, Cameron was 15 years old.
- In 2001, 26,000 credit card numbers (including some owned by Bill Gates) were stolen by two Welsh teenagers.
- Michael Furdyk and an Australian chat room friend he had never met in person started a company called MyDesktop.com. Within a few months, it was making \$30,000 per month. Michael and his friend were 17 and 16, respectively.
- The main rival to Microsoft Windows, called Linux, was originally developed by a college student from Helsinki, Finland.

We live in a world where children in some of the poorest places on the planet can do the harm that only governments and generals could do in the past. We live in a culture where, for the first time in history, children don't need authority figures in order to access information – information is available at their fingertips. We live in a culture where, in many ways, children **are** the authority figures and adults need their help.

Sweet asks an insightful question: Who is the most adept in your house at programming the VCR? Who is the most computer-literate?¹

Many of us are immigrants in a foreign culture which makes us uncomfortable.

***If you're an immigrant,
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If you're an immigrant, you probably feel most comfortable in protective enclaves of people who share a similar cultural background and customs. And if you're an immigrant within the church, that creates a problem, because immigrants who withdraw into a cultural ghetto will never impact a culture of natives.

Which group of people (immigrants or natives) is growing in number, and which group is decreasing in number? By definition, the number of natives is growing and that group of people is taking up a greater and greater percentage of the world's population. And immigrants are taking up a smaller and smaller percentage of the world's population as some among their number pass away.

¹ The thoughts on immigrants and natives are taken from http://www.oates.org/olc/mbr/a0200/transforming_ministry/1_sweet.htm which is an excerpt from Leonard Sweet, *The Dawn Mistaken For Dusk* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000)

In the Fall of 2001, the average age of a Protestant pastor was just under 50 years old – firmly ensconced in immigrant culture.² And so the leadership of today's churches are largely immigrants working to reach a native culture.

If we are immigrants, God is sending us as missionaries to a foreign culture of natives in our own country. Their language is different than ours. Their customs are different than ours. Their methods and patterns of communication are different than ours. The important question is this: "Will we learn the language of the native culture? Will we learn the customs of the native culture? Will we learn the methods and patterns of communication used by the native culture? And will we use that knowledge to contextualize the message of Jesus so that it can be understood and seen as relevant by natives?"

*Will we put the new wine
of the gospel into new
wineskins?*

Will we put the new wine of the gospel into new wineskins? Or will we attempt to contain the new wine of the gospel within the old wineskins of cultural parameters with which we are comfortable, all the while ignoring natives or unwittingly presenting ourselves to them as irrelevant?

Foundational Assumptions

The objective of this white paper is to investigate the various ways in which a church's website can be targeted toward unbelievers in a church's local community, particularly the growing population of "natives" in a local community.

When I think about internet evangelism in general, I start with a few foundational assumptions (and these don't apply just to church websites – they apply to internet evangelism in general).

Foundational Assumption #1:

The segment of people we are discussing in this white paper is increasingly at home on the internet, and the internet is more and more becoming a primary means of communication for the emerging generations we are trying to reach with the gospel.

If nothing else, this is true because of simple mathematics – younger generations (natives) are completely at home on the internet and use the internet as their primary form of communication. As older generations pass on and current generations make up a greater and greater percentage of the population, it's only natural that the internet will become more and more central to the lives of those we are trying to win for Christ.

² "A Profile of Protestant Pastors in Anticipation of Pastor Appreciation Month", Barna Research Group of Ventura, California (www.barna.org), 2001.

If we want to communicate with a generation of “natives,” we will need to be “on” the internet, actively communicating our faith through their primary mode of communication.

The good news is that people are already “on” the internet, looking for spiritual information. More than 3 million people currently surf the web every day for spiritual purposes. One in every four Americans has searched for spiritual information on the web. According to a 2001 report, more people use the web for spiritual purposes than for online banking, online investments, or online dating services.³

Since an increasing percentage of the world’s population is “on” the internet and is using it for more and more of their communication, doesn’t it make sense that it is becoming increasingly true that the church must have a “presence” throughout the internet? And having a “presence” throughout the internet involves a lot more than putting up a website. A website is only one facet of a well-rounded Christian approach to the online world. Having a “presence” throughout the internet involves believers spending time in chat rooms, on message boards, using instant messaging applications, participating on email lists, blogging, etc.

We are called to take the gospel to the marketplace and, in many ways, today’s marketplace is the internet.

- Over 600 million people are currently “on the internet.”⁴
- 38 first-time users join the net every minute in the United States alone.⁵
- In Peru, for the price of a postage stamp, you can get 15 minutes in front of a computer in an internet café and log on to a free email account and surf the web.⁶
- Computers are now outselling television sets in the United States and Japan.⁷

³ “CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online”

(<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=53>), Pew Internet & American Life.

⁴ “How Many Online” (http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online), Nua Internet Surveys. We should keep in mind that statistics concerning the internet are out-of-date the moment they are released; the statistics in this section are included only for purposes of illustration - we don't make any claims to perfect accuracy.

⁵ Walter Wilson, “The Internet Moment in Human History,” Christian Computing Magazine, September 2002.

⁶ Leonard Sweet, Plenary Session, Internet Evangelism Conference, November 2, 2000.

⁷ Walter Wilson, The Internet Church (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), pg. xii.

- Current email volumes exceed the delivery volumes of the U.S. Post Office.⁸
- Every second, 36 new web pages come online (just to put that in perspective, in the United States, there is a birth every 8 seconds).⁹
- 1.5 billion instant messages are exchanged every week.¹⁰
- Almost every university in the United States, Canada and Western Europe provides students with internet access. Eighty-six percent of United States college students use the internet on a regular basis.¹¹
- Seventy-three percent of United States teenagers regularly use the internet. Using the internet is second only to movies as a pastime among American teens.¹²

In the first century, Paul and the apostolic band aggressively took the gospel to the marketplace and declared it fearlessly in the midst of the native culture.

In the first century, Paul and the apostolic band aggressively took the gospel to the marketplace and declared it fearlessly in the midst of the native culture, often using the language and traditions of the culture as a backdrop for the message of truth.

One of my favorite quotes is by Scottish minister George Macleod, who founded the nondenominational Iona Community in Glasgow in the 1930's:

I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church.

I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves, on the town garbage heap, on a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew and Latin and Greek, at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble, because that is where He died and that is what He died about.

*And that is where church people should be and what church people should be about.*¹³

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Walter Wilson, "The Internet Moment in Human History."

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ September 15, 2002 press release

(<http://www.pewinternet.org/releases/release.asp?id=50>), Pew Internet & American Life.

"Teenage Life Online" (<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=36>),¹² Pew Internet & American Life.

If we don't take the gospel to the marketplace of the internet, we risk being seen as irrelevant by the "native" culture, by today's postmodern generation.

Foundational Assumption #2:

The most appropriate target audience for a church's website is made up of unbelievers.

When we think in terms of targeting a church's website toward unbelievers, it will be helpful for us if we first take a step back and realize that many of our assumptions about our world are unfortunately incorrect.

Consider the following premises which, although they may be shocking to some, reflect what I believe is the common perception unbelievers have about today's church:

***People don't care about
your service schedule or
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they don't plan on
attending your meetings.***

- People don't care about your service schedule or calendar of events because they don't plan on attending your meetings.
- People don't care about your statement of faith because they have little to no desire to become affiliated with your organization.
- People don't care who is on your pastoral staff because they don't anticipate any occasion when they might meet those staff members.
- People don't care where your facilities are located because they can't foresee a time when they would set foot in those facilities.
- People don't care what this week's sermon title is because they don't plan on listening.

A Question: If the above premises are true, why do so many churches make these the most prominent pieces of information on their websites?

What DO People Care About?

- People today care about the stories of other people - people with similar interests to their own, people with similar life experiences, and people with similar problems.

¹³ George Macleod, Only One Way Left (Glasgow: Iona Community, n.d.), cited online by Keith Wheeler, "Devotional Thoughts: The Message of the Cross," www.kw.org/devotional_cross.htm.

- People today care about relationships with people who have similar interests and life experiences.
- People today care about the thought of a possibility of unmerited love revealed in the midst of true community.

If people today really do care about the stories of other people, about relationships, and about the possibility of unmerited love, our websites should have as their priority helping them discover how our churches can meet those needs.

Authentic Christian community is the foundation of all effective outreach.

Foundational Assumption #3:

Authentic Christian community is the foundation of all effective outreach.

In John 17:21-23, Jesus prayed, “....*that they may all be one, even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one. I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.*”

According to these verses, if Jesus’ disciples are one, the world will believe that the Father has sent Jesus. If Jesus’ disciples are perfected in unity, the world will know that the Father sent Jesus and that the Father loves them as He loves Jesus.

The converse is true as well. If Jesus’ disciples are not one, then the world will not believe that the Father has sent Jesus (this also implies that the world will not believe in Jesus’ mission – the world will not believe that Jesus died for their sins). If Jesus’ disciples are not perfected in unity, then the world will not know that the Father sent Jesus and that the Father loves them as He loves Jesus.

This means that the environment of an authentic Christian community is required for effective evangelism and outreach. A conversion which takes place without a prior experiential knowledge of authentic Christian community must be considered suspect in its depth and permanence.

If that premise is true, what does it say about internet evangelism?

Internet evangelism is only effective when it is creating and taking advantage of opportunities for conversation between believers and unbelievers.



**Website of
Christian Life Center**

Foundational Assumption #4:

Internet evangelism is only effective when it is creating and taking advantage of opportunities for conversation between believers and unbelievers and when such online conversations, whenever possible, lead to face-to-face conversations.

And so when we look at the task of developing a church website, we need to look at it with that question in mind: how can we develop the site in such a way that it will create and take advantage of opportunities for conversations between believers and unbelievers?

An Example Of A Church Website Focused On Outreach

In the final section of this white paper, I would like to point you to a church website which was developed with the contents of the previous discussion as its foundational philosophy.

If you are currently in front of a computer and online, I would like to invite you to visit the website of Christian Life Center in Santa Cruz County, California:

<http://www.clcsantacruz.org>

Christian Life Center is a contemporary church located in the heart of Santa Cruz County, a region with a population of about 250,000 people and a relatively low population of evangelical Christians (we estimate the percentage of born-again Christians in the county at 17 percent). It is a very postmodern area of the world.

When the church first approached me and asked me to develop a site for them. I told them I would be happy to do it, but that I wanted to talk to them about my philosophy of church websites before getting started.

Somewhere along the line, I had become convinced that most church websites were missing a great opportunity. In trying to provide resources for members, we were failing to use the web to present the community of believers to non-Christians in an effective manner. I told the senior pastor that most of my friends at my day job thought of the Christian church in less-than-favorable terms: "I have to wake up early on a Sunday morning, get dressed in uncomfortable clothes, get my kids dressed to go to a place they've never been instead of playing, drive across town, walk into a building where the only people who say 'Hi' are the people at the door and the minister (and it's their job to say 'Hi'), turn my kids over to a stranger (!), be asked for money, have to stand up and introduce myself to a

Effective Church Websites



Online Profiles

hundred or more people I've never seen, and then hear someone tell me what's wrong with me for half an hour."

I shared with the senior pastor that I thought the best use of a church website would be to target it toward non-Christians and address some of those misconceptions. Over time, the concept grew in our hearts to a point where we felt that the primary purpose of the church's website should be to intrigue the lost, so that they would be motivated to make contact with real people who could then share the Gospel with them in face-to-face encounters. From this germ of an idea grew a system of online profiles and interviews with church members designed to present the community of believers to non-Christians who have similar life experiences and interests to those we profile on the site. The result was, I think, a very non-traditional church website.

In targeting unbelievers, we attempted to stay true to three basic principles:

First, we wanted to present people and their stories more than information (about programs, service times, etc.). Our immediate goal was not that people would see the website and think, "I need to commit my life to Jesus – I'm going to do that right now." Instead our immediate goal is that people will see the website and think, "That's not at all what I expected from a church. I think I want to find out more about these people." - and then we want unbelievers to come encounter the community of believers at our gatherings (perhaps after being put in contact with people in the congregation). This approach would serve to facilitate conversations between believers and unbelievers around similar interests and common life experiences.



"What To Expect"



Interview Transcripts

To accomplish this, we set up a page (it's the first link on the home page) called "What To Expect." When people click through to that page, one of the first things they will see is a section entitled "Who Will I Meet." Under that section are links to five person-specific sections of the website (a man who has hepatitis C, a man who is a champion race car driver, a man who is an actor, a teenage girl who has leukemia, and a man who is a local musician and former Hindu).

Each of these sections includes a short profile, an interview transcript, a page of related web resources, and a link to a page describing the "community" within the church for which this person has the greatest passion.

Our hope with this is to be able to promote these person-specific "bridge" sections through search engine positioning, geographically targeted banner ads, geographically targeted email campaigns, postcard

mailings, newspaper ads, etc. and thus draw people to the church through presenting people within the church who have similar life experiences and interests to particular unbelievers in our area. We have also provided a “tell-a-friend” form for each person’s profile so that folks in our congregation can forward the webpage addresses to their unbelieving friends who might have similar interests and/or life experiences.

We also would like to continue to profile and interview people in the congregation so that we can have an ever-increasing number of resources to draw unbelievers to our congregation through this vehicle.

Secondly, we wanted to avoid church language / Christianese. I think we were fairly successful at doing that. Some of the person-specific sections ended up with more religious language than I would have liked, but for the most part, I think we were able to minimize it.

Thirdly, we wanted to answer some of the questions we feel most unbelievers would have about a church. I think we did a fairly good job of that. On the “What To Expect” page, we just listed what we think some of those questions might be and tried to answer them honestly and in a straightforward manner.

Here are the questions we asked on our “What To Expect” page. Feel free to visit the website to see how we answered them.

- Do I Have To Stand Up In Front Of People?
- Do I Have To Wake Up Early?
- Do You Want My Money?
- Do I Have To Dress Up?
- Do I Have To Turn My Kids Over To A Stranger?

Conclusion

Using our admittedly somewhat artificial distinction between "immigrants" and "natives," we can say that there are roughly four groups of people in our world today:

1. Immigrants who are believers
2. Immigrants who are unbelievers
3. Natives who are believers
4. Natives who are unbelievers

The first two segments use the internet primarily as a means of obtaining information. The last two segments use the internet primarily as a means of facilitating relationships and community.

The vast majority of church websites are targeted toward immigrants who are believers - these websites provide information (about service schedules, doctrinal beliefs, locations, staff members, programs, etc.) to those who have already become a part of the local church. Secondly, these websites also provide information to immigrants who are unbelievers (by including propositional versions of the plan of salvation - here are the steps to follow to become a Christian), with the reasoning seemingly being that we ought to include a plan of salvation on the off-chance that an unbeliever might stop by our website.

Immigrants also make up the segment of society which is most likely to be born again, the most churched, and which has the most exposure to the gospel.¹⁴ And so, the majority of church websites today are dedicated to providing static information to those who are the most familiar with the message of the gospel and the Christian life.

There are very few church websites which are targeted toward natives, and even fewer which are targeted toward natives who are unbelievers. But these emerging generations represent the segment of society which is the least Christian, the most unchurched, has the least exposure to the gospel, but is the most likely segment to be "searching for the meaning of life."¹⁵

My prayer is that many, many church website committees, webmasters, pastoral staff members, board members, etc. will begin to catch the vision for a cyberspace version of Romans 15:20-21: *"And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; but as it is written, 'THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND.'"*

The opportunity which the internet presents to us is crucial for evangelism in a postmodern world. If the church fails to use the internet in an effective manner, she risks being seen as irrelevant by emerging generations.

We must aggressively seize the opportunity and establish an effective presence in the midst of today's marketplace so that we can effectively declare the gospel to the internet generation.

A church's website in today's postmodern world should focus on people rather than programs, avoid religious language, and answer the questions most unbelievers would have about a church. And unlike websites

¹⁴ "Generational Differences," "Church Demographics," and "Born Again Christians," Barna Research Group (<http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=22>, <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=11>, and <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PageCategory.asp?CategoryID=8>).

¹⁵ Ibid.

targeted toward immigrants (which are primarily used to provide information), websites targeted toward emerging generations should focus primarily on creating opportunities for conversation and relationship (both online and offline) between believers and unbelievers.

If you have any questions about the contents of this white paper, please do not hesitate to contact the author at:

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