

Internet preaching

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This article reviews the experiences of the Glasgow Kelvin ecclesia in undertaking the preaching of the gospel via the Internet, highlighting the benefits and difficulties this new medium presents. Correspondence is welcomed from those who have also been involved in this form of preaching.

IT CAN BE very disillusioning when special effort after special effort yields few or no visitors and there is poor attendance by ecclesial members at public lectures. In addition, church attendance in general is in decline,¹ and this could lead to the conclusion that the UK is in a sorry state when it comes to religious interest. This article seeks to show that such a conclusion is false. There is still a lot of interest in the Bible; in the case of Internet preaching, an overwhelming interest.

A changing society

The Internet has changed many aspects of modern life: the way we communicate, the way we shop and the way we search for information. The explosion in growth of the Internet has provided us with yet another avenue by which we can preach. According to the latest government statistics, "In the fourth quarter of 2003, 49 per cent of households in the UK (12.1 million) could access the Internet from home, compared with just 9 per cent (2.2 million) in the same quarter of 1998".²

There is a growing market for Internet preaching. The 2001 Census was the first to collect information about religious identity. Just over three-quarters of the UK population reported having a religion, with seventy-two per cent of these saying they were Christians.³ If this is the case, are we simply using methods which fail to reach these people?

Glasgow Kelvin's websites

The Glasgow Kelvin ecclesia has two websites:

- www.glasgowkelvin.org.uk
- www.biblequizzes.co.uk

These were set up approximately four years ago, the ecclesia having been spurred on by the example of the Saanich Peninsula ecclesia in British Columbia. The quizzes site is a colourful,

interactive site for all ages and offers a variety of Bible-based quizzes. The ecclesial site, the primary focus of this article, contains information about the ecclesia, and originally offered the Bible Reading Planner and the Learn to Read the Bible Effectively Course (LRBEC) by post. The cost of sending Bible Reading Planners and the LRBEC soon began to add up, with most costs being generated by requests for the LRBEC. To save money, the website was modified so that the LRBEC was available either in electronic form (sent as email attachments) or by post. Whilst the number of requests for the postal course did fall, they did not drop as much as expected. We reluctantly withdrew the offer of a free postal LRBEC⁴ and currently only offer the course in electronic format.⁵

On-line 'lectures'

Given the trend for people using the Internet to find information rather than attending an evening or special lecture, we decided to take the 'lecture' to the people and offer it online. Instead of billing houses in the local area, we display millions of adverts on the Internet. The adverts are only displayed to people in the United Kingdom and appear to those searching for information which relates to one of our online 'lectures'. This is akin to billing only houses which contain someone who is interested in the topic of a special lecture. The beauty of online advertising is that if an advert does not get a response it costs nothing. Cost is only incurred if someone clicks on the advert and is therefore taken to our site to read the online lecture. In

1. The Church of Scotland has reported that if its congregation sizes continue to fall at the current rate of 17,000 members a year the church will be dead within fifty years. *Sunday Times*, 23 May 2004.
2. www.statistics.gov.uk.
3. Source: Census, April 2001, Office for National Statistics.
4. Occasionally people apply electronically and we send them the course through the post if they do not have regular access to a computer.
5. The course is sent as a Portable Document Format (PDF) file attachment. PDF files are very difficult to edit and are therefore an ideal means of ensuring the course is not modified by a third party.

Table 1 Some of the topics in the “What the Bible says about . . .” section of the site

Interracial relationships	The immortal soul
Maitreya and New Ageism	Is Jesus God?
Easter	Weddings
The Rapture	Christmas
Christening	Lent
Funerals	Prayer
Love and hate	Laughter

reality these lectures are short, concise, Scripturally-based articles. The articles are stored in an archive in the “What the Bible says about . . .” section of the site. Each article has its own advertising campaign.

The anonymity of the Internet allows people to search for information in the privacy of their own home without the social repercussion of being ‘spotted’ attending a Bible talk. It also gives the ‘visitor’ complete control over how much contact is established. In a similar manner, whilst the actual name of the website is not deceptive, it hides the fact that it is a Bible-based website. The discretion of Internet preaching is therefore one of its appeals.

What we advertise

[Table 1](#) above shows some of the topics we have dealt with so far. Some of these topics may appear to be Scripturally unsound because the people we are trying to reach have unsound beliefs. An advert offering an article about baptism may not appeal to someone who thinks in terms of christening.⁶ Other topics have arisen as a result of a member of the public requesting an article on a given topic.

All the adverts we display are text based; it is therefore vital to choose words which yield the greatest response.⁷ The wrong choice of words can:

- alienate a non-Christadelphian reader. For example, the phrase ‘some people’ is the language we would use to refer to someone ‘outside’. This phrase places the reader in a different group from those placing the ad-

vert. Experience has shown us that it is far more profitable to make the advert personal to each reader by using the word ‘you’.

- render the advert pointless. Posing a question in an advert and then answering it removes the need for the reader to respond to the advert!

At the end of each article there are a few sentences which invite the reader to sign up for the LRBE. Again, the choice of words has been shown to be vital. Changing a question that began, “Why not . . . ?”,⁸ to a statement that begins, “Please sign up”, significantly increased the response.

As a community we tend to fall into the trap of assuming that a visitor/contact is a novice when it comes to the Scriptures. This is often not the case, particularly in the context of Internet preaching. Most of those who volunteer extra information when they apply for the course profess to be Christians and have existing (often strongly held) beliefs.⁹ They want to further their knowledge of the Bible. This has a direct effect on how we correspond with contacts.

Response to adverts

We currently have thirty-six different advertising campaigns linked to articles, and one campaign which advertises the LRBE direct. These campaigns bring roughly 2,000 new contacts to the site each month (See the ‘clicks’ column of [Table 2](#)). The technology behind the adverts is advanced; not only do we know how many people respond to our adverts, we also know how many people sign up for the LRBE as result of responding to an advert.

With regard to the advert that directly advertises the LRBE, twenty-four per cent of those who respond to it sign up for the course. Each contact gained from this advert costs £1.70.

Twenty-two out of thirty-six articles have led to people signing up for the LRBE. For example, our most successful advert (for an article on prayer written by a sister) was displayed 37,524 times from 1 January 2004 to 13 May 2004. 368

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6. The actual article itself obviously explains that the Bible teaches baptism, not christening.
 7. This applies to any form of advert.
 8. For example, “Why not sign up for a free Bible Reading course?”.
 9. For example, a belief in the Trinity. They know that they believe it but do not know, or cannot prove, why.

people responded to the advert and nineteen (5.16 per cent) of these signed up for the LRBECC. These nineteen contacts cost £0.99 each. The cost of the 368 people reading a Christadelphian article ('lecture') on prayer was £18.88, or £0.05 per person.

At present we spend an average of £220 a month on advertising. We have gratefully received a number of donations from individuals and ecclesias, and also a grant from the ALS, which allow us to continue with this highly efficient form of preaching. The figures in Table 2 show that the actual response rate to the advert is roughly 0.83 per cent per advert display. However, the more significant figure is that 5.35 per cent of advert responses lead to an application for the LRBECC.

Comments received

As well as sending the LRBECC to UK residents, we have also sent it to many other places, including Brazil, China, Egypt, Germany, Ghana, India, Ireland, Kenya, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Malta, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sudan, Uganda and Zambia. As this list shows, the concept of 'local' preaching does not apply to the Internet, hence the phrase 'World Wide Web'. The adverts simply boost the response from the UK by providing an additional means of finding the website. Over the page are some of the comments (reproduced with no corrections) that we have received.

How we respond

When we decided to send the LRBECC by email we were faced with the following options:

- automate the process
- use a team of email tutors to send the course.

We chose to use a team of email tutors so that contacts can deal with a human being on a personal level, rather than dealing with a computer. We have come to realise that sending the course is almost secondary to corresponding with a contact and gaining their trust. Once this has been established it is then possible to have serious religious discussions. This places extra responsibility on the tutor; it is quite a task to reply to, say, five¹⁰ individuals, all of whom are at different stages in the course and have asked different questions.

Table 2 The number of adverts displayed and new contacts made per month during the first nine months of 2004

Month	Advert Displays	Clicks	Course sign ups		
			UK	Other	Total
January	229,411	2,203	76	30	106
February	203,812	2,214	75	32	107
March	216,602	2,348	65	37	102
April	270,239	2,473	76	25	101
May	243,589	2,136	121	23	144
June	238,295	1,905	86	25	111
July	280,797	1,966	92	30	122
August	326,480	1,960	93	31	124
September	302,668	1,959	82	27	109
Total	2,311,893	19,164	766	260	1,026

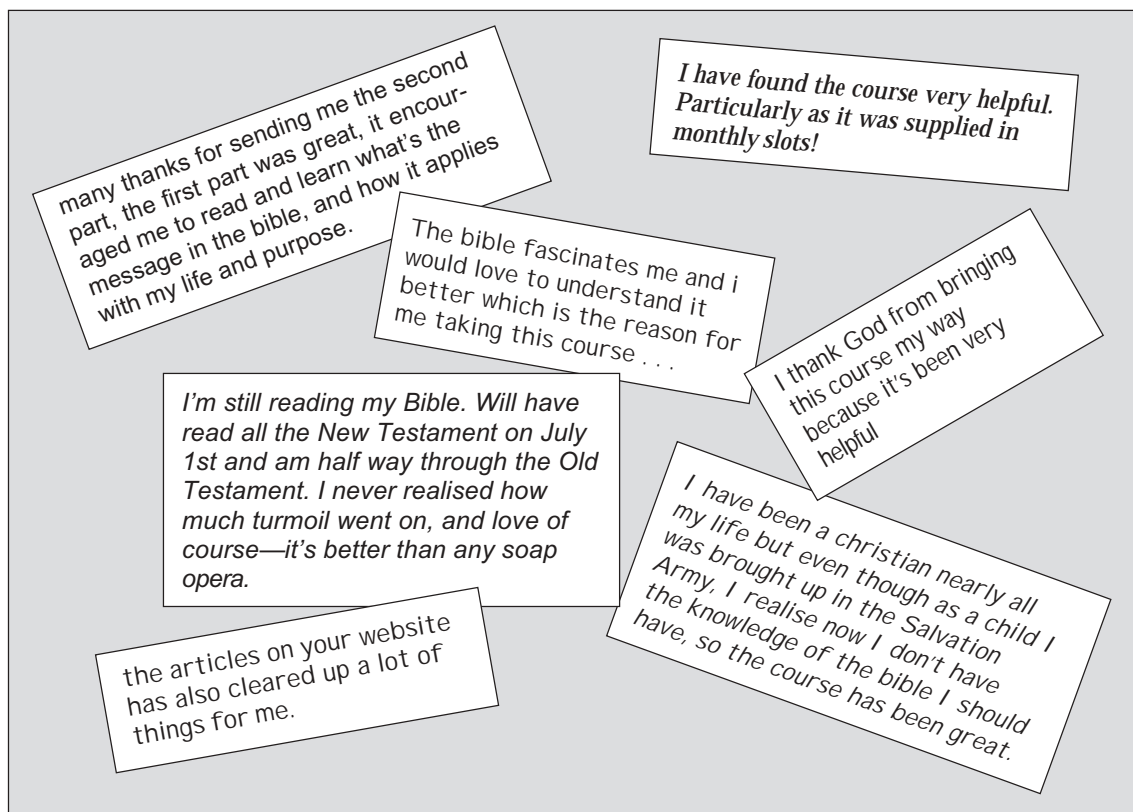
After building a relationship with a contact the email tutor can offer them information about special lectures or whether the Bible Exhibition is coming to their area, for example. Wherever possible we match the gender of contact and tutor.

Ideally every ecclesia should have a website (or at least submit information to www.ukchristadelphians.org.uk—a database containing information on all UK ecclesias) so that anyone searching for information on churches, or church events, in their locality will find details of Christadelphian ecclesias in their area. This is the only sense in which an ecclesial website can operate in a 'local' manner. Our appeal is that, besides each ecclesia having some form of presence on the Internet, they also offer us help in the ways outlined below to lighten the load on our existing tutors.

Appeal for help

As has already been stated, all advertising is targeted at the UK. In order to keep the response

10. Most tutors have well over twenty contacts each.



rate down we have capped our spending,¹¹ which limits how often the adverts are displayed. [Table 2](#) shows the volume of contacts generated for January to September 2004 inclusive (the latest figures available when the article was written). It can be shown from advertising statistics that, if we enlarge the site, it will generate more contacts. The site has therefore also remained relatively static so as not to generate too much interest! We are currently in the bizarre situation of having to limit the amount of preaching we do due to lack of human resources.

As a result we need help from sisters and brethren (order intentional as we need more sisters). There are three areas in which readers can help:

- 1 **Become an email tutor.** We currently have a team of twenty-five tutors who are taking on more and more contacts each month. All a prospective tutor needs is a computer with an Internet connection.
- 2 **Writing articles.** Each month there are a number of topic requests. This is where members of the public request an article be written for the "What the Bible says about . . ." section of the site. At the time of writing

there are twenty-five topic requests awaiting a response due to the reasons outlined above.

- 3 **Financial aid.** As an ecclesia we are unable to sustain the site by ourselves. We are therefore extremely grateful for all contributions already made. Any further contributions will be gratefully received as it will allow the work to continue.

At present we are receiving help from brethren and sisters in Glasgow, Stirling, Wigan, Newport, Cardiff, Maidenhead, Bournemouth and the USA.

Internet follow-up

The electronic LRBECC consists of eight parts. Some students, having completed the course, are keen to continue studying, and are asked if they would like a follow-up course. The LRBECC sticks to its remit of teaching the reader useful Bible-reading techniques, without going into doctrine. Consequently, it is possible to complete the course and still believe that you will go

11. As of 5 December 2004 we have further reduced our advertising budget, cutting it in half.

to heaven when you die as long as the devil does not get you first! We felt that a follow-up course should meet the following criteria:

- Encourage the student to apply the skills learnt in the LRBECC to carefully chosen passages or topics
- Use the same style (for example, typefaces, colour, layout) as the LRBECC
- Contain content which is positive and assertive rather than speculative
- Guide the student to think about the implications of what they read in terms of doctrine
- Be interactive and exploit the fact that it is being sent via the Internet.

The obvious follow-up course is one based on Genesis; the LRBECC emphasises its importance as the foundation book upon which the rest of Scripture is based. The existing Genesis courses reviewed fell short of the above criteria. As a result we are currently writing a brand new follow-up course based on the theme of the Gospel in Genesis. We are also planning a revision of the LRBECC, specifically highlighting methods or techniques which are explored further in the new follow-up course, in the hope of whetting the appetite of the contact.

In-person follow-up

A possible outcome of taking the LRBECC is that a contact expresses the desire to attend a meeting local to him or her. The email tutor then liaises with the secretary of the contact's nearest meeting. Once again we are forced to consider how we handle visitors. To do this we should put ourselves in their shoes. If we wanted to

find out what the principal actions of a group's worship are, how could we best do this? Would it be through attendance at the main communion service or at a different meeting at which it is likely that not all members of the church attend?

The Scriptures show that the breaking of bread is exclusive in terms of who can participate but not in terms of who can attend. Paul wrote: "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come" (1 Cor. 11:26). To whom are we to "shew" this? The word translated here as "shew" is usually translated as 'preach' (Acts 4:2; 13:5; 1 Corinthians 9:14). What we have, then, is a preaching method endorsed by Scripture. Yet some notice boards outside ecclesial halls have such things as, "Memorial Service 11:00—Members only". We know of a case where an interested member of the public was put off attending an ecclesia with such a notice outside their hall. Fortunately, this visitor then found a different ecclesia which had a more welcoming notice board.

Conclusion

We hope we have shown that there is still a real interest in the gospel message in the UK. We are in the frustrating situation of trying to attract fewer visitors to the Glasgow Kelvin website so as to keep down the number of contacts we generate. We are therefore appealing to any sister or brother who feels they can assist us to contact Brother Jered Bolton by emailing jered@glasgowkelvin.org.uk. Full technical assistance will be given if required.