



Just the mention of technology is enough to make technophobes in the church run for cover. It's all about bytes and rams and mega-somethings, hardware and software, modems and hot syncs. It's guaranteed to make those who aren't technologically savvy feel inadequate. After all, church workers are into relationships, being present, face-to-face ministry. What does technology have to offer the church? Can it possibly have something to offer family ministry?

And, what is meant by the term "family ministry"? It is all of the worship, education, and service to, with, for and by all of God's family. It serves all the varied family constellations by which people identify their family. This ministry partners home and congregation to nurture faith in all of the generations. It understands church as both home church and congregational church. It is a holistic view of faith nurture. It suffuses all of our life together. In the words of Deuteronomy 6:4-7,

The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

And that would leave what time and what place in which we are not to do faith nurture?

### **TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHURCH: FEARS**

In every era, innovations have felt threatening to what is familiar and already mastered and valued. The printing press, the earth is round, the Industrial Revolution, the railroad, the telephone ... all felt threatening. Early on, they were demonized. The demise of all that had value in our culture was predicted. We survived.

Now, technology is burgeoning and proliferating, and again we are afraid. Will cell phones and computers, PDA's and game boys, implanted medical devices and video cams replace face-to-face relationships, create a digital divide and be abused? Is it the anti-Christ?

Pastor Stephen Cornils of Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, MN answers that question with a resounding, "No!" He explains that in every generation we fear the new, seeing potential losses and abuses. "Technology," he explains, "simply adds another delivery system, one more way to get the Word out. We can't let down on print resources, face-to-face presence and personal relationships. It is not a question of either/or; it is both/and. New technology is a supplement, not a replacement. As the church has harnessed and benefited from the printing press, copiers, motorized travel, telephone and postal service, so it can harness and benefit from technology. We need to be stewards of technology, maximizing its use for good."

So, how do we do that?

## TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHURCH: GIFTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

How can we get technology to support ministry, faith nurture in home and congregation, and the building of connections? Pastor Cornils offers many possibilities.

### WEBSITE

- **Welcome the experts in.** This is a perfect opportunity to invite those in our midst who have gifts and skill in technology to help us harness this new potential for advancing the future of the church.
- **Congregation offers the content; technology is the delivery system.** Remember that the congregation is in charge of the message ... and we have a powerful message to share, one the world needs to hear.
- **Website is the picture window of the church.** It invites others to look inside and see what we are up to and how they might want to be involved. Therefore, it needs to be current and to change often enough to invite people back. It needs to be up to date, changing as schedules and programs, church seasons and congregational opportunities change. This is a perfect place to find congregational news, shared ministry opportunities, sermon, prayers, daily devotionals, and responses to what is happening in the world.
- **Volunteer ministry opportunities for a variety of gifts.** Creative people can make your website look appealing. Technical people can post and manage the information on the website. Those with an eye for content can watch and note what needs to change.

### OTHER TECHNOLOGY OPPORTUNITIES

- **Internet café or station in the library.** Here is an opportunity for teens to tutor seniors, grandparents and other who missed the wave of computer technology. It affords all of the generations an opportunity to stay in touch and to sustain intergenerational relationships by email. Internet research is another way to support lifelong learning.
- **Special needs kids**, especially autistic children, may be “runners” and the computer may be a perfect place for them to run to, to be engaged.
- **Target emails** are a wonderful way to follow up with participants in congregational programs, to send invitations and reminders, to offer encouragement, support and pastoral care.
- **Online classes** offer a learning opportunity for those who can't get to the face-to-face courses you offer.
- **Church newsletters** can be given a huge distribution at virtually no additional cost.

## **EQUIPPING THE CHURCH STAFF**

- **Staff needs to be trained** to at least be able to send and retrieve email, word process documents, and retrieve and post information on the internet.
- **Model** de-demonizing computer technology for the congregation.
- **Credibility with those currently outside our church walls** will be increased when congregations can be accessed via the internet, showing that they have harnessed technology to share the very Good News.

## **CONGREGATIONS SUPPORTING HOMES IN USING TECHNOLOGY**

What can congregations do to support homes in understanding, using and controlling the use of technology?

Teach parents, grandparents, godparents and all adults how to use computers to stay in touch with the people they love, to learn, to practice their faith and to stay connected to the congregation. Computer education can also be invaluable for those looking for employment or educational opportunities.

Teach parents and other adults how to supervise technology use by kids. What behaviors ought to spark concern? What are potential abuses of technology and how might adults prevent and avoid them?

Adults are concerned about

- Online pornography
- Meeting people online who would prey on our children
- Kids focusing on virtual friendships and not the real, face-to-face ones
- Kids disappearing from family life
- Technology, not people, being the primary presence in the lives of children

Congregations can help parents harness and balance the use of technology by

- Putting the computer in a shared space
- Supervising computer use
- Limiting time on the computer and other technology
- Planning family time together with technology turned off
- Balancing time online with face-to-face friend time
- Pursuing other hobbies
- Providing opportunities in the congregation for families, peers and intergenerational gatherings, fun activities, worship, education and service projects

## **TECHNOLOGY SUPPORTING THE HOME: 4 KEYS TO NURTURING FAITH**

The Youth & Family Institute in Bloomington, MN has discovered four very easy, everyday keys to nurturing faith in families. How might technology, with a little help from the congregation, support these four keys?

### **Caring Conversations**

- Email and phone calls (remember that favorite of all technologies) can link the generations across the miles.
- Computers and phones can also bridge the distance when family members travel or move away.
- During the dicey adolescent years, when face-to-face communication is strained, email notes may allow youth and parent to discuss the hard issues and share love, affection and concerns. Eventually, this builds a bridge back to better, stronger, deeper communication.

## **Family Devotions**

- Make sure families know that this is not something that can be done only by those who are seminary trained. This is how we braid faith talk into our everyday lives, how we find God in the everyday.
- Many congregations offer daily devotions online.
- Other organizations online offer daily devotions. Find them. Mark them as favorites or subscribe. Ask family members to share favorites.
- Share responsibility for finding and sharing an online devotion.
- Ask family members how they have seen Jesus on the internet. Ask what they have seen that would concern God. Together, pray about it.

## **Rituals and Traditions**

- These are the repeated and cherished parts of our life together that give us identity as a family. They may include bedtime routines, grace before meals, the way we say goodbye for the day or hello at the end of the day. These are the stories we tell about ourselves. They are the way we mark holidays and birthdays as holy days.
- By email or phone or videotapes or photographs, share these family markers with those who can't be there in person.
- Congregations can help families with ideas that are age appropriate for family traditions that celebrate being part of the family of God.
- Some families take a Sabbath from technology, turning off phones and computers and TV's and electronic games and focusing on one another. Some even create a "Sabbath box" into which they put the things (like a cell phone, pager or game boy) or symbols of things (like the computer cord or the remote control for the TV) they will not use.

## **Service**

- Post family service opportunities on the website.
- Offer an email address for prayer requests.
- Email a list of prayer requests to a willing family to pray about in their family devotion time.
- Take a laptop to visit a friend or relative or member of the congregation who is ill or shut in. Offer to send an email or letter that the one you visit can dictate. Send in prayer requests they might have.
- Offer to do online medical research or research on a favorite topic or hobby.
- Give email support and stay connected with those you don't see often.
- Sign online petitions to support causes that reflect your family's values.

- Advertise and fund raise for mission projects, church camp, youth gatherings and choir trips online.
- Report back to those who supported your mission.

Let us all welcome technology and the potential it offers home and congregation to nurture faith. Let us commit to harnessing this cluster of new ways to deliver the Good News to a world in need of it.