

Caring Through Good Communication

By The Rev. Donald A. Fishburne

One of the troubles of the information age in communicating with parish leaders, members of the congregation, and the public is “information overload.” To combat this phenomenon, **efforts at church communications must be timely, personal, interesting, and “colorful.”** Tried and true methods still work: face to face conversations, a well-timed telephone call, and of course, a card or letter can still work wonders.

But there are new tools available to the church. Can we be high-tech and high-touch too? At Saint Paul’s, much of the communication among clergy, staff, churchwardens, parish officers, and other groups takes place at all hours of the day and night through voice-mail, e-mail messages, and faxes. These often eliminate the need for meetings.

This telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication.

*An 1876 Western Union
internal memo*

Because most Vestry members have e-mail addresses and faxes, a fair amount of routine information can be exchanged without incurring additional postage costs. Still, mailed Vestry packets with pertinent meeting information gets everyone up to speed and allows good stewardship of time during the actual meeting.

In communicating with the congregation at large, Saint Paul’s uses a two-color newsletter mailed twice a month to supplement the Sunday bulletin and announcements at worship. A mailing service is used so that parish staff and volunteers don’t have to keep up with all the intricacies of ever-changing Postal Service regulations and so that we’ll be guaranteed the lowest possible non-profit postage rate. (Do you really want to keep abreast of changing rules for “pre-sorted, bulk rate, CASS certified, nine digit zip, bar-coded, carrier-route sorted mail” ?!)

We are also experimenting with a simple device, PhoneTree™, which acts something like a telephone answering machine in reverse: church staff members or group leaders can record a voice message

once, and the system calls persons on any number of selective lists, delivering the message to group members or to their answering machines. The system can be easily programmed to deliver messages at any time of the day. It can also conduct simple polls: “Are you coming to Tuesday’s luncheon meeting? Press 9 for yes.” Or, “You are on our emergency call list for O negative blood. Can you respond to an emergency need for another parishioner?” The system can be easily programmed with a small set of numbers or quickly downloaded with the names and numbers of groups such as the choir, fellowship groups, youth groups, and so on. PhoneTree™ doesn’t cost any postage money and can be a quick way to notify groups of a schedule change or a meeting cancellation.

Other ways to communicate with parishioners include articles in the diocesan newspaper and notices in local daily and weekly newspapers.

In communicating with the general public there are traditional means: an ad in the “Yellow Pages,” in the “Religion Section” of the local newspaper, and even bumper stickers and billboards. **The front door of the church can be an inviting advertising message on its own: let it be open to the public every day.**

The information age offers new techniques to augment traditional methods: our newspaper ad encourages people with fax machines to “poll our fax” to receive a service schedule, map, and other information; and our Web site address, which appears as a line in our newspaper ad, invites readers to visit our pages (now metered at about 500 hits per month). The site was designed and is maintained by parishioners who volunteer their time and talents. **The explosion in the popularity of the Internet means that a Web site can be a cheap way to reach a limitless number of people.**

Of course, even in the digital age, with voice mail, e-mail with voice messages, video conferencing, and all manner of other emerging communications tools, a well-run meeting and a “Hi, I just dropped by to visit for a moment” still are among the best forms of communication around!

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com•mu•ni•ca•tions, n. the techniques used to communicate information. In this fast-paced, high-tech world, the ways in which we communicate and the medium we use to deliver a message are becoming increasingly more important. Church communications — to our own communicants or to the Church and world at large — are no exception. This issue of *Vestry Papers* addresses the tried-and-true as well as the information age technology. Hopefully, you’ll pick up some pointers that may help your own congregation’s communications efforts.

Being Online:

Excerpts from an address to the 1998 Convocation of Interim Bodies of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church Minneapolis, MN – March 20, 1998

By Bill Lewellis

Every morning on my drive to work, I look up to the top of the Cathedral Church of the Nativity as I cross a bridge into south Bethlehem. An image there centers me for Morning Prayer or Eucharist. I look first at the cross on the Cathedral roof, then at the satellite dish on top of the adjoining four-story bell tower. The cross becomes a window into the heart of God. The satellite dish becomes a symbol of the many and various other media of God's self-disclosure.

I wonder then where God will show up in my day. Cyberspace has become one of the places where I have come to expect that God will find me – whether at a web site or in a screen of e-mail or on an online conference. God has found me in all of those places – and I expect God will continue to do so.

Over the past four years, the Diocese of Bethlehem has taken the plunge in online communications by taking advantage of the unique conferencing system available through Quest/Ecunet. From the beginning, we looked upon this not as a communication project/program, but as a communication tool. Today **every person, even the Bishop, uses online communication as a tool for ministry, conversation, and community.**

We have developed a regional meeting – “Bethlehem of PA.” Though useful information is indeed a major component in the meeting, we have made every effort to keep the meeting truly horizontal. And it has, indeed, become virtual community. Currently, some 200 people dwell in our cyberspace – half from within the diocese, half from across the country. Most are Episcopalians, many are not. We have made it possible even for people who are not members of Ecunet to join the conversation via their Internet addresses. We have emphasized that this is a Christian community. Everyone is welcome. Everyone is respected.

I can't overestimate the importance of the online presence of the Bishop. Because computer networking will inevitably move the church and the world toward types of horizontal communication wherein gatekeepers (top-down communicators) will become dinosaurs, a bishop ought not be intimidated by electronic conferencing (such as on Quest/Ecunet) nor by the responsiveness required of him/her within that world of horizontal communication. In order to build community through telecommunications, the Bishop needs to be vulnerable. For that is what keeps communication horizontal.

Within our regional public meeting, we have been in relationship with a priest during the week preceding his serious cancer surgery. He shared with us online how he and his family were facing the stark possibility of his death. We prayed online with parents who were anxious about news that their paratrooper son was about to be sent to one of the hot spots of the world. We were in online relationship with parishioners of one of our churches as they shored up a dike during a flood, lest the river flow through their church. We recently welcomed online a doubter/seeker who needed a community wherein he might air his feelings. Six of our congregations farthest away from Diocesan House have created a private meeting wherein they converse with one another and with their Bishop. We are hoping soon to have every member of Diocesan Council online.

During my early online experience, I saw something that drew me into this medium of communication and exemplified its potential. There was an invitation on the Ecunet system to join a meeting for preachers to discuss the Oklahoma bombing. It read as follows. “I remember growing up and being told by my parents how the Sunday after John F. Kennedy was shot the minister preached on something totally irrelevant. In response to this evil and tragedy [in Oklahoma], we need to help the people in our parishes make sense of the world and God. The issue of theodicy is very real right now. How will we be relevant in our pulpits on Sunday morning?”

The Internet in its many incarnations is where I have gotten to know – and respect – people I may never have the good fortune of meeting, or whom I meet face to face rarely. It's where I have also gotten to know people I only thought I knew. Leander Keck says in *The Church Confident* that, **“the self-communication of God is communicated in the gospel. Since the church lives by the gospel, communication is at the heart of its life. Consequently, the renewal of the mainline churches will manifest itself in the renewal of their communication.”**

We can't imagine yet what it will mean when hundreds of thousands of people active in ministry – as many people as want to – can be connected for thoughtful conversation. The conversation may change the nature of church as institution and as agent of reconciliation. I think we need to be there as subjects rather than as objects when that's happening.

Bill Lewellis is Communication Minister/Editor for the Diocese of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.

Ephesians 3:7-10

Web Communications

Suggestions on how to get started

By Alethea B. Pratt

Does it feel like everything you read or hear starts with www? The World Wide Web is closing in on all of us. Everybody has a Web page - large corporations, local governments, your twelve-year-old! Everybody asks if you are on the Web. So the time has come for your parish to join the Web party, and you want to know where to start.

Every successful project begins with research, a goal, a plan, and commitment. Ask some basic questions such as how many people in the parish have access to computer equipment? If the majority of the membership is not on the Internet, then do not rely on the Web for communicating information about upcoming events in the parish! If outreach to the community at large is the goal, are there local community organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce or a community college who would link to your site or even offer to host your site?

Who is going to maintain this site on a timely basis? Is there somebody who will "own" and care for it? Good web sites invite people to come back and revisit. There is nothing more frustrating than outdated information and material, and think what that does to your image!

What about the name? The name will be used in your advertising. Select a domain name that will be easy to remember and will fit on your letterhead, calling cards, and bulletins. Register the name with Internic <ftp://rs.internic.net/templates/domain.template.txt>. Once you register your name you will own

it, and more importantly, you can move it to any host site you wish.

What is the best way to present material? A web site can be presented in many ways. A visit to other sites on the web can help decide what your look will be. Do not be afraid of color. It can be used to draw the eye to a particular feature. Use clean crisp graphics and size them appropriately. Not every visitor will have the ideal computer and modem, so maximize what will be seen on the home page. Use navigation buttons on each page. A visitor should not rely on his/her browser to navigate a Web site.

Once all the plans are made and the web site is developed, it will need to reside on a host server. Look in the community for organizations that will host your site for a nominal fee each year. Local governments, libraries, colleges, and business community groups are some sources. A local ISP (Internet Service Provider) will also provide this service.

As you may have surmised by now, a web site is a commitment! Technology is ever evolving and with it come new ways to send your message. Always verify that you are delivering the message that you intended at the outset of the project, and do not be afraid to start over. Tomorrow's new wizardry might fit your needs better!

Alethea B. Pratt is Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer for The Church Pension Fund in New York City.

Precision of communication is important, more important than ever, in our era of hair-trigger balances, when a false, or misunderstood word may create as much disaster as a sudden thoughtless act.

James Thurber
Lanterns and Lances

Church Periodicals . . .

Here are a few publications your Vestry may be interested in, as well as information on how to subscribe to them. For a complete listing of church periodicals, please refer to *The Episcopal Church Annual*, published by Morehouse Publishing (717) 541-8130.

- *Anglican & Episcopal History*, Box 261, Center Sandwich, NH 03227
- *The Anglican*, (914)226-5727
- *The Anglican Digest*, (501) 253-9701
- *Anglican Theological Review*, (847) 864-6024
- *Bible Lands*, Jerusalem and the Middle East Church publication, Fellowship of St. James of Jerusalem, Box 216, Cotati, CA 94931
- *The Christian Challenge*, (202) 547-5409
- *College of Preachers Newsletter*, 3510 Woodley Road, NW, Washington, DC 20016
- *CPC Quarterly*, the newsletter of the Church Periodical Club, 3344 Hunter Road, Lexington, KY 40502
- *Episcopal Life*, (212) 922-5382
- *Forward Day by Day*, a daily devotional

guide from Forward Movement, (800) 543-1813

- *Insights*, a news magazine of ERM, (800) 299-6324
- *Journal of Women's Ministries*, (800) 903-5544
- *The Little Chronicle*, The Society of St. Francis, Box 389, Mt. Sinai, NY 11766
- *The Living Church*, 816 E. Juneau Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53202
- *St. Andrew's Cross*, the magazine of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew, (412) 266-9577
- *Sewanee Theological Review*, an Anglican journal of theological reflections, (615) 598-1475
- *Sharing*, a journal of Christian healing, Box 13701, San Antonio, TX 78213
- *The Virginia Seminary Journal*, 3737 Seminary Road, Alexandria, VA 22304
- *The Voice of Integrity*, Box 5255, New York, NY 10185-5255
- *The Witness*, a journal addressing social justice issues of the Church, (313) 841-1967
- *Worldwide Anglican Encounter Newsletter*, 815 Second Ave., New York, NY 10017

" . . . the mission of a community is to give life to others, that is to say, to transmit new hope and new meaning to them."

Jean Vanier
Community and Growth

The Communications Dilemma from a Diocesan Perspective

by Tom Beckwith

The Diocese of Colorado is geographically extensive. The majority of the state's 65,000 Episcopalians live in an urban axis along what is called the "front range" (of the Rocky Mountains) extending from Ft. Collins in the north to Pueblo in the south. This axis includes the Denver metropolitan region and the city of Colorado Springs. There are also large pockets of Anglicans throughout the mountain and western regions, and several vibrant congregations on the eastern plains.

As in many dioceses, this geographic mix can make for a rich and, sometimes, stressful jumble. Church politics tend to mirror those of the state, with urban interests conflicting with rural. The physical barrier of the continental divide also creates psychological distance between the populous front range and the communities on the "western slope." People in smaller communities also suspect their urban brothers and sisters of having "liberal" tendencies, so that there is sometimes a confusion and mistrust of motive.

The mix is a frustrating one when one is trying to use communication as a tool to build a sense of community. Limited diocesan resources make it impossible to place a paid assistant editor in each congregation, and efforts to identify volunteers have been less than successful. The diocese is currently struggling to find the funds to hire five associate editors who will become conduits of information from the congregations to the diocese. Without that personal contact, it is easy for churches to believe they have been "forgotten" by the diocese. "You never report any of the good stuff that we're doing," is a frequent complaint from lay people and clergy to the diocesan communications office, who assume it is because of an unstated editorial bias. Clearly, the work of ministry is being done mostly in the

"trenches" of the individual congregations, they complain, but you would never know that to read the diocesan newspaper.

A longstanding strategy in the Diocese of Colorado has been to subscribe to congregational newsletters, then comb them for information on the churches. The pickings are surprisingly thin. Most parish newsletters are little more than narrative calendars that report on upcoming events. Presumably, this is because of a clergy orientation that struggles to promote events and get a good turnout. Rarely, however, do church newsletters report on the outcome of such events.

In 1999, the communications office of the Diocese of Colorado plans to hold a series of workshops throughout the state that will train church newsletter editors in journalistic techniques as well as give tips on layout. It will be at once a ministry to the congregations to help them improve their internal communications and a shamelessly self-serving exercise to improve diocesan communications. The diocesan communications office hopes to identify people who will "string" information about their congregations to the diocese.

Communication is really a chain or string that binds people together through an awareness of their shared experiences and goals. Diocesan communications goals are not so very different than those of a parish or mission. Anything that we can do to strengthen the links in the chain will improve the entire effort.

Tom Beckwith is editor of the Colorado Episcopalian and serves on the executive board of Episcopal Communicators, a national organization of people with communications responsibilities in the Episcopal Church.

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(\$25 annually for 5 issues
sent in packages of 12 copies of
each issue)

To subscribe, contact the
Cornerstone offices listed above.

Questions to consider about communications . . .

- In communicating with the Vestry and other key congregational committees, is the church office using the most effective means of communication available to it?
- Is your parish newsletter making the most effective use of space, and is it reviewed regularly for quality and content?
- Does your congregation have a web page,

and if so, is it being updated on an as-needed basis? By whom?

- Do you have a good working relationship with your local newspaper?
- Do you contribute regularly to your diocesan newspaper?
- Have you polled your congregation on their preferred method of communication?

Other Cornerstone Publications . . .

- **Vestry Resource Guide** — designed to assist vestries, as the elected lay leadership, with their role. \$5.00 per copy. Order by calling Forward Movement at 800-543-1813.
- **Involuntary Termination** — a research report dealing with findings on conflict that can

result in the involuntary termination of a rector. \$2.50 per copy. Order by calling Cornerstone at 901-527-1450.

- **Spirituality Consultation** — a brochure on the process of discernment and spiritual reflection in a retreat setting. \$0.25 per brochure. Order by calling Cornerstone at 901-527-1450.