

Technology changes the way missionaries work

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Technology changes the way missionaries work

By Hannah Elliott

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NEW YORK (ABP)—Most Baptist missions leaders agree technology has changed the face of missions. What they don't agree on is what it has changed the most.

Some claim centralized integration of information has radically reshaped the mission process. Others think easier and expedited communication has changed the very nature of field work. Still others credit visual and audio media with changing the fund-raising, recruiting and promotional landscape forever.

They could all be right.



Using his
laptop
computer,
Southern
Baptist
missionary
Mike
Houser
shows a
Fulani
friend
photos he
took
during a
festival in
Nigeria,
West
Africa.
(IMB
photo)

Telephone landlines, snail-mail and the quintessential missionary slideshows have been replaced by e-mail, voice-over-Internet protocol and video presentations. Extensive databases have taken the place of file cabinets crammed with paper information about field workers.

Jim Burdick, director of [Evangelical Baptist Missions](#), said the integration of information has most affected his work. Founded in 1928, the Indianapolis-based agency used to store all personnel information in five scattered file cabinets. Now, Evangelical Baptist Missions keeps all information in one place—a huge step forward, Burdick said.

“We now have the ability to take everything from the application standpoint when somebody contacts us and says, ‘I’m interested in missions,’ now we can start to gather that information online, and that starts to accumulate in a database we have,” he said. Whether it’s a “person, a foundation or a church—if there’s any kind of relationship—it’s in one database.”

The database is managed by an outside vendor—the mission agency pays a subscription fee for the software—and took about a year to implement. Burdick said the database is part of his office’s five-year technology plan that will next work toward upgrading accounting and other office-based tasks.

John Burnette, director of [Open Door Baptist Missions](#), appreciates the streamlined accounting practices and improved donor interface the technology fosters. But it’s the communication opportunities that really get him talking.

Burnette and his wife lived as missionaries in South America more than 20 years. Having worked in missions a total of 38 years, the greatest change since he started has come in communications, especially in the last 15 years, he said.

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“When we started ... it took usually 10 days for a letter to get from South America to our home office in Cleveland, Ohio, and then be distributed and returned over another 10 days. Now, for a request or question even in remote areas, people can get to a computer and send an e-mail, and they can get an answer in the same day,” he said.

Now stationed in the United States, Burnette uses a laptop and special cell phone to talk to his daughter and her family, who live on a boat in the Amazon River. And he talks to missionaries in Israel using a voice-over-Internet protocol phone.

Written communication with donors has changed, too. Since Burnette’s missionaries largely are supported by churches, e-mail attachments of financial statements let them know on a regular basis their donation status.

“What used to be something that took awhile to get in order, by the time we mailed it to them, they may get the statement for June by the end of July,” he said. “But presently, our accountant is pretty much able to close the books by the end of the month and send them a .pdf (graphic computer file) of their statement.”

Burnette said he also has seen a move away from the standard, hard-copy prayer letters. Instead, missionaries at Open Door send weekly e-mail updates with pictures, charts and other visual components.

Lonnie Richards knows the value of the visual. A video producer at [Baptist Mid-Missions](#), Richards has a full video studio and two complete video editing suites at his disposal—and he makes full use of them.

During furloughs, missionaries visit the studio to create and edit video presentations for church visits, adding narration tracks and formatting it for DVDs. Right now, the shooting center production schedule is booked for months in advance, said Richards, who works in Cleveland, Ohio.

“We’ve recently completed a video presentation of our own to use for recruitment in Europe,” he said. “For Europe, the video was to say ‘when you think of the mission field, you think of Africa, you think of China, but you don’t always think of Europe.’ So we put together a video showing people in Europe.”

Production on the recruitment video took several months on the software-based suites. Originally, the suites were hardware-based and cost \$60,000 to \$70,000 total. Now a complete studio costs roughly \$9,000, not including the cameras and lights, Richards said.

It’s well worth it, he said.

“If you affect hearts and lives, I guess that pays dividends,” he said. “You don’t do these kinds of videos to make money. That’s not what we’re here for.

“But if you can touch a life and call someone to the mission field ... or make someone think they want to be involved or pray ... then there are added gains.”

The proliferation of technology has brought down its price as well. Burnette said that several years ago, many congregations thought a laptop was an excessive luxury for a missionary. Now, it’s accepted as a necessary tool.

Price aside, the benefits of technology abound. Missionaries at Open Doors use specialized computer programs to work with Arabs in restricted countries. And they train nationals in closed countries using computer courses, chat rooms and question-and-answer sites.

Another benefit of technology is the ability-to-share capacity, Burdick said. His group has worked closely with other mission agencies, swapping best practices and dishing about the best software vendors.

There are down sides to technological advancement. It brings change to tactics and systems that have worked for decades—and Baptists are known for tendencies toward aversion to change. Sometimes mission supporters “struggle with the changes because they think ‘you guys are just playing with computers,’” Burdick said.

Burnette said there is a danger “in becoming so focused on technology that you forget your purpose, which is sharing the Lord Jesus Christ with individuals.”

Security always is a concern. Sensitive information sent to mission workers in Muslim or Communist countries can jeopardize their work. Even seemingly innocuous prayer requests could have serious ramifications. Burnette said encrypted messages and .pdf documents generally help shield sensitive material from prying eyes.

Burdick said computer data actually is safer than hard copies of records. His employee information is kept on a remote server and backed up by several other servers at different locations in the country.

Still, the benefits of e-mail access and an Internet connection outweigh the risks, even in simply letting field workers know they’re not alone.

“It also has provided a little bit the less of a feeling of being isolated because missionaries can communicate with their family and friends,” Burnette said.

“You can even conference with video and web cams. It does eliminate a little bit of the isolation in many respects.”

All told, missionaries agree technology is on the mission field to stay.

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