

The Internet Is Our Parish:

A Learning Party on Technology and the United Methodist Church

Introduction

We live in a interconnected world. As Thomas Friedman has noticed in his book "The World Is Flat," internet usage has created a new paradigm for communication in the world. No longer can any church ask whether they will have a web site or not -- it has become an expectation along with hymnals and pews. The questions that churches must now answer are focused on how to utilize current technological trends to maximize the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world. Whereas the church has functioned with mass communication paradigms in mission, the rise of blogs, podcasting, and other user created media distributed through the internet means that we have to think in new ways.

The Internet Is Our Parish is an event designed to assist church leaders in becoming more proactive in thinking about technology and the church, and allowing leaders in new media to collaborate on ways that technology can assist the mission of offering the world Christ.

Potential Partners

One of the realities of new technology and the open-source software movement is a mistrust of traditional institutions and commercial entities. With that in mind, groups involved in this event will not be "sponsors" but rather "partners," setting the table for conversation without a specific promotional agenda. The potential partners could include:

- The Web Empowered Church Initiative of The Foundation For Evangelism
- The Network of United Methodist Bloggers (NUMB!!!)
- United Methodist Tech Shop
- The Upper Room
- United Methodist Publishing House
- Universities with Online Degree Programs (Drew/Asbury/Wesley)
- British Methodist Church (Church of Fools)

Goals

- To encourage the development and use of the internet by local churches for programs of evangelism and discipleship.
- To facilitate the creation of a network of United Methodists involved in the development of content for internet distribution.
- To help churches develop a comprehensive strategy for using the internet, and provide the opportunity for training on the creation of new media options, including blogs, podcasts, and other Web 2.0 applications.

Format

One of the values inherent in the new internet based media paradigm (open-source) is the valuing of conversation. As such, “open-source” meetings have been created that maximize the opportunity for conversation, providing a more level playing field that minimizes the power dynamics between teachers and learners. This involves the creation of “learning teams” (popularized by Peter Senge in “The Fifth Dimension”) which work together collaboratively.

Since this particular gathering is focused on the use of the Internet, it will be crucial that the event be hosted in a location that allows for strong network access, preferably wireless. In order to minimize costs, participants will be encouraged to bring their own laptop computers with WIFI access, allowing all participants a “hands-on” experience. For those persons who do not have a portable computer available, a number of computer workstations should be available for their use. It will also be important to have data projection capabilities throughout the facility.

We recognize that participants will come to this event having different levels of expertise. With that in mind, we propose the creation of two “streams” to allow persons to address those differences:

- The “Dial-Up” stream will be designed for persons who have minimal background on using the internet in their ministry. This stream will need to look at foundational questions, such as “Why is internet ministry important?” as well as basic issues of technology, including “Web Site Basics,” “Blogging for Beginners,” etc.
- The “Broadband” stream will be designed for persons who are comfortable with technology and have been involved in using the internet for some time. This stream will focus both on technological innovation, but also content creation and promotion. Additionally, this stream should consider tools for distance learning and their application for the church.

This event must also value corporate worship and spiritual formation in the broader context of the conversation. The focus at all times must not be on technological innovation (a geek fest focused on the latest gadgets) but on the final goal of mission. With this in mind, we propose that worship services be designed which focus on the call to offer Christ. Just as Jesus was a creative storyteller during his time on earth, our use of the internet is simply a tool for creatively telling the story of God’s work in our lives. This value must be central to the design of this event.

Proposed Schedule

Day 1

9 a.m. – 5 p.m. Registration Open

9 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. “Early Bird” seminars

1:30 p.m. – 4 p.m. Continuation of “Early Bird” seminars

Early Bird seminars are 5 hour intensive workshops on particular topics in technology. This might include training on Typo3 and the Web Empowered Church software, basics of web site design, or other topics as desired.

5:30 p.m. Opening Banquet – UM Internet Awards

7:30 p.m. Opening Worship

Day 2

8:30 – 9:45 a.m. General Session #1

10:00 a.m. – Noon Workshops #1

1:30 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. Workshops #2

3:15 p.m. – 4:45 p.m. Workshops #3

5:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. Supper Break

During the dinner break, persons will be encouraged to gather with others to network on various topics, such as blogging, podcasting, web design, communications strategy, etc.

7:00 p.m. – 8:30 p.m. General Session #2

8:45 p.m. – Collaboration Groups

The collaboration groups are opportunities to brainstorm about how technology is used in specific contexts.

Day 3

8:00 a.m. Morning Prayer

9:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. Workshops #4

11:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. Closing Session

Resources Needed

- Resource Persons
- Computers and networking hardware
- Data projectors and/or plasma/LCD display panels
- PA systems for main hall and large breakout rooms
- Audio recording for podcasting sessions during and post event
- Web hosting and site development (including on-line registration module) for event.
- Video Recording Equipment
- Wi-Fi Enabled Site

Proposed Planning Team

- Gavin Richardson
- Dale Lature
- Cole Wakefield
- Shane Raynor
- Paul Ervin

- Beth Quick
- Theresa Coleman
- Jay Voorhees
- Chuck Russell

Possible Support Team Members

- Jonathon Norman
- Jody Lentz (Open Source Event Planner/Business Consultant/Blakemore UMC Lay Leader)
- L&H John
- Susie Albert Miller
- Web Empowered Church Team Members

Site Suggestions

The site for "The Internet is Our Parish" Conference should be Wi-Fi enabled. Centrally located to an airport and adequate hotel housing. This could be combined within a hotel system or in relative distance to a church. Venue would have to provide ample meeting space for general sessions, workshops, breakout/networking sessions, and meals should they be provided "in house" or in proximity to main venue.

Site Ideas

- Nashville - Brentwood UMC / Hotels in Brentwood Area
- Kansas City - Church of the Resurrection
- Detroit - Convention Center
- Atlanta - Northpoint UMC or possibly Peachtree Street UMC or Simpsonwood Convention Ctr.
- Orlando, FL - Asbury University
- Louisville, KY -
- San Diego, CA -
- Charlotte, NC -
- Philadelphia, PA - Hotels and Convention Center, plus the whole city is Wi-Fi enabled