

The church on the Web

by [Michael L. Keene](#) in the [August 11, 1999](#) issue

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Sunday School teachers say that the toughest question kids ask is, "But what's a virgin?" While my class of 13-year-olds hasn't asked me that, they certainly can stump me with other questions. After the bishop accepted my wife as a candidate for seminary, I mentioned to the class that she had to send him a status-report letter four times a year-during Ember Days. I should have been prepared for "But what are Ember Days?" Where can you go for quick answers to such questions? To the Internet, of course. In my office or at home, the answer is only a click away (for example, at Canon Beverley Wheeler's "Question Box" <<http://www.wwdc.com/stpauls/stpqanda.htm>>; or at Simon Kershaw's "Keeping the Feast" <<http://www.oremus.org/liturgy/etc/ktf/year.html#s9>>;).

The World Wide Web is playing an important and rapidly growing role in helping laypeople think about their faith. For starters, it helps us look up all kinds of church history and other theologically oriented reference information. But the Web also helps build the community of God both by increasing the flow of information from denominational organizations to churchpeople and by helping like-minded believers find and connect with each other. And the Web provides additional opportunities for people to engage in private, or not-so-private, prayer. Finally, and perhaps uniquely, the Web can bring a refreshing wind of serendipity into our faith lives, making more concrete the line that "the spirit blows where it wills." Access to the World Wide Web gives us access to a richer church life.

My Education for Ministry class at the cathedral has "the quest for the historic Jesus" as one of its topics. As usual, in the hours before the class meets I'm looking for additional ways to illuminate and update the subject matter. Typing "quest for historic Jesus" into my favorite search engines produced a mishmash of odd sites, and a quick look at the first five or ten of them (this takes only five minutes with a fast connection) suggests I'm not getting the kind of thing I want. Having just finished rereading *The God We Never Knew*, I take a chance and type in the author's

name, "Marcus Borg." The second site that comes up on AltaVista is Cam Linton's "A Portrait of Jesus" <<http://www.united.edu/portrait/index.html>>;, which contains an amazingly detailed summary of Borg's work, complete with an audio of Borg and links to his speaking schedule for the year, to a list of his publications, to the Jesus seminar and to Westar Institute. It takes only a couple of minutes to browse the site's main pages and select a few to print out for my class. The printer puts the Web address on each copy so that students can go straight to the source I used.

That scenario shows just one of the many ways that the Web helps me find additional information on church-related topics. When I'm puzzling over a particular Bible passage, such as the one I always remember (incorrectly) as "the spirit blows where it will," I like to read other people's interpretations. Of course, the first problem is that I don't remember exactly where that phrase occurs. Not having my pocket concordance with me at the office, I go to the "Bible Gateway" <<http://bible.gospelcom.net/cgi-bin/bible>>;, which has a very forgiving search engine-if I give it an approximate phrase, the computer will do the rest. (The Bible Gateway also offers seven different versions of the Bible in ten different languages.) I choose to search the RSV for "spirit blows," and the site gives me back information more accurate than my search phrase had been. The source is John 3:8: "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit." If I feed "John 3:8" back into the search engine, it will offer me the whole chapter so I can see the context (or the same text in any of the other six versions).

Once I have the right chapter and verse, I can start looking for sermons and commentaries on that text. I can check Richard Fairchild's enormous "Sermons & Sermon-Lectionary Resources" site <<http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermon.html#text>>; or John Kapteyn's "Sermon Central" <<http://www.sermoncentral.com/>>;, but there are so many sermon sites, nearly all of which will let me search for sermons by a particular chapter and verse or a particular key phrase, that I may decide simply to type "John 3:8" into the AltaVista search engine, which itself yields me over 1,800 "hits."

Or maybe it's music I want. My home church's choir normally focuses on music by 18th- and 19th-century European composers, so when they launched into the spiritual "Steal Away" a few weeks ago, I was really struck by it. But on Monday I couldn't remember the words. A quick visit to Frank Petersohn's "Hymns, Gospel Songs, & Spirituals" site <<http://ingeb.org/spiritua.html>>; takes me right to the

words, and the site will play me the melody (both versions) as well.

Why is my favorite hymn often called "The breastplate of St. Patrick"? I can find the answer at Diarmuid O'Laoghaire's "Introduction to Celtic Spirituality" <
<http://indigo.ie/~lifecork/html/celtspir.htm>>;, which I found by putting "breastplate of St. Patrick" into the AltaVista search engine. This search took longer than usual, not because I did not find an answer in under five minutes, but because the search led me to so many good Celtic spirituality sites, most of which I could not resist skimming.

Was the answer I found authoritative? That's always an important question to ask on the Web, where the mad ravings of pizza-crazed computer programmers and the wise musings of English professors are often initially indistinguishable. I would have to look up Diarmuid O'Laoghaire to find out how authoritative his answer is. On the Web, the fact that it looks good and sounds good may not count for much. With a little help from the search engine, I find that O'Laoghaire, who turns out to be a Jesuit, publishes in Milltown Studies and Celtic Studies, has translated and published a collection of short stories by Welsh writers, and has contributed an essay to James Mackey's Introduction to Celtic Christianity-probably enough information on which to base a decision about the authoritativeness of this reading of the breastplate.

Of course, there are official sources of information as well. If I'm interested in the demographics of seminarians in the Episcopal Church (my denomination), I can find that information from the Episcopal Church's Standing Commission on Ministry Development page <<http://www.ecusa.anglican.org/ministry>>. In fact, if I go to the Episcopal Church's own home page <<http://www.ecusa.anglican.org/>>;, I can learn things about the church this lifelong Episcopalian never suspected. (Many other denominations have home pages, accessible through nearly any search engine.) And I haven't even mentioned Michael Fraser's "Computer-Assisted Theology" page <<http://info.ox.ac.uk/ctitext/theology/>> or the Jean and Alexander Heard Divinity Library at Vanderbilt <<http://divinity.lib.vanderbilt.edu/>>. Either of these sites is worth at least a day's online browsing.

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While the notion of looking things up more quickly and easily is appealing, there's another important and growing function of the Web: building community. Here we will go from the biggest to the smallest features, but without implying that the

biggest is most important or that the smallest is least important.

Every three years the Episcopal Church comes together in its annual convention. Like most Episcopalians, I have never attended. So it is hard for me to appreciate just what goes on at the convention-socially, politically, theologically, or in any other way. Some delegates bring a reasonably full report back to their congregations; many do not. Most of us have to make do with the vague rumblings we hear-"rumble rumble women; rumble rumble rumble gays; rumble rumble rumble budget" and so on. Usually local discussions take place on the basis of such meager information. So during the 1997 General Convention it was a delight to find on the Web a complete account of each day's happenings, compiled by volunteers and the church's news service and posted by the morning of the next day. This account was in the form of a complete newspaper done anew every day. (You can locate the "'97 General Convention" site at <<http://ecusa.anglican.org/gc97/>>;) For perhaps the first time, I felt part not just of the larger spiritual body, but also of the larger political body of the church. Now, because I have subscribed via my computer to the mailing list of the Episcopal News Service, I receive daily news stories and bulletins, not just the once-a-month summary offered by the denomination's newspaper.

So far I have talked only about one-way communication, but on the Web communication goes a multitude of ways at once. Consider the example of listserves, electronic (e-mail) mailing lists that allow any number of people to stay in touch with each other regularly-all one has to do is subscribe. Here are two examples: I am one of perhaps six mentors in the Education for Ministry program, within a 50-mile radius. But in many places, EFM mentors live far apart. So what does someone do who has a problem, question or epiphany to share? The answer is a listserve called "Reflections-L" that enables mentors everywhere to "talk" with each other daily. Typical postings might include questions about how to lead a particular lesson in the program, how best to deal with a particular kind of meeting problem, or how to find additional resources for, say, graduation ceremonies or recruiting new students or dealing with the departure or illness of a group member. There's a list of publicly available listserves that have to do with religion on Stephanie da Silva's site <<http://www.neosoft.com/internet/paml/subjects/religion.html>>;. Though the listserves range from "ADORE-L" to "Zondervan e-mail alert," there are many more religious listserves than those included here.

If you want to see a great example of what building the community of Christ on the Web can be like, visit "Saint Sam's Cyberparish" < <http://justus.anglican.org/stsams/samhome.html>>;. Yes, it's a church that exists on the Web. (Its motto is "Via Media Via Modem.") You can spend a considerable amount of time wandering the site, but if you've never been part of a listserv before, I recommend that you first view the last 48 hours of posts < <http://justus.anglican.org/stsams/list/status.html>>; there you'll see Christian community-warts, halos and all-alive and at work. This list has not just created a cyberchurch, it has also spun off the Society of Archbishop Justus < <http://justus.anglican.org/soaj.html>>;. The society states its purpose as follows: "The particular good works that we focus on are Internet information services: Web and e-mail servers that help Anglicans be one body. Our members help install, operate and maintain the computers and networks that enable our online communication, and they help educate the Anglican public about how best to use those computers."

The Web builds the community of God by allowing even local groups to communicate better. My parish, St. John's Cathedral in Knoxville, Tennessee, is a downtown church with a nongeographic membership. We live all over the city and in the surrounding hills, and we tend to see each other only at church events. So we have to work to stay in touch. In my EFM group, seven of this year's ten members have e-mail. When someone misses a meeting, I send that person a short e-mail summary of what went on (the other three, when they miss, receive the same summary by regular mail). Of the 15 young people in my Sunday morning class, 13 have e-mail. We send out e-mail announcements of program activities each week. (Our 13-year-olds seem to pay attention to what they receive electronically but throw away anything they receive on paper!)

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While the image of hundreds or thousands of people sitting in front of their computer screens praying may make many shudder, the Web does offer interesting resources for personal prayer. One of my favorite sites is the "Daily Office" < <http://www.missionstclare.com/english/index.html>>; (also available in Spanish), a function of Elisheva Barsabe at the Mission of St. Clare. This site offers a liturgical calendar, liturgical music and complete texts-including texts of the readings for each day-for morning prayer, noonday prayer, evening prayer and compline, plus the daily devotions for families and individuals. You can use these for your own worship

anywhere you have a computer, and you can print them out for use in groups.

Like most Web sites, this one also offers a list of links to other sites. If you have time, these lists are always worth following. For instance, it was from the Daily Office site that I learned that Forward Movement Publications' Forward Day by Day is now available on the Web (only the current day's entry, though) at <
<http://www.forwardmovement.org/fdd1.html>>. So if I don't make it to church for morning prayer, I can read the service right here in my office. And if I don't have time for that, I can surely take a minute after lunch to read the day's entry.

One of the best things for me about life in the church is the way grace seems to shower on me. I find that our new canon pastor used to live in my hometown, a thousand miles away from here; or a faculty colleague with whom I've often had minor squabbles becomes a good and warm friend because we have dinner together so often at church on Wednesday nights, or on retreat I meet someone who teaches at my daughter's college and knows her and I say, "Gee, it sure would be nice if she would go ahead and make the decision to be confirmed," not knowing he's a catechist in that diocese-and four months later she's confirmed.

Little epiphanies like these play a major role in our faith lives. Perhaps because the World Wide Web is so enormous and so constantly changing, working through the Web's religious sites seems to increase the flow of that kind of grace. So there I am on the Web, again on a Wednesday afternoon, hoping to find something appropriate to share with my EFM group for the beginning of Lent, but also thinking about my own Lenten discipline. I'm at one of those points when giving up dessert or beer or even pizza seems not much of a response, and I used "giving up giving up things" as last year's discipline. Looking at the Daily Lectionary site, I bump for the first time into the Day by Day site, and the entry which includes this poem by Robert Herrick:

Is this a fast, to keep
The larder lean?
And clean
From fat of veals and sheep?

Is it to quit the dish
Of flesh, yet still
To fill
The platter high with fish?

Is it to fast an hour
Or ragg'd to go
Or show
A downcast look and sour?

No: 'tis a fast to dole
Thy Sheaf of wheat
And meat
Unto the hungry soul.

It is to fast from strife
From old debate
And hate
To circumcise thy life.

To show a heart grief-rent
To starve thy sin
Not bin
And that's to keep thy Lent.

In those lines "It is to fast from strife / From old debate / And hate / To circumcise thy life" I found my Lenten discipline.

Then there was the day I had been listening to too much gossip among church friends about how the denomination is tearing itself apart. By coincidence, that day I also discovered the Web presence of the Society of Archbishop Justus (mentioned above) and found in its list of resources the reference to a "collection" of prayer books. Clicking to that page <
<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/bcp.htm#Other> BCP's> I found The Book of Common Prayer from 1549, 1552, 1559, 1662, 1786, 1789, 1892, 1928 and (the current one) 1979. Somewhere in my browsing through those intriguing, faith-filled documents, I lost the hard edge of my anxiety about today's church. Perhaps concern is appropriate, but looking at that 450-year history convinced me that panic is not.

Finally, there is humility. How do you feel when you visit a different church? What if you could visit not five churches, not 50, but 500 or 5,000? Would you not feel humbled and awed by the splendor and variety of God's creation? I have already mentioned Web search engines such as Yahoo! or AltaVista (but not multiseach

engines, such as Dogpile <<http://www.dogpile.com/>>, which search more than one search engine at once), but I have not mentioned subject trees, which are hierarchically organized lists of resources that have already been looked up and categorized by subject. Yahoo! maintains a comprehensive subject tree, with categories such as Education, Entertainment, Government and so on.

Under the category "Society & Culture" there is "Religion," and under "Religion" are over 40 subheadings ranging from Angels, Arts and Crafts, Ask an Expert, and Bibliographies to Software, Symbols, Television, Theology, Theosophy, Tours and Tour Operators, Web Directories, Women and Usenet. Under each of these headings there are more delightful, more bizarre and more spirit-filled sources than any of us could take in. But the biggest subheading is "Faiths and Practices," with over 16,000 entries, within which we find "Christianity," with over 11,000 entries, under which is "Denominations and Sects," with over 7,000 entries. The main list under Denominations and Sects includes more than 100 variations-Amish, Armenian Evangelical, Association of Vineyard Churches, Cell Church, Charismatic Episcopal Church, Free Methodists, Free Presbyterians, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, Knanaya, the Plymouth Brethren, Rastafarians, the Two-by-Twos and the Waldensian Church, among others. Click onto any one of those entries in this subject tree, and you're immediately into that church's world.

Perhaps what you see on some of these sites may offend you, especially if they feature sects that have split off from your own. But at some point, at least for me, it's all replaced by wonder. In the words of the great hymn, it leaves me "lost in wonder, love, and praise." (This hymn can be found at <<http://www.maark.org/hymn11.htm>>, or <<http://www.lutheran-hymnal.com/online/tlh351.txt>>, or with the music <<http://www.stjohnsdetroit.org/html-stj/stjhylis.html#hyfrydol>>, or again with the music <<http://www.cet.com/~voice/songbook/ghf002.htm>>).