The Communicator

We're Back! You might've noticed that it's been quite some time since an issue has been published and from all of us at Comm Comm, we're sorry about that. As I'm sure most know sometimes there are just not enough hours in a day to get everything done that we'd like to do. The purpose of this publication is, as the name implies, to assist the churches of our fellowship communicate with their members, their community and their sister churches more effectively.

Technology. The mere mention of the word can make some run for cover; either that or all you can imagine is that it's going to be expensive. Well, in this issue we hope to dispel these myths with some simple and inexpensive, some even free, ways in which you can use technology to more effectively communicate with those around you. For a little more in depth knowledge join us for our workshop Tech Reach at the Annual Meeting.

Blogs

By Rev. Rob Brink

Senior Pastor First Congregational Church Saugatuck, MI

Every minister ought to blog. That's a strong claim, since some ministers don't even know what "blog" means, but I believe it's true. Blog is short for Web log, an online journal. The benefits of journaling are well documented, but blogging also provides uniquely 21st-century benefits. Suppose you meet someone online. How do they know you're legitimate? Suppose someone is church shopping. How can they tell you're not "one of the crazies"? Suppose your search committee interviews someone. How do you know they're not just saying what you want to hear? A blog provides instant credibility. Take two minutes, go to RevSmilez.com, and peruse. Just skim and click around. In two minutes or less, you'll learn and a bit about my family, interests, and theology. With slightly more effort, you can verify that I've been blogging for over two years and get a very good idea of my personal "voice."Why does this matter? Because faking something like that is way more work than your average miscreant cares to invest. Also, search engines LOVE blog content, making you much more findable online. How to get started? Go to wordpress.com and sign up for a free account. (There are others, but I like Wordpress.) Post sermons, pictures, ponderings, videos, music, or commentary. Whatever it is that you're good at, post it. Think of it as a portfolio, or a very gentle way to start a conversation. Looking for a next step? Invest in a domain name. They look professional, they're cheap, and they open up cool options down the road. Want to know more? E-mail Rob@RevSmilez.com.

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Podcasting Sermons

By Rev. Dawn Curlee Carlson

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Sermons are for Sunday mornings, right? Not necessarily. For some people in your congregation, listening to Sunday's sermon on Tuesday evening may be the best way to share in worship when going to Sunday services just wasn't possible. With a minor investment in equipment and software, your church can podcast Sunday's sermons for the benefit of church members who are unable to attend regular Sunday services. And the whole process just might bring new members into your church.

A podcast is defined as digital audio or video file, episodically made available in a conveniently accessed downloadable format that is program-drive with a regular host or theme. That's a very fancy way of saying a recorded sermon, downloadable from an internet website.

This sounds difficult and technical, but current technology and internet platforms make it easier and cheaper than ever before.

First Congregational Church in Terre Haute, Indiana has been uploading podcasts of Sunday's sermons for a little over a year and it has proven to be a remarkable tool, not only for regular church members, but also for those outside of our community who have become part of a church family through technology. The entire process couldn't be easier and it has become an important part of the missions and ministries of our church.

We begin with a simple digital recorder, purchased at Radio Shack for about $30.00. Our model is an Olympus that has 2GB of recording capability. (That means it will record about 1000 hours of sermons, but our sermons aren't usually that long!) It runs on "AAA" batteries and by putting the device in standby mode when not in use, that's a long-lasting battery life.

I experimented for several Sundays with the best place to position the recorder and finally settled on directly on top of the pulpit where it picks up the audio quite well. To keep it in place, I've velcroed it to the top of the pulpit in the upper left corner, out of the way and unnoticed. I simply take it off stand-by mode and hit the record button at the beginning of services then stop the recording and return it to standby mode after the benediction.
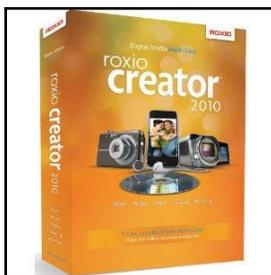
Once the service is recorded, a small USB cable easily downloads the audio file to my computer. I then use audio editing software to remove those portions of the sermon I don't want to have in the final audio file. I use Roxio Creator 2010 that I purchased at Staples for about $80, but your computer may already have software you can use or you may be able to download free audio editing software. What you will want is software that allows you to convert the WAV file (the format the recorder uses to record your service) to an MP3 file which is much smaller in size and uploads and downloads quicker than the large WAV file. This software allows for high quality MP3 and low quality MP3 formats. I use the low quality MP3 format because it is so much smaller in size and I really can't tell the difference when I listen to the files.

In the editing process, you will have to decide how much you want to share and how long you want your "online service" to be. We always upload the sermon, final hymn and benediction as one file.

Once you've recorded and edited the file to the content and size you want, then what? How do you make it available for others? There are a variety of possibilities, including uploading a link for downloading the file directly on your website, but we've found an even easier way to do it. We use a platform called posterous.com.

Posterous.com allows users to create a web presence through a blog-like platform. The site allows uploading directly via the internet, but more easily by simply emailing the file to the posterous site. What could be easier than that? Open an email, make the subject line the title of your sermon, attach the audio file to the email and hit the "send" button and you're done. Posterous takes your information and adds it to you web page. And best of all, it's free!

Once your audio file is uploaded to the posterous.com website, it's accessible by anyone who has the link. We make that link available in two ways, either by accessing the link via our website or by a direct link to our posterous.com web page, via Facebook.
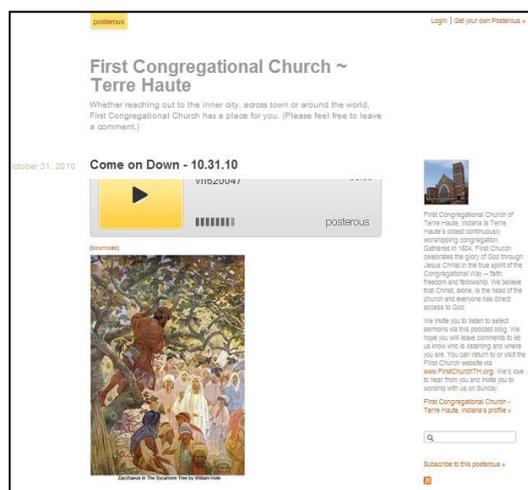
First Congregational Church, Terre Haute, Indiana, has identified a number of ways to use our podcasts of sermons as an outreach tool. We have found several people who live outside of our typical service area – some as far away as Colorado and Texas – who regularly listen to our services and support our missions and ministries. We've had local residents who have found our website, listened to sermons and then visited us in person. Many of our regular members of our congregational family listen when they are unable to attend services.

For a very small investment in equipment and time, we've expanded church beyond our doors and we're very glad we did.

One last thing before we close this issue: Let's face it, technology is changing faster everyday and at times it can seem like a daunting prospect when you're trying to learn something new. Well, that's what we're hoping to dispel, the myth that it takes lots of money and lots of time to try things like podcasting, blogging, setting up a web site and on and on. In future issues we'll cover these things, ways to publicize your church inexpensively and more. And once again, don't forget to join us for our workshop Tech Reach at the Annual Meeting in Scottsdale where you can see some of these things in action.

If you have something you'd like to see in the future or have an idea for an article, please e-mail me at medic1_61@yahoo.com. Thanks and God Bless Rev. Richard Gossett Senior Pastor Merrill Congregational Christian Church Merrill, MI Editor