Church Chat: London-area church finds Web technology helps members invite friends

Posted: 04 Jun 2011 09:00 PM PDT
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Inter-American Division > Communication Department

Libna Stevens

Jun 5, 2011

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5 Jun 2011, Montego Bay, Jamaica...Ansel Oliver

The tourist couple from Sweden seemed at home when they walked into the Wimbledon Seventh-day Adventist Church in England halfway through a recent service, even though it was their first time visiting. Pastor Sam Neves stopped his sermon to welcome and invite them to take the last two open seats, on the front row of the 160-seat sanctuary. He later found out they attend online and considered the congregation their own.

That result is rooted in a church board action 3 years ago, following Neves' bold request of 15,000 English pounds (roughly US$20,000 then) for a media ministry -- the exact number of the existing church budget at the time.

The board was equally divided, he said, but three meetings later it granted approval.

Now the technology is allowing members to more easily invite their un-churched friends to share experiences with their church family. Once a month, the church holds a secular-friendly service, and members share online links to videos and other resources for friends to "check out."

An online church presence isn't unique in the denomination, but Neves says the move is rare for a small church and underscores how technology is able to help connect people seeking God. The ministry also includes media-savvy members, who otherwise might not attend regularly, he says.

Neves, 29, is originally from Brazil and earned a master's degree in theology at Newbold College in England. He shared his story at last week's Global Internet Evangelism Network forum, an annual Web technology conference of the Adventist Church.

Before addressing the audience, he spoke with ANN about why messages should inspire, not just convince. He also shared what he's learned about Adventist evangelism and how he would have launched an online ministry differently.

Interview excerpts:

**Adventist News Network:** Why did you feel it was so important to lobby your board for an online ministry?

**Sam Neves:** We wanted to go beyond the walls of our small church. Getting out into the community is sometimes just shooting yourself in the foot. We're in a central hub of a location, but my members live all over the place. My impact is not at the church, it's in those different locations. Yes we still keep the church open and feed the homeless, but the real impact won't occur here because members don't live there. So we wanted to bring what we have here to the environment where they are.

**ANN:** What's the focus of your service designed for secular people?

**Neves:** The key word to elders is to keep this service "entertaining." That's a dirty word in some circles, and some of my members aren't ready for that. But secular people like to be entertained -- they go to live shows and stand-up comedy, and they're no strangers to the stage. That service needs to be entertaining and inspiring and challenging because secular people want that. They
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As internet communicators met on day four of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Global Internet Evangelism Network (GIEI) Conference in Montego Bay, they were challenged to share the gospel through social networking.

June 4, 2011 - Montego Bay, Jamaica...Libna Stevens/IAD

As internet technologists and communicators met on day four of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Global Internet Evangelism Network (GIEI) Conference in Montego Bay, they were challenged to share the gospel through social networking.

"In social networking today we need to do what Jesus did to attract people around the theme of preparing for the Kingdom of God," said Pastor Leon B. Wellington, vice president and communication director for the church in Inter-America.

"We are called to be kingdom builders, to be His witnesses," said Pastor Wellington as he addressed more than 100 during the worship service today.

"This is the context in which we, disciples in a postmodern age, are called upon to witness," he continued. "We are called to educate the peoples of the world concerning the importance and necessity of getting ready for the Kingdom."

It was the resounding theme of this year’s conference which has focused on using online social networks as effective media for spreading the gospel.

Pastor Wellington reflected on Jesus' method of networking as he called disciples, touched children, healed the sick and preached about peace and hope.

It's about "being witnesses in our homes, on the street, in our communities, at the workplace, on the internet, wherever people gather," explained Wellington. "There is no witnessing template, prototype or mould; just tell the story as you understand it. Tell how this Galilean named Jesus changed your life and destiny."

Taking advantage of the internet and social network platforms is the kind of unique opportunity to witness like Jesus did, went on Pastor Wellington. "We can touch more people at the same time, in more places than was dreamed possible by the disciples. People are searching for answers to their daily challenges and we must be there online with solutions to life’s stresses and strains."

"To be relevant we must change and broaden the content of our websites from stories that pat us on the back and tell the world how good we are, to content that answers the need of those who contemplate giving up on life and are suicidal, those with dysfunctional marriages and are clueless hot to fix it, those whose children have become rebellious, drug pushers, purveyors of crime and violence, those who are not feeling loved by anyone, the sad, discouraged, seeking for help in the middle of night, those who just learnt they are terminally ill, those concerned about their self-image, low self-esteem," explained Pastor Wellington.

"We must build relationships, impact the communities where we are, give the people hope, tell them of the peace, and freedom to be found in Jesus, so they too can be ready for the coming Kingdom," he challenged.

The GIEI conference will continue until June 5, 2011.