

# **The beginning of the adventure, which became my involvement in Ecunet**

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It was 1983 and I was the minister of Ellesmere United Church in Burnaby. I had been minister of University Hill United in Vancouver and was also part time Chaplain for United Church students at the Vancouver School of Theology.

Our family's big adventure was now a decade before, when the seven of us had lived in Germany for two and ½ years as I studied Martin Luther and his knowledge of the Hebrew language. My original plan was to finish my dissertation in the six months following our return to Vancouver, and I had brought with me cartons of photocopies and some books to allow this completion. The completion had never happened. Sure, I had done some reading and writing and more research. I had even returned to Germany for a month in 1978 and now I had even more materials, but closure on the dissertation project became more and more distant.

My research materials were carefully filed but not indexed. I needed some help with the index and flirted with the idea of buying a IBM Selectric typewriter, to help in the filing and the writing. However personal computers had been invented and a few of my friends had already purchased them.

## **Enter David Lochhead**

While I had been at VST I had sat with the students while we met and interviewed candidates for the theology position. One of those candidates was David Lochhead. I remember the shakiness of his hands as he fielded probing questions from the students. I also remember the clarity of his answers.

In my Presbytery duties with Westminster Presbytery I had been appointed Chair of the Ministry and Personnel Division. David Lochhead lived with his family in Maple Ridge, a bedroom community some 40 kilometers east of Vancouver, and joined Westminster Presbytery because of the geography of his home. David was a regular attender of Presbytery meetings and also was a member of the Ministry and Personnel Division.

One evening, when we had done the other work of the Division, we broke into discussion about the various interests of our members, and they varied from Stress Management, to Hospital Chaplaincy and others. David Lochhead told about his work with his personal computer creating a program about the sources of theological writings. As Chair I asked in the plenary for 30 minutes in the following meeting so that each of six people could have five minutes to outline their passionate interests.

A month later, with his five minutes, David Lochhead set up his computer and printed off the results of his program.

### **Choosing a computer**

It was becoming clear that a personal computer would be the answer for me, but which one to purchase? One friend was strongly into the Apple personal computer, others were using the Commodore 64. I almost bought a Commodore 64 at our local Eaton's outlet, when a lawyer friend told me: Don't buy anything until you come and try our IBM DisplayWriter. This was a great experience, a very sophisticated word processing program, which were saved on 8 inch disks.

This was not the equipment for me. I think the price tag was \$20,000 at that time. But it tilted me towards IBM.

I bought an IBM PC, a model which had come fairly recently onto the market and was becoming popular. They also sold me software, PSF File and Multimate word processing and I was in business. Within a month or so I had an index of all my German materials. I then began transferring the chapters of my dissertation into Multimate, and soon I was up to date.

My only reason for buying a computer was to organize my dissertation materials and to continue my writing. What a surprise was in store for me!

### **"What's a modem for?"**

David Lochhead phoned and suggested I might want to buy a modem for my computer. What for? I had no idea, at first, what a modem was, and then after explanation, had no idea why I would want or use one. When I had the Hayes Smart Modem installed internally in my computer David and I tried one evening of trying to get our modems to "handshake" over the telephone lines from Vancouver to Maple Ridge. That was not as satisfying as finding some local bulletin boards which were open 24 hours a day, and so I began my first

explorations of the online world.

Meanwhile David Lochhead had his antennae out for anyone else who was experimenting with computer communication.

### **Reaching out by computer**

At that time the Reader's Digest had founded "The Source" - an online resource which hosted a great number of discussion groups combined with e-mail (a primitive form of today's AOL). One of those discussion groups was called "Religious Associates" and there a discussion had been going on for months which involved people from a number of churches in North America. I remember a few of those names, and some of them may be reading here. One is for sure: Bob Cramer, who can do his own describing. From the United Church of Canada was Iaian MacDonald and David Lochhead. I joined that group in its discussion.

David Lochhead was part of a committee for the United Church of Canada called TFIF (Task Force For Information Flow), which was the way the United Church was attempting to relate to the increasingly important place of computers in the operation of the Church. Few of the Conference offices were computerized at this time. Some of them were fitted with AES computers, which were dedicated word processors with some e-mail capacity. David was trying to move the Church in the direction of computer communication, which was only in an embryotic stage at this time. Somehow he convinced the Division of Communication to fund a four-month experiment of linking anyone in the Church with a computer to each other by means of the Envoy E-mail system. This system was a creature of the big telephone companies and was intended primarily for business use.

### **UCHUG is formed**

A dozen of us responded to the invitation to become part of this experiment. November 1, 1984 the United Church of Canada entered the world of computer communication using a dedicated e-mail system and sending conference-like notes to each other by mailing lists and "answer all" commands.

There were stirring in other Churches throughout North America at the same time, some before, some a bit later. We were able to compare notes at a later stage, when we got a better idea of the players in this field. But for the time being we were trying to make our own sense of this new medium, to get to know each other across the country, and to try to master the "handshaking" problems with our computers and modems.

Our computers were whatever we had already bought, for other purposes. There was a Radio Shack Model 100 which was purchased to create weekly bulletins and sermons for a small congregation in Petitcodiac, Nova Scotia. There were Texas Instruments, Apple 2's and an IBM PC. We were hackers, hobbyists and business types. None of us bought our computer as a communication device. None of us thought of ourselves primarily as communicators. Reminiscent of Woody Guthrie's song, we were communicating from Vancouver Island to the Bay of Fundy.

### **Houston and the "Pentecost Machine"**

In a few months we would meet Houston Hodges, who brought us the best definition of the Modem: The Pentecost Machine. Indeed it was allowing us instantaneous translation without an interpreter between all kinds of computer equipment. There was a second effect of the Pentecost Machine: we were being drawn out of our original individual paths into a common path in which we began to become acquainted with one another, to interact with each other, to collaborate with each other and eventually to love one another.

With some horrendous volume problems along the way, the 4 month experiment on Envoy went well, and showed some of the potential usefulness for the church of computer communication. We had been dubbed UCHUG: the United Church Computer Users Group. For good reason we were seen as hackers and hobbyists, not to be taken too seriously. However David Lochhead convinced the Division of Communication to authorize a standing committee to be formed: The Small Computer Committee of the United Church of Canada: SCC. We had a small annual budget and the approval to be a western-based committee, something very unusual in our Church, in which all committees are usually based in Toronto.

### **The Small Computer Committee**

David Lochhead became Chair of the SCC and I, with my first career business background, became Treasurer.

### **Fred and Diana**

The first task was to find a server that would be more satisfactory than the business-oriented Envoy system. We wanted something which offered the specialized software called "Participate", which we had experienced on THE SOURCE, but with a server who could tailor things more to our specialized use. David went on a search, looking at COMPUSERVE and THE SOURCE. He finally

found a "Mom and Pop" operation out of Denver, Colorado, which its owner, Fred Dudden, had named UNISON. Fred had a great vision for computer communication and the name UNISON captured his desire to draw all sorts of people together into a common concern.

## **Unison**

We decided to set ourselves up on UNISON and now we were able to request a certain style of interface for our members in which they would feel comfortable and would be encouraged to use the flexibility of the Participate software to create scores of conferences. We now had to learn some new handshaking techniques but when we mastered them we were greeted by a friendly message, like a horoscope. My favourite was: "It is better to save one human life than to build a seven-story pagoda". Fred was assisted in keeping this Mom and Pop operation going by Diana Campbell, who worked on the Denver-based operation from her home in Lubbock, Texas, providing us with our first example of a person working online from their home.

## **Bob Cramer**

We had never laid eyes on most of the people we were beginning to converse with online. We knew a lot about them, but had never set eyes on them! Bob Cramer became part of the new conferences on UNISON. He was one of the very first who were not from the United Church of Canada, but he was a harbinger of many more to come! But what a harbinger!

Bob remains one of the most fascinating of all the online personalities. He has been consistent in his delight in the online medium and has always wondered why thousands more people didn't take to it immediately. Bob was and is a "gadfly" - the proverbial "fly on the wall" in most and nearly all conversations. Bob is an ordained minister in the American Baptist church, living in Windsor, California, just north of San Francisco.

Diana Campbell became extremely important in the early discussions. We did not expect the level of competence Diana showed, her ability to be up at all hours of the night and the extent of her conversational availability. Fred Dudden was far more than our landlord and host: he was an active participant in many discussions and a man of great passions.

The early discussions on ENVOY had challenged our local geographical parochialism. Now the location of the server in Colorado was challenging our

church-parochial conversations. This wasn't all about the United Church of Canada anymore. It couldn't be. Because Bob, Diana and Fred were part of the discussions. Bob came from a different Church, in a different country. We didn't know what Diana's and Fred's relationship to church was as all. But we sensed deep and wonderful humanity from both.

The seeds of ecumenism had been sewn and were beginning to grow.

### **Meeting in the flesh!**

It was June of 1985, just 6 months after the UCHUG experiment has started, that I waited at the Vancouver Airport for Bill Dearborn to arrive from Saskatchewan. It wasn't until I began to scan the crowd at the baggage carousel that I realized that I had no idea what Bill looked like! I was so comfortable talking with him online that I was sure I "knew" Bill!

Our UCHUG community now had a home in a place where we liked our "Landlord" (Fred) and his helper (Diana). Now we could offer incentives to other members of the United Church to get modems and get them working online. The Conferences were beginning: One on Lectionary resources, Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, Time Styling, "Sexuality and the United Church".

### **Donel joins us**

At our first Annual Meeting of the Small Computer Committee, held at the Vancouver School of Theology in June, 1985 we welcomed the interest of a new member. David Lochhead's antennae had picked up the person of Donel McClellan, a pastor in a Disciples of Christ congregation in Bellingham, Washington. Bellingham is a pretty town about one hour's journey south of Vancouver. It is the most northerly major city in Washington.

Donel had made a collection of Church software programs. He was not connected online at all. After our meeting one night we rigged a computer up so that we could go online with UNISON and arranged an online chat (Speakeasy) with Bob Cramer in Windsor, California. Donel was sold immediately and joined Unison.

### **A flood of participants**

In the Autumn of 1985 we were inundated. To understand how this happened I need to sketch briefly what had been going on in other Churches.

The United Church of Christ's research was being led by the Rev. Curtis Ackley, with the head office support of Gene Schneider (may his name be blessed!). With a committee one, (then two when Donel McClellan joined Curt), they had a very effective and efficient and limited operation. Curt was able to get included in the experiments of other Churches, especially the United Presbyterians.

The United Methodists had the early help of Bob Cramer, who came up with the unique name "Circuitwriter". Their first short-term experiment with computer communication was May to September, 1983. Bob Cramer was their consultant with this experiment.

Then we turn to the largest and most involved experiment: the United Presbyterians. They had created a huge experiment on CompuServe, called Presbynet, which involved a 90-day trial period beginning in June of 1985, with unlimited time usage. This ended in the online version of a fireworks display, with notes and "Computer Graffiti" being sent across the country at an enormous rate. This experiment, which was dubbed the "Monday Night Connection" ended with the suggestion that some might want to shift voluntarily to the Unison network to join the discussions with those of the United Church of Canada.

By Autumn 1985 so many new people were joining us at Unison that it felt like an invasion. I remember that David Lochhead was becoming quite upset, feeling that we had set up something quite good, and in the way we liked, and here were a group of people "coming to take over"!

Looking back on it there might have been an authority issue for all of us. David ran our network like something of a benevolent dictator. Perhaps it was his position as a theological professor that put us in awe, added to his acknowledged brilliance with everything to do with the computer. There was no aspect of the computer which daunted him. He was a hacker, a hobbyist and a programmer. There was nobody else among the United Church of Canada contingent who had all of these skills. Elections for office were hardly elections. David would tell us what he wanted and we did that.

The new group of people did not come in with those cultural expectations! For example, Merrill Cook, from the United Presbyterians, joined us with a set of skills which matched David's in every way. I think there were some behind the scenes fireworks before David and Merrill built a working relationship.

In addition there were some wonderful new resources added to our discussions. Houston Hodges came on as a wonderful bridge-builder between the various

groups. In one of those ironic twists of history, Houston had worked in Canada, worked for the Winnipeg Presbytery of the United Church of Canada, and made the most of his biculturalism. He reminded me of my service club days: like the Lion's club tail-twister, he began to knock us about with his humour, to help us to get to know each other and begin communicating.

Jack Sharp arrived, with his wonderful "Sermonshop". We already had a conference called "Lectionary", which was more free-flowing than "Sermonshop" and for a few years these two conferences continued side by side. Gradually "Sermonshop" took its predominant place because of the consistent good management which Jack Sharp provided.

Jim Collie arrived, bringing lots of experience as one of those in "Religious Associates" on the Source, continuing into the Presbynet experiences.

Lew Wilkins, brought an amazing array of Church administrative talents, as well as a style in which his periodic notes added such brilliance of content and insight they left us gasping. Not gabby, LeW's "less-is-more" style made you sit up and take notice whenever he fashioned one of his wonderful notes!

Curt Ackley joined us from the Presbynet experiment. In fact Curt prided himself on being the greatest user of the free Presbynet time, devising ways to send hundreds of notes. Remember, Curt was not from the Presbyterian Church but from the Disciples of Christ!

A number of friends joined us from the United Methodist Church as well, including Michael Henderson and others. Bob Cramer knew these folks intimately from his continuing role as consultant to the "Circuitwriter" people.

The way 1986 opened was with an event which rocked the world, and became the foundation for what we would soon call: "Ecunet".

### **A note to Pat Hodges 2001 - David Lochhead and my Dissertation**

1121 (of 1121) GORDON LAIRD Feb. 16, 2001 at 10:50 Eastern (2593 characters)

Sorry about your arthritis, Houston, but thank you very much for sharing it with us. I care about you a lot, and it seems from your Church stories, that a whole bunch of other people do too!

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Pat, I now want to tell you about David Lochhead. When David fired up his program in the basement of my Church for the Presbytery meeting, it began to print off bar charts and graphs which indicated the number of times certain authors cited medieval and ancient texts.

The program was not all that helpful for me personally. It was more what it held "in potential" which was like so much of what happened in computers and networking.

First to tell you that David Lochhead suffered a massive stroke in May, 1999. At that time he was on sabbatical from the Vancouver School of Theology and had moved for one year to Saskatoon with his wife, Marta, who had been appointed Theology professor at St. Andrew's college.

David did not die immediately, but lost the abilities of all extremities except for his eyes. And his eye movements were limited to up and down. He could not speak.

Dozens of us who knew and loved David through his work with Ecunet, rallied to form a team which searched through North America and beyond to see if there could be some computer-generated ways of helping David communicate. We had in mind the examples of Stephen Hawking and others who do all their writing and speaking computer-aided.

A month later David died.

David's legacy: He was the keynote speaker at many of the Camcon's - which were gatherings in Los Angeles (1986), Atlanta, Seattle and many other places. David gave a remarkable address in 1984 entitled "Theology in a Digital World" which stands out even today as the first entry in a field of inquiry. It happened at the Vancouver School of Theology and the occasion was his being appointed to Full Professor. His speeches added further chapters to the books on the subject he published.

David was the first President of Ecunet, which was by then incorporated at Ecunet, Inc.

To describe David one speaks of paradoxes. Shy and introverted, he could

deliver a spell-binding speech to hundreds of people in a large room. He also could preach up a storm!

A slow and deliberate typist, in the world of "Publish or perish" David produces more published books and articles than most of his colleagues.

With a high position in the ivory tower world David was very much at home within the Church, in small, struggling congregations and at long and boring Presbytery meetings. He had wonderful pastoral skills.

And he was a good friend.

And now, Pat, to respond to your second question: what happened to the dissertation I was working on.

Having my IBM PC computer the research and writing was helped in great measure both to assemble and amplify my research materials and to write up chapters for my "dissertation".

The "dissertation" continues to this day, and will not be finished in my lifetime. The subject which began with an investigations into how Martin Luther learned and used the Hebrew Language moved on to explore the obscure rabbinical Kimhi family, and then to figures like Johannes Reuchlin, Sebastian Muenster and Eli Levita. I have recently finished a chapter on Levita and plan to continue with Muenster.

Into this writing came for me the Internet and my own home page in 1996. I have "published" most of my writing to date on my Home Page.

Today, if you use your favourite search engine and search for "David Kimhi" a good percentage of the results will refer you to my Home Page.

I hope I have answered all the questions, if not please ask another!

Gordon Laird