The Internet in Vocation Awareness

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I come today not as an expert in Internet technologies nor even an expert in vocation ministry. I come really as a practitioner of vocation ministry, and one who has invested a great deal of effort and time into using the Internet to build up the culture of vocation. I have been a priest for thirteen years, a diocesan vocation director [Joliet, IL] for nine years, and the designer and Webmaster for Vocations Online (www.vocations.com) since 1995.

Why is the Internet important to vocation ministry? The web is the place where most young people get their information and a primary means by which they communicate. If vocation ministers are to affect the youth culture today, they must be Internet savvy. If used well, cyberspace holds promise for the Church's effort to build a vocation-rich culture today.

The Internet provides a relatively inexpensive way to connect with many, many people. For the person discerning a possible vocation, the Internet provides anonymity and a sense of confidentiality in the learning process. One doesn't have to identify oneself to look up information or even to ask a question via a website. This characteristic of the Internet should not be underestimated as many people in the initial stages of discernment do not necessarily want to be known in public as being in discernment.

The principle that drives my own use of the Internet for vocation ministry is that with any media, including the Internet, we must keep in mind the two P.R.'s of vocation ministry—Public Relations and Personal Relationship. Web sites provide opportunities to tell the story, to have attractive, appropriately focused information on religious vocations. Yet there is also the opportunity to connect with individuals who might be interested, of inviting them into a relationship of discernment. We have also had success in using the Internet to learn more about the people who are thinking about religious vocations today through the college student survey.

A basic question a diocese or religious community might ask is: Who will be responsible for the vocation website? Can they do it on their own, or will they hire someone to do it for them? The answer will depend on the Internet programming and design capabilities of the vocation personnel and the financial resources available for the project. Using web design software that is currently available, such as Microsoft FrontPage,

very fine websites can be designed and maintained by local vocation offices. Even if there is an outside person responsible for the design of the website, the vocation director should be aware of what to include in a site and how to build in interactive elements in the website.

When designing a site, determine who the target audience is, and then design the site with them in mind. If a site is intended to invite young people to consider the possibility of becoming a priest or religious, then there needs to be elements that will engage young people in a conversation so that they know their experiences and backgrounds are valued. Use the language and images appropriate for the target audience. Some common elements to include in a site are: a message of welcome from the Bishop or religious superior; a description of what priesthood or religious life means; a listing of qualities that are needed in candidates; some witness stories of people who are in formation, a description of the formation process or seminaries used; frequently asked questions; and information on how to get more resources. Special attention should be given to making sure that interactive elements are readily available to those who visit the site. Interactive elements include e-mail links, guest books, bulletin boards, surveys, and chat rooms.

Vocations Online includes several different kinds of interactive elements all of which seem to be used by visitors to the site. These would include the Story of My Life, which is used to identify talents that people have in relationships, leadership, and spirituality, e-mail links, the guest book, and a college student survey that helps us understand young Catholics' attitudes toward Church vocations and their own interest in considering priesthood and religious life. During the workshop we will look at a few samples of different ways of creating interactivity through a vocations website.

There are a number of things to keep in mind in implementing a website for vocations. As mentioned, the first priority is to make sure the site appropriately addresses the target audience. Do not place too many words per page, especially on the front pages of a site. There also needs to be a balance between graphics appeal and the time needed to download them. Not everyone has a T-1 line or DSL, and we don't want to turn someone away because of his or her first impressions of a site that takes too long to download.

Once a site is posted or ready to be surfed, update the site frequently, keeping new and current information readily available. Be open to feedback and suggestions, and ask others what they think of your site. Look around and see what other vocation sites have, adapt and be creative. During this workshop we will also spend some time looking at some elements of a variety of vocation websites.

One of the beauties of the Internet is that it is always in the process of being updated, or always under construction. One doesn't have to have the perfect site to publish it to the Internet.

As the presenter, my goal for this workshop during the Continental Congress is that everyone will leave having a better understanding of the possibilities available for Internet vocation ministry. We will be discussing several examples of discernment experiences and Web site successes, and we will, we hope, be able to learn from each other. ❑