

VESTRY PAPERS



To Encourage and Guide Those Called by God to Lead Episcopal Congregations

Parishes on the Internet

by the Rev. Frank M. Harron

What a difference a decade makes. Just about ten years ago, the Internet was expanded beyond the limited use of government and universities to anyone who has a computer through the creation of the World Wide Web. Web usage grew twenty-five fold in twelve months from June 1993. A tool that was once rare is now a household commodity for millions. Ethnic and racial minorities are the fastest growing groups of new web users in the United States.

We now know that the web is much more than a technological innovation; it is a major cultural revolution. In a speech given in April 1997, Tim Burners-Lee, whom many regard as the creator of the World Wide Web, identified three goals: "personal empowerment; social efficiency, understanding and harmony; exploitation of computing power in real life."

Access to information and conversation is now barrier free internationally. Movie and restaurant reviews as well as entry to rare,

primary resources in the world's major universities and museums are a click away. Conversations among people with special interests bubble away around the clock around the globe. Online education and training ignore old boundaries of time, location and cost.

Uses for congregations

What are some uses for this new tool for clergy and vestries?

I will make my suggestions in two categories: old uses for a new tool and new uses for a new tool. The "old uses" are more obvious and feel safer; "new uses" venture into the larger cultural changes created by the web.

The easiest use is advertising. In his article in this issue, Richard Bass describes how he and his wife used the web when they went "church shopping" in a new city.

continued on page 6

*Almighty God...direct,
we pray, those who
speak where many
listen and write what
many read; that they
may do their part in
making the heart of
this people wise.*

*-The Book of Common
Prayer, page 827*

Finding a Home: Websites and the Congregation's Mission

by Richard Bass

Last year, I moved from Memphis, Tennessee, to Alexandria, Virginia, to take a new job. This entailed many changes, but one of the most daunting challenges was finding a new church. I have fairly particular tastes, and I like to become actively involved in my home congregation. How could I find a community of faith that would welcome and nourish me, that I could embrace and that would embrace me?

According to the Episcopal Church Locator at www.theredbook.org, there were twenty

Episcopal parishes within five miles of my new zip code, and seventy-four within ten miles. I had never been confronted by such a blessing of abundance, and I was not sure how to sort through the choices. After visiting the closest parishes, which weren't quite right for us, the thought of more visits to unfamiliar churches with a three-year-old in tow was unappealing. So I turned to the web to find out what I could about the local parishes.

continued on page 3



CORNERSTONE
IS A MINISTRY OF
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
FOUNDATION



Small Churches and the Internet

by the Rev. Ann Hallisey

"We can't get an Internet service provider because the church doesn't have a credit card," complained the part-time church secretary. Since this was a congregation that had financial impropriety in its past, the rector was opposed to the church having a credit card. The parish office had three old computers, cast-offs from parishioners who had upgraded. They were used primarily for word processing and a bit of bookkeeping. It is not an atypical scenario of the bind in which many congregations find themselves. For small churches the problem is even more acute.

Mainline churches have not generally been known for their technological savvy. We were not the first in line to use radio or television as a means for furthering the work of the Gospel; now it is the Internet. Yet in just a few short years this seems to be changing.

Computers are common in parish offices. Clergy use e-mail as easily as the phone, in communicating with parishioners.

In the face of obstacles such as no money, lack of expertise, or problematic availability,

what is the vestry of a small congregation to do? The good news is that resources are available. A quick entry into an Internet search engine with the words "small churches and the Internet" yields a variety of options. Web designers, consultants and professionals abound, many who specialize in assisting churches of all sizes in crossing the "digital divide". In the "For Dummies" series one can find titles like *The Internet for Dummies*, *PCs for Dummies*, *Windows '98 for Dummies*, to name a few. See page 4 for more suggestions.

How can vestries help their congregations cross the "digital divide"? Apply what they use in their work and personal lives. Ask someone who knows. If there are parishioners who would like computers and cannot afford them, be bold. Ask around; perhaps there are others who are upgrading and would like to donate their old models. Just get started. Connecting can be as simple as a phone line and as vast as the world.

Ann Hallisey is the Director of Cornerstone.

Mainline churches have not generally been known for their technological savvy.

ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

Networking in the Electronic Age

by Eddie Gibbs

Churches across the theological spectrum and throughout the Western world are losing their young people in droves — and by "young people" I mean all those under 30 years of age. Anxious to identify churches that are making a significant impact, an adjunct instructor here at Fuller seminary came up with a solution that hadn't occurred to this 63 year-old. He said, "If they are in touch with Generation X and Y, they are web-savvy."

He then conducted a web search, which identified more than 300 churches with websites that were technically sophisticated, interactive and attuned to the generations that have been shaped by popular culture. Subsequently, we have begun to visit some of those churches. They are not mega churches, for the under 30's want intimacy and informality rather than celebrity

performances, but they are having a mega-impact through their cyberspace networks.

Communication by means of cyberspace constitutes one of the most significant developments in this generation. It has redefined how we access knowledge and develop communication networks. Knowledge is no longer privileged information.

Cyberspace technology divides church leaders into three camps in terms of interest, skills and attitudes. Some of us over 38 years of age have struggled to learn new skills, while others live in a different world—a world of knobs and wires, of pencil and pen, and paper and memos. Then there is the world of the under 25's who have grown up with a keyboard, computer screen and mouse. These are the N(et)-generation, who

continued on page 5

Websites and our Mission

continued from page 1

What did I learn from my search? I was not looking for a church with a website that was focused on attracting newcomers. I was looking for a congregation that knew who it was, regularly and intentionally communicated that knowledge, and that lived into that vision. I of course also wanted a church whose mission was consistent with my own beliefs, but how would I know if it wasn't clearly articulated?

Most of all, I wanted a sense of what life in that community would be like. What were the people concerned with? How did the leadership relate to the congregation? When and how did the congregation worship? What opportunities for education and formation were available to my family and me? This is information any newcomer will want to know, members need to know, and a congregational website is ideally suited to supply.

Planning the Website

Those who work with congregations emphasize the importance of a clear mission statement. How does the congregation view its call from God? How is that call expressed in its ministries and community life? These statements are often reduced to a blurb in the Sunday bulletin, and may occasionally be mentioned during a sermon or at the annual meeting. A website provides an excellent opportunity to show how the mission statement is put into action in the congregation. And putting together a website can be one of the rare times when a congregation will take the time to examine how well its life and its mission are aligned.

Regardless of the method in which the website is constructed—by members or professionals or some combination thereof—it is important that the leadership of the congregation be involved in planning the site. *A website is not a way to become something you are not; it is a way to show more fully what you are.*

Websites allow congregations to be lavish in their communications—there are no printing or mailing costs as there are for other forms of written communication. Increasingly, congregational leaders are using e-mail; setting up congregational news and prayer lists can bring the parish to its members several times a day rather than once a week.

Consider the following among the many ways that a congregation can reinforce its mission through its website:

- Post the order of worship during the week before the service, allowing congregants to familiarize themselves with the readings and hymns in advance.
- Describe the congregation's worship style, including the practices that vary across the church: Does it follow Rite I or Rite II? Does the congregation kneel or stand? Who may receive communion?
- Include sermons, which are often the most intentional statements a congregation's leaders will make about its mission. Some congregations include sermons in RealAudio format for online listening.
- Document parish activities. Include photos and participants reports.
- Post the newsletter and keep an archive of past newsletters.
- Search the web for resources that support the activities of the congregation and provide links, including interesting articles, diocesan and national church websites.

Websites are not difficult to create, and the software keeps getting easier to use. Web hosting can be obtained at a low cost. The site does not have to be fancy, but it should be interesting and comprehensive, providing congregants with any information they may need about the parish and its activities, and browsers with a clear and accurate picture of the community.

Richard Bass works for the Alban Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. He is the project manager of the Congregational Resource Guide, (www.congregationalresources.org), a joint effort of the Alban Institute and the Indianapolis Center for Congregations.



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Editor's Note

While this issue deals with new resources and the potential blessings they bring, we are also aware of the gap between those who have sophisticated equipment and those who cannot afford computers. Two suggestions: sharing and grants. If your parish has an outreach budget, you might endow a less fortunate congregation with either computers or the money to buy them. Or you might encourage your diocese to lessen the gap. As is true with all possessions in the Christian community, our faith will lead the way.

Lindsay Freeman

Some Episcopal Websites

Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This landmark church, built in 1767, is also a thriving parish. www.historicchristchurch.org

Calvary Episcopal Church, Memphis, Tennessee. Addresses the questions that arise along the journey of faith. Includes questions and answers from the parish's clergy and others, a weekly e-mail message, and bulletin board for discussions among members. www.explorefaith.org

St. George's Episcopal Church, Arlington, Virginia. Highlights include an online newsletter, the week's order of worship, vestry minutes, and a large collection of links. www.saintgeorgeschurch.org

Trinity Episcopal Church, Santa Barbara, California. A highlight of this website is the ability to listen to sermons online. www.trinitysb.org



YOUR CHURCH'S WEBSITE

A Rich Spiritual Resource

by the Rev. Clement W.K. Lee

Produce a good website and it can be your congregation's most important public presence, as well as a rich spiritual resource for members and prospective members.

The best "church growth" is about meeting spiritual needs, not about filling pews or treasuries. And your website can be a significant communicator for the spirituality that is centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ—in all of its dimensions: proclamation, spiritual nurture, witness, advocacy, prophetic commentary, caring and sharing.

Offer interactive topical discussions, open to members and non-members. Make announcements to members, to the neighborhood, to the world. Build community by offering frequent pictures and stories of the church at word, play, and worship. Learn how to add sound and video. Welcome feedback and questions about the church and about our faith; and about the website itself.

Congregations large or small should consider the value of developing special budgets for web designers and authoring tools for

volunteers. A passion for serving others sacrificially would get the ball rolling.

Some like to use the so-called "free" web pages offered to churches. That may be a starting place; but the best use of those freebies is to have one "real" website and list its web address on all of those free sites. Your real site will show that you care enough about the Gospel and about the people for whom Christ lived and died and rose again, to offer more than a cheap folder on a commercial tract rack in cyberspace.

And to match the welcome of your website, be sure to check how bright and clean your church sign is that points up the street to your other church door!

The Rev. Clement W.K. Lee is Director of Media Services (cwkl@episcopalchurch.org), in the Office of Communication at the Episcopal Church Center. He reminds readers to list their parish website information with the national Episcopal Church website (www.episcopalchurch.org), for which he serves as publisher, and welcomes feedback about site format and content.

Your website can be a great communicator for the spirituality that is centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

Networking in the Electronic Age

continued from page 2

will soon eclipse the boomers in numbers and will become the dominant influence in our culture by the year 2007.

Why do church leaders need to take cyberspace seriously? We need to recognize that websites are fast becoming the primary means of accessing information. Visit the websites of other churches, especially those that have significant ministry among the under 30s, and learn from what they are doing.

The church needs to come to terms with the reality that half the population in the U.S. is already surfing the web. Among young people between the ages of eight and fifteen that rises to about seventy percent. At the other end of the generational chain, seniors are also big-time web users as they combat loneliness and access services.

HOW TO SET UP A PARISH WEBSITE

The easiest—and free—way is through www.beliefnet.com, which walks you through the whole process. Also, try www.tripod.com, www.geocities.com. You can find free web space at www.freewebspace.net

MAKE LINKS

Links are places on your website that help people get to similar or deeper sites. Try www.anglicansonline.org or www.ship-of-fools.org. They make it easy. On their home page is an invitation to link your parish page. Push the onscreen button and follow the simple directions. Many sites offer similar links.

(source: Frank Harron)

The church has to find new ways of contacting scattered and diversified constituencies. During the past few years not only have Christian chat rooms mushroomed but also whole new movements have emerged through networking in cyberspace.

Using Cyberspace

In what ways can the church use cyberspace? In the first place, to advertise its ministries. But there are cautions. Websites are customized for a particular niche. Their websites are interactive. They do not simply invite “surfers” to worship services, but address issues that respond to the questions that their target audiences have.

Second, consider the evangelistic opportunities provided by web pages and chat rooms, which provide opportunities to address the issues regarding beliefs and behavior, world views and lifestyle.

Third, they are used to keep in touch with those who identify with their ministry. Some churches communicate with their members principally through e-mail messages rather than relying on expensive and cumbersome snail-mail. They use it to download sermons, Bible studies, task-force agendas; they share prayer needs and mentor leaders.

The cyberspace world has introduced a new form of organization that is not top-down and bureaucratic, but functions through networks and relationships. Most of the really significant movements within the church at the present time are arising at the grassroots and spreading through cyberspace. Either we get plugged in or we find ourselves locked out!

A helpful resource: Andrew Careaga, *eMinistry*, published by Kregel, 2001.

Eddie Gibbs is the Donald A. McGavran Professor of Church Growth at the School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.



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Parishes on the Internet

continued from page 1

Richard's point that a parish website must express its mission and ethos authentically is essential. For a site that conveys the essence of a dynamic ministry, take a look at www.GraceCathedral.org. Another way to present a strong, clear impression is to "archive" (store for easy access) important documents, such as a parish profile, significant sermons, committee reports or parish newsletter articles that capture the personality of the parish over time.

Creative links

You can make your site more interesting and useful ("sticky") by the creative use of links to sites that augment your parish ethos. Be creative. If you want to add some humor and stimulating conversation among Anglicans worldwide, consider linking your site to www.ship-of-fools.org. It is easy to link your site to other sites; www.anglicansonline.org.

Explore the cost/benefit of setup and maintenance of video and audio features. Grace Cathedral, already cited, is a vibrant example; so is www.marshall.org.

Beyond the development of a good parish website, clergy and lay leaders will also find exciting new resources for leadership development and personal growth.

www.FaithandWisdom.org is a listing of courses and conferences sponsored by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church.

A treasure trove

If you feel overwhelmed by the hundreds of thousands of sites under various religion categories listed by a search engine such as Google, the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life have done some selecting for you. Go to www.aril.org, scroll down to "Hot Spots" and you will be quickly rewarded with a treasure trove of resources. Are you the preacher or a lector for this Sunday and want some background? Look under their Bible "hot spots!"

Beyond parish advertising and personal and professional development, what about some "new uses for this new tool," that take advantage of the claim I made earlier that the web is both a technological innovation and a major cultural revolution?

The web can enhance practical tasks in the parish and significantly increase "interactive" communication. Consider sending to every family and individual in the parish the membership information you have for them annually and ask them to update it. Early fall is a good time when the parish programs are starting up and just before the stewardship campaign! Consider maintaining the parish prayer list on the web. This allows for instant communication and ongoing pastoral care.

Would you and your rector consider initiating an online Bible discussion? An online class requires a new role for clergy or others who might lead the course. See *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace* by Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt, (Jossey-Bass, 1999).

Jump into a discussion

You might want to experiment with a separate "seeker" site that is aimed not so much at "church shoppers" as "spiritual browsers." The success of www.beliefnet.com is inspiring some to experiment; Calvary Church, Memphis is one.

Discussion groups (list servers) are another "interactive" use of the web. Jump into a discussion already underway and then consider using this dynamic new way to expand communication within and beyond your parish. It should not be surprising that our GenX clergy are leaders in this use of the web. See their site and "lurk" or join the lively online conversation, www.gtng.org.

Our church is just beginning to get the first hints of the old and new uses for this technological innovation and cultural revolution called the World Wide Web. Recalling the revolutionary use of the web in our daily lives in the past decade, imagine the opportunities ahead for us in the next ten years!

Frank Harron (fharron@aol.com) has served parishes in Maryland and Philadelphia. He was vicar of Washington National Cathedral and scholar in residence at Trinity Church, Wall Street, and serves as a consultant and conference leader. He is at work on a new book, tentatively titled, Postmodern Believers.



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