

Thursday, July 9, 2009

Domestic missionaries search for converts online

By AMY GREEN c. 2009 Religion News Service

ORLANDO, Fla. -- For centuries, missionaries have ventured to the farthest reaches of the globe to share the gospel. Today, the new mission field is just a mouse click away.

Some 2 million surfers a day type keywords like "God" and "Jesus" into search engines, and hundreds of thousands of them end up at one of 91 Web sites operated by Global Media Outreach, a ministry of the Orlando-based Campus Crusade for Christ that dispatches domestic missionaries to the far corners of the World Wide Web.

The sites describe the basics of Christianity, such as who is Jesus, and provide forms where surfers can submit questions and share personal stories with one of the ministry's 3,000 missionaries. The missionaries, in turn, respond via e-mail with personal messages, Bible passages and prayers.

It is the newest way to reach out, said the Rev. Allan Beeber, the Orlando director of Global Media Outreach, which also has offices in Silicon Valley.

"The paradigm of evangelism is changing. In the past, various Christian groups would go door-to-door, or they would hold citywide crusades," he said. "The paradigm change is that people are now coming to us."

The number of these spiritual surfers has grown so much since the ministry launched less than a decade ago that officials now hope to double the number of missionaries by the year's end. In the last year alone, traffic on the ministry's Web sites more than doubled.

Campus Crusade is among the nation's largest nondenominational campus ministries, with some 55,000 students involved at more than 1,090 colleges and universities nationwide. Worldwide, the organization offers 29 ministries in 191 countries.

Global Media Outreach has partnered with Northland, a local megachurch whose pastor is the up-and-coming Joel Hunter, to add missionaries and a church-planting effort to the ministry. Now, when surfers e-mail about how to start a church, Northland can respond with church-planting resources.

The partnership is a fit for Northland, which subscribes to the philosophy that a church is defined by its people and can be as small as three people gathered around a dinner table, said the Rev. Dan Lacich, a pastor at Northland. Some 10,000 people worship each Sundays at one of Northland's multiple locations, including 1,000 online.

"It's another tool," Lacich said. "What we're hoping happens is that missionaries who are in field ... will get encouragement and support from this ministry as we're able to connect them with people who are near them."

Technology is now at a point where Christian leader can track how many people worldwide are exposed to Christianity, and how many want to become Christians, Beeber said. It also is the first time missionaries can reach into dangerous countries, and other hard-to-reach populations, such as teenagers here at home, without ever leaving their desks. What's more, online outreach can be specialized to target a variety of groups, from members of the military to hurricane victims.

One group of pastors handles especially difficult theological questions. Most missionaries respond within 24 hours, Beeber said.

Evangelicals are not the only ones turning to point-and-click proselytizing. Mormon missionaries spend 12 hours fielding questions online as part of their training before being dispatched around the world. Missionaries who can't go overseas for health reasons can instead put in a two-year stint at the Mormons' online referral center in Provo, Utah.

"Absolutely it's the new frontier," said Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project. "In advanced economies, the majority of people are online, and ... they begin to think of the Internet as the default starting place for all kinds of information searches.

"So it's not surprising that when people have spiritual questions or have concerns about the direction of their lives, a lot of them now sort of start their search for answers online."

Maria Rodriguez, a Campus Crusade accountant who heard about the project around the office, said sharing the gospel is now akin to "going on a mission trip without stepping out of the house."

Rodriguez helps oversee the ministry's Spanish speakers and enjoys developing online relationships with those who write in, including a woman from Peru who is moving to Canada but worries about leaving her mother, who is in poor health, behind.

"We go back and forth, praying for each other, praying for her mother and her decision," said Rodriguez, 48. "Mostly people want to be heard. They want to tell their stories. ... The family of God is so huge that we can reach others from such a distance."