# CONGREGATIONS AND CYBERSPACE

**Problem:** The rapid growth of the Internet has dramatically changed the way people find and exchange information—leaving many congregations behind.

**Solution:** Congregations are turning the Internet's power of communication into a tool for building stronger bonds of community.

The most revolutionary aspect of the Internet may be the way it expands the free flow of ideas, obliterating old barriers of time and distance. E-mail allows widely scattered users to receive identical messages almost instantly, while the World Wide Web allows any person to post his or her opinion to a public site that can be accessed at any time, from almost anywhere.

For example, anyone in the world who has access to the web can read Thomas Hill's opinion about Halloween. Hill is the associate pastor for outreach and missions at Eastern Star Church in Indianapolis. On his web site (www.halloweenoutreach.com), Hill argues that Christians should not observe Halloween as a holiday. Rather than convincing people to stop handing out candy, though, his goal is to help them use that tradition as an evangelistic tool.

Hill sells booklets for sale over the web that Christians can hand out along with candy. The booklets trace the history of Halloween and explain why Hill believes its celebration is offensive.

Hill's work on Halloween Outreach is formally separate from his work as a staff member at Eastern Star. As of summer, 1999, his web page could not be accessed through the church's web site—because the church did not yet have one.

While individuals are using the Internet for all sorts of purposes, some large organizations have yet to establish a presence there. (Eastern Star, which ranks among the largest churches in the city, is in fact developing a web site.)

Five years ago, the Internet was in its infancy and few congregations maintained a web site. Today, the Internet is evolving into a commonly-used—and powerful—communications tool. Five years from now Internet access may be as ubiquitous as the telephone, and congregations without web sites the exception.

Hill's use of the Internet to promote Halloween Outreach '99, and Eastern Star's relatively late entry into the field, are instructive. Hill began his web site with a specific agenda in mind. Eastern Star did not develop a site earlier because it had no convincing answer to the question, "Why do we need one?"

"It can be worthwhile for a church to have a web presence," said Nancy Armstrong, director of finance

and computer services at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, "but you have to think about what your purpose really is—what is it that you want the site to do?"

Some congregations offer only basic information on their web site. Others offer elaborate details about their programs, make staff e-mail addresses available, post their newsletter, and archive sermons. A few even offer live transmission of their worship services.

Congregational web sites tend to be spare, but a few, including those of some small congregations, are impressively sophisticated. Typically, congregational web sites are designed and maintained in-house by a volunteer; having a site professionally designed can cost thousands of dollars.

A congregation with a traditional worship style and an older membership may feel little pressure to have an attractive web presence—or any presence on the web at all. A congregation that has initiated alternative-style services targeting a younger audience may put more thought and effort into its web site.

Following are two examples of congregations attempting to make use of the Internet. They are not much interested in the medium's capacity to reach a national or international audience, but are concerned with how the Internet can help them here, in Indianapolis, build stronger ties of community.

## Holy Cross Lutheran Church

Holy Cross is located on Oaklandon Road in the rapidly growing Geist area on the city's northeast side. The church began in 1988 with twelve families; it now averages about 400 worshippers each week.

Holy Cross's location along a heavily traveled road in a booming part of the city has been key to its growth. Its location has also shaped the pastor's philosophy about using the Internet. The nature of the neighborhood makes it important for the church to be online, he said, because the Internet creates opportunities to build community in a place where there are few ties that bind.

"In this area, everyone moves here from someplace else," said Rev. John Sattler. "There are no long-term members. If they're moving here, they're moving away from family. They don't have connections in the area, unless their kids are in the schools; otherwise, they're just left hanging."

Sattler, who spent two weeks of vacation in the summer of 1997 learning to create web sites, constructed and maintains Holy Cross's site himself. Sattler believes it is the church's responsibility "to provide as many connections as possible—member to member, member to community. We want to get people talking to each other and developing relationships. All the things we do here are a way to get people relating to each other, because that's how you love one another."

Sattler sends out, via e-mail, a weekly update to all church members with an e-mail account. (In 1996 only four members had an account; today the number is well over two hundred.) The update—less than a formal newsletter but more than a note—contains news about recent events at the church, reminders of upcoming events, and a joke. It also includes a summary of the e-mail notes that he receives during the week from members, provided that the messages are intended for distribution.

Holy Cross's web site is an eclectic mix of information about the church and links to other sites that may interest the user. The home page is devoted to a general description of the church and its location, and news of upcoming events sponsored by the church. A permanent "frame" along the left edge of the screen lists allows the user to connect directly to each page on the web site, including a page that lists biographical and contact information for the church's staff members.

Some pages are seldom visited; others, like the online version of the church's newsletter, are visited frequently. Holy Cross subscribes to a service that tracks activity on the church's site. It reports such data as the number of "hits" the site receives on a monthly basis, the site from where users enter the Holy Cross site, and the length of time viewers spend viewing the different pages.

When Sattler updates the site, he concentrates on changing those pages that get a large number of hits. The "latest news" portion of the home page and the newsletter receive the better part of his attention.

**East 91st Street Christian Church**

East 91st Street's web site is most notable for its simplicity. The design is spare, yet sophisticated, attractive, and easily navigable.

This sparseness is not for lack of information to convey. East 91st has a membership of several thousand people, and the church is set to dedicate a new Community Life Center, which will house programs and activities aimed at both church members and the community at large.

East 91st Street's web site also features a frame along its left edge, but unlike the Holy Cross site the frame lists only a few options: the home page; information about the church's philosophy; information about its various programs; schedules of upcoming events; and a map with directions to the church.

The site has been online since 1997. Volunteer members of the church maintain the site. Once a month, a church committee meets to discuss maintenance and changes to the site.

For now, only the two pages that list upcoming events change regularly. And the church has decided to scale back the postings of upcoming events information.

"We've found that the maintenance of upcoming events pages takes a lot of time and effort," said Darrel Cross, systems administrator for East 91st Street. "And, while we have a fair number of people hitting the sites, all that information is available from other sources—written publications, or on Sunday morning from the pulpit. So it's redundant. We're refocusing our efforts on more static information that members may not be able to obtain otherwise. For example, members don't really know who our missionaries are, what they do, where they are. So we're hoping to build a set of pages about missionaries."

East 91st has undergone significant changes in recent years. Once it had a primarily older congregation, but its membership base has become younger as the church has concentrated on building its family and singles ministries. The church's Internet activities are a relatively low priority, because there are more urgent matters to deal with, even though its younger membership is more likely to use computers.

"We feel behind the curve right now because the church has changed so much in the past three years," Cross said. "We're still trying to figure out how to respond to that. We recognize that people are turning to the Internet more and more for their sense of community and worship. We recognize and want to be a part of that. How it's going to happen, we don't know yet."

## The Quest for Community

Both Sattler and Cross say that fostering community is a principal reason for their church to have a web site. Yet, the way congregations typically establish and maintain a web presence works against that goal.

A web site that creates community is one that users visit often, because the information posted on it changes regularly; one that offers links to other useful sites on the web; one that allows users to interact with the person or organization whose site they are visiting.

A site maintained by volunteers is often inadequate at fulfilling these functions, primarily because volunteers rarely follow a regular schedule in updating their site. Typically it's done in their spare time, so the site quickly becomes outdated.

Holy Cross's situation is rare, in that the church's pastor is also its webmaster. Maintaining the site is part of his pastoral responsibilities. Sattler spends about four hours a month updating it—posting the church's monthly newsletter and updating the events information. It is at least modestly effective in creating community. Portions of it change occasionally; it provides numerous links to other related sites; and it allows users to contact Sattler and other Holy Cross staff members electronically.

East 91st Street's site, by contrast, generates little community now and is likely to create even less as it moves away from posting upcoming events and concentrates on static information. A heavy investment of time and energy is required to keep information current. The church recognizes the increasing importance of its web site, yet doesn't see paying for its upkeep as a realistic option.

A site designed and maintained by a paid professional has obvious advantages of attractiveness, functionality, and timeliness. The cost can be an advantage as well, if it motivates the congregation to think seriously about the purpose of the site. But the cost can be high. Do the benefits offset the expense?

The fundamental question a congregation must ask is: why do we need a presence on the web?

For many congregations, the static type of site that East 91st Street is creating—sometimes called a "brochure" site—may be sufficient. It is perfectly suited to the use of volunteer labor, because it requires little upkeep yet can present all the basic information that a congregation may want to convey.

But such sites are only effective in reaching people who are "shopping" for a congregation to join. Most Internet users, particularly younger people who use it most actively, will rarely return to a site that seems stale. A brochure site doesn't facilitate relationships or create community.

Which brings up the question: for whom is the site intended? "Do we want it to reach our own members with information, is it an outreach piece, or both?" said Nancy Armstrong of St. Luke's United Methodist. "Web sites intended for different purposes will look very different." If the goal is to reach potential visitors, a brochure site will do. But if it is intended as a community-building tool for the congregation, then an interactive and frequently updated site is necessary.

According to Jay Hudson, a consultant affiliated with the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., "You can't do a web site like a print promotional piece. A web site is much more interactive, and you're going to grow as much through a site as the user will. The big mistake congregations make is that they assume it doesn't have to be interactive, that it can be one-way communication—that you can broadcast your presence out there and not really care about the people hitting your site. There's a whole huge expanding market of people who are not interested in the traditional church, but who are spiritual people. They can be reached through the Internet, but it's got to be two-way."

Hudson's comments speak to the ideal at a time when many congregations have not even entered the field or mastered the basics.

However, the options are not limited to having a superior web presence or no presence at all. "If the choice is between doing nothing and having volunteers do it for free, I say let the volunteers do it and get something up there," said Aaron Spiegel, a consultant with the Indianapolis Center for Congregations. "But don't have unreasonable expectations."

A brochure site will not likely attract many users—members of the congregation will not use it often, and others will stumble across it only infrequently. But it can at least give the congregation a basic presence as it plans to do something more effective and interactive.

Some congregations choose to pass on a web presence entirely. One local Christian-owned Internet service provider, SpitFire Communications, has approached numerous congregations about establishing a web site, only to be rebuffed. SpitFire's Dave Hunter said that congregations are skeptical for a variety of reasons, including a fear that the medium has a greater capacity for inflicting harm than for accomplishing good. As with radio and television in their early days, many regard the Internet as a dangerous influence.

## AN ALTERNATIVE

Meanwhile, a rich source of untapped possibilities lies in something far less complex and costly (and less controversial) than a web site: the use of e-mail. Free accounts are available from a variety of sources; Holy Cross Lutheran provides a disk that allows members to connect to one of these.

A small amount of time and energy invested in a service like Holy Cross's weekly e-mail update can repay large dividends, fostering community even in congregations that have weak web sites or no site at all.

The argument against e-mail is that it tends to increase efficiency at the expense of nurturing personal relationships. But Chuck Berdel, pastor of the 1,000-member Christ United Methodist Church, has found that using e-mail makes him both more efficient and increases his member's willingness to share their thoughts openly.

"It's much more efficient for people to send e-mail than for me to be taking phone calls all day," Berdel said. "And it's given me an insight into the congregation that I wouldn't have gotten otherwise. A lot of people probably never would have called me. Because the church is large, people suspect that it's pretty hard to get in to see me. Or, they go the e-mail route because they're so busy themselves."

Berdel, who is not yet connected to the Internet from his church, checks his messages each evening from his home computer; he typically has ten to fifteen messages from church members that require a response.

"I find that people share very personal things with me," he said. "I can't think of anyone who's really held back. And I usually share back on a very personal level, too."

Whether through e-mail or a web site, the goal for most congregations is to facilitate communication, allowing members and visitors to share and to learn. In doing so, congregations can translate virtual community into stronger bonds of actual community.

## POINTS TO REMEMBER:

- The first question a congregation should ask is "Why do we need a web site?"

- The character of the congregation determines how high a priority an Internet presence should be.

- Creating community with a web site means giving users a sense of belonging to some project that is changing and evolving, and that they have some kind of input.

- Using volunteers and building a web site that creates community are often mutually exclusive goals.

- A "brochure" web page may be adequate, but static sites run counter to the fluid, ever-changing nature of the Internet; it will attract little traffic and create little community.

Used creatively and consistently, e-mail can accomplish some of the same community-building functions as a strong web site; it's also cheaper and less time-consuming.

## CONTACTS & RESOURCES:

**Holy Cross Lutheran Church**
8815 Oaklandon Road
Indianapolis, IN 46236
(317) 823-4089
www.hclc.in.lcms.org

**East 91st Street Christian Church**
049 East 91st Street
Indianapolis, IN 46250
(317) 849-1261
www.east91st.org

**American Bible Society**
www.housesofworship.net

For churches that have not established a web presence, the place to begin is the American Bible Society's Houses of Worship site. ABS's goal is to collect in one place an editable web site for every Christian congregation in North America. Virtually every church now in existence within that territory now has a listing; a link to any individual church's site can be called up by doing a keyword search on the church's name (from the HOW home page, press the "find a church" button, then enter the keywords in the appropriate space). All that is needed to establish a web site through ABS is for a representative from the church to supply the appropriate information—a schedule of services, a note from the pastor, the youth schedule, etc. The result is a rudimentary but usable site that can be maintained at no cost. These sites attract little traffic but at least provide some kind of presence—and they're good practice on the way to creating something more sophisticated.

**Indianapolis Center for Congregations**
950 North Meridian Street
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 237-7799

The Center for Congregations occasionally sponsors seminars centered on the use of computer technology; its staff is available at any time to answer questions and provide support on an individual basis.

There are several online directories that link to local congregations. None is exhaustive, but several offer an extensive selection: for example, www.indianapolis.in.us/home/religion. An excellent source of links to churches state-wide is:  www.churchsurf.com/churches/Indiana/cities.

To browse congregations nation-wide, go through the various denominational web sites: for example, www. disciples.org (Disciples of Christ); www.umc.org (United Methodist ); and www.elca.org (Evangelical Lutheran Churches of America). The denominational sites also offer congregations an opportunity to begin a web site at little cost. Some denominations will "host" a congregation's web pages on their own site, at no charge. Some have staff members available to help congregations establish a web presence.

**Publications:**

The August 11-18, 1999, issue of the *Christian Century* (www.christiancentury.org) contains an insightful article, "The Church on the Web."

Jeff Zaleski's book, *The Soul of Cyberspace* (Harper*Edge*, 1997), explores the implications of the Internet revolution for the future of spirituality. Even those not interested in the abstract subject of the book should check out the substantial list of recommended web sites, found at the end of the chapters on major world religions.

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