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COMPUTERS DEDICATED TO CONGREGATIONAL MISSION

The "computer revolution" has arrived within many of our United Church congregations.

The number of computers which are available to United Church congregations or which are owned by the congregations themselves has increased considerably in the last few years. Four years ago in our Presbytery there were three computers. This spring we held a computer event in which most of the leadership came from our presbytery. There are dozens of computers at work for the Church, either in the congregational office, in the minister's study, or in the home of a lay person.

Mostly computers are used by the Church for word-processing, maintaining of Church lists and accounting functions. They ease the tasks of the typist, the Church secretary and the Church accountant. To this extent they do not extend the mission of the Church in fundamentally different ways.

At Ellesmere United we do not have a computer in our Church office. The computer is in the minister's home. But our congregation has been affected by the "computer revolution" in some significant ways.

Computers can be one way of overcoming barriers.

CHURCH SCHOOL AND ANSCOMB HOUSE

Many of our Church School students are exposed to computers in the classroom. One day I brought my portable computer to Church School for the class to type some notes. Then I learned about Anscomb House from Clare Holmes in Victoria. We decided to try sending some notes from our Church School children to the young people at Anscomb House.

Anscomb House is a special section within the Queen Alexandra Children's Hospital dedicated to young people with physical handicaps. Many are young men, in their late teens or early twenties who have muscular dystrophy.

Clare is a University Chaplain at the University of Victoria and serves as a volunteer chaplain to Anscomb House. Clare and I were already connected electronically with each other through the Envoy computer network (we are both members of UCHUG - the United Church User's Group.) Soon our young people were sharing the titles of their records, their favourite hockey teams and their hobbies with the young people in Anscomb House. In return came the names of their favourite wrestlers and rock bands.

Since the time of this experiment Anscomb House has become part of an international network, first on UNISON then on NWI. They send and receive notes to and from all friends all over the U. S. and Canada. They have even shares ideas and experiences with people in Japan.

The first computer experiment with our Church School is complete, but the lessons from it are still intriguing. Some important barriers had been overcome - the barrier of distance and the barrier of physical disabilities.

STUDY GROUP ONLINE

One of the first applications for computer communication has turned out to be one of the best. The increasing popularity of the use of the "Lectionary" has meant that many ministers of various denominations are preparing sermons on the same texts each week. When it is possible to arrange weekly meetings of those who are using the lectionary sermon preparation becomes a much more collegial endeavour. But geographical and time barriers intrude. Even if the offices of the participants are 30 minutes driving time from each other it is difficult to get together. When they live in different provinces or different countries the barrier is obvious.

Since December, 1984 some ministers, field staff and lay people have been "meeting" together "online" to examine the lectionary texts for the coming week. This has grown to the point where each week there are contributions from all over Canada and the United States. Carefully prepared exegetical material is available together with off the cuff ideas about the direction which sermons will take.

Some very real pastoral care has happened online across all lines of denomination, professional position, nationality and geography.

CAN WE WORSHIP TOGETHER "ONLINE"?

It is even possible to have a sense of worship on special occasions. When the Challenger Space Craft exploded in the air in January, 1986 the night following there

was a "Memorial Service" online prepared by ministers of four denominations - the United Church of Christ, The Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Canada.

Those who were joined to the UNISON network that night were invited to enter into a worship experience which allowed reflection, scripture and prayer, and invited any responses of those joined. Participants came from the United States and Canada, one checking in from Honolulu and one from Stockholm, Sweden.

COMPUTERS AND GENERAL COUNCIL

It is difficult for congregations like Ellesmere to feel directly and personally involved in General Council. Yet the issues raised at General Council include those which concern our Church people very much.

During the hot days of August when General Council is meeting far away from us we are left with a few newspaper reports and the occasional mention on the television or radio.

When there is something newsworthy it is usually contentious. The minister and the congregation have only the media reports to inform us. On occasion those can be quite misleading.

A prime illustration happened at the General Council meeting in Sudbury in August, 1986. General Council had approved a resolution favouring the use of inclusive language and encouraging congregations in this direction. The resolution asked the United Church to:

"create a freer and more broadly inclusive community by the use of a variety of human and other metaphors, images and pronouns for God in church documents, worship and liturgy."

A reporter for the Toronto Globe and Mail, reported:

"...The church will no longer use the word "man" but instead use the inclusive word "people". Similarly, Father, King, He and Master will no longer be used. The church will instead say God, Creator or Father-Mother."

The Globe and Mail report was picked up by Canadian Press and was featured in scores of newspapers across Canada.

The people of Ellesmere read the headline in the Vancouver Sun: "King of Kings soon to be Queen of Queens".

However at this time as a member of UCHUG I was aware that daily reports from General Council were being made available by computer (Paul Mullen and Bill Dearborn of the Small Computers in the Church Committee were at Sudbury reporting daily for conference offices and others joined by computer).

As a pastoral minister in Vancouver, far removed geographically from the General Council in Sudbury, I now had what I needed - daily, reliable, information for the congregation.

I was able to use the facts which I had received over the computer to help our congregation understand what had actually happened and to point out the danger of simply believing everything they were reading in the newspaper.

On Sunday, August 24th, just 6 days after the erroneous report was released I was able to read from the pulpit the words of the actual General Council resolution and the text of the Globe and Mail reporting, so that people could make up their own mind. It was essential to counteract this report the next Sunday. Any later the damage would have been hard to undo.

Plans are already underway for computer reporting from the 32nd General Council in Victoria (August 17-25th, 1988). Ellesmere will be connected and receiving daily reports. We may even find ways of sending our opinions to General Council over computer!

GOOD COMMUNICATION HELPS OUR MISSION

Increased communication between the various levels of our Church will not necessarily help us to agree on any particular issue. It may help us to be clearer about exactly where we disagree. I believe clearer communication will have some effects upon the mission of our Church at the congregational and every other level of our Church.

Computer communication can have the intriguing effect of blurring the distinction between congregational, Conference and General Council concerns. It allows communication to cut across the boundaries which have been erected primarily because of geography and allows to the individual a sense of the whole Church.

My hope is that congregations and their ministers could get a sense of how computers can aid communication within the United Church. The 32nd General Council could be the impetus for many congregations to begin to receive and send information by computers.

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Immediately the Moderator, the Right Rev. Robert F. Smith, issued a statement to the media pointing out the error in reporting. But this statement, and the retraction by the Globe and Mail of the original report were not picked up across the land. How were our people to be informed if their newspapers did not inform them?

The "world" had communicated about the Church. We had no way of getting the "Church's side" out to our congregations. The Observer article which explained this event was received by congregations some two months later, after firm positions had been taken. Contributions to the Mission and Service Fund were, in some cases, dramatically reduced.

However, at that time, an experiment was in process at General Council which could help us modify the impact of such an event in the future.

Two members of the Small Computers in the Church Committee were sending daily reports of the proceedings of General Council over two computer networks.

Bill Dearborn of the Conference Staff of Saskatchewan Conference and Paul Mullen, a United Church minister from Edmonton had been invited by the Division of Communication to set up their computers at General Council and to send daily reports and impressions. Bill and Paul were also receiving reactions and opinions from a score of people in Canada and the United States who had linked their computers with one or other of the two computer networks Bill and Paul were utilizing.

Using Envoy 100 all of the United Church Conference Offices across Canada had available immediately the text of the Globe and Mail article, and could also read and print out the actual wording of the General Council motion for comparison. Furthermore they had the statement of the Moderator and information about the Globe and Mail retraction.

On UNISON, a network based in Denver, Colorado, a number of ministers and lay persons from the United Church, as well as a number of Churches in the U. S., could read the same reports.

IMPACT OF THE SECULAR MEDIA UPON THE CONGREGATION

As a United Church minister, who is used to only reading about General Council in

newspapers or hearing the occasional radio or television report the effect was dramatic. I had some hard data with which to correct the impression left by the Globe and Mail article.

The Globe and Mail story broke Monday August 18th. I received some phone calls immediately reacting to the Vancouver Sun article. Others were bothered by the article but did not say anything until I raised the topic.

I was able to use the facts which I had received over the computer to help people understand what had actually happened and to point out the danger of simply believing everything you read in the newspaper. On Sunday, August 24th, just 6 days after the erroneous report was released I was able to read from the pulpit the words of the actual General Council resolution and the text of the Globe and Mail reporting, so that people could make up their own mind. It was essential to counteract this report the next Sunday. Any later the damage was hard to undo.

This is by no means the first time mis-communication has happened within the United Church. And I do not assume that if we all communicated well with each other we would agree on all issues within the Church and society. But I do believe that many of our most heated arguments are the result of mis-information.

LOCAL COMPUTER BULLETIN BOARDS

In most of our communities enthusiasts have initiated "Bulletin Boards" for computer users. A phone number is made public which is answered "electronically". The high-pitched sound you receive indicates that a computer is waiting for your computer message. To join the bulletin board you need a computer (any make or size) with a "modem" attachment. The modem is a device which sits alongside the computer and makes the connection between the computer and your telephone.

Bulletin Board can be far more than a place for pre-stored information. They usually allow messages to be left for other callers, and discussions on various topics. Usually bulletin boards are provided at no charge, through the good graces of the Sysop (Systems Operator).

Some United Church ministers consider these secular bulletin boards as places to participate in dialogue and a kind of evangelism with a random assortment of people from all walks of life and all ages. In many cases there will be a place established for religious discussions. If you were to join one of these discussions you might be invited to share what you think about the television evangelists, or the capital punishment debate, or the role of homosexuals in the Church and Society.

In some instances congregations have established a computer bulletin board of their own, to get their message out into the community and to share the response from the community.

DIALOGUE, NOT PAT ANSWERS

The kind of irreverend give and take on local bulletin board illustrate the state of Church - Society relationships. There is not much interest "out there" in pat answers to societal questions. There is interest when the representative of the Church will engage the questions, inviting and welcoming dialogue, and join with the others in struggling for new solutions to societal and personal issues.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

THE CHALLENGE OF TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

If the above suggest was accepted and acted upon we could achieve a reliable way for the General Council to send its message "out" to United Church congregations. But there are even more revolutionary possibilities to computer communication.

Can we imagine that the same route of information might be used by individuals and congregations to send messages to General Council? Can we imagine a bulletin board somewhere near the proceedings of General Council which is updated hourly with messages flowing to General Council so that the Commissioners could read these messages during coffee breaks? Could messages coming in on an hourly bases be given to "table groups" for their consideration?

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Followed by a short biographical note, information on SCC, and how to apply for an introductory account.