

Send and receive: Manners and ministry on the Internet

by [Donna Schaper](#) in the [August 9, 2003](#) issue

The most dominant form of pastoral contact in my congregation is e-mail. I love it. And I hate it. I love it more than hate it, but the contest is not over. In fact, it has just begun.

The Internet allows me to contact more people more often than can be done by way of the telephone or home visits—the two predecessor modes of pastoral communication. Home visits sound downright quaint these days when most people are seldom at home or are too busy and adamantly prefer that the pastor not call. The telephone was not an improvement on the home visit because it is less direct and intimate than person-to-person encounters. The Internet is even more impersonal. A person is not very likely to confess a sin or share a fear or tell a secret on the phone. Face-to-face, over time, they may feel safe to do so.

But not all intimacy is lost on the Internet. It creates a sense of privacy such that people often say remarkable things, just as they bellow intimacies into their cell phone while on the commuter train. Oddly, they seem to think no one is listening. The solitary nature of Internet communication creates a unique kind of intimacy between pastor and people. We can maximize its benefit by assuring parishioners that we are the only ones reading our e-mails. But we all know that piracy is a possibility, especially in open, public institutions like most churches are. We can also respond with hands out for more personal contact.

The very person who tells an awful “secret” by e-mail may be the most resistant to contact in person. “My husband just beat me up” may not mean “Come over and help stop this violence.” In fact, it may mean just the opposite. The person may unburden only to go back into the very shell that the e-mail creates and protects.

If the Internet is a mixed blessing when it comes to pastoral contact, it is also a mixed blessing when it comes to frank discussions. The Internet can encourage the saying of mean things. More often than not, we should have pushed the delete

rather than the send button when we are having a fight or expressing a disappointment.

Our congregation has made a rule that the staff may not fight on the Internet. They have to fight in person. The “no electronic fight” rule works, for the most part, and we are hoping to extend it to parishioners as well. Why? Because people complain a lot in parishes, and they cloak complaints in e-mails rather than risk the genuine exchange of conversation. We call this bamming, rather than spamming. It lacks courtesy and fairness and it makes many of us afraid to turn on our computers.

Another problem is the ease with which we can send copies to others. When I “yell” at you electronically, I can also let other people know that I am doing that, either by copying them boldly or copying them blindly. The use of the copy button can be a terrible form of gossip. Frank conversation between mature people needs to involve face-to-face time with privacy if there is to be any hope for resolution. When “everybody” knows about the fight, it is much harder to go to that place of grace known as saving face. We lose face in the copying.

The Internet is not only a form of interpersonal contact. It is also a way to build community—within families, congregations or clusters within congregations and within political groups. Since community-building is an integral part of any congregation’s mission, the Internet is a magnificent tool. But this positive feature also has the same problems as pastoral contact via e-mail: We may let others overhear what we are saying to our brother or sister in Omaha or Raleigh. We may also issue information that embarrasses somebody.

I encourage people to be in touch with their loved ones far away and to ritualize such contact. Grandparents love hearing from their children. I love knowing my brother is a minute away while also being 600 miles away. I enjoy regular Internet contact with my husband while at work. There is a personal unburdening that can happen by e-mail that builds community. When people feel well supported, pastors have less work to do. In a culture in which people don’t even have time to go bowling together, such contact keeps us connected, mitigates human loneliness and relieves the tedium of daily work and routines.

The Internet also has spiritual and evangelical uses. If they choose, the members of my congregation receive a daily e-mail from the church that includes a short devotional with a prayer. Many still use devotional booklets, but most use the daily

e-mail prayer, which we call “Manna.” In the Friday e-mail we mention what the music, scripture and sermon title will be on Sunday and encourage congregants’ participation. Many will respond that they can’t come because of something going on in their lives but will nonetheless read the scripture or pick up the sermon on the Web. The sermon gets posted on the Web around 9 a.m. on Sunday morning. A member or browser can keep up with what is going on without being in church on Sunday morning.

Community is built by ritual contact, by knowing that someone else has read the same devotional as you this morning. And community is built on frequent contact. Because 80 percent of our congregation is under age 60, it is very Internet-friendly. In fact, most of our new members come in the door because they found us on the Web. Yes, there is a disadvantage to those seniors who don’t want or choose to go on line. As our parish gets younger, we will find ourselves increasingly Web and e-mail friendly.

A class issue lurks here: some people with whom we might want to communicate simply cannot afford computers. These liabilities need to be compensated for. Changing meeting times—which seems to happen hourly here—is a breeze when you can count on others to be monitoring their computers. But we have to be careful to call the one or two members of each group who are not online when new information is sent.

In addition to supporting people, transmitting information and building community, the Internet has enormous capacity for prophetic mission. Before the Internet, I probably wrote a dozen letters a year to my elected officials. Now I can do five times that. My voice is amplified, and so are the voices of many others. In a country in which only half of the people who can vote do vote, this general amplification is excellent for democracy and for peace and for justice.

Some guidelines for e-mail: Do use it to contact people, but limit the number of messages. My limit is a hundred e-mails a day and 12 phone calls. I play this numbers game to keep the contacts from taking over my life and world. Don’t use the Internet to gossip and never hit the copy button without asking yourself whether you are gossiping or engaging in self-enhancing or self-protecting communication. Do use the Internet to build community in your parish and in the families in your parish. Teach people how to stay in touch, and how to touch each other. Don’t use it as a substitute for hugging, eye contact or being together.