Should I Serve Non-Christians?

We're continuing the series on "Launching Online" – capturing the decisions faced and lessons learned in launching a new online ministry/business.

By Russ McGuire - russ.mcguire@gmail.com

Last month we covered the hard topic of whether or not we should buy from non-believers. This month, we're going to go a step further and consider whether we should serve non-Christians.

What's Your Mission?

For the vast majority of Christian ministries, this is a really easy question. As believers we all are under the Great Commission, in which Jesus commanded His followers: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20 ESV)

The apostle Paul further clarifies for us when he writes "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" (Romans 10:14-15 ESV)

Therefore, most Christian ministries, especially churches are sent to "preach the good news" to those that don't yet believe, "making disciples" and "teaching them." If that is the mission of your ministry, then there is no question that you *must* serve non-Christians.

However, this series is about the lessons learned in launching Hschooler.net. Our mission is "to connect families with the people, resources, and tools to train up young men and women to the Glory of God." Our tagline is "A fun place to grow. A safe place to be." Inherent in our mission and our promise to those we serve is that we provide a secure environment where Christian parents can feel safe about their kids meeting new friends.

Therefore, the mission of Hschooler.net requires us to critically examine the question of whether to serve non-believers or not. Those we serve must trust that we're providing an environment that is safe from physical and spiritual predators, what Paul referred to as the "wolves" (Acts 20:29). Perhaps your ministry is in a similar position. Because of our duty to Christian families to provide a safe environment, the only conclusion we can reach is that we should NOT allow non-Christians to become members of Hschooler.net. As we describe it in our terms of service "it is important that all members of Hschooler.net have a common Christian faith and a common heart in the raising and nurturing of our children."

Excluding Non-Believers

It's easy enough to say that we shouldn't serve non-Christians. It's a much trickier thing to keep them out.

How have we approached this challenge at Hschooler.net?

We start by requiring everyone to agree to terms of service before they can gain access to the community. We provide a "plain English" version of the terms that is directly linked to the legal terms of service. You can read both here: http://hschooler.net/account/register.php. Note that our terms of service are published under the "Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike" license, so you should feel free to "borrow" from our example if it suits your purpose to the Glory of God.

The plain English terms include this paragraph: "As such, it is important that all members of Hschooler.net have a common Christian faith and a common heart in the raising and nurturing of our children. Agreement with the Statement of Faith is critical to your participation in Hschooler.net. **If you read nothing else in the Terms of Service, read this**" (as referenced above, bolding is in the original).

The legal terms include this paragraph, followed by a relatively broad, but clearly Christian statement of faith:

Statement of Faith. Hschooler.net is only for use by Christians and their families. To use Hschooler.net, you must agree with this statement of faith. This is not intended to be judgmental, but rather to ensure that all members of the Hschooler.net community have a common heart in the raising and nurturing of our children:

By definition, therefore, non-believers are banned from participating in Hschooler.net.

Enforcing the Ban

Of course, it's one thing to tell non-Christians they aren't welcome and it's another thing to actually keep them out. We have to expect that the "wolves" will come in. The question is how to identify them and remove them.

Jesus said "Beware of false prophets, who

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come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? … Thus you will recognize them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:15-20 ESV)

Therefore, we will know any "wolves" in our midst by their fruits – what they say and do within the service. We can't personally monitor everything that is written or added to the site, but we can rely on the fact that the vast majority of members share these Christian values and have the ability to discriminate between what is right and true and what is not. Throughout the site, virtually every page has a link in the top left labeled "Report as inappropriate." When members click on this link, the page is sent to the Hschooler.net administrators who check out the content and take appropriate action.

Thankfully, so far, most of the reports have been false alarms. We have had a couple of members reported who weren't acting as graciously online as I believe their Christian character would have them treat their neighbors offline. In these cases, a gentle admonition has had the desired impact.

But, if we ever do encounter true "wolves" as demonstrated by their fruits and their unrepentant responses to our correction, we will need to remove them from the service. We have the legal basis for doing so because of the terms of service that they agreed to when joining.

In addition to the agreement to a Christian statement of faith, the terms say "Hschooler.net may not be used for any immoral purposes. Specifically, Hschooler.net may not be used in a way contrary to the Glory of God. Examples of such forbidden activities include publishing any materials or promoting actions defined as sin in the Bible, or using Hschooler.net in a way that lies to others, steals from others, or otherwise fails to 'love your neighbor as yourself'." The terms also say we "may terminate your access to all or any part of the Website at any time, with or without cause, with or without notice,

effective immediately." Therefore, we have the legal basis to remove the "wolves" from the service.

The open source software we use (Elgg) provides an easy way to remove users from the system. Blocking them from rejoining isn't a feature of the software, but relatively easy to implement if it becomes a problem.

As always, your needs, experiences, and approaches will undoubtedly differ from ours, but hopefully it's been helpful for you to consider how we've approached these questions and decisions. May the Lord bless you with wisdom and discretion in your online ministry work!

Russ McGuire is an executive for a Fortune 100 company and the founder/co-founder of three technology start-ups. His latest entrepreneurial venture is Hschooler.net (http://hschooler.net), a social network for Christian families (especially homeschoolers) which is being built and run by four homeschooled students under Russ' direction.