



By Jacqui King

God is doing a new thing! That is the proclamation from the prophet Isaiah. In the world of technology, new things are happening every day. New technology offers the church new tools with which to share the gospel message and to invite people to experience new life.

Imagine receiving a text message that saves you from making an unnecessary trip. That's time-saving communication. How about a text message reminding you to pray at 12:00 noon each day? That is soul-saving communication. It is just a little reminder that you may appreciate receiving from your small group leader. This is just one example of how technology is enabling the church to reach new people in new ways.

What if a new small group study was being designed to invite people to grow spiritually together? The standard ways for developing this group might include establishing location, time, selecting materials, and training leadership teams to help facilitate the groups. In the digital age, however, social networks and real-time online discussion can offer additional ways for the group to gather for study and fellowship.

Online tools like a Facebook group or a portal on your church website can supplement face-to-face gatherings by letting discussion continue after the class or group meeting has ended and by communicating administrative announcements to the entire group in one place. The web can also provide an alternative to face-to-face meetings altogether, using websites like Skype (www.skype.com) and Talkshoe (www.talkshoe.com).

The Nu Faith Community, a new church plant I was called to lead in the Texas Annual Conference, began with Bible studies that met both online and in person. The face-to-face group of twelve persons met at my home at 6:30 p.m. and then the online group met at 8:30 p.m., through a "community call" on Talkshoe. Although the Bible study material was the same, the Internet broadened the audience, enabling people to join in without leaving their homes. Families were invited to study the Bible together live every Thursday evening, getting people more acquainted with others in the new church community and with the biblical stories behind the preaching passages for the upcoming Sunday message.

Some churches have gone beyond social and study gatherings online by giving worship an online alternative as well. Simple ways to do this are by offering podcasts (audio recordings) or streaming video of past worship services. Some churches post just the sermon, while others include the entire worship experience. These options provide a way for people to get a feel for your church before visiting, or for people unable to attend on the weekend to have an opportunity to worship.

A more recent innovation is to create a virtual worship experience with as many components of the live experience as possible. These so-called "online campuses" offer video of their live worship service at a particular time, and those watching the service online at the same time can chat with one another before

and after the service, offering some of the same fellowship and discussion one might have surrounding a live service. Some also provide opportunities to submit prayer requests or contribute to the offering.

As central to people's lives today as the Internet is, it is only natural for churches to use the many tools and opportunities the web provides in order to reach people where they are. When we began Nu Faith, we started with a strong web presence at www.NuFaith.org that provided information about face-to-face gatherings and also various ways to ask questions, but the site was also consistently updated with dynamic data about events in the Houston area that would draw people to our website via general Internet searches. Our slogans, "Come as You Are" and "Meet God @ Anytime," set up the expectation of acceptance and availability that our new faith community would provide both in person and on the web.

Technology was a tool for us to connect and introduce new people to faith experiences, but it also offered economic benefits for our developing congregation. As the necessity to connect met with increasing gas prices and an all-around rough economy, we brainstormed more ways to connect weekly online, as opposed to establishing additional face-to-face meetings. We created an electronic newsletter called eNews, and set up a phone tree calling service and text messaging to communicate with new families. Such innovations are easy to implement with a new congregation that doesn't have expectations about how things "should be" or "always have been," but all churches can still use new technologies to help longtime members rethink outreach and connection in a new era.

Although face-to-face communications are important in building trust, evangelism today involves making intentional connections virtually that may lead to future face-to-face connections. Reaching a new generation for Jesus Christ requires using technology. Many people today who are resistant to attending a worship service in person will participate in social networks and other online media. Asking what means of technology is needed to touch the hearts of the unchurched and others who do not feel comfortable within existing congregations is central to making a new place for new people in the twenty-first century. □



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