

The Wired Church

As we enter the 21st century, new technologies are developing all around us. Email, the Internet, cell phones, wireless devices, DVD, laptop Pentium computers, cable access. As Intel's commercial jingle says, "It's a wired world." A reported 159 million people are now online and an estimated 70% of North American households have a PC. A recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, showed that 21% of Internet users have looked for religious and spiritual information online – making this a more popular activity than online banking, participation in online auctions, and the use of online dating services.

New technologies are not only being embraced by the N-Generation (those who have grown up surrounded by digital technologies). Growing numbers of clergy are online. Recently, an article in *Modern Liturgy* magazine listed 100+ websites for preachers, compiled by "webminister" Richard Fairchild. Many

periodicals for clergy including *Modern Liturgy* and the *Practice of Ministry in Canada* (PMC) feature regular columns on web page content and design and reviews of online preaching and worship resources. Websites with names like The Desperate Preacher's Site (www.javacasa.com/dps), Preach! (www.cyberword.com/preach), and The Sermon Barrel (www.joinhands.com) offer collections of sermons, anecdotes, illustrations, and lectionary discussion groups. What is the attraction for clergy? For clergy, especially those in rural/small pastorates, the Internet offers a way to connect with colleagues around the world. "Being in rural ministry, we run the risk of isolation" says Mark Satterly, a United Church of Canada minister in Manitoba. "So I am always looking for online connections...a place to find ideas for worship."

There are fewer sites dedicated to Christian education but, as churches begin to experiment with technology in their Sunday School and weekly programs, that is changing. Take for example the website created by Neil MacQueen (www.sundaysoftware.com), author of *Computers, Kids, and Christian Education: How to Use Computers in Your Christian Education Program*. MacQueen is the pastor of a Presbyterian

The world has changed.

The question is: Has the church changed to meet the needs of the present

church in Ohio. His own church began to experiment with computers in Christian Education in 1990 with two donated computers. They quickly grew to having five computers in their Bible Computer Lab, which classes visit on a rotating basis.

In their search for new approaches to Christian education that will excite and attract both adult leaders and children, many churches have begun experimenting with using computers in church education. Why? Because when multiple senses are involved, learning is a richer experience. And computers today involve multiple senses – through sound bites, images, music clips, art, and the spoken and written word. To those who would scoff at the idea, we would stress that this is nothing new. Christian educators have always used audiovisuals to enhance teaching – fish drawn in the dirt, stained glass windows, Bible story pictures, flannelgraph figures, filmstrips, and videos. The computer is just another, albeit powerful, multi-media tool.

"The goal of Christian Education is to tell 'the old, old story' in ways that speak to today's world," says Cheryl Kirk, diaconal minister at Trinity United Church in Wallaceburg, Ontario. "As Christian educators, we have to find ways to share the good news in today's language. Without a doubt, computers are the language of today." Kirk's congregation, which started its experiment with computers in 1998 by offering a computer learning center during their Vacation Bible School program now has a lab of computers. "In a time of declining attendance and shifting trends in church

life, I believe that the computer is one more tool that we can use to reach and teach."

In their book *Wings Like Eagles: How to Be a Thriving Congregation in the 21st Century*, authors Clair Woodbury and Joyce Madsen describe how they talk to participants in the workshops they lead: They ask people to reflect on how they welcome visitors into their home. What if there are children coming? If there are teens coming? If there are babies? "We remind folks that when newcomers walk in the door of their church, whether they are conscious of it or not, they expect the same rules apply...How clean is your nursery? How well stocked with CDs is your teen space? How many computers do you have in your computer room? You will notice, we have not asked whether your church has a computer room. That is not the question any longer, only how adequate your computer room is and whether all the computers are linked to a fast Internet service or not."

Communication has always been at the center of the life of the Church. In the early days of the Church, epistles (important letters written by Bishops in the early Church) were carried from diocese to parish by Deacons. Later with the rise of Benedictine monasticism, monks hand copied books – creating vast libraries that preserved knowledge through the dark centuries and into our day. With Gutenberg's invention of moveable type, printing became available for everyone, and yet for years, the Bible and other religious books and tracts were the most common items printed. For centuries, the Church remained at the center of information communication. The Church founded schools, libraries, and universities to store and communicate information. Even Sunday Schools were

designed by the Church to communicate information about Jesus to a young, illiterate population.

Today, churches and church people are using new technology in ever-expanding ways to communicate and do their work. Ellen Cutter, a Christian educator in a United Methodist congregation in Illinois, describes her experience of participating in an email-based discussion group as "probably the most consistent support I have in my job." Janet Farrow, the Superintendent at a Presbyterian church in Michigan agrees: "I like sharing ideas (via email) and learning about what

other churches are doing with their Christian Education." In the Presbytery of Superior, isolated, diverse and geographically spread-out churches meets online to do its "routine business" which includes online motions and voting. At its expense, the Presbytery purchased a computer for every congregation and provided 20 hours of Internet time per month. A programmer and Webmaster trained the apprehensive elders how to use the program, how to post questions, debate, and vote. "Although an 'online presbytery' will never replace a 'face-to-face presbytery,' the electronic meetings have removed much of the time-

consuming stuff that can overwhelm a presbytery's agenda, clearing the way for more interesting and creative work," says Mary Whitson, formerly a minister in the Presbytery of Superior.

Ten years ago, many of us, hesitantly, gave up our electric typewriters for computers. We learned to use them and, discovering their advantages, liked them better. So we too may find this new technology confusing at first, even overwhelming. But as we discover the advantages, we may find new resources to expand and enrich our ministry.

Diary of A Week in the Life of the Wired Church

MONDAY

The office manager checks the church email. Two people have sent messages about members of the congregation who are ill and a committee chair sends the wording for a bulletin announcement. The Treasurer downloads current banking transaction records and checks the status of investments made with a bequest from an online brokerage in order to prepare his report for the Board Meeting. An office volunteer searches the File Maker Pro database of congregation members for families with children between 4-12 to send a letter of invitation to the Family Fun Night Advent Party. A church Elder checks the online Presbytery Meeting Bulletin Board for new business and uses her password key to post a question, add to a debate, and vote on a motion.

TUESDAY

The minister reads messages from the lectionary discussion group he belongs to and begins preparing his sermon. The office manager uses the online Bible at www.crosswalk.com to download and copy the passages for next Sunday into the Lector's book. The minister sends out Bible commentary and questions for reflection to the adult Bible E-Study group. Group members discuss passages with each other by email during the week. The Sunday School Coordinator books a video online from a denominational outlet. The Chair of the Church Board opens the meeting with a reflection and prayer downloaded from a site that offers free devotional messages. The Secretary of the Board takes minutes on a laptop to save time transcribing minutes from hand-written notes.

WEDNESDAY

The Secretary of the Church Board circulates minutes by email to committee and Board members with email addresses. At 10:00am people gather in the computer lab for the "You've Got Mail" coffee program for seniors and retired people to learn basic computer skills and how to send and receive email. The minister of Christian Education fills out a curriculum evaluation online, saving time and postage. The "Wednesday Night Live" spirituality-and-the-movies video study group meets. The group has purchased a license from a motion picture licensing company that allows church groups to rent and view contemporary films.

THURSDAY

The chairperson of the Outreach Committee downloads a petition on child labor from a justice website. The Sunday School Coordinator sends free electronic greeting cards to children and youth who have birthdays coming up. The Youth group creates a Powerpoint slide show, using photographs of people in the congregation, that will be projected on a screen during the hymn "For All the Saints." A member of the Worship Committee downloads instructions from the Internet to create a temporary labyrinth using masking tape on the floor of the sanctuary.

FRIDAY

The sermon is emailed to Sunday School teachers who miss that part of the worship service because they are teaching. The editor downloads free clip art to add graphics to the church newsletter. The office manager uses Stamps.com to download and print postage on envelopes to mail out the newsletters.

SATURDAY

Sunday's sermon is archived on the church website, along with announcements of upcoming events and a "this week at our church" schedule that includes times and locations for youth group, adult Bible study, other mid-week and committee meetings. The church newsletter is emailed to young adults who are away attending college to keep in touch and tell them what's happening at home.

SUNDAY

At 9:30am the kitchen volunteers arrive to set up for coffee hour. The coffee urns, which used auto-timers to turn on a half hour earlier, are perking happily away. The Junior Class uses the computers in the computer lab to visit websites to learn more about the origins of Advent symbols and colors. They download patterns to create a Jesse Tree.