

The Web 2.0 Revolution in Church Growth, Part I

By Mike Simon

Internet Web 2.0 technology may find its way into the history books as having as much, or more impact on the Christian landscape as the invention of Gutenberg's printing press in the 1440's. The printing press released the power of human communications and therefore changed human history, especially the Church as it made it possible for common people to have their own Bibles. Today, Christians all over the world are fast discovering the power of the internet, which may prove to be a ministry tool that revolutionizes the way we think about and do church for generations to come.

How Web 2.0 technology impacts Christianity will largely depend upon visionary leadership and innovative strategies. Web 2.0 is a tool; and like any tool, is only as useful as the craftsman's skills and creative talents. If used properly, tools can become powerful instruments in workers' hands. As more and more Christians "grab hold" of the power of Web 2.0 tools, millions of people will be impacted with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is Web 2.0?

Well, this largely depends on whether you're talking to software developers, marketers, or just ordinary people. Some say Web 2.0 is the next generation of web-based services, including VoIP, digital media, XML, and much more. Others define it in terms of "s-commerce," using social networking and Web 2.0 technology as means to boost e-commerce. And there are those, like me, who look beyond apparent advantages and into intrinsic value and see an exciting way to connect people and build healthy relationships.

Web 2.0 technology is an emerging platform for building organic, interconnected relationships that serves both people and organizations. For people, Web 2.0 can be casual and entertaining; for organization, it can help build dynamic infrastructures that can be vital to change, progress, and growth.

What's the difference between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0?

Web 2.0 may be considered as a modern upgrade from Web 1.0

internet technology. Web 1.0 provides one-way communications; Web 2.0 enables two-way communications. This modern upgrade has enormous impact on the way people use the internet. The World Wide Web is being transformed from an information highway to a virtual, interactive community for people to connect with family and friends, 24/7.

Today, internet users are looking for more than just information; they are searching for an experience. With Web 2.0, the webmaster shares the responsibility with his internet audience for keeping the website informative and engaging. The modern website is transforming from a simple place to store information, to a dynamic place where people regularly gather and interact.

How will Web 2.0 impact the Internet?

The internet is in the midst of a major "paradigm shift." Traditionally, it has served as a means to gather information; now, it has become a gathering place for building relationships. Social networking takes full

advantage of Web 2.0 technology.

A new research report just came in from the Center for the Digital Future at the University of Southern California. Their 2007 Digital Project revealed that 43% of internet users who are members of online communities say that they “feel strongly” about their virtual community as they do about their real-world community. The average numbers of hours users are online has increased to 8.9 hours a week; up one hour more than 2005. More and more statistics show that online social networking is here to stay, with dramatic increases continuing for years to come.

How will Web 2.0 impact the Church?

For the first time in history, the Body of Christ can experience local and global connectivity. Not bound by time, location, or costly expense, Christians all over the world can now get together, talk in real-time, and join forces in advancing the Kingdom of God. This helps bring evangelization to critical mass all over the planet.

Jesus said, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14, NIV).” We simply cannot ignore the possibility, that the internet could be an instrument in God’s hands for bringing the Body of Christ together in purpose and mission.

Thousands of ministry leaders are now searching for new ways to utilize the internet for mobilizing coalition forces in worldwide evangelism. They believe that God is using the internet to change the world and transform people’s lives.

In 1997, ministry leaders from churches, denominations, and parachurch organizations gathered together at the Billy Graham Center to discuss ways the internet could be used to stimulate and accelerate worldwide evangelism. Their passion for evangelism gave birth to the Internet Evangelism Coalition in 1999.

Accord to Dr. Sterling Huston of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and Chairman of the Internet Evangelistic Coalition, “The rapid growth, broad international reach and economical cost of the Internet offers individuals, churches, and ministries an unprecedented opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus Christ worldwide.”

Today, the Internet Evangelism Coalition (IEC) is facilitating the growth of strategic partnerships among Christian organizations now engaged in internet evangelism. I had a chance to sit in (video via the internet) on one of their recent gatherings in Chicago this past year. I heard their desperate cry for someone to build a Web 2.0 organic tool that’s designed exclusively for Christians to use.

Well now, someone heard their cry and built a Web 2.0 solution that can be used for local and global evangelism: the Oikos Community Console™ (<http://www.simonsolutions.com/oikosconsole.html>), created by Simon Solutions (<http://www.simonsolutions.com/>). Oikos captures the best and most popular features of Web 2.0 technology and brings them together into one web-based package that’s simple to learn and easy to use.

How will Web 2.0 benefit the Church?

Gone are the days when having a church website was all that was need to attract new visitors. Today, websites must not only look good; they must feel good. They must look less like a digital brochure and more like a vibrant community. Church websites must be inviting and engaging and must grab users in a matter of seconds.

The average attention span of an online user is 10-20 seconds. Professionally designed websites are great at capturing people’s attention. Developers who incorporate Web 2.0 technology into web design can also position churches

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Recent improvements in Web 2.0 development can now provide individuals and organizations with the ability to build their own social network or “online gated community.” These communities can be private/exclusive (for members only), or they can be public/inclusive (everyone is invited).

Such benefits throw the door wide open for new and innovative ways for organic transformation and can bring about a back-to-basics, natural process for church health and growth. Church can now draw closer to people, and to their everyday lives. Web 2.0 can provide “new wineskins” in how people minister and care for people’s needs. Church without walls and bridging-the-gap between Church and community is now possible. Unlimited possibilities prevail; limited only by one’s imagination.

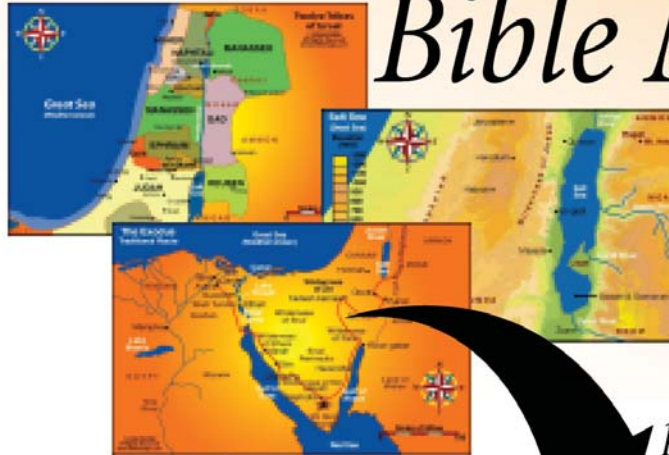
Local and global connectivity is now available. Christians can now take advantage of cost-effective means to connect with family, friends, and co-worker anytime, anywhere in the local community, or around the world. This means that for the first time in history, the Body of Christ can connect and collaborate in real-time, worldwide. Mobilization of local, national, and global forces for evangelism is now possible, 24/7.

This could easily engage millions of new evangelists and draw in millions of new believers.

[Stay tuned for Part II of this article that will run in the July issue of CCMAG, where Mike will continue his discussion of technology’s effect on the local church, the community, and worldwide evangelism.]

Mike Simon’s expertise spans over 27 years through executive leadership of large, multi-staffed churches, businesses, and non-profit organizations. He is a specialist in community development and small group (cell-based) ministry. Passionate about helping people and ministries grow, Mike’s personal mission is to motivate, mentor, and mobilize Christians for broad-based action. He currently serves at president at Simon Solutions, a company that desires to empower people through technology in order to serve the body of Christ. For more about the Web 2.0 solutions that Simon Solutions offers, or to read more articles from Mike at his blog, visit <http://www.simonsolutions.com>. For detailed questions about the Oikos Community Console™, email info@simonsolutions.com, or call 1-888-764-0633.

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The Web 2.0 Revolution in Church Growth, Part 2

By Mike Simon
President of Simon Solutions
Creator of Oikos Community Console

In part one of this article in the June issue (www.ccmag2.com/2007_06/2007_06specialfeature.pdf), I shared with you about the basics of Web 2.0 and how it is affecting churches and worldwide ministry. In the second part of this article, I'd like to share with you what the use of Web 2.0 applications can mean for the local church and how it can help us expand to build a church without walls.

What does Web 2.0 mean for the local church?

Web 2.0 can help the local church in closing the back door, and opening the front door. An ordinary church website can now be transformed into an interactive community for members and visitors. A virtual neon sign can flash, "Open 24/7." This will attract seekers and visitors to a cultural relevant, online community of believers. This opens the door for dramatic results through using *Oikos*TM for true E-vangelism.

Web 2.0 tools can help maximize communications, vital to the building of healthy relationships. This promotes cooperation, collaboration, and teamwork. Organic, relational networks can be built that strengthen, develop, and transform congregations. Prayer networks can be empowered and happen in real-time. Trained volunteers can help in pastoral care while they are at home. Small groups are easily developed.

Web 2.0 can also help get more people excited and involved in shared ministry. Ministry leaders can now broadcast a compelling vision for cooperation in building ministry synergism. Staff can now spend more time in ministry; less in management, saving time and money. This can help spark communal transformation, resulting in both internal and external growth.

Can Web 2.0 help build Church without Walls?

For the church ready to reach out beyond their four walls, Web 2.0 is a powerful tool. This is where things get really exciting. Church can go where people are, rather than waiting on them to come. With millions of Internet users integrating their online world with everyday living, churches can move way beyond their four walls and into people's homes, workspaces, and school environments. New paradigm ministries can now be launched, providing effective ways to minister to multitudes of people.

Web 2.0 is also a great tool for planting new churches and local missions. An organic, interconnecting network can emerge, strengthening support and leadership development. Cost-effective, online communications can happen as training resources are made available online, 24/7. Web 2.0 is great for multi-campus churches, cell-based ministries, house churches, and apostolic networks.

What about area-wide or global ministries?

With Web 2.0 technology, ministries can easily connect in good communications and collaboration. Greater vision and mobilization happen as people build relational synergism—people working together for greater purposes realized only through concert efforts. Using Web 2.0 technology, church, business, and civic leaders can collaborate together in City-Reaching, that is, impacting the whole city with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As more and more Christians come together on common ground and pool their resources, they will experience the power of unity (not uniformity) of purpose—a force of many moving as one! With this, ministries

can cross the threshold into explosive, biblical dynamics and synergistic results. This will readily apply to denominational initiatives, parachurch missions, campus ministries, and marketplace outreaches.

Why should Christians use the Internet?

Every person on the planet is spiritual hungry. The Net Generation (teens and young adults) currently represents 30% of the population. They are the future of the Church; yet according to the research, they are not turning to the Church for spiritual advice and comfort. So, where are they going? You guessed it—to the Internet.

According to Andrew Careaga, well-known author on the subject of the Net Generation, “For most N-geners, the Internet is the communications medium of choice. Just as Baby Boomers grew up with television, the Net generation is growing up with the Internet. The Net is in their homes, in their schools and, with the advent of wireless communications devices, even on their belts or in their pockets. Most young people are at home in cyberspace. If they have questions, cyberspace is where they turn for answers.”

But not just young people are turning to the Internet; older adults are too. The Barna Research Group of Ventura, California states: “Our research indicates that by 2010 we will probably have 10% to 20% of the population relying primarily or exclusively upon the Internet for its religious input. Those people will never set foot on a church campus because their religious and spiritual needs will be met through other means—including the Internet.” Since the time of this report in 2001, these estimates have risen from 50 million to 100 million “displaced” Christians, all searching for new ways to connect with each other and build community.

People both young and old are searching for a “place” to belong, grow, and participate in the building of life-giving community. They want to connect and build relationships with other people. More and more of these people are turning to the Internet and meeting in online (virtual) communities where people share common interests and life experiences. While researchers, philosophers, and theologian continue to debate over the viable essence of virtual community, millions of people just do it!

Is this just a fad?

According to the USC – Annenberg Center for the Digital Future, a large number of Internet users feel as strongly about their virtual worlds as they do about the real world. Jeffrey Cole, the Center’s director, says, “More than a decade after the portals of the World Wide Web opened to the public, we are now witnessing the true emergence of the Internet as the powerful personal and social phenomenon we knew it would become.” According to their 2007 project,

- More than three quarters (77.6%) of Americans are Internet users
- Internet usage has increased to an average of 8.9 hours per week
- Many people are spending less time watching television and more time on the Internet

In 2000, there were an estimated 150 million people on the Internet—one out of every 40 people in the world. Today, there are more than 1 billion people online (CIA World Factbook)—one out of every six people in the world.

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Where do we go from here?

A number of years ago, I attended an important gathering of ministry leaders who were anxious to hear the message of a well-known church growth consultant. Everyone was excited; ready to take home “keys” to unlocking the secrets of church growth. The consultant stood up and said with a loud voice, “I’ve got good news...and bad news! Which one do you want to hear first?”

No one was prepared for the consultant’s next comments. “The good news is that over 200,000 new Christians are coming to Christ, everyday, all around the world. The bad news is that many of you sitting here today could possibly see, in 35 years from now, a ‘For Sale’ sign on the front lawn of your church property.”

You could have heard a pin drop in that gathering. I watched as many of these confident church leaders turned to each other in amazement and rude awakening. The consultant went on to discuss the inescapable reality of the next generation’s feelings about traditional American Church, and its inability to “connect” with them and their needs.

So, where will this next generation of people turn to for spiritual advice and comfort? One thing that we do know is that millions of people, of all ages, are turning to the Internet to search for authentic Christian community. They will use Web 2.0 technology to connect with family and friends, hoping to find genuine Christians who can answer their questions and share their concerns.

Yes, it is true that virtual community will never replace face-to-face community. But, as more and more people successfully integrate their online world with everyday living, the Church of the 21st Century can be positioned in both places at the same time, reaping a great harvest. Web 2.0 technology offers the Church a choice – “be there, or be square!”

I realize that a number of you who are reading this article will have mixed emotions about all of this, and that’s ok. Whether you believe that Web 2.0 is a new revolution in church growth, this probably remains to be seen. Perhaps this message is not ready for the masses, but only for the few—those who already have the vision deeply planted within their hearts. You are the ones who will most benefit from these thoughts.

I’ve come to realize that there are three types of people in this world: Those who make things happen. Those who watch things happen. And those who say, “What happened?” I ask you, which one of these, will you choose to be?

Mike Simon’s expertise spans over 27 years through executive leadership of large, multi-staffed churches, businesses, and non-profit organizations. He is a specialist in community development and small group (cell-based) ministry. Passionate about helping people and ministries grow,

Mike’s personal mission is to motivate, mentor, and mobilize Christians for broad-based action. He currently serves at president at Simon Solutions, a company that desires to empower people through technology in order to serve the body of Christ. For more about the Web 2.0 solutions that Simon Solutions offers, or to read more articles from Mike at his blog, visit [http://](http://www.simonsolutions.com)

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