

# Technology unites missionaries, families around the world

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(RNS) Janine Winkler loves reading books to her 2-year-old grandson Judah, but instead of sitting on her lap at her home in Michigan, he's usually half a world away in Nigeria, where his father works for Wycliffe Bible Translators.

What connects them is Skype, the free online telephone and video service, that has made expensive phone calls and lengthy periods of no contact a distant memory for many missionaries abroad and their families back home.

"I've told people that I think God waited to send them until ... the technology got to where it was," said Winkler, who never had a camera on her computer or used Skype before her son left the country. "I couldn't imagine just waiting to get letters from them."

Missionaries say the new technology can bridge the thousands of miles between home and the mission field, often for free and in real time.

In a recent survey of more than 800 of its missionaries, Wycliffe found that about one-third use e-mail daily to communicate with family and friends back home. More than half said the Internet connections have made it possible for them to stay in the field longer.

Wycliffe President and CEO Bob Creson recalls the days when he was a missionary in Cameroon in the 1980s, when a staff of 200 would sign up to use the one landline to call home on weekends. Now texting, Facebook and Twitter are available to his employees.

"The world really has flattened out so that people in these very, very remote areas have contact," he said.

Aid workers and missionaries from other organizations also report improved ability to work abroad and stay in touch with family.

"It certainly does allow there to be instant and constant communication, where before the ability to communicate with family was limited and expensive," said Wendy Norvelle, a spokeswoman for the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board.

Jim, who has served as a Southern Baptist missionary in Asia for 15 years, says technological advances have allowed him and his wife to keep in better touch with their children, who returned to the U.S. as adults. When his granddaughter recently started walking, his son in Virginia alerted him that it was time to get on Skype.

"Actually, she walked very poorly because she was distracted by Grandma and Grandpa talking to her," said Jim, who couldn't be identified by last name because he "serves in a place where there are government gatekeepers in religious matters," the missions agency said.

Bwalya Melu served in Zimbabwe as interim national director for the Christian aid organization World Vision for most of 2009. Video communication proved difficult, but he was able to send text messages to his teenage sons after their football games.

"That was important to them," he said. "They wanted me to know ... how the game went, if they lost and how they felt."

Despite technology's benefits, some experts say there's a downside, especially with young missionaries.

"I know of several cases where young missionaries have been asked to spend much less time online, especially in the first year," said Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

"They're supposed to be doing language learning and being out among the people and they're spending like 50, 60 hours online" a week.

Norvelle said there is "supervision and accountability" for Southern Baptist missionaries, but said there are no specific rules on the number of hours that can be spent online.

Missionaries find the technology can be available one moment and inaccessible the next.

Chad Phillips, who manages the missionary kids program for the Assemblies of God, said the capability of technology varies greatly, from unlimited reach in Europe to Internet access in some parts of Africa that is "sparse and not user-friendly."

When it is available, he said the technology -- including phone services like Vonage -- has been particularly helpful when missionary kids leave a foreign country to head to the U.S. for college.

"No longer are Mom and Dad separated as they were 10 years ago, but now the parents can be much more involved while their kids are at college," he said.

Blogs, Facebook and videoconferencing are key for connecting everyone from aging parents back home to growing families overseas, missionaries say.

Chris Winkler alerted his parents back in Michigan that a second grandchild was on the way by having Judah wear a shirt with the words "Big Brother" as they talked on Skype. Other friends found out when he and his wife posted an ultrasound image on their blog.

"It really closes the gap and makes it seem like Nigeria really isn't that far away," said Chris Winkler, whose immediate family has returned stateside until their second child is born.

Winkler's Wycliffe colleague, Heather Pubols, works in Muizenberg, South Africa, and blogs to her family about how she and her husband Jeff spend holidays.

"Having access to video Skype has opened some new opportunities, even as simple as showing friends and family a new haircut," she wrote in an e-mail message responding to questions about her experience.

Both Pubols and Winkler acknowledge that the technology helps, but can't replace the in-person touch of a faraway relative.

"A virtual hug isn't nearly the same as a real hug," Winkler said.

"Being able to have Judah sit on his grandparent's lap and listen to the

book isn't nearly the same as having them reading the book over Skype."