

# Surfing for Jesus

## Using the Internet for Ministry and Evangelism

### 1. Purpose

"The Internet? Is that thing still around?" — Homer Simpson.

The Internet has become an integral part of our lives over the past decade or more, and more people are spending more time there. However, like all other forms of media, the Internet has its good and bad points. Given that we are still in the world, don't expect this to change much.

But our God is so amazing, He can even use such a chaotic medium to bring life and salvation. God's main Means of Grace is His Word, and since the Internet is still mostly words, it's simply<sup>1</sup> a matter of putting God's Word into the mix, just as a church building gets built in the midst of a town full of sinners. And the Internet being a world-wide phenomenon (or at least world-wide to those who can afford it and have access), we have the potential to reach *vast* numbers of people with the message of eternal life.

So the question is, then, "How can God use me to bring His Word to the world?" The answers are as diverse as the people reading this, as is the nature of the Body of Christ, but following are the easiest and most common, with tips on where to go and what to flee from.

### 2. Places to Visit

#### 2.1. Dedicated Websites



Probably the most common form of Internet ministry is the website. Unfortunately, it's also usually the least effective, as most Christian websites tend to operate like too many churches do:

"We're here—they can come if they want." If the disciples had stayed in the upper room on Pentecost and painted pictures and written Scriptures but never gone out to the streets to preach, Pentecost would be celebrated in a museum instead of churches around the world.

So how do you get people to come through your virtual doors?

##### 2.1.1. Church and ministry websites

These kinds of sites, like most congregation websites (e.g. [www.stpaulslcms.com](http://www.stpaulslcms.com)), generally get traffic from the members of that congregation, and that's about it. If the congregation uses the URL in all their brochures, etc., they will get a few people from the community checking them out...once. As most church sites are pretty small, usually less than a dozen static pages, there's little reason to revisit the site. Remember, there are *millions* of sites out there.

But dynamic content *will* bring people back.

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<sup>1</sup>Simple for God, anyway!

### 2.1.1.1. Dynamic Content

If something changes on your site on a regular basis, and the visitor knows that changes are coming and is interested in what those changes are, they'll be back. Whether you include periodic new articles or some other content, adding content to your site help fight the "Been there, done that," attitude.

#### 2.1.1.1.1. Dynamic content from other sites

Many sites allow you to include content from their sites into yours. Before you borrow content, make sure you have permission. Christian sites that steal from others have an opposite effect on the Gospel.

But many sites have content intended *specifically* to be pasted into other sites, everything from Bible studies to games. [lcmspastor.com/websiteresources.html](http://lcmspastor.com/websiteresources.html) has a good<sup>2</sup> starting list of examples.

Remember, though, as you add content, especially external content, that you keep your mission in mind. With each piece you add to your site, ask yourself, "How will this bring the Gospel to people?" Adding tic-tac-toe games might keep people sticking around<sup>3</sup>, but they won't hear the Gospel.

#### 2.1.1.1.2. Your own dynamic content

One potential problem with dynamic content from another site is that it sends the message, "Go to that other site, not this one!" The way around this is to have your own dynamic content.

What kind of content? For a church site, the weekly sermon via print, audio, or video<sup>4</sup>, is a no-brainer. If you really have the tech, streaming video of the service is wonderful. However, streaming video is for professionals. Don't try this at home.

Other kinds of content are limited only by your imagination. Art submissions from members that you scan and upload, photos and write-ups of your latest potluck or Jell-o<sup>®</sup> salad competition<sup>5</sup>, etc. will not only bring your own members to your site, but it'll add that sense of love and fellowship that will show people that your congregation is a good place.

#### 2.1.1.1.3. Newsletters

One of the easiest ways to bring back repeat visitors is to set up a newsletter. The simplest is usually something like, "Find out when this site changes," with a place to send an e-mail address. Anyone who signs up will be added to a group who gets a notice whenever content is added to the site. Gospel messages can also be added to newsletters, so you get a "double whammy" this way. Note, though, that many people are reluctant to give out their e-mail address for fear of spam, so a privacy statement should usually be used in connection with it. Many will *still* be reluctant, though.

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<sup>2</sup>Well, draw your own opinion—it's my site, so I like it.

<sup>3</sup>Okay, actually, most people have better things to do than play digital tic-tac-toe, but it's just an example.

<sup>4</sup>A postage-stamp video is 100x better than audio, which is about 5x better than a sermon manuscript. A/V appeals to the couch potato in us all.

<sup>5</sup>We are Lutheran, right?

Another kind of newsletter is a content-driven newsletter, or e-zine. Instead of information about your site, you include actual articles related to your site. The goal of the e-zine is twofold: it not only reminds the recipients about your site, but it also provides a service to them. Church-related e-zines can include any number of topics. Topics might include family issues, community topics, or Bible-study topics/devotions. One easy idea would be to create a links 'zine with short summaries and links to other sites, like articles from Focus on the Family <family.org>, Creation Science topics <answersingenesis.org & icr.org>, "Christianity in the News" links to Foxnews.com, CNN.com, etc. Make sure to summarize the articles and not plagiarize them. The 'zine could also offer commentary on the news articles: "The article says Christians believe X, but \*we\* believe...."

#### 2.1.1.1.4. Interactivity

Besides games void of content, it is possible, if you know someone who can do a little coding, to make simple games for a website. A bit of creativity and someone with coding experience and a passion for the Gospel can create games that teach Biblical truths. However, this does require someone with skill and time, and those things are both rare commodities. If you can do basic HTML and enjoy writing, a "Choose your own adventure"-style story can be easily made with a combination of pages and links.

Using forms, you could also write a "Mad Libs" style story with a Christian theme, using the visitor's information, etc. With a little javascript or PERL knowledge, you could even create a digital mock call, where a person enters his name and answers to the other questions on the call survey, and a script could process that information with the 3S method. See [stpaulslcms.com/oafc](http://stpaulslcms.com/oafc) for an example of the Good News method being used this way ("Send a Good News card to a friend")



Send a Good News Card via e-mail!
Your Name:
<input type="text"/>
Friend's Name:
<input type="text"/>
Friend's Email:
<input type="text"/>
<input type="submit" value="Submit"/>

#### 2.1.1.2. Other Dedicated Christian sites

There are also "I love Jesus" sites out there with personal witnesses and often poetry or other Christian writings, plus usually a whole lot of links to other sites. These are nice personal witnesses, but the likelihood of a non-Christian visiting your site is extremely slim, and the likelihood of them sticking around long enough to read your content is even slimmer unless you use some fast-loading animations to grab their attention.

#### 2.1.1.3. Getting them there in the first place

It is possible to get them there using a search engine, though, provided you have a large variety of content on your site. For example, [stpaulslcms.com](http://stpaulslcms.com) has a series of skits used for confirmation class. Those skits include references to TV shows, wrestling, and all kinds of keywords that don't specifically relate to Christianity, and a significant number of that site's visitors find it via search engines, looking for those other topics. The most popular page on [LCMSPastor.com](http://LCMSPastor.com) is the Palm handheld resources page.

#### 2.1.2. Hobby Sites

You have a much better chance of attracting visitors if the main topic of your site is a hobby topic or other information resource. Think about what you can contribute that others would be interested in,

whether it be writing stories, offering tips on a topic, graphics, or expertise in an area. Any topic you have an interest will work. The point is to attract visitors based on the topic, but including Gospel statements and/or links along with the content. InfinityLtd.org is a Macintosh and Palm site, but the front page has a prominent Gospel statement on the opening page.

### 2.1.3. Downloads and Read Me's

If you have downloadable content, like graphics or some kind of software, you can include a "Read Me" in text, HTML, or PDF format to offer more information about the file downloaded, like instructions or other information. In this "Read Me," you can also include a Gospel statement.

### 2.1.4. Do

#### 2.1.4.1. Get your own domain name

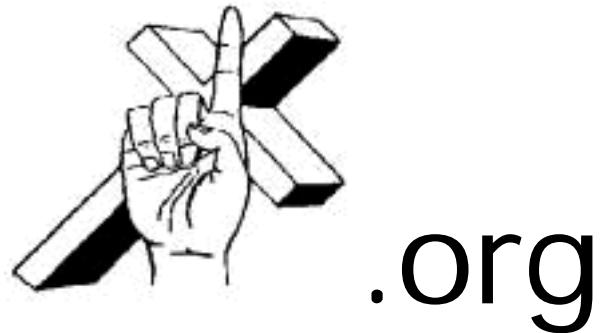
Domain names (yourname.com) can be bought for \$15-20/year if you shop around, or bundled with web hosting for as low as \$35/year. For that price, it just makes sense to get a real domain name instead of having an URL like, < www.freehostcompany.com/longname/8675309/yourusername > . It looks more impressive, avoids questionable ads, and is easier to remember.

#### 2.1.4.2. Link to OAFc.org!

Most websites have links pages or sections. Make sure to link to OAFc.org and your team's site if you have one!

### 2.1.5. Don't

#### 2.1.5.1. Use MIDI



MIDI files are very small and can be found freely and easily. They can be embedded into your page to add background music. Don't use it. Most computers, when playing MIDI files, sound tinny and annoying, and most visitors will close the window as soon as they hear the first note to avoid a self-inflicted Malchus impression. If you must use MIDI (e.g. your site is a collection of hymns or otherwise dedicated to music), the on/off control should be prominently displayed and probably default to "off."

#### 2.1.5.2. Use pop-ups, pop-unders, or mousetraps

These are scripts that cause additional windows to open besides your main content window. They are usually used for advertising and are extremely annoying. Many browsers will automatically block them. Mousetraps are windows that open when the visitor leaves your site and are both unethical and annoying. When people want to leave your site, as tempted as you might be to have a window appear saying, "Jesus died for you!" < Close > "Really!" < Close > "He did, you know!", don't do it. You'll just anger people.

### 2.1.6. Beware

Be careful how much personal information you offer about yourself on the site. For site feedback, use a web form or javascript e-mail link instead of a simple mailto: link, as spambots use mailto links to harvest e-mail addresses. If possible, use a different address on your website than your personal address, so that, should spambots get ahold of it, you can change it without having to change your personal account.

## 2.2. Forums, Usenet, and Guest Books

*"Come to think of it, there are already a million monkeys on a million typewriters, and Usenet is nothing like Shakespeare." — Blair Houghton.*

Many sites allow visitors to interact with each other via bulletin boards, forums, and guest books. Usenet, an older—but still popular—forum system is very similar and will be included here. E-mail discussion groups are similar to Usenet but will be discussed below.

These forums cover every conceivable topic. Some are censored, but most are simply “moderated”: someone is watching passively to make sure nothing gets out of hand, whatever their definition of “out of hand” happens to be, and that definition can vary widely.

### 2.2.1. Sig lines: the cheapest form of advertising

If you find a forum that interests you, feel free to leave a message if you have something to contribute or a question to ask. Take part in the conversations and allow the others to get to know you. While you are doing that, most forums allow the use of signatures, or “sig lines.” In one or more lines, you can put a note at the end of each of your posts. These are usually favorite quotes or links to a favorite web page. You can even use “ASCII art” to grab attention. My personal sig line, which I also use in e-mail, is:

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--
|      Pastor Dale, St. Paul's Lutheran Church Delaware, IA
- \o/- (563) 922-2364      http://www.stpaulslcms.com
|      Director, Iowa East OAFc  http://www.stpaulslcms.com/oafc
<      Webmaster          http://www.lcmspastor.com
| 4U  Jesus took your place so you can go to His place.
```

Note that, for ASCII art, you need to make sure the forum uses (or allows you to use) monospace fonts.

### 2.2.2. Do

#### 2.2.2.1. Find your niche

Don't frequent boards or Usenet newsgroups that aren't interesting to you. If the only posts you make to the forum are evangelism-oriented posts, you will be ignored at best and banned at worst.

#### 2.2.2.2. Include a link

If your sig line has an URL, like OAFc.org, make sure it's “clickable”. In most web forums, you'll need to write it like this: [URL]http://www.oafc.org[/URL]. With e-mail and newsgroups, this is not necessary.

### 2.2.3. Don't

#### 2.2.3.1. Be someone you're not

Don't pretend to know more than you do, change your identity to a fictitious person, or pretend to be interested in a topic you don't care about.

#### 2.2.3.2. Spam

Only post to topics where you have a genuine question or comment that the group will be interested in. Don't feel the need to post in every single forum thread, and never post "Me, too," unless you have something to add.

Also, sig lines should be 6 lines or less.

#### 2.2.3.3. Act like the Spanish Inquisition

Never shove Christianity down anyone's throat, and don't turn every thread into a crusade. Remember, people will be more willing to listen to you if they get to know you and trust you. Don't be afraid to share your faith, but stay on topic most of the time. Plenty of opportunities will arise to share your faith during normal conversation.

### 2.2.4. Beware

#### 2.2.4.1. Trolls

Some people will post comments for the express purpose of angering you. They are called "trolls" and are best ignored, or if you reply to them, be kind and considerate. They hate that.

#### 2.2.4.2. Personal Information

Many forums allow you to give all kinds of information about yourself in your "profile." The younger you are, the less information you should give out. Certainly never give your full name, address, or other contact information, and if an e-mail address is required, don't use your main one.

## 2.3. Chat/IRC/Instant Messaging




These are best used with people you know or with parental supervision. Similar to a telephone conference call (and some even have voice/video), the goal here is to simply be loving and considerate, sharing your faith as the opportunity arises

### 2.3.1. Beware

If you chat in public areas, make sure you watch what you say. Personal information is especially easy to let slip, and it's easy to say things that can come across as harsh. Remember that printed words always sound one step harsher than spoken words, since you can't "sound happy" in print. This goes for forums and e-mail as well, but chat happens so fast, it's easier to "slip."

## 2.4. E-mail discussion groups

 E-mail discussion groups, or “listserves,” like those at [yahoogroups.com](http://yahoogroups.com), are similar to Usenet, but all posts on the subject come to you via e-mail, and when you reply, everyone else registered gets your e-mail. Rules, sig lines, and other comments are similar to forums and Usenet, but a few additional comments are in order:

### 2.4.1. Do

#### [2.4.1.1. Get your parents' permission](#)

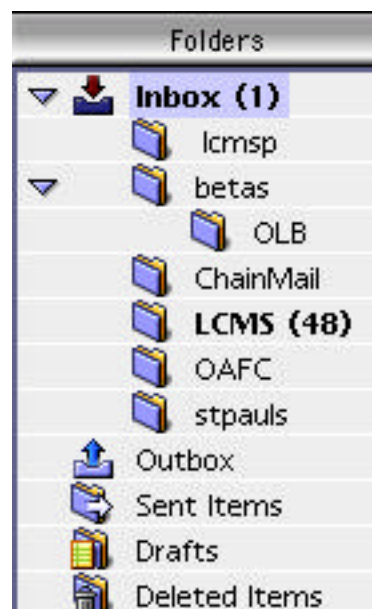
If you are a youth, especially if you are using your parents' e-mail address, get their permission before signing up. Some lists are *very* active, with dozens of posts per day. (Others are very quiet, with only a few per month.) Your parents may not appreciate their inbox being suddenly flooded with mail from strangers.

#### [2.4.1.2. Learn how to filter messages into subfolders](#)

Most e-mail clients like Outlook Express and Eudora allow you to create additional folders to store messages, and you can use filters (Outlook Express calls them “Mail Rules”) to have all messages addressed to the group automatically filed into a folder instead of filling up your main inbox.

#### [2.4.1.3. Learn about Digests and quoting](#)

On mailing lists, you can subscribe to either “Feed” mode or “Digest”. “Feed” will send the messages to you as soon as they go to the list. “Digest” will collect messages and send them in one message at a set interval, usually once/day, with a table of contents at the top. When you reply to either, only quote a section you are replying to, not the entire message, and if you're replying and subscribed to the Digest, make sure you change the subject appropriately instead of “Re: Digest #...”



### 2.4.2. Don't

#### [2.4.2.1. Go off-topic often](#)

Different lists have different rules regarding how strictly you must stick to the topic. Be sure to stick to the topic of the list as much as list rules require. If you have questions about list rules, read the FAQ or talk to the list owner, or “listmom.”

#### [2.4.2.2. Spam the list](#)

Unless specifically cited in list rules, *never* use a list to sell anything. Also, don't use it to promote any product or service from which you benefit directly. The exception would be in your sig line.

### 2.4.2.3. SHOUT

Typing in ALL CAPS is considered shouting in

### 2.4.3. Beware

Standard personal information rules apply

## 2.5. Personal E-mail

E-mail is like snail mail, only faster. It can be used to share the Gospel through conversations, as well as sig lines.

### 2.5.1. Do

#### 2.5.1.1. Remember vocal tone

As previously mentioned, e-mails always sound slightly harsher than intended, so always read your message in the worst possible light before sending it and adjust accordingly so you're not misunderstood.

#### 2.5.1.2. Get Virus software

If you are using WinDOS, you need Virus software, but to keep it updated, weekly at least.



software. There are thousands of viruses floating around out there, and the only way to save yourself major headaches is to not only have the software, but to keep it updated, weekly at least.

or other non-WinDOS operating system, as Macintosh viruses number around 60 in their total history, and the most recent one, as of this writing, has been around (and pretty much gone) for about 4 years. If you use Microsoft's Office applications, though, you will still need the software unless you turn off Macros. Linux viruses are even fewer.

### 2.5.2. Don't

#### 2.5.2.1. Spread urban legends

Whenever you get a message, especially a forwarded one, telling a story and asking you to pass it on, make sure you check to see that it's true. [snopes.com](http://snopes.com) or [urbanlegends.about.com](http://urbanlegends.about.com) are excellent sites to verify these stories. The same goes with virus warnings. The latest virus information can always be found at [symantec.com](http://symantec.com) or other virus protection software companies. Christians lose a lot of credibility when they fall for old hoaxes. "If they believe this one, no wonder they believe that Jesus rose!"

And forwarding messages will never gain you any kind of reward, monetary or otherwise.

#### 2.5.2.2. Coerce people to forward messages

A lot of "Christian" message that get forwarded have guilt trips attached to them. "If you love Jesus, you'll forward this." Nobody has the right to guilt you into doing anything. If you want to pass stuff on, do so, but don't pass on the warnings. Clip that out.

### 2.5.2.3. Send dirty messages

When you forward a message, clean it up. Remove extra >'s (Most newer e-mail clients can do this with a menu command.), and delete all of the "To:" and "CC:" stuff at the top of the message. There's nothing more annoying than 10K of junk at the top of a 2K message.

### 2.5.3. Beware

#### 2.5.3.1. Tips for avoiding Spam

##### 2.5.3.1.1. Never Reply

If you get spam that says, "To stop getting this, reply or click this link" or something like that, don't. It'll just confirm that you read the message.

##### 2.5.3.1.2. Watch where you use your address

Many contests, etc. use the contest to harvest e-mail addresses to sell to spammers. Be very careful about giving out your address.

##### 2.5.3.1.3. Watch out for HTML spam

Anything you think might be spam, make sure you're disconnected from the Internet before reading it, or strip the HTML out of it (Mac users can do this automatically with an AppleScript). Otherwise, spammers can put tags into the message that will tell them when you read it and confirm your address.

##### 2.5.3.1.4. Avoid common webmail services

The largest spam targets are hotmail, yahoo, and AOL. If you use any of these for e-mail, you can expect spam. Consider using a different service if you get too much spam, or use their built-in spam filters.

## **3. Personal Enrichment**

John Grotans, a dear, sainted friend of mine, used to say, "Everyone's surfing the Internet. Me, I like to spend time surfing the Bible." The Internet can easily use up much of your time (especially if you have a slow connection!), and while you may be sharing the Gospel with others, personal growth in the Word is important, too, just as we have "Personal Time with Jesus" in OAFB. Following are some ways to use computers and the Internet for spiritual growth.

### **3.1. Bible software**



Several Bible software packages are available at different price ranges. If you'd really like to dig into your Bible, try one out. I recommend Online Bible for starters because it is free and is very full-featured, and Mac and WinDOS versions are available. <[www.online-bible.com](http://www.online-bible.com)>

## 3.2. Devotional websites

A lot of the so-called “devotional” websites out there are more fluff than substance. They will leave you feeling good, but unlike God’s Word, once the feeling wears off, you’re left with nothing. However, there are many excellent sites that not only have faith-building substance (God’s Word), but are enjoyable to visit.

### 3.2.1. Sermons and other programming

#### 3.2.1.1. Some LCMS Churches with Sermons on-line

This is by no means a comprehensive list. All of these churches have sermons either in audio format, or the sermon manuscript is available to read. For more, go to your favorite search engine and type “LCMS sermon”

- <http://www.stpaulslcms.com/sermon.html>
- <http://www.redeemerparkton.com/SERMON.HTM>
- <http://www.lollutheran.org/sermons/>
- <http://www.cklcl.org/>
- <http://webpages.charter.net/redeemer/rlchurch.htm>

### 3.2.2. Periodic Devotionals

Besides sermons, various sites are available for personal devotions with daily or weekly offerings. Some of the best examples:

<http://www.lhm.org>

<http://www.kfuo.org>

## 3.3. Devotions via e-mail

Several sites also offer daily or other periodic devotions or Bible readings as well. lhm.org offers daily devotions. lcms.org/enews also offers several devotional e-mail offerings, and ebible.org offers daily Bible readings via e-mail.

## 3.4. Christian Fellowship Forums

Forums covering specifically Christian topics can be found as well. These can be a great place to meet friends, but there are a few things to watch for:



#### 3.4.1. How do you define “Christian”?

Some “Christian” forums don’t bother to define “Christian,” and as we’ve learned from canvassing, a lot of people out there consider themselves Christian, but have no idea what that means. Consequently, not all “Christian” boards are really worth your time, unless you want to evangelize there.

#### 3.4.2. Just because it’s Christian doesn’t mean it’s secure

Also, even on a Christian board, be aware that non-Christians will frequent there, too, sometimes as trolls, and sometimes as curious onlookers. Watch what you say.

#### 3.4.3. Watch out for predators

Some visitors on boards may also be predators, trying to glean personal information from you to hurt you in some way. Unless you know someone personally (i.e. have met them in person), be aware that predators lie about their ages and other personal information in order to get you to trust them. Adults, it’s a good idea for you to be honest about your age (roughly, anyway) so kids don’t think you’re another kid.

#### 3.4.4. Know where to hang out

[stpaulslcms.com/oafc](http://stpaulslcms.com/oafc) has boards specifically for OAFc members, although they’ve been pretty quiet to this point. We’re hoping to add boards at [OAFc.org](http://OAFc.org) in the near future, so stay tuned. Also valuable, [higherthings.org](http://higherthings.org) has LCMS teen & college-age e-mail lists.

## 4. Netiquette

<http://lowendmac.com/lists/netiquette.shtml> has an excellent article on netiquette. These are specific rules for their e-mail lists, but most of those rules apply to all lists, forums, etc. This should be your first stop on the internet.