

# THE PARISH PAPER

## IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

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### E-mail: Uses and Misuses in Congregations

The pastor and the committee spent months discussing where to locate the new food pantry. Some wanted it inside the front entrance; others thought near the gym was better. The governing board's preliminary discussion affirmed the need for this new ministry.

When the committee made its final decision, to avoid delay in getting started, the chairperson e-mailed the board members to get approval. Four of the board members replied with a variety of e-mailed questions and objections. Their response and the electronic sandstorm of emotional reactions shocked the chairperson. What happened?

Over the last decade churches have witnessed an explosion in communication technology. A multitude of software packages has drastically trimmed newsletter-production time. Television screens highlighting congregational ministries are replacing bulletin boards. Church Web sites offer streaming telecasts of their worship services.

Among these developments, none ranks more significant than e-mail. In a matter of seconds a father in Seattle, Washington, sends a picture of his children to their grandparents in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Though separated by a few blocks or even a few cubicles, colleagues exchange ideas through the touch of a button. Hotel reservations, book orders, and charitable donations are confirmed almost immediately through an electronic message.

The incredible increase in the number of people using e-mail presents churches with opportunities to enhance communication with members and with the world. Therein lays great promise. Therein, also, resides peril.

How do churches navigate through these largely uncharted waters?

#### How NOT to Use E-mail

E-mail is often an unhealthy substitute for face-to-face conversation and group discussions! Congregations benefit when leaders frequently remind staff and members of these suggestions:

**DO NOT** use e-mail to solicit feedback from the congregation. E-mail creates the illusion of distance and anonymity. Therefore, people often tend to inject unwarranted

criticism in an e-mail that they would not express verbally in face-to-face or telephone conversation. E-mail inadvertently promotes distortion of data and indiscriminate venting.

**DO NOT** use e-mail to express concerns or engage in debate. Staff, ministry teams, committees, governing boards, and members sometimes think that e-mail expedites the resolution of a pressing issue. More often, it stifles and garbles communication. The absence of facial expressions and voice inflections can produce painful results.

One task force charged with the responsibility of developing a new worship service found e-mail quite convenient. But when the messages crossed the line from the dissemination of information to the exchange of opinions about music, frustration mounted. Productivity dropped.

*Good rule of thumb:* If you receive an e-mail regarding difficulty in a personal relationship, disappointment about congregational direction, or an emotionally charged diatribe about a church development, do NOT respond. First, deter-



mine whether or not the issue genuinely concerns you. If so, pick up the phone and schedule a time to sit down and discuss the issue together. If the e-mail concerns another individual, committee, or task force, hand the appropriate group a copy of the e-mail. Let the group determine who speaks to the person about his or her concern.

### Appropriate E-mail Uses

In contrast to the perils noted above, e-mail works fine for many congregational purposes, especially those listed below:

**DO** use e-mail to disseminate information. Keep messages short and specific. Example: “The Mission Committee is scheduled to meet Tuesday evening, June 7, at 7:30 p.m. in the library. Please find attached a copy of the agenda.”

**DO** use e-mail to publicize events. Examples:

◆ The chancel choir will present its Christmas Cantata in the sanctuary on Sunday, December 11, during the 9:30 a.m. service.

◆ The Men’s Annual Pie Sale will be held Saturday evening at 6:00 p.m. in the fellowship hall. All proceeds go to Habitat for Humanity. Last year a four-year-old and his father made a pie that sold for \$125! Come and see what happens this year!

**DO** use e-mail to help members and guests engage in ministries. If you periodically invite folks to invest their gifts and talents in a particular form of service, offer them the opportunity to register via e-mail. Print the church’s e-mail address on every congregational publication, including the worship bulletin.

**DO** use e-mail to inform the congregation of joys and concerns among its members and friends. This strengthens a sense of communal spirit, and provides the nurture of corporate prayer. But do *not* include detailed information, and never name an individual without that person’s permission. Even well-meaning efforts to care can be perceived as an intrusion into privacy. Remember: the Internet is *public* communication!

**DO** use e-mail as a means by which the pastor or other approved staff member can send out weekly or monthly devotional messages *to those who request them*. The nature of these devotions will vary from church to church depending on their stated purpose. One pastor established these objectives: (1) To keep members and friends abreast of congregational developments, (2) To nurture a greater sense of connection between the pastor and members of the church, (3) To plant seeds for future ministries, and (4) To offer a theological/spiritual perspective on the mundane events of our faith journey.

### What about Youth?

Today’s youth are technologically savvy. They listen to I-Tunes; they Instant Message and Text Message; they e-mail a variety of friends—usually all at the same time!

All of the above points take on a greater sense of urgency in youth ministry. With youth, e-mail does not simply have to do with communication but with protection: (a) protection of youth from potentially exploitative relationships and (b) protection of youth advisors from spurious claims and charges.

In a society where predators prowl youth chat rooms, congregational leaders must develop, implement, and enforce guidelines pertaining to adult-youth e-mail correspondence. For example, one congregation that enjoys a thriving ministry with hundreds of youth prohibits on-line contact between an individual adult and individual youth. Group e-mails, however, are regularly used to generate interest in upcoming activities.

*What about personal relationships between advisors and youth?* How might advisors express their support and encouragement of those entrusted to their care? Is individual e-mail strictly off limits? Some general principles:

- Group e-mails are much preferred to individual e-mails.
- If an adult ever initiates an e-mail correspondence with a youth, the subject should be quite specific (e.g., *I heard you did well on your report card. Congratulations!*)
- Individual e-mails should always be copied to all the other advisors and youth staff. This provides both accountability and safety. Again, the challenge is not only to provide a safe and nurturing environment for the youth, but also for the advisors!
- Advisors should not engage in Instant Messaging with youth. Yes, youth communicate that way today. However, this style is best reserved for youth-to-youth communication. For all the reasons cited above, Instant Messaging can be problematic for an adult. Intention and perception are not synonymous!

In many situations, the governing board appoints a task force to develop a set of guidelines and report its suggestions to the governing board for review and approval. Limit this task force to not more than seven people. If possible, include two parents, a high school teacher or guidance counselor, a lawyer, a youth advisor, the pastor, and the director of youth ministries. Hold an open forum during the discernment process to give youth, parents, advisors, staff, and church members the chance to express their perspectives.

How does your church use e-mail? Are you heading towards the promise or slipping towards the peril?