

How to Start an Internet Ministry by Mike Gahan

Web-based ministries

This overview is to encourage those who want to begin a ministry on the Internet but don't know how to go about it. Using this guideline, most people will be able to do a web based ministry within one-month. The steps that are outlined can be useful for developing a variety of Web-based ministries, including, **Christian support groups, missionary encouragement, outreach bible study, elderly/distant children ministry, teen mentoring, prayer warrior groups and evangelism ministries.** While some technical knowledge will be required it is minimal. If you already use a computer you will find learning some new concepts a natural extension of what you all ready know.

Testimonies are surfacing everywhere about the life changing results achieved when using this new media. Once the exclusive domain of the secular world and the "techie", the Web is finding its way into mainstream faith-based society. The Baptist community is embracing this new media in increasing measure. There is a growing recognition of the importance this media can play in helping to fulfill the great commission.

What is the internet and what makes this media so attractive? The Internet is a mix of converging technologies. The ability to communicate with anyone in the world using multimedia technologies is a strong incentive for many. Coupled with this ability to quickly reach almost anywhere is its accessibility. Even persons of very modest means can afford to employ it. Internet service can be purchased for less than the cost of a family's monthly telephone bill.

The Internet brings new dimensions with it. It allows all the types of interactions that the traditional media does plus new ones. For example, Non-Internet-based communication tools allow for one person-to-one person, one person-to-a few people, and one person-to-many interactions. The web also enables many people to communicate with many different people in the same context. And it can be done with multi-media (written languages, audio, video, and graphical representations) in any combination! It truly makes it easy for people across the world to communicate, collaborate and cooperate in ways never before possible.

Experts, point to several other reasons why people are attracted to the Internet. Some like the immediate feed-back they get along with the feeling

that they are on an equal footing with everyone else. The playing field is level. No one cares what you look like, how you are dressed, how old you are, how many degrees you have, what kind of car you drive or even whether or not you have your make-up on today. The only requirement is that you are connected to the Internet. You are an equal partner in the "www community".

As many Christians are discovering, the anonymity of cyberspace often helps people shed inhibitions about discussing matters of faith. It is a contradiction in our human nature that we will share our deepest secrets with a total stranger who is thousands of miles away rather than someone close to us. Providing of course that it can be done anonymously. But because of this peculiarity in our nature it has opened up the doors for many people who don't feel comfortable in sharing their faith up close. Now they have a way to be able to do it, via an Internet forum. Many who have been reluctant to share their faith have found this new openness exhilarating and liberating.

One of the neat benefits of the technology is that it can be employed from the home and even from the bedside, allowing people who are sick or in declining health to extend their contribution to the Lord's work.

Internet Communication Channels:

Ministry to people involves two-way communication. Choosing the best means to communicate and develop your relationships is an important consideration. What follows is a brief non-technical explanation of the different ways the Internet empowers you to communicate.

✉ **Email** is clearly the most dominant feature that the Internet offers. The ability to send and receive letters, documents, graphics, photographs, voice messages, and video clips anywhere in the world within a few minutes makes this the favorite of most people.

Internet Service Providers (ISP's) will provide you an email address (like a post office box) when you sign up for their service. There is normally a monthly fee attached to this service. If cost is a key consideration, there are organizations that offer free email addresses and some offer free internet provider service. Be prepared for slower response

How to Start an Internet Ministry by Mike Gahan

time and lots of flashing advertising banners. For really fast service sign up for Cable TV Internet service or your telephone companies Digital Service Line service (DSL). You will pay more than twice the monthly fee for this service compared to regular telephone modem service (56k), but if you spend a lot of time on the Net it may be worth it.

Regardless of which service you choose, you will need an email address. With email you can create email distribution lists of your ministry clients for regular contact. Email distribution lists are one of the cheapest and best ways to develop and help sustain a new ministry.

☐ **Message Boards**, sometimes called bulletin boards, discussion forums, newsgroups, or communities, offer an excellent way to conduct type written discussions with other users (people). For example; post (type and click send button) a question like ***“What is your understanding of John 3:16?”*** Depending on the number of interested users, you could start a threaded discussion that lasts weeks. Threaded discussions allow users to follow board discussions more easily. All messages related to a particular topic are grouped together in an organized, easy to follow indented format. You can also be notified by email when someone has posted a reply to a message you posted. An example of a non-threaded message or single item message might read something like this one, ***“ If you need **special prayer** please email me your request at prayerwarrior@prayercloset.org ”.***

Message Boards often give you the ability to search and view all the messages and responses posted for a specific topic. Many retain message history for several months. There are two kinds of Message Boards, *public* and *private*. Public Message Boards like the name implies are open to anyone who wishes to read and respond to any message posted. Private message boards restrict who can participate. This is done by requiring an interested user (you) to register. At a minimum you will be required to provide a unique user name, your email address (which can be kept confidential) and a password. The main advantage to a private board is that it discourages disruptive users from participating.

As you gain more experience, you may want to start your own Message Board forum. Some of

the larger ISP's and Internet Communities offer this feature free of charge. Establishing your own private Message Board allows you better control over the content. For example, you could start a forum exclusively for **Senior Adult Widows** to exchange information and to provide support. You also have the ability to remove or kick people off the board if they are misbehaving or are unkind. You can put up your own website and put a message board on it. See Website comments for further discussion.

☺ **Chat** is one of the most popular products of the Internet, especially among the younger set. To begin chatting you may or may not be required to register, depending on the chat forum host and whether it is a private or a public forum. The process is very similar to registering for participation in a message board forum, except that you are always asked to provide an anonymous nickname of your choosing, such as **“GodsChild”**. This will be the name that everyone will see on their computer screen when you type a chat comment or a response. There are special topical “chat rooms or communities” that cover a wide variety of subjects and topics. You can also start a new room in just a few minutes.


The earliest form of Chat and still the most widely used are interactive typed messages that are immediately sent over the web. They will appear on every member's computer screen in your chat room within a few seconds.


When you sense you may have someone who may benefit from your ministry you will want to engage them in a private chat. This is done by sending them a private message that only they can see. This allows them to reply to you without others seeing what they answer back. Usually, a small pop-up window appears that you type your private messages into and they type their responses back into. You can still continue chatting in the main room with the other members while all this is going on. You can have more than one private chat going at the same time, even while you are still typing responses to other people in the main room. This can get a little hectic. When there is a slow down some people become impatient and may exit the chat session. This is a time when having a partner or team can be a huge blessing.

To help offset the typing slow down; Chatting has evolved its own form of short hand...”brb” is not a

How to Start an Internet Ministry by Mike Gahan

typo it means be-right-back neither is “lol” (laughing-out-loud). Don’t be concerned about knowing the jargon. You can still use English and you will find that there are plenty of people willing to help new comers.

 **Voice Chat** is becoming more popular. It solves the slow typing problem while making chatting more personal. You will need a microphone and a set of speakers to use this feature. Most chat rooms are still typed message environments and some are mixed, that is, you will see people who use voice and others who type their messages. But voice is clearly the wave of the future, especially with the introduction of new broadband communication networks (Cable and DSL Internet).

 **Video Chat** is the newest innovation and is available on some chat networks. Video Chat enabled rooms establish two way home to home communication. You will need a web camera (they come with built-in microphones) that attaches to your PC in addition to speakers. Video chat is some times called Video Call because that is exactly what takes place. A phone call coupled with a closed circuit TV session. Clearly the advantage here is to facilitate building more personal relationships.

Conversely, the downside is the loss of anonymity. This will keep some away if this is the only forum you choose to use. Because of the band width and processing power it takes, video chat is still in its infancy. But most expect this media to replace the telephone, especially when the costs are considered, free long distance calling coupled with the ability to see who you talking with!

Websites

Websites can be a wonderful tool for building and sustaining a new ministry. The communications costs are a fraction of what other media costs. You can reap a huge return on your investment. But... don’t expect anyone to come visit your website just because you have it listed with search engines. For example; a recent search using the Alta Vista search engine for “*teen parenting*” revealed 124,212 pages that mention *teen parenting*. You will need a good strategy for attracting people to your web site. Once they have visited your site you will need a good retention strategy to keep them coming back. Keep in mind the better the relationship the higher the retention rate.

Consider also the cost and maintenance of your website. Expect your monthly Internet fees to escalate in proportion to the feature richness of the services you offer web surfers. At the bottom you can put up a very basic informational website for free. But as you add more content and features such as message boards, chat rooms, free email accounts, streaming audio and video, expect to your monthly outlay to increase significantly. These issues should be recognized upfront.

The good news is you can start small and grow your site. If you don’t have the funding to develop a custom website, I would encourage you to start with a free or low cost web host provider and grow it. You can still make it worthwhile.

Figure 1 – Internet Forums vs. Ministry Opportunity

Internet Forum	Focused Topical Discussions	Anonymity	Relationship Potential	Group Size	Discussion History	Abusive/Immoral Behavior Risk	Ministry Size Opportunity
Message Board Public	H	M-H	L	L-H	H	L-M	L-M
Message Board Private	H	M-H	L-M	L-M	H	L	L
Chat Public	L-M	L-H	L-M	L-H	L	VH	VH
Chat Private	M-H	L-H	M-H	L-M	L	M-H	L-M
E-Mail	VH	L	H	L-M	H	L	L
Website	H	M	L-H	L-H	H	L-M	L-VH
Web Host	H	L	H	VH	H	H	VH

Usage Legend: L=Low M=Moderate H=High VH=Very High

Steps in Developing Your Ministry:

The chart in figure 1 shows the characteristics and ministry opportunity for each Internet forum. The ranges (Low-Very High) can be very wide in some categories. The specific rating will depend on the features you chose to use in that particular forum. Lets assume for example purposes that the Lord has put it into your heart to be a **mentor to un-churched teens**. You know a little bit about youth but you don’t know much about the Internet. In reviewing the chart you see that one of the largest opportunity to minister to youth is in public chat forums (VH Very High) but

How to Start an Internet Ministry by Mike Gahan

you also notice that this is where the most abusive and immoral behavior occurs (VH). This concerns you and you are not sure what to do? Clearly it appears the greatest need is with these youth. After praying about it you sense the Lord is leading you in this direction. You have a PC, an Internet Connection and an Email address.

- **Enlist a Partner or a Team**

It is wise to enlist the help of a partner to assist you and to help hold each other accountable. Better yet you might want to consider cultivating a group and make this a team ministry. Also plan to provide periodic reports back to your church.

- **Make it a Specific Focus of Continuing Prayer**

Pray specifically that the Lord will give you and your partner(s) peace, wisdom, and kindness to deal with the abusive behavior and the morally offensive conduct of some you will no doubt come in contact with. These may be the very youth that the Lord has put in your path. Request regular prayer from your church. Also, consider requesting your church congregation to hold a commissioning service for this ministry.

- **Establish an Online Schedule**

People need to know when they can find you. Publish the time slots of when you will be on the Internet for mentoring. This will become more important as you begin to build relationships with your mentees. Acquire Internet documents on mentoring youth and review them. There are many publications that are offered free of charge. Search for "mentoring youth". Also check www.churchliferesources.com for good resources.

- **Write Your Testimony**

Prepare a short written version of your testimony, that you will share on the Internet. You will want to give this at the appropriate times. It is an important step in building a good relationship with your youth. Be prepared to provide your mentees with the links to Shockwave (or equivalent programs) enabled Websites that present the Gospel in hi-tech videos. Many are extremely well done, professional quality, productions of the plan of salvation. They really make an impact on the youth.

- **Equip Yourself – Christian Message Boards**

Start by joining a few select message boards that discuss teen issues. Read the documented history of the responses to topics. Learn what questions they ask and what responses are provided. You can get a good feel for hot topics by reviewing the number posts to a topic. Visit youth ministry websites (see appendix) and review their frequently asked questions (FAQ's) sections and the guidance they offer in addressing difficult issues. Post this statement on a Christian Youth Message Board; "Help! I am starting a ministry to non-Christian youth that chat in the secular chat rooms. I would appreciate any advice or suggestions you may have". Answer the posted response if appropriate.

- **Equip Yourself – Christian Chat Rooms**

Follow a similar pattern like you did for the Message Boards. Visit a few chat rooms on different subjects. Observe the conversation flow. Note: you can do a print screen and paste it into a word processor for review and analysis later. Learn the rules of how to chat. You'll be surprised how quickly you can pick them up. Most chat sites have help sections that provide the basics. Also, you will find the youth you be chatting with very helpful when you tell them you are a "newbie" Keep a dictionary of chat terms at hand for ready reference. When you see someone has sent you this message "a/s/l", you will know that person wants to know your age, sex, and location. You can print a list of these acronyms from several chat websites. There are only a few that are used frequently so it won't take you long to pick up jargon.

- **Join Message Boards – Secular**

Now that you are feeling more at ease with the Web, begin visiting the secular message boards. Yahoo, MSM, and TalkCity are some giants that attract large numbers of youth because of their feature rich chat rooms, diversity of topics, and foot traffic. Select Texas from their regional directories. View the topics and questions and begin answering them. This is good way to engage someone in further conversation since they have asked for your help and you have provided it. If you can keep a dialogue going on the message boards this will give you a better opportunity to either meet them in a chat room, or get their email address to send them some information about your mentoring ministry. See

How to Start an Internet Ministry by Mike Gahan

figure 2 . Be upfront and tell them why you are interested in them.

- **Join Chat Rooms – Secular**

Be prayed up before you venture into these youth chat rooms. You will encounter profane language. You must remember to see these youth the way God does. Your purpose is to begin to build relationships with these youth. When they show an interest invite them to dialogue with you in a private chat session. Again, let them know what your interest is in them. Ask permission to send them some information about your mentoring ministry. If they don't have an email address offer to send them some information on how to get a free one. Encourage them to share this information with their parents. Let them know that your ministry will not do anything that goes against rules their parents have established. This should also be spelled out in your literature on the web.

- **Build a Ministry Contact Database**

Develop a list of names, email addresses, and personal info such a birthday, favorite food, favorite music, favorite quote, etc. You can use these lists to send out e-letters, e-cards and perhaps a monthly or quarterly e-newsletter. This is an excellent way to keep in contact and retain members in your mentoring ministry. They know you care about them if you will take the time periodically to contact them.

- **Create Your Ministry Board and Chat Room**

You can do this by following a simple registration process with Yahoo and/or MSN. By creating your own environment you will be able to better control the content and conversation flow. You will be able to remove rude guests or devoice them. Having a team or partner that ministers with you will become essential if you start attracting larger groups in your I-ministry boards and rooms.

- **Create Your Own Ministry Website**

If your ministry has limited funds there are several organizations that provide free web space with very easy to use templates to help you generate a basic one. You don't need a registered domain name to have a website. Your website will give your ministry a presence and a reference point that you can direct prospective youth to from the bulletin boards and chat rooms. It can provide them more information about your ministry. You

might also want to link it to other Christian sites that will help nurture them. Normally, you can have a basic website using standard templates up and running within 1-2 days.

If you have the funds by all means get your own domain name (www.bettermentors.org). There are many considerations that should be carefully analyzed and decided upfront. You might find it difficult to know what questions to ask before you have the benefit of some experience in bringing this initial phase online. But it is definitely something you should look into if you plan to grow your ministry. You can contract with some one to build your site or buy a Web authoring tool and develop your own. You might want view the creation of a more robust site as a phase II project.

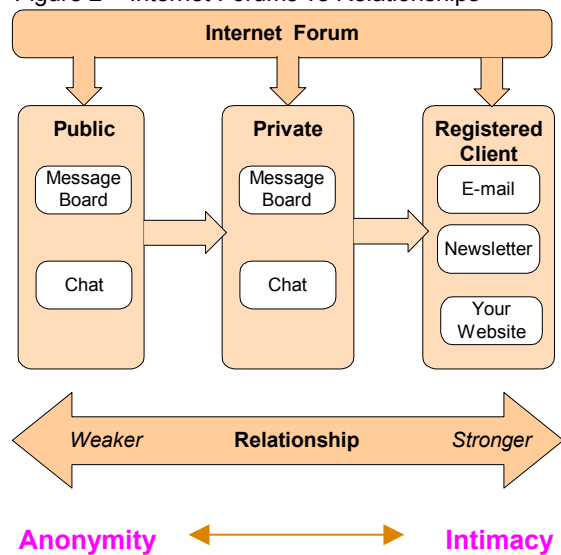
- **Gain the trust of the family**

Bring the parents into the information loop. You might consider doing a newsletter just for the parents of your mentees. Encourage your mentees to share what's happening in your relationship and your mentoring activities with their parents.

- **Connect Your Youth with the Body of Christ**

Encourage your mentees to join a local church. If possible help them make contact with a youth minister in their neighborhood.

Figure 2 – Internet Forums vs Relationships



How to Start an Internet Ministry by Mike Gahan

Getting Started:

Figure 3 is a chart that shows the major tasks that need to be completed to bring your ministry online. Keep in mind that this is a planning guideline. You may wish to accelerate some tasks or defer others. You may also find some different tasks that are not shown in this example because of the nature of your I-ministry.

Figure 3 – Ministry Task Plan

Ministry Task	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Enlist Partners	✓			
Establish Online Schedule	✓			
Prepare Testimonies	✓			
Commissioning Service		✓		
Equip Yourself		✓	✓	
Join Secular Forums		✓	✓	✓
Build Contact DB			✓	✓
Create MB/Chat Rooms			✓	
Create Basic Website				✓
Gain Trust of Parents				✓
Connect Youth w/ Church				✓
Report to Church				✓

- **Do you plan to involve others?** If so, you might want to develop some guidelines and rules to follow that promote consistency in ministering using a team approach.
- **Determine what level** of emotional involvement you should undertake. You should have clear boundaries and guidelines when to refer a person to a professional such as a doctor, or licensed professional counselor.
- **Are there potential liability issues** involved in this ministry? How do I safeguard my self from these? One rule of thumb is to not provide expert advice unless you are an expert on the subject. Stick to the Bible, personal experience, quote other experts, and have a ready list of referral resources to give out.
- **The anonymity** that the Web provides makes it easy to let differences of opinion escalate into heated arguments...what some Net-surfers call "flame wars". It is wise to remember what the Bible says; "a gentle answer turns away wrath." Proverbs 15:1

Common Sense and Cautions:

- **Clearly define the purpose** of your ministry. Who are you trying to reach? What is the expected outcome you are trying to achieve? If possible, quantify the results you anticipate. Document your purpose in a few concise written sentences.
- **Determine your strengths** and interests? Are you one who prefers to work with groups or large audiences or are you more comfortable working one to one? Do relationships that require frequent personal interactions sound appealing to you?
- **Establish clear limits** regarding the amount of time you will spend on your Web based ministry and stick to them. Internet ministries involve addressing people needs. People needs can be very labor-intensive. Also, the Internet can be addictive, drawing you away from family and other relationships that are important to your well-being.

Security Issues:

- Don't use your real name. Use a nickname, at least until you know who you are working with.
- Do not give out personal information such as your last name, home address, work address, telephone number, or school you attend.
- Never share a password for a message board or chat room.
- Never agree to meet with someone you met in a chat room or message board unless you have checked them out thoroughly. If they are under age make sure a parent accompanies them.
- Because you can't see or hear the person you are chatting with, they could be fooling you as to who they really are.
- Don't open any email attachments that someone sends you unless you know you can trust the source. They could contain a destructive virus.

How to Start an Internet Ministry by Mike Gahan

Appendix

Computer Resources Needed:

- A PC or Web TV
- Windows 95, 98, Me, or Macintosh
- Modem (28k+, or DSL, or Cable)
- Available Phone Line or Cable TV Service
- Internet Service Provider (ISP)
- Internet Browser IE Explorer or Netscape Navigator
- Email Client - MS Outlook, Outlook Express, Enduro, Hotmail or Juno

Christian Links for Teens:

[Carman](#)

[Challenge 2000](#)

[christian teens](#)

[ChristianTeens.Net](#)

[Christian Teen Page](#)

[Christian Teens Revolution](#)

[Dawson McAllister Live!](#)

[Just the Facts](#)

[NetCentral](#)

[See You At The Pole](#)

[the.christian.teen.place](#)

[Teens Alive](#)

[Teen Seen](#)

[The Missing Link, Inc.](#)

[YouthWalk Online](#)

[Praise TV ~ Live!](#)

[LifeWayOnline](#)

[BGCT](#)

[SBC](#)

[ChurchLifeResources](#)