

SUSTAINED WORLD MISSION IN A NETWORKED AGE

Modern communications technology has greatly boosted our capacity for effective cooperation in Christian mission and global church life, in the following areas:

1. connectivity - connecting Christian workers, members of Christian communities and other interest groups, denominations, para-church organizations, for outreach, follow-up, purchasing goods and services and administration; enables diverse users to meet on common ground, using technology that hundreds of millions in the modern world regard as “standard”
2. division of labour - cooperative consultation and development of mutually useful materials, across continents
3. removal of isolation/elimination of distance - enhanced social networking (eg through emails, Facebook, MySpace, UTube, Skype and wikis) in all places where telephones (including mobile phones) can be reached and enhanced through broadband Internet facilities)
4. replication - able to connect with many recipients at once/send messages/receive global feedback; on a huge scale that costs almost nothing
5. accountability/reporting/budgeting/close contact and support, with relative transparency
6. platforms for financial support, fast (and low cost) banking transactions; electronic giving at churches; other cashless activities
7. access to practical support and ideas, eg easily established/maintained websites to park/disseminate information, mines of information
8. education and training, including through distance learning, global classrooms, chat rooms, forums, cheap video-conferencing
9. input from both directions, not just West to East, North to South (traditional missions target areas/strategies), but both ways
10. economic efficiencies, instant global reach without the high costs (and loss of productivity) associated with travel and other traditional means of communication and shipping
11. capacity to share vision, events, photographs/videos (eg ministry, worship services/styles) across continents and cultures
12. capacity to bring together people in times of need/crisis, eg to share prayer needs, build interest/information coalitions quickly
13. 24/7 support - time zones are broken down; people can connect simultaneously; or support networks in very different time zones can undertake complementary activities in alternating operating hours

14. penetration of conventional barriers to the spread of the Gospel, eg customs, censorship of Bibles, recordings and other Christian materials
15. enhancement of English language skills (predominantly by users whose first language is not English) leading to greater networking, information flow, mutual growth
16. facilitation of open communication - global conversations, visibility for peer monitoring
17. proclamation of the Gospel; teaching, sharing in every nation
18. increased visibility of the universal church - every nation, ethnic group
19. Christian workers are enabled to function in/across “virtual” locations
20. Bible translation is made easier; multi-linguistic; faster input/liaison with informants, development of new translations

However, IT networking is not an unalloyed product. It is a supplement, not a substitute. The following barriers/issues need to be taken into account

1. email is not a shortcut, a replacement of the need to “go” into the world, and reach real people
2. personal relationship networking and exposure are the only trusted medium in many societies; electronic networks are no substitute for genuine fellowship/support
3. the most effective “strategizing” is still undertaken personally
4. much of global mission continues to need “hands on” approaches
5. virtual communication is often not “real”
6. security issues continue to exist in many countries (eg Muslim societies, totalitarian regimes), where the activities of indigenous Christians are officially regarded as suspect and scrutinized
7. the Internet is used for massive misinformation, exaggeration, fraud, unethical pull factors, misunderstandings, assumptions that sometimes involve Christian ministries
8. loss of quality control occurs in relation to content accuracy/cultural relevance/appropriateness, training results (plagiarism is rife), outreach methods (spraying the message inauthentically) and garnering/analysis of feedback
9. enables cults to proliferate and network churches to mislead in reporting; that said, it potentially makes “discovery” easier
10. continues to leave out the 1 billion + “poorest of the poor” who do not have ready, reliable or affordable access to the communication tools
11. can result in the “wrong” people being seen as in leadership; they are visible because they are IT savvy and well connected/networked

12. many potential users are suspicious of what governments/individuals can/will do with personal information that enters cyber space and decline to embrace the available technologies
13. other users feel intimidated by the sizes of social networks involving many millions of members and believe blogs and the complexities of navigating available information is a waste of time, or of limited value
14. users are frequently mass targeted by adult-oriented advertisements or search results that optimize adult themes, especially pornography (even when they are not seeking such content); many parents feel the Internet should not be the sources of their children's education and values
15. with estimates of trillions of messages criss-crossing cyberspace every day, and a vast number of web sites (especially in English), even in the Christian domain, optimizing IT needs to be targeted to be of much practical effect.

The networked age is a current reality; it is already with us, to stay. (Future users will regard today's tools as primitive.) It is bigger than any of us. It has enormous capacities and some drawbacks. The challenge for the Body of Christ is to use the facility well, to maximize its offer for the greatest possible outcomes.