

FaithVillage: real community online

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PLANO—(UPDATED) The future of electronic communication for evangelical Christians appears crystal clear to Brad Russell.

"Picture a vibrant community of Christians, including leaders, artists, thought-shapers and culture-makers," Russell describes. "They're online together—expanding their faith, deepening their relationships and fulfilling their calling to shift the world for Christ."

What he sees is FaithVillage.com, a new Internet-based gathering place for Christian young adults and teens. It's a ministry of Baptist Standard Publishing, parent company of the *Baptist Standard* news organization. Russell is the website's senior editor.

He sees a future in which millions of young Christians log in to FaithVillage.com. They grow in their faith, receive insight and inspiration to strengthen their relationships, build their churches, serve their communities and minister near and far.

When the beta-testing version of FaithVillage.com launched late last month, his vision became reality.

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Check out FaithVillage.

"Every day, members of this community post personal updates to their friends and collaborate in groups, blog about their passions, and research faith issues and causes," he says. "They create and enjoy videos, music and podcasts, stay informed with news, self-publish their own materials,

recommend content, and discover ministry resources, music and good books.

"FaithVillage is becoming a community of caring, creativity and sharing. That means FaithVillagers use everything they experience online to serve their churches and communities. They are becoming better people who create a better world because of experiences they have here."

Out of wilderness ...

FaithVillage.com sprang from challenge and opportunity, reports Marv Knox, publisher of the new website and editor of the *Baptist Standard*.

A perfect storm of obstacles—overall newspaper decline, denominational malaise and economic recessions—drove circulation down. Meanwhile, Knox prayed and wept as he asked God for a fresh vision to reach a rising generation of young Christians.

"The *Standard* had so much going for it—rich heritage, faithful readers, supportive donors, a committed staff and a bold board of directors," he says. "I couldn't see how the Lord would let us fail. Still, it became clear subscriptions weren't going to climb. But, thank God, desperation is a great liberator. Our frustration freed us to think about new options."

In 2008, two events shifted the scenario, Knox recalls. The *Standard* began thinking beyond news and hired Russell as marketing director.

When Knox recommended the *Standard* place non-news resources on its website, the board requested a bigger vision. So, he and Russell envisioned a website to connect and empower young Christians.

Russell, an ad executive-turned-church-planter, precisely filled the organization's need, Knox says. His passion for ministering to young adults and their families converged with his understanding of new media and

marketing. The result was catalytic.

Across three and a half years, the board and staff collaborated to expand Baptist Standard Publishing's ministry. They affirmed their mandate to publish news, but they resolved to do more.

They conducted nationwide re-search to learn how young Christians use the Internet and what they want in faith resources. They worked with top-tier graphic designers, web developers, church leaders and online journalists. They consulted new-media business experts. Piece by piece, they built FaithVillage.com.

Virtual village; real community

Research revealed young adults thrive on creating and maintaining relationships on the web. They admitted they didn't know where to look or whom to trust for faith content. And they overwhelmingly approved the FaithVillage concept and name.

So, the website reflects a close, warm neighborhood, Knox says. The user interface—what site visitors see—is a series of street scenes in a virtual village. Each building "houses" a channel of content, ranging from preaching, teaching and worship, to music and art, to marriage and parenting, to missions and ministry. FaithVillagers would need to visit dozens of websites to find all the content located in this place.

Since FaithVillage.com is a social network, every registered user owns a profile page—the foundation for posting updates and photos, sharing links to information, and creating and joining groups.

Unlike some sites, FaithVillage.com provides a secure, "faith-friendly" space, and it's not heavily commercialized, Russell notes. User groups can be public, invitation-only or private.

Sure, people live in the real world, and FaithVillage.com doesn't replace face-to-face interaction, he acknowledges, adding it "provides a compelling online space for Christ-followers to explore and express their faith."

Beyond technology, FaithVillage.com helps Christians live real-world lives.

"Cultural and technological change is churning faster than ever, but needs are unchanging," Russell says. "People need truth, beauty and goodness. They need relationships and community. They need to express themselves and make contributions to others. They need to listen and look for God's movement, so they can play their part in the story of redemption. FaithVillage provides an online space to fulfill these timeless needs."

Solid, strategic content



If social networking provides the infrastructure of FaithVillage.com, then content supplies the vibe, Russell explains. Leading ministries, universities, seminaries, publishers and other Christian organizations provide the site's array of articles, videos, podcasts, blogs, webinars and social interactions.

Content partners affirm the site's evangelical faith statement, he adds. They're organizations with proven track records of service to churches and Christians around the world.

FaithVillage.com's editorial team works with these content providers and churches to offer inspirational, practical material.

Powerful church tool

The motivation for building FaithVillage.com transcends creating a cool website or even reaching a vast audience, Knox says. "We love Jesus and his church. Our greatest contribution will be encouraging and equipping church leaders—laity and clergy alike. We're building Faith-Village for the future of the church."

That's why FaithVillage is offered free to churches, when comparable systems cost thousands of dollars, Russell adds.

Each participating church receives a "hub page." From there, it administers its groups; hosts videos, podcasts and blogs; connects volunteers with resources; and even directs guests to its own website.

Churches can manage their entire internal communications through FaithVillage.com, with members linked by all their church groups, from Bible study classes, to deacons, committees and ministry teams.

"Robust churches build relationships, grow in their faith experience, engage their community and transform their culture with loving action. We totally get that," Russell says. "FaithVillage will help churches grow closer, deeper and wider—for free."