

CONGREGATIONS AND COMPUTERS

I went to seminary, not MIT. I know very little about computers and even less about the World Wide Web. All I know is we have two computers that someone gave us, a printer that works about half the time, and a secretary who says it's easier just to keep all the records on paper. The only reason we have a Web page is because a group of 11-year-olds from the confirmation class decided to create one. Who knows what they're putting on it!

Can you hear yourself saying something like this? If so, you're in good company. While many congregations own computers, few benefit fully from their capabilities. How important are these "indispensable" machines to you? A few observations:

The World Wide Web Isn't Universal — Children without access to a home computer are widely regarded as being at an educational disadvantage. What does that say for computer-challenged congregations? Is a computer-less congregation hampered because they don't receive information as quickly as their e-mail oriented counterparts? Are congregations with homepages more likely to attract visitors who surf the web for worship times or convenient locations?

Give Me That Ole' Time Computer – The used computer one of your members donated may be a little like the shag carpeting they offered for the youth room – run over and worn out. Computer functions such as speed, memory, internet access, and software capabilities change quickly. Upgrading an old machine can be nearly as costly as purchasing a new one. Having an old computer can be more frustrating and costly than having none at all!

I Can't Catch On Until I'm Caught Up - The congregational secretary – the staff person most likely to find a computer dumped on his or her desk – practices a ministry of interruptions. Ringing phones, frequent visitors, and forgetful bosses leave little time for structured, uninterrupted training on new computers or software. Inadequate training or explanation of the purpose limits computer usage, and leads to frustration among volunteers and staff.

The Giga-Gap – My father's definitions of a mouse, a CD, and a browser are different from my daughter's. There is a genuine generation gap in computer usage and knowledge. The problem is accentuated when one considers that the average age of Indianapolis clergy is 50, while the percentage of church members who are 19-35 is half that of the general population. Fewer computer-savvy individuals are found in congregations than in other organizations.

AND YOUR POINT IS?

A computer can aid congregations with record keeping, mailing lists, and producing bulletins and newsletters – and can do these and other jobs better, cheaper, and faster. The internet abounds with free resources for grant writing and sermon preparation. Busy clergy frequently extol the advantages of e-mail correspondence over snail mail or frustrating games of telephone tag.

If getting started is a problem, publications such as Scroll and Christian Computing can help with the issues of purchasing and using computers. The Indianapolis Center for Congregations offers workshops on computer basics. And nearly all congregations include some members who are computer savvy – often they're between the ages of 10 and 16.

But here's the rub: Do you and your congregation even want to be more efficient? Is there a cost – beyond equipment and training – to administrative efficiency? E-mail is expedient but qualitatively different than a phone call or personal contact. Some suggest the thousands of sermons and papers on the internet stimulate better preaching and teaching; others argue critical reflection and local relevance are sacrificed. For better or worse, computers have changed the way congregations and clergy operate.

Let's talk about how computers – or the absence of them – shape your life and work. Send me an e-mail or a letter, give me a call or let's meet face-to-face. But let's keep in touch.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kevin".

Kevin R. Armstrong is minister of community ministries at Roberts Park United Methodist Church in downtown Indianapolis, and serves as senior public teacher of The Polis Center. You may write to Kevin at The Polis Center, call him at (317) 630-1667, or contact him by e-mail at Clergynote@aol.com.

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