

Revgals online: Making friends in the blogosphere

by [Susan Olson](#) in the [September 5, 2006](#) issue

I never meant to start a blog. But one day I was reading Real Live Preacher (reallivepreacher.com) and followed one link to another link, then landed on a page where a woman was describing how she told her young daughter that a beloved congregant had died. She wrote with graceful prose and a few pinches of well-timed humor. On another site, a preacher discussed fingernail polish, evoking a spirited conversation about whether or not the well-dressed clergywoman should wear bright colors in the pulpit. Several pages discussed reactions to the PBS documentary film *The Congregation*. The conversations were lively, funny and tender. I kept reading.

Blogs, unlike informational Web pages, are interactive. In comment boxes following each post, readers can add to the conversation by typing in a few strokes at a keyboard. I was a lurker at first, reading the posts and the responses from the sidelines. Eventually, however, I left a comment, and then another. I began checking back to read how others had responded to what I'd written, and then I read the blogs of other commenters. I was hooked. A few weeks later I had a blog of my own, a pseudonym and a small network composed mainly of fellow women clergy.

Since my career straddles ministry and academia, my blogging network expanded rapidly to include a large number of professors and graduate students. Soon it was out of my hands. Today my blogroll (sort of a blogging posse) consists of a cadre of stay-at-home moms, computer specialists, musicians and expatriate grandmothers. Most evenings I spend time at the computer checking up on friends, composing posts and finding more gizmos (booklists that link to bookstores, word-of-the-day links and other features) to put on my blog page.

For the uninitiated, *blog* is shorthand for Web log, or online journal. Several platforms, or technologies, are available on the Internet to help one set up a free or low-cost blog site.

There are as many blog topics as there are bloggers, but certain bloggers congregate together, regularly reading and commenting on each other's blogs. Correspondences develop, and these can become online friendships. Most pages include a blogroll, a list of links to other blogs that the writer enjoys checking regularly. Visitors can click through and meet the blogger's friends and acquaintances. When I read a new blog, I often check out its blogroll.

Estimates of the number of blogs range from 3 million to 30 million, but no one knows for sure how many there are. This is because there is no uniformly accepted definition of *blog*, and no way to determine what constitutes an active blog. Since software and Web space are generally free, there is little incentive to remove an inactive blog even if one is no longer maintaining it, so discarded blogs live on in cyberspace.

I spent my first ten years after divinity school in places where there were few other clergy of my age or gender. Not having a peer support system was hard in those first bleary-eyed years of ministry. I was unabashedly jealous of divinity school classmates in more populous settings, and coveted their clergywomen's groups and their lunches with mentors. The shift from the ready-made divinity school community to the isolated existence of a 20-something college chaplain was rough. What a difference my new online community would have made back then!

It *is* a community. We pray with and for one another. We offer advice and hold one another accountable. When trouble hits, we respond. Every day I check the blogs of a second-career Methodist seminarian and a new Episcopal priest somewhere "out there" in Montana. I eavesdrop on conversations between a stay-at-home mother and her four-year-old; I advise a southern-lawyer-turned-Christian-educator on what to look for in a mother-of-the-bride dress. A midwestern clergywoman writes about officiating at the funeral of a beloved church member; a West Coast counterpart presides over the closing of a church. A hospital chaplain's long-term relationship falls apart; a seminarian plans her wedding; a psychology professor is in love.

This is more than just voyeurism; these new friends share important aspects of their lives with me and enrich my life. Having a window into rural solo pastorates and urban storefront churches—ministries previously known to me only in the abstract—enhances my membership in the connectional church. The view into the particularities of denominations outside my own (and into my own denomination in other countries and regions) has widened my outlook.

Yes, I could read books or articles about these things, and I have. There is a difference, though, in learning through the personal narrative. It's like having a backstage pass to a performance you might have otherwise seen from the audience.

During the chaotic post-Katrina days, a pastor on the Gulf Coast suggested that we send books to her clergy friends who had lost their pastoral libraries in the storm. As a theological school administrator, I was able to ship 586 pounds of books to my friend to distribute. Another blogger went to Mississippi for two weeks to work as a supply preacher for beleaguered local pastors.

We share other life events. When a Virginia-based associate pastor announced her pregnancy, the blogging community congratulated her and offered advice on how to manage a pregnancy in the pulpit. A month prior to her delivery, over 50 bloggers presented her with a baby "blessing way." Each of us wrote and posted poems, prayers and good wishes. When my cat McKinley (my most cherished ordination gift) died, I received over 40 notes of condolence.

Some of the founding mothers of the clergy blogging movement are at www.revgalblogpals.blogspot.com. Here, 180 Revgals, some of whom are neither revs nor gals, participate in informal surveys, read weekly roundups (summaries of notable posts on member blogs), and purchase such delights as "Does this pulpit make my butt look big?" coffee mugs and Revgal-published devotionals. The community is growing daily.

I am not one of the founding mothers and am not active in the group projects (though I do love my mug). My involvement is limited mostly to my small base community, the bloggers whom I've enjoyed and befriended over the past year and a half. I have met some of them in person—at continuing-education events or when one of us has passed through the other's region. Others I will never meet and will know only by their pseudonyms.

At times I wonder if I can truly befriend someone when I may never hear that person's voice, never be with that person to share a meal or a laugh. At other times I remember a pen pal I had as a child, and relive the freedom of defining myself for that girl in South Dakota without the encumbrances of personal history or the interjections of others' opinions.

My letters offered my impressions of small-town Illinois life—and mine alone. If I wrote that the neighborhood ice cream shack's mint chocolate chip was superior to

the downtown chain's, it was. If I tried to be funny in my letters, I was—no neighbor or teacher was looking over my shoulder and recasting me as a serious, dreamy type. I experience that same freedom in blogging. If I say a sermon flopped, I don't have to argue about whether or not it flopped, but I can get feedback about how others have handled that sinking feeling while preaching.

Clergy isolated by geography, politics or demographics use the blogging platform to vent, to be vulnerable and to trust colleagues in ways that are appropriate and protective of pastor-parish confidentiality. Most do not blog under their own names and true locations, using pseudonyms instead. These give them distance and the freedom to think things through "out loud" without losing face or breaking confidences. It's easier to be honest about your concern for how your church will pay for a building renovation or how you'll replace a retiring organist if the "listener" doesn't know your name or state, and if you don't have to put a positive face on your congregation. Most clergy blogs also include references to issues in the blogger's personal life—dating worries, money woes, career concerns—that are uncomfortable or inappropriate conversation topics with congregants.

Blogging's speed is part of its appeal. You can jot down a post and not have to edit. Many bloggers write other forms of prose and view blogging as a writing exercise—quickly creating lots and lots of material without having to do much editing. Thanks to blogging, I've discovered a desire to write, to record my experiences without having to mold them to a particular audience or tie them to a particular scripture. When I applied for the Louisville Institute's Writing as a Spiritual Practice program, I submitted a revised blog entry. Having several "rough drafts" to choose from helped me meet a tight application deadline.

Blogging enables clergy and laity to be part of a community using slivers of available time. I can comment on three blogs in the ten minutes between work and an evening meeting, or write a post when I'm up at 3 a.m. with insomnia. Other blogs belong to clergy with children whose schedules are ruled by the twin dictators of vestry meetings and ballet lessons. Their social lives have shrunk.

There is a downside. Some bloggers spend hours on the Internet and fail to cultivate outside relationships or interests. It is easy to get lost in the blogosphere and to wander aimlessly for hours. Most people's work and lives, however, demand that they limit such surfing.

Another downside is the presence of bloggers who propagate false information, or even use their bully pulpit to slander or malign. A year ago, a friend of mine was slandered regularly in a religious blog. When I wrote to the owner of the platform to complain, I was told that there was nothing the company could do about it, as blogs are considered opinion pages.

Perhaps the greatest risk of blogging is exposing private workplace issues. A young woman blogging under the name Dooce lost her job when her employers came across her written commentary on her workplace. Dooce's story is a cautionary tale ("dooce" is now a verb referring to losing one's job for blogging), and most bloggers take great pains to disguise sensitive topics, or avoid mentioning them.

Bloggers who avoid these pitfalls may find a rewarding experience in cultivating online community. In the 18 months since I began blogging, I've become part of a virtual but real communion, one where I am a participant instead of a presider. This accidental congregation feels like church to me.