Is technology a missionary's friend, or is it his foe? When I am able to send a message to family via laptop and satellite phone from a remote village, or 'sit in' on a board meeting in Pennsylvania from Ghana via international conference calling, it seems like a friend. When as a returned missionary, it makes me feel about two decades behind the times, it seems like a foe.
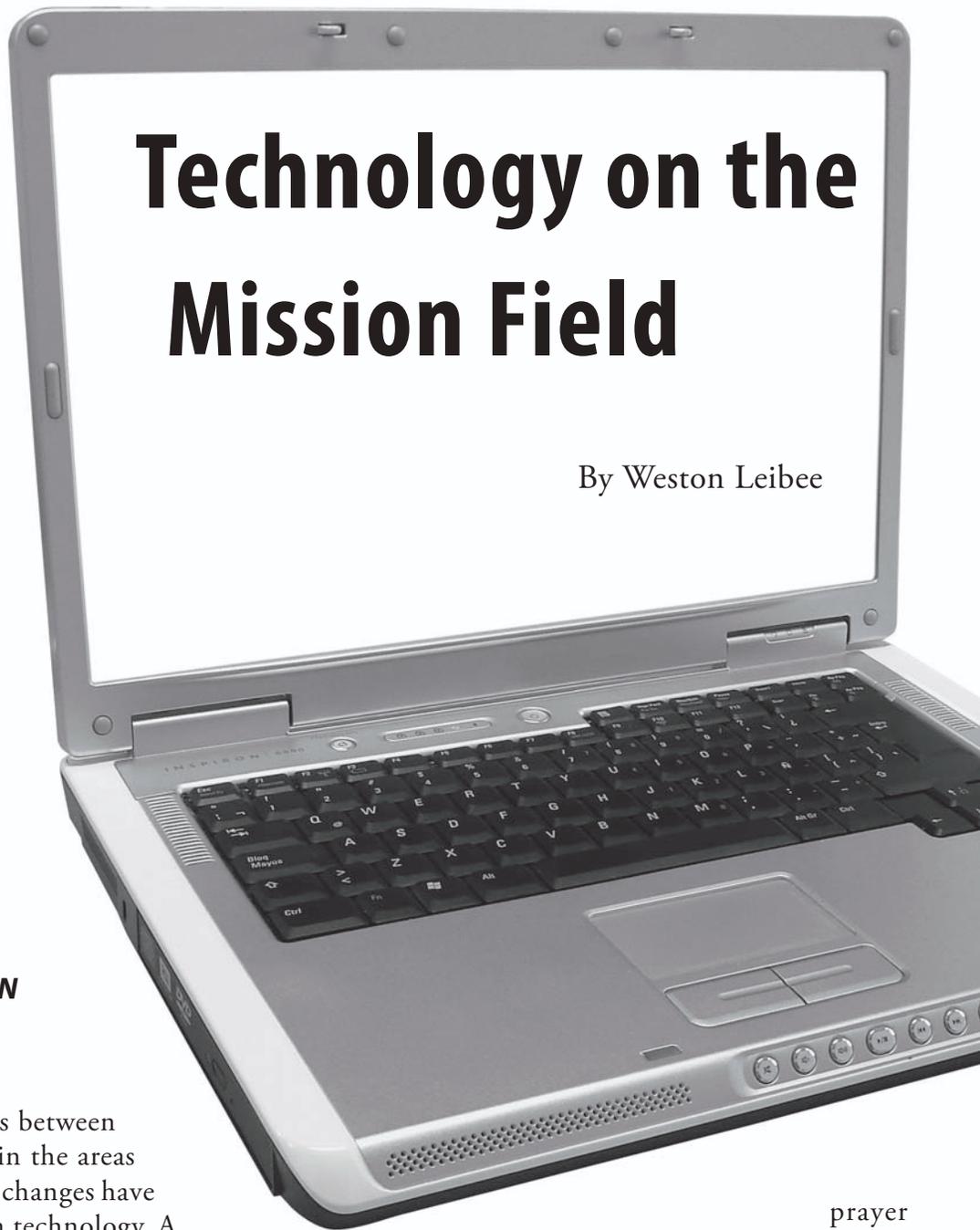
Missionaries aren't the only ones caught up in the drama. How is technology affecting the senders? What about the potential future missionaries that are being raised up and trained? What about the short-term workers? Is technology helping or hurting the cause of world missions? Well, let's start by looking at some of the positive effects.

# Technology on the Mission Field

By Weston Leibee

## BENEFITS OF TECHNOLOGY ON THE HOME/SUPPORT SIDE

Two of the enormous differences between Hudson Taylor's time and ours are in the areas of communication and travel. These changes have been made possible through modern technology. A two-month journey by sea is now accomplished in twenty-four hours by air. Email and digital pictures have reduced the 60 day delays in fresh news from the field to almost instantaneous updates. Think of the tremendous potential this gives us as senders and supporters to be involved in world missions! It is now entirely feasible for a local church to send a couple 'ambassadors' to go and see a cutting-edge pioneer missionary endeavor first-hand, then come back and motivate the church for that field. We have digital slide shows complete with video clips and sound that brings us so close to the field that we feel we have experienced at least a small part of what it would be like to be there in person. Email updates give us 'hot-off-the-press' news and prayer requests that keep us updated on what is going on.

How else might technology help in the cause of world missions on the home side? The internet has opened up an enormous wealth of information that was previously hard to get our hands on. We can find information about hidden countries and peoples – Are they reached? What are they like? Where are the greatest needs? How can we pray? Maybe there is a country or a people group that God has laid on your heart as an intercessory prayer burden. A Google search on your targeted country or people group will likely turn up thousands of results and flesh out your prayer burden into real live facts, pictures, and statistics.

## Benefits of Technology on the Field

Like the home side, the field has greatly benefited from technological advances in the communications sector. Laptops and satellite phones have brought easy communication to places once considered 'out of range'.

In many areas where missionaries live and minister, the local people's time is almost entirely made up of survival. Appropriated technologies such as solar panels, vehicles, and other tools allow the missionary to go beyond basic survival, freeing him up for much-needed time to preach, teach, and minister.

Record-keeping devices such as laptops and backup hard drives keep valuable information safer on the field, avoiding tragedies such as the one that occurred about 20 years ago slightly north of where I live in Ghana. A pioneer missionary's house burned down and with it was destroyed about 10 years of his culture, language, and translation notes and files, quite possibly the most comprehensive data on that people group at that time. It was all paper copies, and to this day that information has not been totally recovered. Modern technology adds a safeguard in such cases today.

Advances in linguistic software are slowly chipping away at the languages that still have no Bible. From the user-friendly Rosetta Stone® language learning programs to Wycliffe's complicated language analyzing software, these tools are helping and equipping us to bring the Gospel to every tribe and tongue. In some cases technology has knocked years or even a decade off a translation project. Digital audio recordings are lowering the cost of producing oral versions of the Word of God for illiterate societies. Considering the thousands of translations that still need to be done, technology is assisting us in one of the most vital tasks on the Church's to-do list.

## Technology Reaches over the Fence

Numerous countries in the world have been labeled as restricted or closed to missionaries. Satan and his earthly counterparts have erected 'fences' both spiritually and physically around these nations. Some of us may be unaware of the stunning way in which God is using technology to reach over or around those fences.

Radio broadcasting has been used for some years already and is no longer considered a new technology, but it is worth a brief consideration under this heading. Probably your flags go up initially. Radio preaching? We must put aside our picture of radio preaching here in the U.S., where famous and sometimes wealthy men attempt to impress already well-fed audiences with ear-tickling doctrines. No, picture with me a different scenario. A restricted nation is targeted. A large transmitter is set up on an island, or in a nearby friendly country. Then a man of God is sought who speaks the language of the people 'behind the fence'. The man preaches the gospel and it is beamed in powerful short-wave frequencies into the restricted area. Hungry people often must hide and tune-in with their volumes lowered to avoid attracting attention. In this way, millions of fenced-in people have had the Gospel preached to them and many have been converted. When the fence is removed from such a country through intercessory prayer or political pressure, believers are often uncovered, many of them tracing their walk with God back to those radio transmissions.

But the second way of reaching over the fence is a newer innovation, the internet. Some of the restricted nations of the world, particularly in the Middle East, are very wealthy nations. A large percentage of the population has access to the internet. In a country where smuggled printed materials are often seized and nearly every religious gathering is broken up by the police, how can the Gospel get into people's homes? Christians with a burden for such countries have set up websites and chat rooms where seekers can go in the privacy of their home, or, at a greater risk, in the semi-privacy of an internet café, and learn more about Jesus. The internet has been particularly effective in Muslim nations. It is very difficult to gather data of the results of such ministries as personal follow-up is extremely difficult. Www.bible.org *reportedly served over 15 million people from 175 countries in 2006. Although, in many countries, the government tries to monitor the internet and prevent people from downloading the Bible or Christian material, there are many stories of the Bible being 'smuggled' into people's homes using the internet.*

# ON THE OTHER HAND

Wow! Technology has helped missions a lot, hasn't it? But it's time for a bit of a reality check. The question is: Has it cost anything? Are there any negative side-effects? Is technology always helping the cause of missions? Is it ever hurting us?

These are fair questions to ask. I'd like to make some objective observations on the effects of technology as it relates to world missions. I realize I've lived in the so-called 'third world' for the past 4 years, and I will admit that it has changed my perspective on technology. I trust my candid comments will be received in a way that provokes us to consider these things from a positive standpoint.

There are physical and spiritual side-effects associated with technology that are easy to spot.

## Physical Side Effects

On the practical side, technology sometimes complicates a task it was meant to simplify. Like the legendary scenario of a missionary who is tired of walking or biking and has an ATV shipped over, only to have it break down and find out there are no parts for it in the entire country. He spends lots of his spare time working on the thing, while the local people who have never seen such a machine are constantly admiring it, creating jealousy and complicating the missionary's relationships. A year later he realizes that he has spent more time and headache on the 4-wheeled contraption than he would have walking. We all chuckle. But we must beware of over-complicating our lives! We don't have the time or the mental capacity for that kind of stress. When it comes to cross-cultural missions, we must be especially careful when introducing new technologies into a different environment. The question becomes not, "Is the technology available?" but rather "Is the technology practical and necessary?" In Ghana, my wife and I live in a local house equipped with a very basic solar-powered 12-volt lighting system. There is a whole solar world out there with catalogs full of 12-volt coffee makers, 12-volt MP3 players, 12-volt foot massagers, 12-volt you-name-it! That doesn't mean my wife and I need all of that stuff. Again, let me repeat the maxim: Need, not availability, guides our use of technology.

That leads us right into the next side-effect, which

I call 'Kingdom finances down the drain'. It blows my mind to try to think of the thousands or even millions of dollars that we have collectively spent in the past several years on technology that we existed without until it came along. I am not against every new thing. But there must be a stopping point! The materialistic and even devilish plan to rob us Christian stewards of God's financial resources by bringing out a new updated model of each gadget every 6 months must be repelled! There are vast mission fields yet waiting to be opened up, and I'll be honest with you, it will take a lot of money to open those fields up. How shockingly sad if Christ returns before we accomplish that task only to find HIS finances that He entrusted to us are locked up in gadgets that we had to have just because they were on the market.

Finally, on the physical side, another side effect of the technological take-over is the loss of old-fashioned skills that are still vital to world missions. Just a few examples: I think learning to type is essential; but not at the expense of writing. There are still a lot of places in the world where pen and paper are used everyday. Another big one is clear oral communication. Our email and instant-message society is teaching us to speak in abbreviated one-liners that are not a good form of communication on a deeper level. We are fast becoming a society of geniuses who are unable to perform simple life skills. Many of us would have an easier time updating our anti-virus software than we would patching a bike tire, and we likely know more about Microsoft Word than we do about basic nutrition! We have learned to speak a whole new dialect with words like *jpeg, i-pod,* and *wi-fi,* yet we are still convinced that we can't learn any language except English!

## Spiritual Side Effects

On a spiritual level, integrating technology into missions has some real side effects as well.

On the field, appropriated technologies greatly increase the missionary's quality of life, but often place him out of touch with the people he so desperately wants to bring to Christ. In his vehicle, he whizzes right past the hundreds of people on bike and foot, and he may well be whizzing right past them on deeper levels of communication and spiritual connectivity as well. Does his lifestyle put him out of sync with the thought process of those around him? Learning to think like his

adopted people is vital if he wants to present the Gospel to them in a meaningful and real way.

As our lifestyle in the West becomes more technology based, it is harder and harder for us to connect with people whose lifestyle is based on other values, people who are affected little if at all by technology. In relating to such people, our priorities of efficiency, speed, and information must give way to the opposing values of people, culture, and learning. The chasm that has existed for years between Western culture and most of the rest of the world is widening at an increasing and even alarming rate of speed, making it more and more difficult for missionaries to effectively cross the divide. I have personally observed this even in my relatively short involvement with cross-cultural missions (in total about 9 years). It appears to be more and more difficult for our young people who come to Ghana to connect with the people there. The internet revolution has not affected rural northern Ghana at all. Our lives have been so affected by the computer revolution, by personal cell phones, the internet, and PDA's, that it seems awkward to try and talk to people for whom such things mean nothing.

The widening gap between the two worlds also increases the amount of lifestyle change and corresponding challenges required for long-term missionaries. Just several years ago, a new missionary moving to a remote location would have considered giving up running water to be his greatest sacrifice. Now, many would consider living without internet access to be equally primitive! Weaning ourselves from a technology-based culture to a relationship-based culture is a mammoth shift that just keeps on getting tougher.

## What Shall We Say Then?

So what is the answer? Are technology and missions not compatible? Should we avoid anything modern simply because it does not exist in the third-world? No. This is not the answer.

I think the answer lies, at least in part, in a piece of advice from Paul to the Corinthian church. *And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away. 1 Cor 7:31*

The word *abusing* in this case simply means overusing. The Greek words are *chraomai* (use) and *katachraomai* (abuse), with the prefix *kata* meaning "exceeding or out of measure." So, to abuse something is to use it out of measure. It is a hyper-fascination with something that was originally intended to be a tool. As that tool moves toward the very center of our life, it has ceased to be a tool and has become something of an end in itself. Its functionality as a tool has been reformed by our experience, turning it into a combination of past-time, hobby, recreation, centerpiece of discussion, and total lifestyle. We have gone beyond *using* the thing to *abusing* it.

What do you think? Evaluate your own experience with this tool called technology. Does it fascinate you? Has it moved from a peripheral tool in your life towards the very center? Is it consuming your spare time? How can you use it without abusing it? How can you avoid living in fascination of a tool? Ponder these things. We need some answers.

But to conclude this article, we must return to the narrower scope of how technology relates specifically to world missions. We have seen some pros and cons. We have decided to not ask "Is it available?" but rather "Is it practical and necessary?" We have seen the exciting possibilities of technology reaching over the fence to hidden peoples. We have realized how technology has made it more difficult for us as Westerners to relate to most of the world. We rejoice in the ease of communication that technology has introduced to our mission cause, but are concerned about the depreciation in real life skills among our pool of future missionary candidates.

Above all, let us make wise choices so that an unbiased observer could accurately describe our relationship with technology as *using* and not *abusing*.

*"And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away."*