

Church netiquette: Ministry by e-mail

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [June 30, 2009](#) issue

Like most pastors, I claim that the face-to-face meeting is the best way to do the ministry of the church, but you would never guess it by my work habits. Also like most pastors, I spend an enormous amount of time reading and composing e-mails.

I am driven not so much by my own schedule or preferences as by those of my church members. Many of them use e-mail all day long and expect the church to take advantage of the same means of communication. I may want to speak to them personally, but before I have a chance to do so the matter has been put online, and it usually has a rather extensive audience. In the time it would take to reach one another by phone, the matter has been resolved. So if I want to be in on the discussion, I had better be typing.

Often when we feel comfortable with a particular type of communication, we assume that everyone does, or that everyone should. Would you rather deal with a sticky situation via an e-mail, in a letter, on the telephone or face-to-face? There is no right answer to the question. But most of us have a preference for one type of communication over another.

After reading a contentious e-mail, I will often complain, "Why didn't you come talk to me about that in person?" But after a difficult conversation, someone else might wish that the matter had been dealt with in writing, to give everyone time to think about their words and the consequences. There is no one right way to communicate. God has given us many ways to get our point across and to listen to others. And these days congregations are using e-mail, message boards, blogs and the like to carry out the ministry of the church. We are online, like it or not.

There's no question that e-mail can be a blessing when you are trying to arrange a meeting time or want to get written materials to people in advance. Minutes can be read and approved, agendas can be set and plans can be made. It all works beautifully where simple matters are concerned.

But setting an agenda can quickly become complicated. All it takes is one “reply all” response like “Why do we have that mission project on the agenda? I thought we decided not to help fund it again.” An e-mailed question like that can open up a Pandora’s box as people seek to answer individually and often at length without seeing one another’s facial expressions, hearing one another’s inflections or sensing the movement of the Holy Spirit in the room.

With e-mail, meetings often get scheduled, decisions made and matters settled before some people have had a chance to read the initial e-mail, let alone the entire string. So in such cases, is the matter really settled? E-mail debate favors those who spend the most time with e-mail, as well as those who have the proper equipment. On days when I am in the office, e-mail works well for me. But on days when I am out on calls or at meetings, I sometimes return to a long e-mail string waiting for me to sign off on an event that is just about to happen. Is there such a thing as communication that moves too fast?

When I started in ministry 15 years ago, it was the pile of handwritten phone messages in my mailbox that caused my blood pressure to rise. A few years later, it was the flashing light on the answering machine. Would I have three messages to write down and follow up on or 15? Now the first thing I check, before going to my mailbox or my voice mail, is my e-mail. (At one time I always checked it on my computer; now I can do it on a handheld device.) How many e-mails will there be? Once I have checked, do I go through them methodically, one by one? Or do I bounce around, practicing triage?

One can find all sorts of secular advice about using e-mail efficiently; the sources on “netiquette” are multiplying. Netiquette is mostly advice that you would hope is common sense: be careful about using “reply all,” don’t send jokes or forward mass e-mails, and think before you hit “send.”

One author warns that we should never check e-mail in the morning but instead devote that time to what we have already planned to do. E-mail, we are told, makes us reactive, and when we are pressed for time we should be proactive. But when I receive an e-mail that says “prayer request,” I’m going to read it first, no matter what time of day it is. This approach may not be efficient, but there are human hearts beating behind all this technology, and we readers are not machines.

In earlier years of the e-mail age, I would worry about the committee or ministry team member who did not use e-mail. But that hasn't been an issue for years at my suburban church. When I read recently that retirees are spending even more time online than teenagers do, I was not surprised. Older people are speeding down the information highway. E-mail is easy for a suburban congregation like mine, whose teenagers all seem to have the latest computers. But we can isolate those who don't have the same equipment, can't afford the same technology and haven't had the same training. The world that isn't online becomes invisible.

Everyone who is online knows how e-mail communication can go wrong. I learned my lesson in my very first office job. Three of us employees sat in adjacent cubicles. Whenever our boss would announce his latest demands, we would lean down, looking industrious, and type instant commentary to one another on exactly what we thought of his big ideas—an intraoffice version of what would later become e-mail. It wasn't what the computer network was built for, but it was a good indication of what it would become: a mechanism for chatting, gossip and humor, allowing for quick, sarcastic quips to be made in silence and without consequence.

One day I accidentally sent some snarky remarks directly to my boss. When he yelled and called me into his office, I realized instantly what I had done and knew that taking it back would not be possible. Hence I had my first case of send-button remorse. And by calling me into his office, the boss was preventing me from settling the matter from behind a computer screen.

Many church members and pastors have made similar gaffes. While we don't mean to be cruel, humor can often be misinterpreted. What is funny to one friend may be lost on another. E-mail does not allow us to read one another's reactions or to recognize the need to interpret our jokes for one another. One good-humored pastor I know thought he was sending an e-mail to his five closest clergy friends, so he signed off by referring to himself as "Your Lord and master." It turned out that he had sent the e-mail to the entire clergy cluster of his denomination, in which his church was by far the largest. At first he was afraid about the reaction he might get, but eventually his concern turned to the fact that he got no response whatsoever. Either his colleagues were being kind and discreet or they had no idea that this tall-steeple pastor was joking.

We are not the first generation of Christians to struggle with multimedia communication. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "I do not want to

seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters. For they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.'" It appears that Paul's written word was conveying a different message from his embodied word. His letters were scary.

I've received some scary e-mails as a pastor. I have read words that the writer would never have spoken out loud—words typed in haste or anger. Mostly they were sent out into an anonymous universe without the sender having to see the recipient's face when it was read. This is a hazard of e-mail, but it has always been a hazard of the written word. Today we ask, "You didn't hit send on that, did you?" when once we would have said, "Tell me you didn't mail that thing." Is Paul's remark to the Corinthians his own version of send-button remorse? Nobody wants to scare people with their letters, but then again, Paul could not have enjoyed being told that his physical presence was weak and his speech contemptible. And he probably was told all that in a letter. It appears that Paul was struggling as a speaker, so he wrote letters—and we still read them today, week after week in church. They may have scared some people, but now they are how we remember him.

When Yahoo handed over the e-mails of Chinese dissidents to their country's government, it confirmed what we already suspected: our e-mails are not our own. Even when we don't hit "reply all," there is no such thing as privacy in this brave new world. If we remember this, we may fare better with e-mail. Perhaps we might even imagine someone reading our e-mails aloud in church. If that's a scary thought, it may serve as a call for a little online repentance.

When Paul responded to those who criticized his scary letters, the issue came down to consistency. In writing back he wanted to make it clear that he stood by what he wrote: "Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present."

We could do worse than remember Paul's words when composing our next e-mail. In fact, I have them taped to my computer as I write, along with this paraphrase: "And let us also understand that what we say in an e-mail from behind a computer we will also do face-to-face." Will people recognize in what we write the same individual they meet in person?

Sometimes I get impatient with people whose communication preference is different from mine. I want them to adapt to my way so that I can understand them better.

But what I really should do is pray for the wisdom to understand them in their own words and in their own medium.

I often receive e-mails with “prayer request” in the subject line, and I always wish I were getting the news in person. But here it is, typed out, perhaps at some late hour in the middle of the darkness, after a long night of the soul. Another e-mail arrives with complex details about a parishioner’s health, with many people indicated as recipients of the e-mail, and I worry that the information may not be accurate.

I open a so-called inspirational e-mail, fairly confident that it will not inspire me. And no, I do not heed the request to forward it to ten people I love. I never want to read the poem “Foot prints” again, but thanks to the magic of e-mail, I may very well receive it daily. For me, hell would be being chained to a computer, forced to read one inspirational e-mail after another, all of them with the subject line, “I’m serious—this one is really, really good!!!!”

Despite our carelessness on the keyboard, we are still being the church. Prayers are conveyed, comfort is offered, meals for the sick are planned, the despairing are encouraged. Online, real ministry is happening. Ultimately, whether we’re high-tech or low-tech followers of Jesus, it’s still the message, not the medium, that matters.