

Communications

2005 – 2007 REPORT TO THE US NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Report

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My work can be divided into these areas:

1. *Publications*: writing, editing, design, and printing.
2. *Internet services*: websites, email, blogs, on-line forms, etc.
3. *Computer support*: Macintosh hardware and software set-up and support.
4. *Filemaker database*: design, maintenance, expansion, the web interface.

During the latter part of the 2001-2005 quadrennium, I dropped to a four-day-a-week schedule. That continued until March 2006, when it became obvious that I couldn't do my job in just four days a week. I approached Bishop Ron Ramsey about the possibility of going back to five days, and he had been thinking along the same lines. So I returned to fulltime status.

In the rest of this report, I'll hit some of the things which have consumed my time since June 2005, and also look ahead at some things I'd like to develop.

Computer Upgrades

Things got very busy for me immediately after the 2005 US National Conference. We needed to upgrade the headquarters accounting program, plus all of the computers. For the most part, we were seriously behind. Staff meetings were held, and decisions were made. Implementing the decisions mostly fell on me, because it involved ordering and installing computer equipment. By September of 2005, I had ordered, installed, and configured eight iMacs, three Macintosh Powerbooks, and one PowerMac tower (with two more close behind). I also provided training resources for the staff.

We settled on AccountEdge as the financial program. I set up a dedicated server for it and installed client software on the necessary computers. Marci Hammel has taken it from there.

Servers

We operate four different servers, all of

which are currently housed in my office.

Web server. The UB.org and UBmissions.com websites are run on a new PowerMac G5 tower, which was installed during the fall of 2005.

AccountEdge server. The accounting program runs on its own PowerMac G4 server.

Filemaker server. Our internal databases for tracking people, churches, statistics, and missionaries (and much more) use the Filemaker program, which is cross-platform. It runs on a dedicated PowerMac G5 tower which I installed in early 2006. Several missions databases were kept on the previous server until the fall of 2006, when I got them switched over.

Email server. In December 2006, I switched from CommuniGate (which we had used since 2002) to Kerio Mailserver. CommuniGate had served us well, but we couldn't use it for web-mail and it had no built-in spam filtering. Spam had become a huge problem, with some of us getting hundreds of junk emails every day. Kerio has strong capabilities in filtering out spam, and that has been a relief. It also provides a very nice webmail interface, plus a variety of other updated features. It runs on a Mac Mini.

Blogs

In late 2005, we began playing with the idea of using blogs (web logs) as a communication tool, particularly for Bishop Ramsey. I had been running a personal blog for two years, using Blogger. I researched a number of blogging systems and decided that Movable Type would serve us best. (I have since switched my own blog to Movable Type.)

The BishopBlog premiered in January 2006 as a place Bishop Ramsey could post "tidbits of vision, instruction, experience, and admonition." This blog found an immediate audience.

At the same time, we launched the ClusterCoach blog as a way for cluster coaches to interact and share ideas, and for Pat Jones to write on various things. The concept was good, but

cluster coaches never really got involved with it.

At the same time, Bishop Ramsey was having trouble keeping fresh content coming. And so, in June 2006 we made two changes: the Cluster-Coach blog was discontinued, and the Bishop-Blog was expanded to include additional contributors: Pat Jones, Gary Dilley, Tom Blaylock, and Steve Dennie. This has worked much better.

I also converted the UB news pages to a blog format, which enables me to post from anywhere (rather than just from the office). The blog setup has been perfect for the news.

I also set up two blogs for internal UB Headquarters use: one for letting everyone know about address changes, the other for posting computer tips and tricks.

Filemaker Database

In early 2006 I rewrote our Filemaker database from scratch. It began around 1994 as a way to track information about ministers. Over the years we added many features—church statistics, conference registrations, labels, nametags, church directory, and much more. A bad case of featuritis afflicted the database. Plus, because of limitations with our financial program, we were several versions behind. A rewrite was necessary. The new database is far superior.

The database now tracks information on churches, ministers and laypersons, missionaries, clusters, event registrations, and the email directory. The church and missionary directories are published on the web live.

Event Promotion

Promotion for the Days of Missions, Youth Summit, Women's Conference, and the US National Conference comes to me. The first priority is getting information on the website, since all other promotional pieces channel people there. With these events I've produced bulletin inserts, brochures, cards, posters, online registration, emails, and these reports.

Constant Contact Email Service

Since we no longer publish a denominational newsletter, most information is now distributed through the website and by email. The periodic email updates are an important part of the communications strategy.

In mid-2006, I began using Constant Contact, an online company, to send mass emails to our constituency. This has provided many advantages—in appearance, security, tracking, reporting, and much more. (At least one

church, Morning Star UB in Kokomo, Ind., uses Constant Contact.)

We send out UB News Updates on an as-needed basis, rather than according to some regular schedule. The News now goes to 950 addresses (which includes, at the moment, a curiously even 387 ministers and 387 laypersons, plus an assortment of missionaries, church addresses, and non-UB people).

We now have at least one email contact in all but 24 of our 210 churches, plus contacts in each of the Canadian churches. Of those 24 churches, 22 have less than 50 people attending. So when we send out mass emails, we cover our US and Canadian churches very well.

In June 2005, Tom Blaylock launched the Harvest Prayer Update to give prayer requests and updates from our church planting situations. That email list is now up to 95 persons.

Website Statistics

I use several methods to measure traffic to our websites, and they often show very different results. But here are stats I consider reliable:

- During February 2007, the BishopBlog had 806 visitors, one-third of them first-timers.

- During February 2007, the UB website (ub.org) had 6000 visits, 77% of them first-timers.

- During the last six months of 2006, over 12,300 persons visited ub.org, 7000 of whom came only once but 1200 of whom visited more than six times. I would assume that those 1200 are UB people.

- 88% of traffic to ub.org comes from people in the United States. Visitors from over 100 other countries have also stopped by for a visit.

- The busiest time for traffic to ub.org is Monday at 3 pm.

- The sections of the website which receive the most traffic are: News, Downloads, About Us, Resources, and Articles.

Other Internet-Related Activities

- Installed new forms processing software, a big improvement over what we had been using. We have online forms for submitting church news, pastoral changes, address changes, general questions, email addresses, and more.

- Incorporated the revised Pastoral Ministries Handbook into the website.

- Set up online registration for the two Day of Missions events held in 2006, the Day of Missions event for 2007, the 2006 and 2007 Youth Summits, and the 2006 Women's Conference.

- Got everyone at Headquarters set up with online calendars.

Materials for Global Ministries

- Handled editing, design, and printing for the monthly (actually, more like ten times a year) *WorldView* newsletter. In late 2006, we switched it from two-color to four-color.
- Designed and reprinted the UB Missions map in 2005, 2006, and 2007.
- Designed 150 slides related to UB missions.
- Designed labels for DVDs for Global Ministries.
- Designed materials for Self-Denial.
- Designed materials for the summer VBS project each year.
- Redesigned the missions website template.

Other Materials

- Updated the *Discipline* after the 2005 US National Conference, and made it available on the website (we did not print hard copies this time, since it has only a two-year lifespan).
- Designed the National Conference Covenant certificate.
- Designed fillable forms in Microsoft Word for church financial reports (which can be emailed to Marci Hammel).
- Designed fillable forms in Microsoft Word for the annual reports (local church and ministerial reports), starting with the reports for the 2005 year. About 35 pastors and churches used them for the 2005 reporting, and the number for the 2006 year will no doubt be much higher.
- Handled the CVLI (Christian Video Licensing) renewals. About 90 UB churches participate.
- Developed PowerPoint presentations for Ron Ramsey, Pat Jones, and Tom Blaylock.
- Designed new business cards for Ron Ramsey and Pat Jones.

Church Graphics

Our churches and pastors need training in a variety of communications areas. I frequently groan upon seeing misuses of such computer design tools as fonts, borders, shading, clip art, photos, PowerPoint, etc. I have been forgiving in the past, recognizing that local churches were doing the best with what they had, and I shouldn't expect ministers (trained in theology and pastoral care) to be knowledgeable about computer graphics and typography.

But at this point, 2007, way too many people

have at least a basic knowledge of what constitutes good web design, good publication design, and good PowerPoint usage. Using these tools poorly casts ministers and their churches in a poor light. And so, I'd really really like to help churches and ministers raise the level of what they do in communications.

Publications. The computer makes everyone a designer, whether or not they know anything about design. This is an area of enormous weakness. Many church publications looked cleaner in the typewriter days. Now, too many church publications (that I see) are graphic eye-sores, with a multitude of fonts used inappropriately, ghastly clipart (often bitmapped), and sundry other graphic and editorial blunders.

Websites. For people looking for a church, a church's website is often their first impression of the church. But as I've heard in too many seminars, a poor church website—especially since it is, indeed, the first impression—can be more detrimental than helpful. Some UB churches have very attractive websites, but some sites look, well, hideous. In most cases, it's a matter of lack of tools, time, and/or expertise. Churches also need information about securing a domain name, and the best places for doing so. A domain name is a valuable (and cheap) piece of property, and once it's gone, it's gone. There are also ways to maximize search results, so that when visitors are looking online for a church, they comes across your site.

Sermon. Today, the sermon is no longer just about standing in a pulpit and speaking, but can be a mixture of various types of communication: speaking, electronic slides, note handouts, video, drama, etc. All of this needs to be done well and in a cohesive way, and with knowledge about what constitutes "well" when it comes to legibility, readability, flow, metaphor, font and graphic usage, general principles of written communication, etc. For instance, nearly all PowerPoint usage that I see is stuck in the 1990s, with an abundance of bullet points; current usage has gone way beyond that.

Projected lyrics. Many churches now project song lyrics on a screen. This is a good thing. However, I often see lyrics that are difficult to read. There are principles and techniques that can help, and things to avoid.

Email. Many churches have an email list for the local church constituency. This is a good thing. But there are some principles and concepts to keep in mind.

These are all areas in which I yearn to help.

In the next couple of years, I'd like to develop some ways to come alongside churches and ministers to help raise the level of communications expertise. Perhaps cluster meetings are a possible forum. I'm open to ideas.

Ideas for the Future

Websites for churches. The Filemaker database generates a basic one-page website for all UB churches. However, I envision developing several full website templates aimed at smaller churches and church plants that lack the resources to develop something nice. We would host and update their site, and provide email addresses at UnitedBrethren.com or UnitedBrethren.org (two unused domains we own). This would be a valuable service, but could become extremely time-consuming.

New website for Global Ministries. They are overdue for a new website.

Software expertise. I need to go deeper in my proficiency with InDesign, Dreamweaver, Flash, and Photoshop. I also need to learn FXForge, a program for creating Filemaker web-interface pages in the PHP language.

UB Email list. I'd like to increase the size of the UB email list to 1500 (from the current 950) during the next two years.

UB Booklet. The little UB Booklet has been very popular, and we've sold thousands of them over the years. Something which accomplishes the same purposes—can be used for membership training, and also to give to people who want to know more about the UB church—needs to be developed.

Web Resources. I'd love to put the entire UB history book online. That would be a massive project, but it would be a great resource. And Google would love it (and send lots of people our way). I'd also like to publish an online library of missions-related photos, both of missionaries past and present and of photos from our various fields. People in local churches could craft videos and PowerPoint presentations, which could then be shared with the whole denomination. This is a way to make use of what's being called "crowd-sourcing."

Personal

Local church. Pam and I attend Anchor Community Church, located near downtown Fort Wayne, Ind. I play the keyboard in the worship band (we also occasionally play in coffeeshops and for other occasions), put together the announcement loop on Sunday mornings, and do

lots of other stuff.

RandomPokes. My online business, RandomPokes.com, is doing fine and is now set up so that it doesn't require much of my time. My slides are being used by (at least) several hundred churches in 35 states and five countries. Type "announcement slides" into Google, and I'm at the top. Type "PowerPoint slides for churches," and I'm number 2.

My Blog. I have a lot of fun with my RandomPokes.org blog. It's a great outlet to keep my writing abilities fresh and to generally spout off. I've done it now for two-and-a-half years.

Pam. Pam is one of four partners (second in seniority) in the accounting firm Christen•Souers LLC, which has offices in Fort Wayne, Angola, and Marion.

Family. In December 2006, we took in a young couple from our church (and their two-month-old baby) who basically had no money and no place to go. After having the house to ourselves for 18 years, it's been quite a change—but a rewarding one, as we constantly find ways to build into the lives of this couple, who come from terribly dysfunctional backgrounds. I am so proud of Pam as I watch her interacting with all three of them in loving ways.

Conclusion

As always, it's been a pleasure to serve the United Brethren church as Communications Director. I continue to be stretched, I continue to learn, and I continue to enjoy myself.

Every time a new bishop comes aboard, the atmosphere of the office changes in various ways. In 2005, two new leaders came to the Headquarters: Bishop Ron Ramsey, and Pat Jones. It's been fun working with them and watching them lead the United States churches in some new directions. Bishop Ramsey gives me more freedom and trust than is probably wise, but I appreciate it. We creative types crave latitude, and I've been blessed to have that with all of the bishops under whom I've served.

The UB Headquarters is a fun place to work. We have a quality group of people who get along well, we have a nice building, and we're blessed with quality equipment for doing our work. And there is never any shortage of work.

With gratitude,

Steve Dennie
Communications Director