
News From Covenant and Northeast

Summer 2004

Building Community Electronically

Jane McGookey has written this from her experience as Technology Consultant for the Presbytery of Lake Michigan and Chair of the Communication Task Force for Presbyterian Women in The Synod of the Covenants.

For the past three years Lake Michigan Presbyterian Women has used the Internet and email to “widen our circle”. Previously our only way to communicate with our sisters was through mailings and at our gatherings. We are extending our reach by using email to distribute reminders, share devotionals, share prayer concerns, gain consensus and distribute documents (newsletters, proposals, bylaws, mailing lists, etc). Our PW also has a web site where visitors can learn more about us, sign up for email updates and print gathering registration forms. Visit us at www.lakemichiganpresbytery.org/women.

Reading and sending email can be quite enjoyable. Questions usually get answered in a timely manner and people are able to send and receive when it is convenient for them sometimes between 10 pm – 8 am. More people are using email because it is a fast, easy and inexpensive way to communicate. Some people refuse to use email, even though most public libraries have Internet terminals for public use. Perhaps it is because they are unwilling to learn yet another thing in our technological society. I imagine some people resisted using the telephone when it first became a popular form of communication. Fortunately, many people do use the Internet and email, making the exchange of information much more efficient.

This past January, the Presbytery of Lake Michigan initiated electronic distribution of the Presbytery Packet through the web. Pastors and Elder Commissioners are required to download Presbytery meeting information from the web site, www.lakemichiganpresbytery.org. An email is sent to each church and to each pastor notifying them when the materials are available. It is church’s responsibility to download and print the information before the meeting. The Presbytery recognizes not everyone has the ability to do this and they accommodate by making a few exceptions to the no-mailing goal. Obviously, not all people have embraced the change. Each meeting there is frustration (thankfully less each time) that someone forgot or had a problem downloading the information. It is necessary for staff to continue to educate and to reinforce the reason why this decision was made. The budget is tight and more creative ways to save money are necessary. A significant savings is made with the elimination of printing and postage for this information.

If for no other reason, use email to make your newsletter editor’s job easier. When an author submits an article using email it only takes a few keystrokes to include it into the newsletter. Don’t get fancy sending an article, just type or copy it into the body of the message, and attach a picture, if needed. If you use a Word Processor to type the article, chances are the editor will have to reformat the article to fit into the newsletter.

Email tips:

- Word emails carefully. Re-read your email message before sending it; do not try to be cute. Often what you meant in a humorous way is taken the wrong way when viewed by the reader.
- Always, always, always acknowledge an email that has been specifically sent to you! Even if you do not have the information being asked for or you missed the date of an event. It is just plain courteous to acknowledge the receipt of an email!
- Use common sense when determining if an email decision is appropriate. It is fine to use email to gain a consensus on meeting times. It is not acceptable to assume everyone reads email on a daily basis, so don’t email the neighbor to ask them to watch your child after school tomorrow. Generally assume people check their email only once a week but this by no means guarantees they will! If you haven’t received a reply, use the phone to ask if the person received the email!
- Keep it simple. Having pretty backgrounds or dancing images may look lovely in your email program but the reader may not be using the same program. It could mean the difference of your message being read or tossed in the trash because it produced an annoying error or warning message.

Background

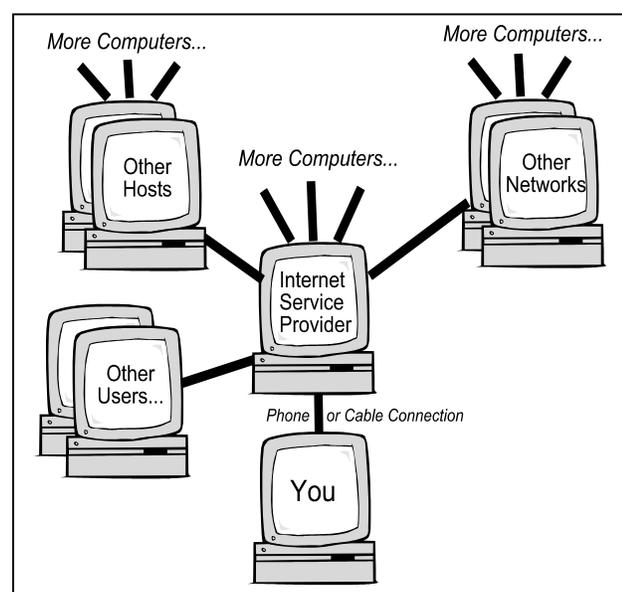
A network is when two or more computers share information. The Internet is just one humungous network. All you need to get connected is a computer and an Internet connection. Check your phone book for Internet Service Providers to find out what kind of service is located in your area. Find one that is willing to patiently answer your questions. If their sales team is not courteous, chances are their support people are not either. Patience is a necessity when dealing with technology.

Thing you need to learn about:

- Your operating system (Windows XP, Linux, Unix, Windows 98)
- Your Internet service (Dial-up, DSL, Cable modem)
- Your email program (Outlook, Netscape Messenger, AOL)
- Your Internet browser (Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator, AOL)

Where to find the information:

- Take a class – check with your recreation department, community ed, library or school district
- Good programs come with useful Help. Click on ‘Help’ on the toolbar in the program you are trying to learn. Some programs even come with tutorials, check the CD!
- Take a trip to the bookstore – Find a book or magazine. Beware – there are thousands of choices! Take your time when looking through the many books and magazines available on a topic. There is information available for every level of computer user from total novice to the geeky guru. Know ahead of time what you want to learn.
- Search on-line – Regardless if you are trying to learn about your computer or a particular piece of software, you should check the manufacturer’s web site. Quality software has good support both with the program and online. If you still can find the information try support.microsoft.com, Internet.com or Google.com (click on Discussion groups).



Web Site Tips

- Determine if your group needs a web site. Does the Monday night knitters group really need a web site? Perhaps they want more members or want to show pictures of completed projects or be a resource for other knitting groups.
- Who will maintain the web site? If no one is responsible, it will not get updated and would not be worth having. It is frustrating for Internet users to go to web sites that are out of date. Check your site at least once every 6 months.
- Is your Presbytery or church willing to host your site? If not, contact an Internet Service Provider to determine the cost of hosting a web site (~\$20/month + setup fee). There are FREE services but you must tolerate their advertising.
- Invest in a web editing program, this makes maintaining the site much easier. The two most popular are Dreamweaver and FrontPage.
- Do your homework before buying anything. There are countless options, make sure you know what you are getting into.

Remember, change is constant and faster than ever in today’s society. When working with technology you must have patience and be willing to read and learn. Take comfort in knowing there are a lot of other people out there going through the same thing you are. Have fun with it!

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