



PARISH GROWTH
PARTNERS



USING EMAIL

TO DEEPEN YOUR CONNECTION WITH PARISHIONERS

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“The Internet is certainly a new forum understood in the ancient Roman sense of that public space where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the social life of the city took place...It was a crowded and bustling urban space which reflected the surrounding culture and created a culture of its own. This is no less true of cyberspace, which as it were a new frontier...For the Church the new world of cyber space is a summons to the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel message. This challenge is at the heart of what it means at the beginning of the millennium to follow the Lord’s command to ‘put out into the deep’.”¹

INTRODUCTION: STANDING AT A DECISIVE GATEWAY

Threshold Moments

Throughout time, the Church has been faced with what the Holy Father calls “threshold moments” – moments marked by incredible discoveries and resulting change. Each new age, with its corresponding inventions – the printing press, cinema, radio and television – has brought with it challenges and possibilities for proclaiming the Word of Jesus Christ; and with the Internet revolution in full force, the Church finds herself “unmistakably at another decisive gateway.”¹

Today, as apostles of Christ, we find ourselves entering a foreign land: the new world of cyberspace. It is a world with a culture unlike any other. It is a culture with a language all its own. A language that transcends barriers of time and space. A means of communication that is immediate, interactive, and participatory. A means of communication we are called upon to employ. E-mail. Without an understanding of e-mail, and without a parish e-mail communications plan in place, we cannot follow the call of the Holy Father. We cannot enter this “new frontier.” We cannot proclaim the Gospel message.

It is time for us to understand the unique nature and incredible potential of this powerful communications tool.

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The Nature of E-mail

E-mail, or electronic mail, was one of the first and most popular uses of the Internet. Electronic mail – messages sent over the Internet – allows us to cross the divides of both time and space. Thanks to e-mail, we can send messages instantaneously – any time we want, anywhere in the world.

The uses of e-mail are as varied as the users themselves. Through e-mail, politicians speak with constituents, faculty with students, sisters with brothers, consumers with retailers, and so on. The list is endless.

E-mail is no longer the novelty it once was. It is quickly becoming a required and preferred means of communication. According to Archbishop John Foley, President of Pontifical Council on Social Communications, in his report entitled *The Church and the Internet*, “as more and more people become familiar with this characteristic of the Internet in other areas of their lives, they can be expected to look for it in regard to religion and the Church as well.”²

Not only would it be self-defeating for the Church not to use e-mail as a tool of communication, but also, Pope Paul VI warns the Church that we “would feel guilty before the Lord if we failed to use media for evangelization.”²

A carefully structured parish e-mail endeavor can:

- **Strengthen** the bonds between the church and her members
- **Enrich** the lives of parishioners
- **Complement** and sustain religious teachings
- **Provide** targeted communication to particular groups or individuals
- **Enable** us to spread the Good News beyond all barriers and frontiers

THE IMPACT OF E-MAIL FOR THE CHURCH

E-mail has made a tremendous difference in the lives of the faithful. Faith communities that have harnessed the power of e-mail have strengthened their sense of community, provided easy access to information, and fortified and sustained their spiritual growth.

Strengthening the Bonds of Unity

The Internet allows the Church “to hear more clearly the voice of public opinion, and enter into a continuous discussion with the world around her...”²

The key difference between e-mail and other forms of mass communication rests in its interactive nature. Unlike the top-down communication of the past, e-mail transforms

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static, one-sided communication into a two-way flow of information. Using e-mail, pastors can now enter into a continuous dialogue with their parishioners. “Access to email,” argues Los Angeles based web developer Eric Stoltz, in his white paper *The Church and the Internet Revolution*, “...provides a ready outlet from which to learn about concerns of the faithful...” It is this ongoing discussion and sharing of opinion – this validating of individual voices – that ultimately strengthens the bonds of unity between parishioners and the Church.

The recent report by Pew Internet & American Life Project ([Wired Churches, Wired Temples: Taking Congregations and Missions Into Cyberspace](#)) furthers the stance that improved communication between staff and members is a direct result of e-mail. With over 1,300 congregations responding to this online survey, 91% of churches and synagogues stated, “E-mail has helped congregation members and staff stay more in touch with each other.” Furthermore, 90% of high access communities expressed great satisfaction with the role e-mail plays in their faith community. The Pew Internet & American Life Project is a non-profit initiative of the Pew Research Center for People and the Press.

It is the interactivity and ongoing dialogue that builds this feeling of community; and, thanks to the Internet and e-mail, interaction has never been so easy. With e-mail addresses in place for parish priests and staff, a “connection” with parishioners can be made any time of the day or night, at a fraction of the cost of traditional mailings.

Community and belonging, however, is no longer limited to those who we can see and touch. E-mail has opened the doors of our faith community to those who would otherwise be excluded simply by virtue of accessibility. This remarkable new tool “offers the unique opportunity for proclaiming the saving truth of Christ to the whole human family.”²

Communicating Beyond Barriers

“Consider...the positive capacity of the Internet to carry religious information beyond all barriers and frontiers. Such a wide audience would have been beyond the wildest imaginings of those who preached the Gospel before us...”²

With the capacity to overcome distance and time, e-mail enables us to communicate with those who may otherwise be difficult to reach – the homebound, the ill, or those living in remote areas. The Message of the Holy Father states that through e-mail, we are able to “multiply contacts in ways hitherto unthinkable.” With the touch of a button, we can send a message to one or one hundred parishioners any time, anywhere.

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Because e-mail enables us to reach individuals and the masses in a way that overcomes both time and space, it is a powerful and readily available means of relaying parish news and information. E-mail can replace the numerous, time consuming phone calls and expensive mass mailings needed to spread important news or facilitate parish events. No longer will parishioners be “left out” due to a missed phone call or a lost piece of mail. While it is clear that e-mail will enable us to “multiply our contacts” in ways “unthinkable,” it will also enable us to enrich and sustain the followers of Christ in ways once unimaginable.

Enriching the Spiritual Life of Parishioners

“While the Internet can never replace that profound experience with God, which only the living sacramental life of the Church can offer, it certainly can provide a unique supplement and support in both preparing for the encounter with Christ in community and sustaining the new believer in the journey of faith...”¹

Through e-mail, the Word of Christ can continue to reverberate in the lives of parishioners throughout the week. Parishioners will not have to leave their homes to hear and “feel” the word of Christ. Parish priests can e-mail inspirational reminders or simple statements of support on a weekly or even a daily basis. These simple words of wisdom can, at times, be all it takes to fortify our belief in Christ’s message and provide us with comfort in times of need.

Not only can e-mail provide spiritual support, but also over 20 million Americans, as reported by Pew Internet American Life Project, have sought spiritual information online. Furthermore, another 41% of their online survey respondents have offered spiritual advice through e-mail.

How is e-mail being used to improve spiritual life? One example comes from the Pew survey where a conservative synagogue uses e-mail to inform members of a death in the community and to ask for volunteers to sit with the body and pray with the family members. (*Wired Churches, Wired Temples*). Quite similarly, parish priests could use e-mail to inform parishioners of such events and ask them for prayers on behalf of the family. Would it not sustain the bereaved knowing that their entire community is praying for them? And if so, how can we ignore a tool that allows us to do so?

Spiritual enrichment, as reported by Pew Internet, is not limited to the relationship between priest and parishioner. Parishioners are also currently using e-mail to sustain each other as they “send e-mail back and forth to support each other spiritually or share spiritual concerns.”³

With the “always-on” and “easy access” connection that e-mail provides, it is no wonder that 81% of Pew Internet’s respondents proclaimed that the “use of e-mail has helped the spiritual life of their community.”

Conclusion

The benefits of e-mail are too powerful to ignore: spiritual enrichment, opened lines of communication, and enhanced feelings of community. Each one of these qualities lies at the heart of the Church’s mission.

With each day that we choose not to use e-mail, we choose not to follow the Holy Father’s summons to “bravely cross this new threshold, to put out into the deep of the Net.”¹

The time for action is now. It is time for each and every parish to put in place a parish e-mail communications plan and reap the limitless benefits that such a plan will produce.

About Parish Growth Partners

Parish Growth Partners is a leading provider of customized Catholic parish stewardship conversations using personalized and attractive email newsletters. Parish Growth Partner’s solutions for stewardship communications enables local pastors to create, deliver and manage very relevant and effective stewardship conversations that foster a deeper connection, create a closer bond, invite greater involvement and drive growth in all segments of parish offertory. We provide a comprehensive turnkey solution. Founded in 2002, the company is based in Winchester, Massachusetts.

CONTACT US:

*Parish Growth Partners
540 Main Street, Suite 4
Winchester, MA 01890
T: 781-721-9977
F: 781-721-3337*

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