Link by Link: Creating an Online Parish Resource Center

By Peter Antoci

One historic dimension of Christian formation has been proclamation of the good news, the *kerygma* of the gospel message. It is a feature of Christian community that has been and will always be with us, yet we are consistently challenged to take advantage of the means of communication that are available as well as those that are evolving.

I serve as an associate priest at a large, urban parish in Washington, D.C. In my capacity as director of adult formation, I was asked early on to begin exploring some of the possible advantages of electronic and social media.

After almost two years of development, we recently **dedicated a digital resource center**. This is the story of **Spirit Link**, St. Columba's digital resource for spiritual exploration and Christian formation. While it has taken some time, I want to assure you that in the end this is not an onerous or overwhelming project. If your parish has a website, a digital resource center can be as elaborate or as simple as you would like to make it.

Who?

The place to start is to identify and recognize who are your stakeholders and who are your peer ministers in developing this resource. Certainly parishioners fit the bill as stakeholders, but dig a little deeper. Who are they? What formation needs have they have articulated or have you discerned? Do they use electronic or social media? The answers to these questions will help you choose materials.

As for your colleagues in development: call together a group to help you brainstorm and workshop links and resources. If possible, you may want to take advantage of any consultants available to you in Christian education or formation. Since we are close to Virginia Seminary, we sought the advice of the **Bishop Payne Library** staff and the **Center for the Ministry of Teaching**.

Of course, staff resources are vital for parishes that have them. Consider who can assist with your communications work, and how such a project can be integrated into the annual work plan of the staff.

Both expert as well as user advice is valuable. Calling these folks together will also strengthen a sense of mutual creativity and mutual mission. Nothing like pairing *kerygma* with *koinonia* (community)!

What?

One of the challenges with creating in cyberspace is to have the community

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recognize this resource as a place where they can *go*. Simply saying "We've created a link for you on our website" is not very compelling. This place needs a name.

After some workshopping, we eventually came up with the term Spirit Link, as something that would appeal to our congregation. The title came from members of the formation committee.

Eventually we even found a graphic from our own stained glass windows, which became the website icon for Spirit Link. Use what you can from your physical space to create your virtual space!

Both the name and the image have helped us capture what we hope the resource will offer. They reflect some of our values in **curating resources** and our criteria for inclusion.

The true challenge of a digital resource center is not in creating it; it is in curating it. We came up with three categories for what people will find on Spirit Link: Pray, Think, and Do. These categories correspond to what our parishioners were asking for—resources for prayer, resources for theological study, and resources for Christian practices and service at home and in the world.

Where?

As in real estate, so in cyberspace: location, location, location. Where will this resource be found?

The easiest place is on your parish website, but I suppose there might be a case for locating it on other electronic or social media platforms. In any event, you want to create a sense that this resource is a place for people to explore.

It is no surprise that an Episcopal parish might want to liturgize the inauguration of such a center, even one in cyberspace! While there is no current liturgy for this, the Book of Occasional Services has a short liturgy to set aside a secular space for sacred uses. We adapted this to set aside a cyberspace, and hallow the link.

We want this resource to be as much a place for prayer, study, and service as is our parish nave, library, or kitchen!

Turning the dedication into an event for worship and blessing was a great way to kick-off this new resource. It also brought together *kerygma* and *leiturgia* (liturgy).

When?

The time it took to put this resource together was just shy of two years. This could move faster or slower, but there really is no reason to rush.

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You need time to bring together stakeholders, peers, and staff. You need time to brainstorm, explore, test, and make decisions. You need time to create a marketing plan. When will you dedicate/inaugurate this resource? When will you advertise it?

We took the approach of a month-long teaser campaign: "Spirit Link is coming … will you be there?" Variations on this appeared in parish communications each week leading up to the roll-out. It created questions and a positive, enthusiastic buzz. To put this theologically: consider how you will proclaim the proclamation!

How?

The development of this project was not, in the end, terribly complicated. In the simplest of terms, you are creating a list of links.

What becomes critical, however, is how you involve the faith community (congregation, committee, consultants, and staff). The creation of Spirit Link was as much a project as it was a process. If this is to be a resource for spiritual formation it needs to be birthed as the result of mutual ministry and mission.

Anyone can put together a list, but who will care about it?

The answer lies in how members of the church come together in both the initial creation as well as the ongoing curation of this kind of resource.

Indeed, at our very dedication event, as we were demonstrating the link(s), we were receiving good feedback from the congregation. As a result, the first changes to our list were made in the first week! This is therefore a tool for ministry feedback as well as mutual learning.

Why?

There are lots of ways to broadcast the *kerygma* of the Gospel, and as I noted earlier, Christians have been doing this since the first century. Indeed, Christians arguably may be seen as 'early adaptors' of novel media.

The codex, the gospel genre, the autobiography, and the printing press were all forms or genres embraced, in their inception, by Christians. Electronic and social media are just the most recent means of communication to come along.

That is our cultural context in the twenty-first century. But we also have our unique, community and parish contexts. Draw upon them as resources for formation, otherwise a digital resource center will be nothing more than a list of links. And the last thing we want to do is to burden people with boring links, a chain to shackle their spirit.

To adapt a saying attributed to St. Francis, "Always proclaim the Gospel, sometimes

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use the Internet!"

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