

A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation

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Media, Technology and Faith

Earlier this year, there was a story on *60 Minutes* about Facebook, one of the social networking internet sites that have become so popular, especially among young people. Out of curiosity, my husband went to the web site and experimented by registering himself. Almost immediately, he received a list of everyone from our e-mail address book who we could designate as one of our “friends” on Facebook. We were amazed by the variety of people we know who have apparently already joined one of these online communities! Not wanting to get in any deeper, however, he tried to cancel out, but not before several people had received automatic invitations from him to become one of our friends. One of these days when I have time to explore and figure it out, I think I’m going to join Facebook—after all, everybody else seems to be doing it!

In 2006, when *Time* magazine designated “You” as people of the year, paying particular attention to the explosive growth of such web sites as YouTube where you can post videos which are then available to millions of people around the world, I’m not sure I really even understood what YouTube was. And I’m still not very familiar with it, although I have gone to the web site to view a variety of videos, ranging from a couple of very entertaining ones of “Nora, the Piano-Playing Cat,” to political commercials both serious and satirical, to an inspirational story about the origins of the hymn,

“Amazing Grace.” But I have yet to figure out how to upload my own video (assuming I made videos, that is).

These are just two examples of new forms of media and communication made possible by the explosive growth of electronic technology in recent years. I feel like I am reasonably savvy when it comes to computers and other electronic gadgets. I can program my own VCR; I can set up a new computer, load software and do basic troubleshooting; others at work often come to me for technical assistance when their Word documents won’t do what they want them to do; I can maintain a web site and do basic web design (emphasis on the *basic!*); and I can use a cell phone for text messaging and e-mail. But on the continuum of skill and knowledge, I feel like I am pretty far at the lower end of what’s possible. I know enough, however, to know that those possibilities relate not only to how we do our jobs in industry or government but also how we do church and communicate our Christian faith.

This is the second edition of *Shalom!* in less than two years on some aspect of technology, which probably tells you something about the rapid pace of change. The original suggestion of a theme for this edition was “Faith and Media,” but it seemed to me that it would also be important to explore the implications of the growth of technologies that have changed the way we communicate with

each other.

So there are articles in this edition on Christians in Hollywood, using media in worship, and the portrayal of Christian faith in media such as newspapers and rock-and-roll music. But there are also articles on making life better and safer for senior citizens with new technologies and the uses and misuses of the communication tools made possible by the internet. Demonstrating that “technology” is a relative term, there is also an article describing how at the very basic end of the technological continuum are methodologies that can make life better for people who experience poverty and other hardships. ☺

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

Remaining Topics for 2008

Spring 2008, “Caring for Our Children”

Summer 2008, “The Church’s Role in Social Service Ministries”

Fall 2008, “On Being a Man in Today’s World”

Please contact the editor if you or someone you know would like to contribute to any of these topics.

Christians in Hollywood: In, But Not Of

By Steve McBeth

At a recent gathering of Christians in Hollywood, Pastor Jeff Perry spoke on the subject “Whatcha Lookin At?”, a reflection on the pervasive influence of the images and subject matter of film, television and pop culture. To Christians in the industry, entertainment is much more than choices of what to see or do in one’s leisure time—it is a life’s calling.

There is no denying the power and reach of the media and entertainment in 21st century life. And American media is arguably our nation’s largest and most important export to the world, reaching billions of people with images, stories and ideas conveyed in a myriad of entertainment forms.

For the Christian in the entertainment business and Hollywood culture, daily life is the classic faith struggle: to be in the world, but not of the world. As a minority working within the vast entertainment system, Christians often feel they have little say over the form and content of the

work they do. However, more Christians are awakening to the opportunities in entertainment and media, and a movement is growing which is elevating the voice of faith in the industry and its impact on the world.

Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* may still be the exception, but many in Hollywood are challenged by and working on what might be called “21st-century parables”—stories of meaning and truth told through the media of our time. Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation (Fox Films and Networks) now has a Fox Faith division. At virtually every major studio you will find Bible studies and prayer groups meeting regularly. A number of parachurch organizations are beginning to support Christian efforts in Hollywood. But significant challenges remain.

The entertainment industry is a massive commercial endeavor. Contemporary film and television has grown increasingly complex in its production and distribution, a process dominated by a small number of huge studios. It is an industry built on talent and money. Often, to “breakthrough” in this work requires large amounts of both. For Christians working in the industry, seeking to make a positive impact and to influence form and content, it is a constant quest to find and rally the people and resources to do the work. Regrettably, a number of Christian projects in Hollywood have not have enough talent and money to succeed, and the industry has noted the failures, making it even harder to secure support for new work.

Many times Christians in Hollywood face the dilemma of working on projects that are well-funded and have the talent available, regardless of the subject matter, versus working with little of each on a story that might be much more worthy of being told. It is a real and personal struggle, and sometimes a place of significant discomfort. The system is built to support projects targeting the widest possible audience—the ones most likely to become hits and get the greatest financial return for

the investors. These may not be the best or most worthy projects.

So how will Christians have a greater impact in this challenging environment? The good news is that entertainment companies are beginning to recognize the large and underserved market for content created for Christians. Just as the Christian music and book and magazine businesses have grown over time, the film and TV businesses are beginning to see opportunities in this area. There has probably never been a better time for talented people to pitch projects to the studios, even with stories of faith and Christian themes.

But the greatest opportunity will come from the Christians inside the industry. This minority is beginning to grow in number and voice. Being “in” the world of Hollywood does not mean being “of” it—sold out to its purposes and methods. Much of this new talent is coming from the younger generation, a generation steeped in all forms of media, who find it natural and compelling to have an impact in this kind of work. To this generation, a life of work in entertainment is a life of significance.

If it is possible to view Hollywood as a “mission field,” then certainly its time is now. Christian schools and programs in film and television are rapidly increasing in number and quality, training and equipping the next generation of Hollywood talent. More money than ever is being invested in worthy projects and supported by Christians in Hollywood; two recent films, the Wilberforce story *Amazing Grace* and *Bella*, had the strong support of Christians in Hollywood. Projects like this not only succeed in their own right; they also serve as encouragement to those working in the industry.

The Wedgwood Circle, a new Washington, D.C.-based organization dedicated to the renewal of culture by investing in film and television (among other cultural art forms), calls Christians in Hollywood to “the true, the good and the beautiful.” As one of

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a number of faith organizations seeking to make a difference in this world, they support the Christians doing the work. As organizations, schools, training programs, support networks, and Christian leaders in the industry combine to give greater voice to the effort, greater results will be realized.

Is it too far-fetched to envision the call on the lives of the next generation of Hollywood Christians, those who are committed to Kingdom purposes through work with the cultural artifacts of our

age? The great Christian movements have always had their leaders, called to higher purpose and to towering lives of faith and service. One thinks of Oswald Chambers in the missionary workers movement, Billy Graham in world evangelism, and others—saints who embodied God’s message and purpose for their time. Could it be that God will call forth from this generation or the next, willing servants and leaders who will take their talents and gifts and, for His purpose, fashion extraordinary stories

and images of truth, goodness and beauty? Hollywood would never be the same.

Pray that it be so. 🙏

Steve McBeth, who grew up in the Grantham BIC congregation and graduated from Messiah College, was a senior executive for The Walt Disney Company for nearly 20 years. He currently resides in Camarillo, California, where he is working on several projects in television and live entertainment.

Maintaining Civility and Human Connection in the World of Online Forums and Blogs

By Rachel Petersen

Few technological advancements have revolutionized our society as thoroughly as the Internet. From banking to personal communication, the World Wide Web has changed the way we do almost everything. Many of these changes are genuine improvements over the way things were done in the past. On the rare occasion that I find myself running errands at rush hour, for example, I spend the majority of my time sitting in traffic, considering all the ways I could have streamlined my day (and saved the environment from my car’s emissions) by taking care of my business online. Of course, efficiency isn’t the only factor to consider when evaluating the ways that technology has contributed (or detracted) from our quality of life.

This is especially true when we examine how the Internet has transformed the way we communicate. I suppose one could make a case for why e-mail is inherently inferior to good old fashioned “snail mail,” or why online periodicals can never take the place of the printed word. But the changes brought about by the Internet extend beyond the digitization of our established means of communication. Far more revolutionary than the trend towards paperless correspondence are the online public forums that have exploded in popularity since the birth of the Internet.

Such sites—particularly blogs connected to reputable organizations—hold enormous potential for worthwhile dialogue, theoretically allowing people from all over the world to participate in conversations with one another. Unlike chat rooms, which tend to gravitate toward adult themes and middle-school-level maturity, blogs (of the public, not private variety) are centered on the writings of an individual or group of individuals who then invite the public to weigh in on the conversation by posting comments. Because such forums draw only those who care about the issues addressed on the site, blogs tend to create something of a virtual community for their readership.

But as lovely as this all sounds, online discourse (as far as I’ve seen) rarely resembles this ideal. I confess that I don’t spend a lot of time surfing the net, so it’s possible that many wonderful sites exist in which individuals partake in respectful and fruitful conversation on pressing social matters, and that I simply haven’t come across them. But the little exposure I’ve had to web sites endeavoring to foster such communication has convinced me that, rather than promoting healthy dialogue, the dynamics created by these virtual forums more often deepen the rifts between those who disagree.

One of my favorite blogs—a thought-



provoking collection of musings from socially-active evangelical Christians—illustrates this sad phenomenon particularly well. Every day, an assortment of new posts addressing a range of social issues challenge readers to live out their faith in ways that will transform the world around them. I’ve often been convicted and inspired to action by these prophetic voices. But each time I visit this site, I’m appalled by the commentary that these writers inspire among their readership.

It’s not the disagreement itself that makes me uncomfortable. On the contrary, the lively debate generated by this blog suggests that the authors are raising relevant questions, and that the audience is taking these questions seriously. If all the readers agreed with everything published on the blog, I’d question the value of having such a web site at all. These disputes unsettle me not because they exist, but because of the manner in which the participants address one another. Rudeness, sarcasm, personal attacks, and even occasionally sexually-charged insults seem par for the course in

addressing one's opponents.

I suppose it shouldn't surprise me that Christians who disagree choose to treat each other with such contempt. After all, we followers of Jesus have a long history of treating one another hatefully. But when I witness such confrontations online, I can't help but wonder whether the dynamics of cyberspace make the otherwise difficult task of loving our enemies practically impossible.

Perhaps the most obvious pitfall is the total anonymity offered by the virtual world. Since no one online knows who I actually am, I can fall prey to the dangerous illusion that my words carry no consequence. Under this guise of secrecy, I am far less likely to practice self-restraint, and far more apt to give in to my fallen nature. Few of the readers who posted such un-Christ-like comments on the aforementioned blog would have the audacity to speak to a

fellow believer so disrespectfully in church, I suspect.

Also, unlike the real world, in which my enemy is a person who I might see in several different contexts, the world of cyberspace turns my adversary into a disembodied username I only ever encounter on a computer screen. In college, I got into plenty of heated debates with classmates and professors whose theological and political perspectives differed from my own. In each case, I would have preferred never to run into these individuals again. But long after the class period or semester ended, I would continue to see them – eating supper in the dining hall, checking their mail in the Commons, buckling their two-year-old into a car seat, walking to chapel. Of course, seeing them outside of the classroom didn't increase my appreciation for our common humanity so greatly that I instantly forgot

our differences. But being part of the same community helped me—over time—live into a sort of appreciation that wouldn't have been possible apart from such mundane interactions.

Perhaps the saddest consequence of our increasingly web-based society is the loss of these fundamental human connections. While the technological innovations of the last twenty years have, in many cases, enhanced our ability to understand and communicate with one another, we do ourselves a disservice if we begin substituting online community for the real thing. ☹

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U2: An Explosive Story of Faith and Rock-and-Roll

By Lois Saylor

Bono: do you know how to dismantle an atomic bomb

Michael W. Smith: no

Bono: love, love, love

From the beginning the Irish rock band U2 has claimed its Christian allegiance. Or to be more precise, three of the band's four members – front man and leader Bono; The Edge, lead guitarist; and Larry Mullen, Jr., drummer – all gave witness to their faith in Jesus and were part of a Christian fellowship in Dublin. Steve Stockman's book, *Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2*, follows the band's spirituality and rise to stardom and its extraordinary staying power to remain and improve on the world stage for over 25 years.

The band's journey starts in Dublin, Ireland. This is a land where Christians are known most for fighting each other. It was not in the church where the three of the four young men of U2 found faith and fellowship, but rather in a Christian group called Shalom Fellowship. Later Bono

would be quoted as saying, "Religion tore this country apart. I have no time for it and never feel a part of it. I am a Christian, but at times I feel very removed from Christianity."

Indeed some of Bono's antics and some of his songs have caused Christians to question him if not outright judge him "not Christian." But this is where a deeper look and broader perspective is helpful. Bono and "the boys from Ireland" are well aware of their doubts and struggles. In fact, they sing about them. Some Christians who first loved U2 pulled away as the music matured; and U2, having been misquoted and feeling abused by the Christian press, pulled away too. It was a long breach that only started to heal more recently. Stockman says, "It would seem that George W. Bush was the man who suggested that Bono go and build support among the faith community" for his social justice activities which mostly focused on ridding Africa of extreme poverty and



addressing the pandemic of HIV/AIDS.

Bono has indeed been meeting with North American Christian leaders. Willow Creek's Bill Hybels says he is convinced that Bono's "faith is genuine" and "his prophetic challenge to the U.S. Church must be taken seriously." After a visit to Wheaton College, Bono said, "I really loved this crowd. These are the loudest Christians in the world... normally I am not comfortable with Church people, they're pious, they're judgmental. These young students gave me hope."

In the long years of estrangement from North American evangelicals, U2 sang its way into rock-and-roll stardom. Author Steve Stockman is a Presbyterian Chaplain at Queen's University in Belfast, a poet, and

interested in social justice. Perhaps it is the joining of these three passions – theology, poetry, and justice – that make him an avid U2 fan with a desire to explore and explain exactly these elements of U2’s personality. For Bono’s lyrics are theology and poetry, a dangerous combination of the absolute and the ambiguous akin to the Psalms; and his emergence on the world scene for social justice is not fashion but evoking change.

An example of the mixture of theology, poetry, and social justice occurs in the band’s song *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* which laments the violence of Northern Ireland. In the song Bono cries out “how long, how long must we sing this song?” It’s a psalm-like cry for peace, a cry to God for help, and the frustration of waiting for both. Another line refers to the “victory Jesus won” and wanting to claim it. The groan of anguish is that Jesus has already won the victory over evil and violence and the question that lingers is again “how long” must we wait to see it lived out.

An early U2 album *War* ends with the song 40 which is taken directly from Psalm 40. Here Bono is singing of that day when he does get to sing a new song: “I waited patiently for the Lord/He inclined and heard my cry/He brought me up out of the pit.../I will sing, sing a new song.”

The song Grace, the last track on *All That You can’t Leave Behind*, begins: “Grace, she takes the blame/She covers the shame/Removes the stain/It could be her

name/Grace, it’s the name for a girl/It’s also a thought that changed the world/And ends /What once was hurt/What once was friction/What left a mark/No longer stings/Because Grace makes beauty/Out of ugly things.”

U2’s latest album is *How To Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, hence the conversation with Michael W. Smith which is quoted at the beginning of this article. This album has all the elements of theology, poetry, social justice and good rock-and-roll. It ends with the song Yahweh, a rather transparent song of faith about submission, failings, and wanting and waiting for more: “More of God, more from God/... Take this soul/Stranded in some skin and bones/Take this soul/And make it sing.../Yahweh, Yahweh/Always pain before a child is born/Yahweh, tell me now/Why the dark before the dawn?/Take this city/A city should be shining on a hill/Take this city/If it be your will.../Take this heart /And make it break.”

The question of U2 Steve Stockman tackles in *Walk On* (a title taken from a U2 song about continuing to walk in faith) is the fine line of “in” but not “of” the world. U2 is a rock band and they have integrity in not pulling back from this musical form though some Christians have advised them to do just that. They play well. Sing well. They are loud and energetic. There is a rebellion in their music, a radical note, and sensuality. They also have integrity to Christian faith and Bono has suggested

that the fourth member bass player Adam Clayton has had spiritual growth in recent years. The rebellion they sing is often against the injustice of evil in this world. Their views and some songs are radical for God much like Jesus was radical in His day eating with tax collectors and sinners. Their sensuality has, at times, a spiritual twist. Songs about a love interest can be sung to or about God reminiscent of another poetic book of the Bible—Song of Songs. The band is great rock-and-roll and does not shy away from the heftier themes of transcendence, grace, sin, and the human doubt, confusion, and the questioning of it all.

Walk On helps the reader to understand this blend by following the band’s journey through the songs, interviews, through scripture, and in their influence in the world in justice issues. Another way you may want to check out the earnestness of U2’s leader Bono’s commitment to faith and justice is to listen firsthand to his address at the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC where he challenges the leaders and lawmakers to follow the higher calling of God’s justice: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/bononationalprayerbreakfast.htm> 🍷

Lois Saylor is a member of the Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church and lives in Elizabethtown, PA. She reviewed Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2, by Steve Stockman.

Portrayals of Religious Faith in the Media

By Reid Kanaley

As a journalist, I can seldom get away from a gathering of believers without being asked – once my occupation is learned – some version of the question: How can a Christian work in the media?

How, indeed?

The answer is easy. But it is not always clear what the question itself is meant to convey. First, the media are so varied, their technologies so diverse and changing, their audiences increasingly subdivided, and their

purveyors so specialized that an honest and full assessment of how people of faith tend to get along within them, or why they seek work there, is nearly impossible to generalize about.

In addition, it seems difficult for many folks to separate fully the myriad content that feeds this crowded zoo, from reality TV to blog postings to news, let alone the quaint distinction that traditional newspapers force between the factual

reporting in the vast majority of front-page articles, and opinions expressed by pundits, politicians, professors and sundry kooks on the editorial and op-ed pages. To be the keeper of one cage in this zoo might have nothing to do with the rest of the menagerie.

In other words, the very human tendency to generalize and to seek a simple answer about this overwhelming flood of information and entertainment to which the

term “media” generally refers may stand in the way of understanding.

Still, people of faith often feel let down, misunderstood and even betrayed by the way their churches, the tenets of their belief, the people they admire and the very world they think they know are portrayed in print and other news outlets.

And they want to know: How can you be a part of that? I’ve worked at newspapers for 30 years, and while I probably bleed ink by now, I too remain uncomfortable to find, sometimes, lazy or misguided resorts to unfair stereotypes, dismissal of legitimate viewpoints, and plain ignorance lurking in the text of the news columns.

News stories that do more than touch on religion are often difficult for the average hard-bitten journalist to write. Newsrooms attract the cynical type, and the inquisitive, but skeptical sort. And many of these writers and editors can be suspicious of the motivations and claims of people who profess to take their guidance from supernatural sources. Remember: Their world is the one where “God told me to do it” is the explanation of the madman as well as the saint.

The tendency then is often to ignore, or greatly diminish the faith “angle” in a story – a bewildering omission or glossing-over

of the powerful motivations for the good in many individuals, as well as for the basis of many an ethnic or geopolitical conflict.

But just as often, news organizations including my own have striven to address and describe issues, and profile people caught up in and affected by sweeping religious trends and dominant institutions of religion. This has been evidenced in recent years by the work of, at times, two or three reporters with religion at the core of their interest and responsibilities, including regular news coverage of our region’s largest denominations, as well as a steady flow of feature articles for the weekly religion sections, and thoughtful, multi-part series on the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the region, and on the dynamics of evangelicalism in America.

A typically cynical insider’s rule-of-thumb for the fairness of any given body of news reporting is to see it either praised or denounced from all sides. As a measure of objectivity, nothing could be finer in the minds of many journalists! And indeed, on this score, I give the bulk of coverage from my own newsroom a passing grade overall. To illustrate the extremes: In one high-profile episode in the last decade, a religion writer left the paper where I work complaining that he had not been

allowed leeway to write critically about the local Catholic establishment. Later, an individual who had been strident about the newspaper’s alleged bias – against that same religious establishment – led a group of investors who bought the newspaper, then, in a move to reassure the troubled staff, vowed in writing not to meddle in its reporting.

On a grander level, though, the work of journalism is a great calling – a call to inform, to uncover injustice, to speak up for the voiceless, to speak truth to power. Now, where have we heard these mandates before? Aren’t they echoes of the Gospel? Add to this the biblical directive to be salt and light in the world, and my answer is simple.

How can a Christian work in the media? How can one not? ☺

Reid Kanaley is a graduate of Messiah College and is a business editor for The Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper. Thanks to Lois Saylor for calling upon her long-standing friendship with Reid for this article. Reid and the editor, who first crossed paths at Messiah College when he was a student and the editor ran the campus post office, recently reconnected on a Messiah College alumni resource group.

Water from Stone

by Tim Shenk

Every morning, women, children and men from Munathi village and surrounding areas file through a wasteland of thorn bushes and leafless trees at the eastern edge of Kenya’s rural highlands.

Their destination is a dry riverbed, where they use gourd shells and their hands to dig several feet into the sandy bottom. As puddles form in the holes, they scoop the water into containers.

The sand is littered with donkey droppings, polluting the little water that is there. Yet thousands of people depend on the water that can be collected from this riverbed.

“We use it because there is no other choice,” says Rev. Amos Daud, a pastor in Munathi, which is some six kilometers, or about four miles, away from the riverbed.

Water scarcity is a crushing problem in rural Africa, forcing households to send someone, usually a woman or girl, to fetch water—a chore that could take 20 hours or more a week. And much of the water is not pure, which causes deadly diseases, especially among young children. Irrigation for crops is out of the question in many locations, decreasing yields and keeping farming communities mired in poverty.

In drought-devastated Munathi, people

have little food and sometimes go several days without eating. Corn and bean harvests have failed for five years, and the pastures have turned into fields of thorns and dust. The villagers’ bony goats and donkeys nibble lethargically at briers. Many cattle have died.

Yet in Munathi, this misery will soon be overcome. Families are working together to build a series of concrete barriers across a gully that runs through their village. These simple structures are called “sand dams,” and they have the potential to improve life in Munathi and in many other rural communities in Kenya.



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Sand dams collect water in underground channels, and the result is an oasis that provides water for people, crops and animals. Over the past 10 years, MCC has worked with the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGFB) to fund construction of 55 sand dams in Kenya.

Two Kenyan organizations that MCC partners with—SASOL and Excellent Development—have built more than 500 sand dams in the last three decades. The effects are impressive. Farmers are growing more food and fewer girls are missing school to fetch water.

Materials and supervision to build a sand dam cost about \$6,000; the local community provides most of the labor. Every day in Munathi, one representative from each family joins the work crew. They dig rocks out of a pit with a sledgehammer and a pick. Then they heat the rocks in a bonfire, break them with a douse of cold water and carry the pieces one by one to the construction site.

They shovel trenches several yards deep across the gully and fill them with stone-and-concrete walls on bedrock foundations. Above ground, these walls—which are sand dams—are about shoulder-high and look like footbridges crossing the gully every few hundred yards. The village will eventually have six sand dams, designed by Excellent Development.

In arid areas of East Africa, rainfall is erratic and even after good rains, riverbeds and springs dry up quickly. In Munathi, rainwater used to wash away quickly as it poured into the gully. Now the sand dams will stop the water, causing it to soak into the ground. The water table in the area will rise to about a foot below the surface, and local people will be able to draw water year-round from nearby shallow wells. Trees, grass and crops will flourish in the moist soil.

Sand dams are built so that water trickles around their edges and underground. Because the water stays underground, it does not evaporate, which increases the underground flow of water downstream. Putting many sand dams on the same channel multiplies the effects making more water available for everyone.

Increasing the water supply can transform an entire region.

In Kenya's Kitui District, farmers are benefiting dramatically from the water provided by 400 sand dams. Before the sand dams were built, most farmers grew only corn and beans, and during very dry conditions, they had to work as farmhands in more fertile parts of Kenya. Now, Kitui's farmers have started by growing fruits, vegetables, sugar cane and trees to sell. By Kenyan standards, these farmers are earning a good living.

Samuel and Margaret Kiola, a middle-aged farming couple in the village of Mathunzuni, witnessed this transformation over the last six years. The Kiolas used to walk some five kilometers, or about three miles, to fetch water. Then villagers built a sand dam not far from their house. Soon afterward, water became available year-round in their shallow well.

A total of 17 sand dams were built on the same channel, and enough water was retained to irrigate crops with a bucket or a small pump. The Kiolas' fields of corn, beans and pasture are flourishing.

"If not for this sand dam, we would have nothing," Samuel Kiloa says adamantly. "We are very lucky how that we have water near our home."

"Gideon-Cyrus Makua Mutiso, the chair of SASOL's board and a former newspaper editor, believes that building sand dams will dramatically improve the lives of Kenya's rural poor.

"It will change economics, it will change incomes, and it will change the dynamics of the whole society," Mutiso says.

In fact, organizations in other East African countries are eager to replicate SASOL's success. Delegations from Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda have visited SASOL's projects to learn how they can use sand dams.

This transformation cannot come too soon for Munathi.

Rev. Amos Daud pastors a Protestant congregation in the village and is the organizing secretary of the project to build sand dams in Munathi. He encourages his congregants and neighbors with the Bible story of the children of Israel, who cried

out to God in the wilderness when they needed water. Moses struck a stone, and God made water flow from it for all the people and animals.

"Now in the wilderness, we are hitting that stone..." Daud says. "And we are expecting water from that stone."

Building sand dams is an immense undertaking for a small, impoverished village like Munathi. Someone from each household must work full-time on the project for more than four months. However, the workers are motivated by the hope for what seems like a miracle—a permanent source of water in the community—water for drinking, for irrigating crops, for watering animals.

"I feel happy when I'm working with the group. I enjoy it," says Nduku James, a mother of eight children. "Life will be good when we have water nearby, and the cattle will get water nearby, and I will plant green vegetables."

James can attest to the difficulties of living through a drought. She has been forced to sell her most valuable possessions—her goats—to buy food. Yet she and her family are often hungry.

But James is in high spirits when she thinks about the future, and her fellow villagers say her enthusiasm is inspiring the whole work crew. On a cloudy day, when the rain seems near, nothing is as tantalizing as the thought of water rising in the ground. ♡

Tim Shenk is a writer for Mennonite Central Committee. This article is reprinted from the January/February 2006 edition of MCC's magazine, a Common Place.

Redeeming Popular Culture

By Ron Howell

What do all the following sentences all have in common?

“What we have here is a failure to communicate”

“Sometimes I guess there just aren't enough rocks.”

“We live in darkness when we don't see what's real about ourselves.”

“This kind of certainty comes but once in a lifetime.”

“They cared more about their lives than their honor”

“In trying to die, I became a hero.”

“Save as many as you can.”

“Great ambition and conquest without contribution is without significance.”

“You can't love people in slices.”

“What we do in life echoes in eternity.”

“You can't hide what's in your heart.”

“The past can come kicking your door down.”

“I guess some mistakes you never stop paying for.”

“Love what you have. Don't yearn for what you imagine you are missing.”

“Have you ever listened to people on the inside?”

“Sometimes all a person needs is a second chance.”

“My Dad told me I wouldn't amount to nothing and I believed him”.

“The past can hurt, but the way I see it, you either run from it, or learn from it.”

“I'll make him an offer he can't refuse.”

“We're on a mission from God.”

“If you build it, he will come.”

“Show me the money.”

“Resistance is futile!”

If you haven't figured it out by now, all the above statements came from Hollywood movies. The other thing they have in common is that all of them are great sermon starters.

Many Christians view Hollywood as an arch enemy of the faith and movies as a servant of the “dark side of the force.” Hollywood has not failed to give those

critics ample ammunition. This has made avoiding all things from Hollywood a great virtue in many church circles.

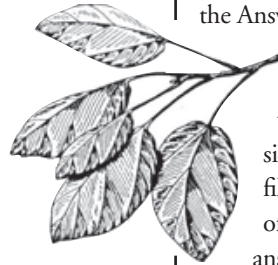
But what if the church was actually trying to reach a pagan culture with the message of Jesus? What kinds of tools might help communicate truth to people who have not darkened a church door since they left home for college? What is one of the most common languages spoken in places where people do not understand words like “beseech,” “consecration,” “verily,” and “asunder”?

At least one of those languages is found in motion pictures. How do we know? We follow the money.

In 2007 people spent \$9,656,000,000 watching movies predominantly coming out of Hollywood. That's \$9 billion with a capital “B.” This figure only represents paid theater admissions and does not include the billions spent on DVDs and cable and satellite dish movie channels. This makes the language of movies a predominant language of the people.

We knew this fact of life when CrossRoads Church opened in Salina, Kansas and so we began immediately using what we call “Flickers of Faith.” These short one to three minute portions of movies grab the attention of the world's people and can be used as a hook to connect everyday life to the gospel of Jesus. It's amazing, but Hollywood often asks the right questions. They just don't have a clue as to the answer. But we know the Answer.

It's amazing how many lost and hurting people understand exactly what Forrest Gump means when he says, “Sometimes I guess there just aren't enough rocks.” Most of the world's population believes that “What we do in life echoes in eternity.” They know the painful truth that “The past can come kicking your door down.” They



understand what it means to say, “I guess some mistakes you never stop paying for.” They've lived this stuff. It's real to them. These phrases stick with them because they often describe what's in their heart of hearts.

What we have to share are the solutions that come through Jesus Christ. We have the Answer to the questions. We have the healing power of forgiveness, the hope of new life, and the Light that shines in the darkness. So we simply use what's true in that familiar film to springboard into the truth of the Savior. That's where the real answers are. Once people realize you have identified what's in their heart, they often become willing to listen to what's on your heart.

Sometimes these modern-day parables in film need to come with some disclaimers. We cannot always endorse the philosophy or the content of the movie itself. But we can redeem its moments of truth for use in the Kingdom. We can use selected scenes to break down resistance and amplify the truth of the gospel. When we do that, the message of Christ can often become relevant to another generation of lost people. And isn't that what it's all about? 🍷

Note: If interested here are some services that can be of assistance in using film media in church: Motion Picture Licensing Corporation, www.movieministry.com, www.screenvue.com, www.worshiphousemedia.com, www.wingclips.com, www.bluefishtv.com, www.sermonspice.com

Ron Howell is senior pastor of the Crossroads congregation in Salina, KS, and also serves on the General Conference Board as the representative from the Midwest Conference.

Technology and Seniors

By Carl Ginder

You're a retired missionary who dearly wants to keep in touch with friends in far away places. Or, your children and grandchildren have moved to another part of the country or even just to the other end of the state. Perhaps you don't drive anymore and you still want to live in your own home but how can you be sure that help is available in case something happens?

There are any number of scenarios one can imagine that can result in an undesirable outcome. Loneliness, helplessness, boredom these are the three scourges of old age. Often referred to as the third age of man, this is the time when either mind or body and sometimes both begin to diminish in capability. Jesus taught Peter this truth in John 21:18: "I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."

"Pure religion" that God our Father accepts is demonstrated by those who care for orphans and widows (James 1:27). God bless those who look in on their neighbors, take meals to shut-ins and help in hundreds of ways to make someone else's day a little brighter. But what about those who need constant oversight but don't have another person to be there with them? Fortunately there are ways of providing assistance and monitoring unobtrusively that will allow them the independence they seek and the social connection they need.

The most obvious connection is the Internet and email. Fear of using a computer should not be a deterrent. At Messiah Village, the Brethren in Christ retirement community in Mechanicsburg, PA, new residents are quickly introduced to the Golden Mouse Club (www.golden-mouseclub.com) where even folks in their 90s who never touched a computer before are soon e-mailing friends and relatives all around the world. The secret is that you don't need to know what happens inside the box in order to make it work. They also learn to use the Internet and open a whole world of learning opportunities. When

equipped with a camera and a high speed Internet connection they can even see and talk with someone who is similarly equipped anywhere in the world.

One of the chief reasons that people become less independent is that they neglect to take prescribed medications resulting in diminished health. What if the pill bottle could talk and remind you of your medication schedule? What if it could dispense just one dose so that you can't accidentally double up? What if you didn't hear the reminder and it could call someone to check in on you? Such a device exists right now. In fact there are several models available for purchase or rental (www.epill.com/MD2) (www.comforthouse.com/pilldispensers.html).

For many older persons the fear of falling is nearly as limiting to their mobility as a fall itself. What if a series of passive motion detectors could observe movement throughout the house and let someone know if something seems amiss? This, too, exists from several companies. Through an internet connection distant family members can check in without having to wait for a call. They can be reassured that all is well (www.quietcaresystems.com).

Telemedicine refers to another class of devices that help keep people healthy. A device connected over a regular telephone line provides face to face communication and transmits health data such as vital signs, weight and glucose levels to a health professional who can answer questions during the daily session. These systems are especially useful in avoiding expensive, multiple hospitalizations common with patients with congestive heart failure. One such system is the Health Buddy (<https://www.healthhero.com/>).

These systems present our churches with the opportunity to be the point of contact if there are no nearby family members. Usually a phone call or a visit at just the right time is all that is needed. It doesn't have to be a medical professional who monitors the system but for congregations with a parish nurse program it is a natural fit. The technology leverages the time one has available and allows that person

to concentrate on those who need their help the most.

Other products are still to be developed. Why is it that we can travel around the world and with a little piece of plastic safely withdraw cash in the local currency from our own account but if an accident or illness strikes us while we are away from home our vital health information is unavailable for hours or days? We are understandably concerned about who has access to personal information so safeguards are important but there must be some way that this can be accomplished. We can "make do" right now by carrying such information on a flash drive readable on a doctor's or hospital's computer. A more reliable solution must be found though.

Other monitoring and assistive devices that prolong independence are available or on the drawing board. The Center for Aging Services Technology (CAST, www.agingtech.org) is working with companies and governments to develop technological solutions that fill the gap between need and available resources. Visit their website and click on "Imagine – the Future of Aging" to see what may be possible in the next five to ten years.

The first question usually asked is, "how much does it cost?" Electronic technology generally comes on the market at a high cost and then settles down after the early adopters have had a chance to try it out. This is true with aging services technology as well. Many products now available are proven and affordable. The systems described above fall in the under \$100 per month category depending on what options are chosen. Compared to the cost of in-home care or moving into a full time residential placement it is very affordable. 🍷

Carl Ginder is Vice President of Strategic Development at Messiah Village. He previously served as Executive Director at United Zion Retirement Community in Lititz, PA for 22 years. He and his wife are members of the Manheim Brethren in Christ Church.

Update on the Financial Status of Shalom!

The 2008 subscription letter has recently been mailed, and by the time you read this, I'm sure many of you will have already sent in your subscription renewals and contributions. Thank you very much!

However, I would like to highlight our financial need again. As you know, we no longer receive any denominational funding for *Shalom!* Publication depends entirely on your subscription payments and extra contributions. In both 2006 and 2007, we operated at a deficit; that is, expenses totaled more than contributions. This is in part because we continue to offer complimentary subscriptions to all congregations (although they are invited to contribute, and some do), to some missionaries and various organizations, and to Brethren in Christ students at Messiah College. These complimentary subscriptions

comprise at least half our mailing list. So the question may come down to whether we are able to continue offering complimentary subscriptions, or whether we will need to curtail those and send *Shalom!* only to "paying customers." Obviously, I would prefer not to do that, because, for one thing, I believe it is important for a denominational publication like *Shalom!* to be available in every congregation.

There may be other alternatives as well, including depending more on the Internet. *Shalom!* is currently available on the denominational web site, and we could do more to promote its use there. While online versions of publications are good (and in my professional life, I rely on them a lot as a way to reduce costs), I continue to believe that printed copies are also important; there is often not a good substitute for holding a

printed copy in your hands or being able to share a copy with a friend. (I recognize the irony of this statement in an edition that discusses using technology to communicate faith!!)

I welcome your comments and ideas about the future of *Shalom!*—especially ideas that will increase not only the appeal of the publication (while maintaining its unique mission) but also its distribution to new audiences. I also welcome your continued generous contributions. You can send your subscription renewals and/or additional contributions along with your comments and suggestions to me at the address on page 2 (checks should be made payable to the Brethren in Christ Church), or you can e-mail me at bickhouse@aol.com. ☺

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Virtual Social Networking

By Ray L. Bailey

A girl sings "We live in a virtual world, and I am a Virtual Girl!" in a YouTube parody of Madonna's *Material Girl*—all while the girl is text messaging on her cell phone as she dances in front of picture pages on Facebook. The video has recorded about six million hits with comments like "So am I!" added by the hundreds.

Text messaging has become the primary means of communication for high-schoolers. A recent marketing study by AT&T shows that text messaging has surpassed voice calls as the prime reason for cell phone purchases among the 12-25 crowd. Texting is a fast and easy way to communicate without the overburden of being tied with your ear to the phone. You can still walk and talk with others, or sit in class and chat while a teacher is trying to get something important across.

We have now reached the point where the youth who are using digital devices have never known what it was like to be without the Internet or cell phones. Born in the mid to late '80s they are truly immersed in the digital world. Their fingers are as trained to texting using multiple button presses as a concert pianist. Their minds and their relationships no longer are tied to a physical reality but through the portal of a web browser or symbols on the screen.

One of the newer examples of this is the so-called "Social Networking" phenomenon. Facebook and other social networking sites are an extension of the cell text messaging craze. Inaugurated in 2004, Facebook is an amalgamation of personal information tied to others invited to join. Contact information is easily shared and these amalgamated groups can grow

to hundreds or thousands of individuals. Growing at a fantastic rate, Facebook page requests have now reached the #7 spot in Internet Browser traffic.

Some have commented that Facebook is the new "virtual water cooler" where people can gather to talk. Yet Facebook's organization allows more of a selective environment where only the invited are allowed into the conversation. You don't have to talk to somebody you don't want to. They aren't invited so you never have to interact with them. The socialization becomes compartmentalized by virtue of being selective. Clic-al-la-electronic. At the water cooler you run the danger of having to talk to somebody you don't like.

To a high-schooler, this is a safe place to be. Imagine being able to screen somebody before you meet them. You know what

they look like, what they like, and who else they are friends with. You can talk to them and chat with them before you ever physically meet them. They are vouched for by your friends before you even speak to them. Even students in the same class have admitted that they never would have talked to each other without the virtual introduction of a Facebook contact.

On the other hand, virtual social networking has led to dangerous and even fatal consequences. In the case of the cell phone with cameras, pictures are easily taken and just as easily shared, either via phone or to the internet. The problem is what happens when a friendship goes bad and an accepted insider posts damaging information, gossip or embarrassing pictures before they are shunned from the group? Or as in a recent CSI episode (taken from real life) a girl's picture is snapped at a swim meet, and she is an instant Internet celebrity with people snapping her picture by phone and posting her GPS location to the web. Within minutes a crowd gathers and she is a celebrity she didn't ask to be. She becomes a victim of an invasion of privacy via amateur paparazzis with cell phones.



A photo that may be merely embarrassing to an adult can be devastating to a young teen. Suicides and vicious attacks have been the results of spreading unsubstantiated and out-of-context gossip through virtual social networks. Some have referred to this phenomenon as "cyber-bullying."

In this case, text messaging is not kept like email. Sent via phone, the system treats it as a phone call and sends the messages without recording them. Threatening messages can be sent without fear of retribution or tracking. Much like the traditional hallway "bump" or "accidentally" smashing your lunch, the bully gets his or her message across that you are in sight and there is nowhere to run. You are in trouble and there is no way out. Physical bullying takes a backseat to emotional bullying using technology.

The problem is not the technology. As is always the case, we as humans bring the good, the bad, and the ugly with us into everything we develop. From nuclear power to text messaging, we wield our tools in ways that reflect our souls. The challenge at this time is that an older generation who is not as adept at using the technology needs to understand and help guide our youth as

they grow into a decidedly different world than we did.

In my classes, I have to take extra time to talk about what the students are doing in class. Most of them have no idea that texting or using Facebook on the lab computers while I am teaching is in any way "wrong." I have to take them through the concepts step by step. They have paid money to be in school. If they are talking with their friends while I am teaching, they are wasting their money. Like driving a car with a cell phone can lead to an accident, so texting while being taught means you won't do well on a test – aside from getting you fired when you enter the workplace.

We do live in a virtual world, and our youth are part of it. Our job is to keep teaching the basics: character, independence, looking for the good in others, and all the other aspects of being a good citizen, especially in a digital environment.

We may be in a virtual world, but we do not have virtual values. ☹

Ray is currently a Technology Instructor for Bryant & Stratton College in Amherst, NY. He and his wife Mary attend Ransom Creek Community Church in Clarence Center.

Another Ordinary Sunday

By Joel Percy

I had probably never moved down the hall quite so fast. A few moments earlier, it had been just an ordinary Sunday at The Meeting House. Some people had already started to gather in the main theatre, waiting for the 10:00 a.m. service to begin. Others were pulling into the parking lot, or lining up for their morning coffee. On stage, the band was setting up, preparing to lead the community in worship. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the fire alarm began blaring its persistent whine. When I reached the area outside our main worship space, I found our ushers helpfully trying to encourage people to keep moving out of the

building. As one of the pastors on the scene, I figured I should try to do something.

My main concern, believe it or not, wasn't for hundreds of people streaming out of the church. They might be a little cold, but that would be the worst of it. We had already determined that there was no actual fire, the alarm having been pulled by one of the younger and more curious members of our congregation, who apparently saw something shiny and red on the wall and went in for closer inspection. And sooner or later they could come back inside and enjoy the service. My main concern that morning was that in just under half an hour we were

supposed to be broadcasting our sermon by satellite to Meeting House locations throughout the region—and I didn't know if we would be allowed back in the building in time.

Five years ago, when a group first approached the leadership at The Meeting House leaders about the idea of a site that would watch the sermons on video, nobody really thought the idea would catch on. For many of us there is something about watching a sermon on a screen that seems inherently unrelational. But we decided to give it a try, and the results have surpassed everyone's expectations. In addition to our

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Another Ordinary Sunday

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main location in Oakville, Ontario, The Meeting House now has five regional sites meeting in rented movie theatres across southern Ontario. Each has its own Lead Pastor, its own live worship team that leads music at Sunday services, and its own network of Home Churches that meet through the week to build community and study scripture. The only difference they experience is that instead of Teaching Pastor Bruxy Cavey walking onto the stage to teach each week, he walks onto the screen—all made possible by a live satellite broadcast from the Oakville location.

The satellite broadcast each week is just one of the many ways The Meeting House has been able to make the message of Jesus accessible to people through technology. The sermons are also available for download on the website, and both audio and video versions of the sermon can be received weekly as podcasts. The church has also recently experimented with using a video interview format as part of its Sunday teaching. Segments from an interview with a professor of Biblical Studies or with a visiting international mission worker help round out and expand the teaching, and allow the congregation access to people who might not be available to come teach on a Sunday morning. Kids and youth get in on the action too, as they get to enjoy creative, engaging teaching each week by video before

breaking out with their small groups to talk about what they are learning.

With all this and more, has The Meeting House gone technology-crazy? I don't think so. It seems one of the mistakes people make in trying to understand our community is to assume that the technology we use week in and week out is somehow a big deal. We get questions from time to time about how we are "using technology to attract postmodern people." But I think such questions completely miss the point. The people we are trying to reach—the people in our communities who are searching for meaning or have questions about Jesus—live in a world where technology is ubiquitous. They have 200 satellite channels on their televisions, high-speed Internet into their homes, and spend their week attending meetings supported by PowerPoint slides on LCD projectors. If technology is what they want, they certainly do not need to come to church.

Our goal in using technology to do church is not that people will notice our fancy gadgets—it is that they won't notice them. The goal is not to impress, but to be invisible. People do not attend our regional site in Downtown Toronto because they are intrigued by the idea of a satellite broadcast. They attend because they are hungry to hear about a man called Jesus, and to learn how what he taught applies

to how they live this week. Technology is simply the tool that allows that to happen. The moment we become impressed with all the neat stuff we can do through technology and lose our focus on communicating the message of Jesus to people who desperately want to hear, we have seriously lost our way. Technology, as they say, can make a good servant—but it would make a terrible master.

As it turned out, the fire marshal let us back inside pretty quickly the morning of the alarm. It was close, but we got back in time to broadcast the sermon. As the theatre filled back up again, and the service got under way, those of us who were working behind the scenes breathed a sigh of relief. And for a couple thousand people who were watching at our regional sites, it was just another ordinary Sunday at The Meeting House. 🍀

Joel Percy is on staff at The Meeting House, Oakville, Ontario. You can check out their web site at www.meetinghouse.ca.