

Textweek.com: The woman behind the Web site

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [January 15, 2008](#) issue

If you're a lectionary preacher with access to the Internet, you have probably clicked on textweek.com. The Web site includes extensive links to biblical commentaries and articles on church history, conveniently organized around the upcoming Sunday's lectionary readings. It also includes suggestions about relevant art, liturgical aids, children's sermons and movies.

The site attracts up to 1.5 million page views every month—and “that's a slow month,” says Textweek founder and Webmaster Jenee Woodard. “Around Advent or Lent, we'll get 2.5 to 3 million hits.” Many of the people tapping into Textweek serve rural churches or live in the mission field, far from theological libraries. Woodard has taken the place of the church's bishops and theologians: she's equipping preachers and church leaders for ministry.

Clicking on Textweek can seem like entering a time warp, returning to a less sophisticated day in Web technology. Woodard hasn't changed the design of the site since she founded it in 1997. Many of her initial advertisers still appear. “I never really advertised the site, I just sent e-mails about it to a few friends, and they told their friends.” She caught the Internet wave in its infancy, when archiving links to countless other sites was still novel.

Surprisingly, she's something of a Luddite herself. “I think of myself as a reference librarian. You go to the library, say you're doing a paper on whatever, and the librarian gives you 20 to 30 resources.” She looks the part, with her no-nonsense short haircut and thick glasses. She defers many personal questions: “Don't write about me, I just index things.” And she has contempt for many church efforts to use technology. “I can't tell you how many bad PowerPoint presentations I've been in, or worship services that are trying to be hip in some way technologically—it reminds me of 1970s youth groups with bean bag chairs and the priest in Doonsbury, trying to be all with-it.”

Being a Luddite doesn't mean she isn't hip. She answers one question by saying, "Well, that'd be, just, like, my opinion, man," a reference to a line in the cult film *The Big Lebowski*.

Woodard began Textweek when she realized she couldn't start work on a Ph.D. in New Testament as she had hoped to do after getting an M.Div. at Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City. During seminary she appreciated reading Kierkegaard in Danish—one of the eight languages she reads ("Actually I read Norwegian, which is very close to Danish"). She and her husband had two children, and she stayed home with them while getting ready to apply to graduate school. It turned out that her second child, Phil, was severely autistic and required lots of care. "I needed an outlet for the reading I was doing, and needed to spend some time away from his needs." The nascent Internet was a perfect vehicle for indexing the research she was doing on biblical interpretation.

Her care for her son, now 15, has deeply affected her own theology. "I wrote Marcus Borg once to ask about the historicity of the healing stories," she said. "And he called me back, out of the blue. Phil had a terrible case of chicken pox, and in the next room I'm talking to Marcus Borg." She asked him how many healings there were. "He said, 'There was one, and there were thousands.' That both could be true was a big deal to me."

Woodard says she gets complaints about the links on her site from both conservatives and liberals, and in about equal numbers. She likes setting multiple and competing biblical interpretations alongside one another. "They all have integrity, within their ecclesial communities." Formerly a fundamentalist, she now worships with Methodists when she's not teaching in other churches around her home in Jackson, Michigan. "I can see where lots of very different people are coming from."

In fact, an inability to land on one side or the other of theological debates led her away from seeking ordination herself. But her theological erudition is important to her site's success. As she says, "You want a cataloguer who knows what she's doing."

The theological diversity of her links is part of the reason for her success. Ross Wagner, who teaches New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, uses Textweek often and recommends it to students. "It offers a treasure trove of

resources,” covering the entire span of church history, he says. On the other hand, Wagner’s colleague at PTS, Clifton Black, calls the site a “bizarre mélange,” and says readers find themselves “swimming in a biblical burgoo of John Wesley, René Girard and karaoke ‘Blessed Assurance.’”

Several pastors I interviewed said they use Textweek every time they preach. Some click on Woodard’s assembled academic reflections or links to sermons to “prime the pump” in thinking about their own sermons. Others look for artistic or liturgical resources. Many pastors use the site as an entry to other Web-based resources. One pastor told me he uses it to get to resources that St. Louis University has archived online; another uses it to get to resources at Vanderbilt. Peter Cammarano, a Methodist pastor in rural southeast Texas with “access to only one hardcopy set of commentaries,” told me the site’s real value is “it’s free! You could think of it as the homiletical potluck supper.”

So what insights has Woodard gleaned about the church from her work? One is depressing: “My traffic goes up four or five times the norm on Saturdays.” She wishes the resources on her site would be consulted earlier in the week. But she has found that “more pastors are interested in studying seriously than I thought.” Laypeople with whom she corresponds will say: “I wish my pastor would trust me with this.”

Many preachers express their debt to Woodard—she’s received gifts from missionaries abroad, and when pastors meet her they sometimes exclaim, “I owe you a lot of money!”

She has refused numerous offers to sell the site. The site’s traffic could easily be turned into a cash flow that exceeds the minimum wage that she estimates she makes for her 30-40 hours of work each week (the work is mostly done at odd hours around Phil’s schedule). She’s not opposed to turning a greater profit, but is unsure how to do so without being disloyal to pastors in places like Montana or her native South Dakota, or to longtime advertisers, whom she cuts a break. And she thinks that keeping the site free is important.

I gave her a more ecclesial analogy for her work: rather than being a reference librarian, she is like an Internet John Wesley, who compiled libraries for his poorly educated circuit-riding preachers. She said she prefers the image of a monk scribbling away at a manuscript in the Middle Ages. “It’s scary to think all these people are reading what I compile. I’m just a mama home with her kids.”