

Lighthouse Keeper



Evangelical Congregational Church

January 2008

It's All Fun and Games until Someone Meets Jesus, Then It Becomes Evangelism

(An interview with Rev. Brian Garner,
Faith E.C. Church, Temple, PA)

By Les Cool

Come! Join me on an adventure inside the world of online gaming. No, I'm not going to teach you how to play. That's not my thing. But there are men and women who do play, and some of them are Christians on a mission for God. As a matter of fact, one of our pastors is a gamer and an active missionary to the millions of gamers who fly below the radar of most churches.

Lighthouse Keeper: I've been told that you are involved in a rather creative, out-of-the-box form of evangelism. Could you tell us about it?

Brian: Well, to tell you the truth it's a bit hard to admit. I'm a gamer. I enjoy online video games. But as a gamer, I've fallen into the unique role as guild counselor for a group of other gamers (if you're a Star Trek: The Next Generation

fan, think Deanna Troi) - someone who give in-game and real life advice.

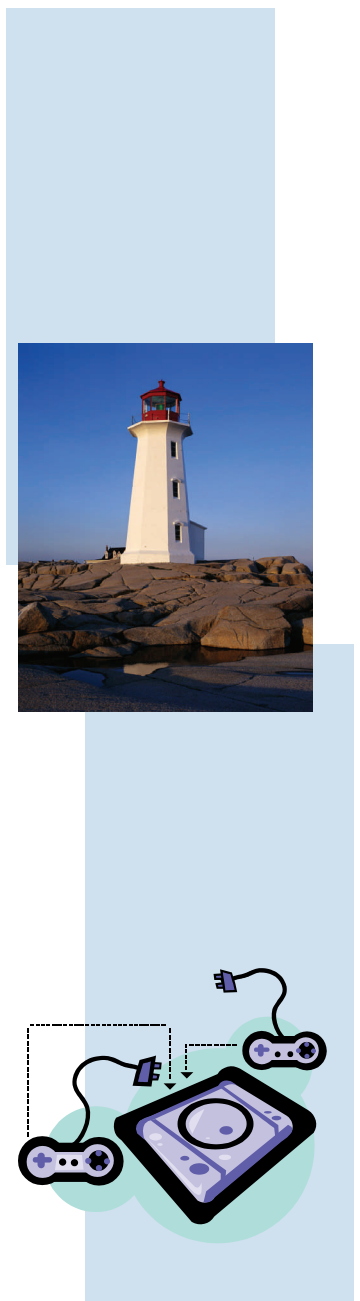
People play MMORPG's (Massive Multi-player Online Role-Playing Games) to escape reality, and that usually means they're dealing with some pretty serious issues. They're looking for answers to the questions daily life brings up, and maybe even a bit of ability to control circumstances that seem to be racing out of control. They are hurting, broken people who need Jesus. They just don't all know it yet.

Currently, over 8 million people subscribe to the game I play. Across the many online games, there are approximately 120 million people. These are people that many others just don't seem to get. But they are a huge group, and it would be insane for us to ignore them.

LK: You might have the largest church in our denomination! You should send in a quarterly report on this church and see how fast you hear from your CM.

Seriously: would you consider this personal, one-on-one ministry, or an extension of Pastor Brian? If it's Pastor Brian, how do you balance the time issues associated with "captured by the passion" as a gamer? I'm sure (I won't tell your church) that this part of church ministry is less pressure (maybe even more fun).

Brian: Most of the time, it is personal one-on-one ministry. The avatar (fancy name for the character you portray in game) I put on for people in the church (the Brian people see) is less like the "me" which I am comfortable with than the avatars I use in-game. At church, I have to watch my words, my posture, even my sense of



humor. I'm not allowed to get angry, frustrated or depressed (okay, maybe I am, but I'm not so comfortable doing it). In-game, I can just be myself.

But the pastoral side comes out too. And it is hard to balance the two. As anyone in ministry understands, the church makes a lot of demands on our "personal" time (if there really ever is such a thing). There are nights that I don't get to go online and play because "real life" interferes. And when it's not just a meeting for the sake of having a meeting, I really don't mind.

Now, if I really could figure out how to form an online church that would meet just for the purpose of Christian worship and development, and I was able to pay the bills doing it... well, it's probably best not to even think like that.

LK: Can you tell us any stories of how this has connected you with people who need Jesus? No names are necessary!

Brian: You would be surprised the kinds of things people are trying to escape from. As guild counselor, I've dealt with people who are facing all kinds of very serious issues. I've counseled people dealing with drug and alcohol addictions, assisted

folks facing terminal illness, prayed for people about to have surgery, dealt with inter-personal conflicts, advised regarding business decisions, career paths, provided marital and pre-marital advice ... all stuff you deal with in a "normal" church. But what inspires me the most are the conversations I'm able to have with people who are frustrated with the "whole religion thing." I've had more honest, in-depth conversations about spiritual matters, and have been able to introduce more people to the Lord in-game than I ever have with those in the church setting.

LK: The experts are right: on the edge of ministry tends to be more fun. I'm guessing some of the passion and energy of the gamer church flows back into your daily life as Pastor Brian. If so, what does this look like?

Brian: It's hard to translate. I'm into new and creative things. But we don't usually have the people or the willingness to do innovative things. I guess that's one of the reasons this outlet works for me. It gives me a chance to be on the cutting edge when I know it's going to feel like I'm stepping backward in time when I enter into the type of worship experience that most of our

folks seem comfortable with.

LK: That sounds reasonable. Now, let's get back to your examples of gamer ministry.

Brian: Take the following for examples — I don't need to change the names, because they're all pseudonyms anyway. Dyssomnia grew up in the Methodist Church, was even very involved in it — sat on leadership teams and all that. But he got burned by all the infighting and politics, as well as what he perceived as inconsistencies between what the Bible seems to say at face value and what was either being preached or practiced. Instead of answers to his questions, he got ridiculed for having them. He hasn't been back in the church for at least five years; but he still misses Jesus. We continue to have some very long, drawn out conversations about faith and life. He's very interested in coming back to Christ, if only he could get over his anger with the church.

Or Morly, who as a teenage boy in the youth group, had his first sexual experience with his pastor's wife. He jokes about it, but with great pain. It turns out that because of that experience, he's spent the last twenty years searching, succeeding greatly in many ar-



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eas, but always questioning whether he's being taken advantage of, and giving up way too soon. You see that frustration coming out in him quite often. He's been jaded by his circumstances and is haunted by his past. But whenever he has a serious question, he wants to talk to someone he knows will listen. I just happen to be one of those he will frequently pull aside for advise. He knows I'm a Christian. He even knows that I'm a pastor. And that's one of the reasons he seeks me out.

And then, there are allies. Zandarr is a deacon in the Baptist Church. He's also the only one in the guild older than me (he's 50). He's amazingly loyal, generous and encouraging. Between the two of us, we never seem to run out of those who are genuinely amazed that Christians would even care about this subculture of people who are so often overlooked.

Nighthawk is one of closest friends in game. He thinks I'm a trip. He's completely overwhelmed that a preacher would not only play games, but be so normal. Even though he lives in Seattle, Washington, he's said he wants to sneak into one of our church services just to check it out. Something about the down to earth nature of someone who cares touches him at the point of

his deepest need.

Of course, there are some who get uncomfortable with the whole "religion" thing the second they find out what I do in real life. Some of them are avowed pagans. Or they are agnostics. I still haven't met an actual atheist yet. Their biggest concern is that I will be harsh or judgmental towards them. And to date, although things got a bit distant at first when the ones who have a problem with religion found out I'm a preacher, they've all warmed up to a Christian who cares. Not a bad track record as far as I'm concerned.

LK: How would someone go about getting started with this kind of outreach?

Brian: This isn't for everybody. That's for sure. I'd say the first thing is passion for, or at least interest in, being a gamer. Be willing to immerse yourself in a culture that may seem unfamiliar at first until you get to know and love it, come to care for the people involved in that culture on a real personal level, be concerned about their eternal destinies and their temporal lives enough to get involved. Wait a second. That sounds like a missionary calling, doesn't it?

On the practical side, find a game that suits

your fancy. Start playing it. Make friends and stick with them. In any MMORPG, you need to form alliances to survive anyway, so you might as well have a purpose behind the obvious. It definitely helps if you have ventrilo or teamspeak server.

That way you can actually talk with people rather than type all the time. But even the shyest people come out of their shells while typing.

The biggest commitment is going to be time. Just as in any ministry situation, it takes a while to get to know people, although in a virtual setting, walls do seem to come down faster. But, then again, people ignore you easier too.

LK: Do you think you face the possibility that even the God-conversations might be a game for the gamer on the other end? I mean, they're just yanking your chain, leading you on. How do you know that the virtual conversation is a real conversation?

Brian: In all honesty, most of the conversations are game conversations. I'd say 95% is game related: go here, let's do this, look out. Another 4% or more is



just people being stupid, joking around with each other, teasing one another, that kind of thing. You can tell, though, when someone is getting frustrated, when the teasing has gone too far and someone's gone emo (a disturbing trend in today's young people; "emo" is short for emotional, but is usually carried to the extreme, sometimes expressed through "cutting or self-mutilation," but more likely than not, just a deep self-wallowing sort of depression). It's then that I step in. It's those conversations that lead to God conversations.

There are also the times when real life invades the game. Bursade and Sarene are a married couple who both play. Burs got on vent (using the ventrilo client and server, being able to communicate with your real voice, rather than via the keyboard) one day and shared that he wouldn't be able to keep an online commitment. His grandmother had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer and the tests had indicated she was already in the final stages. The simple little thing of knowing someone was praying for them meant more than they could say. Sarene even broke into tears. You could hear her sobbing. That kind of thing doesn't get faked.

You also know the

dialog is real when they keep coming back with more and deeper questions. This doesn't happen often, but more so than in the congregations I've served. Gamers are always looking for solutions. It carries over into real life.

LK: Is there anything else you would like to add to what you have already said?

Brian: I'll probably get flamed (gamer term) for suggesting that this is even a viable evangelistic strategy, but consider what's going on. The gaming community is made up of over 120 million people who need Jesus. You can't ignore that demographic. It's an industry that brings in billions of dollars a year. Online/virtual communities are replacing standard relationships at an astronomical rate. You can rage against the machine, complain about the current state of affairs, or accept this reality for what it is, and try to share Jesus in the midst of it. That's the tact I've taken.

LK: I'm not sure our audience is going to flame you. The readers of the Keeper are eager to try new things. Can you point us to resources (websites, etc.)?

Brian: Wow, until you asked the question, I thought I was pioneering the idea. But with a bit of research, I

discovered I'm not alone. There's an organization called Christian Gamer's Online (www.chrisitangamers.net; currently under repair) that helps to disciple people who come to Christ online. Christian conversation takes place on a vent server in a form similar to a sermon, but with the opportunity to provide instant feedback. This sounds like something for me to check into. Relevant Magazine has written well regarding the cyber-church phenomenon, and continues to be on the cutting edge of ministry to upcoming generations. There's a neat article on tying in church ministry with gaming at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/us/07halo.html?ei=5124&en=44d983565461d2c4&ex=1349496000&adxnml=1&partner=permalink&exprod=permalink&adxnmlx=1196467359-HVpb7ptp4PfC/FjMCYKQCw>. But all told, it is pretty much a learn-as-you-go kind of experience. It's kind of like real life and ministry, I suppose.

LK: Thank you, Brian, for sharing about this exciting ministry. We trust that we will hear more from you as you continue to reach out with the gospel.



"The gaming community is made up of over 120 million people who need Jesus."

Creative Outreach and Evangelism Resources

Church Ad Project... gives voice to the heart of the local church through relevant and attractive ad designs that can be used in a variety of ways (postcards, flyers, posters, etc.). Church Ad is available by phone (1-800-331-9391) and on the web (www.churchad.com). More than 100 fee-for-use ad designs are available.

ChurchMax ... is all about church marketing and promotion. Resources include direct mail ideas, materials and processing; internet and website tools (including registering a domain name); promotional “things” (from arm bands to zipper pulls) with your name and logo; and the personalized technical support you might need as you reach out to for Jesus. Contact ChurchMax by phone (1-866-281-8830) or find them on the web (www.churchmax.com).

Outreach ... is a provider of church communication and outreach tools, serving local congregations with ideas and materials designed to reach people for Christ. Outreach is available by phone (1-800-991-6011) and on the web

(www.outreach.com). Many of their resources are designed with specific target audiences in mind (traditional, contemporary, postmodern, etc.).

Church Marketing Sucks ... can be a vital asset for your outreach committee. Check out CMS (www.churchmarketingsucks.com) for more creative outreach ideas and insights, as well as links to MANY other resources and experts. This website is not for the faint-of-heart. It can seem overwhelming. But it might be your link to a perfect solution for your current outreach dilemma. In case you're wondering, this is a real site. Church Marketing Sucks has a mission ... “to frustrate, educate and motivate the church to communicate, with uncompromising clarity, the truth of Jesus Christ.” Church Marketing Sucks is a part of the Center for Church Communication (www.cfclabs.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to helping the church matter.



Promotional (logo-imprinted gimmicks) Resources:

Gopromos ... 1-800-523-9909 or www.GOpromos.com

4imprint ... 1-877-446-7746 or www.4imprint.com

Promo Direct ... 1-800-748-3326 or www.promodirect.com

Crestline ... 1-800-221-7797 or www.crestline.com

Amsterdam ... 1-800-833-6231 or www.AmsterdamPrinting.com



WANTED:

The Lighthouse editor invites your thoughts and experiences in response to the following question: How do you prepare your members to receive visitors? I would be delighted to print your ideas. Perhaps we could do an interview. Drop me a note (coolcopy43@comcast.net) or give me a call (302-395-1286). Let's find a way to share and encourage others by what you have accomplished.



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Lighthouse Resources

Mission America Coalition (www.missionamerica.org; click “Lighthouse Movement”) is committed to “Uniting Christians for Evangelism and Revival.” The Mission America Coalition (MAC) is helping mobilize Christian leaders and individual Christians to collaborate together to reach America with the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Their mission statement is “The whole Church taking the whole Gospel to the whole Nation—and to the World.” Through encouraging Christians to pray for, care for and share Jesus Christ with every person, the Coalition emphasizes spiritual unity, evangelism and revival. Check out its helpful website.



From the

Editor

Wanted:

In a previous issue, a sermon series touched upon several vital issues/questions that a local church might need to grapple with as they seek to do effective evangelism. The Lighthouse editor is looking for papers, discussions or interviews in response to the following:

- 1) The Question of Identity . . . Who am I?
- 2) The Question of Purpose . . . Why am I here?
- 3) The Question of Reality . . . What am I experiencing?
- 4) The Question of Destiny/Eternity . . . Where am I going?
- 5) The Question of Preparation . . . How do I get there?

Drop me a note (coolcopy43@comcast.net) or give me a call (302-395-1286). Your ideas might be the fuel for the next successful outreach campaign in one of our churches.