

Online Church's Speeding Traffic: ECIC X conference in Rome

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As mopeds were racing past religious architecture and ruins in Rome, Church webmasters and webpastors from all over Europe met for the 10th European Christian Internet Conference, ECIC X, to exchange experiences and celebrate the rapid progress of their work as it blazes stylishly past the slowing traffic of traditional church. For religious website managers, just as for Roman moped riders, it is quite a thrilling ride.

The Rev Richard Thomas for instance started an online religious community, based on the principles of Benedictine monasticism, www.i-church.org, which has already been granted the official status of Parish of the Diocese of Oxford, England. He simply can't keep pace with demand and is selecting and training pastoral group leaders as fast as he can, as well as dealing with the development of satisfactory online worship mechanisms, and running the whole outfit on a shoestring with volunteers. This is all happening despite an alarming abandonment of the pews. i-Church "currently has a thousand applicants on the waiting list" says Father Thomas. The notion of a thousand willing and unattended parishioners would whet the appetite of any pastor. In business, leaving a thousand unattended clients would be considered a sin.



Sister Judith Zobelein FSE, webmistress of the Holy See's website, modestly informs us when asked, that www.vatican.va has been having fifty five million visitors... a day! This is at the same time as a crisis in vocations for priesthood that is so deep that in Britain the Catholic Church is resorting to, the apparently desperate act of, advertising on beer mats. Sister Judith also notes that though the internet is new for the Church, we need to recognise that

"computers are here to stay". Integrating such a new technology with age-old institutions and practice isn't always easy.

The Rev Iain Morrison webmaster of the Scottish www.kirkweb.org, who helped set up the ECIC network ten years ago, says that "while churches are leeching members from every side, and fragmenting, online services for pastoral care and spiritual advice and interaction are in ever increasing demand. "It's really not about propping up traditional church" he emphasises "it's a whole new way of doing church. Many people want to explore their spiritual needs without going

to church or belonging to a physical community". This is where people are at the moment and the Churches have to go there, or miss the opportunity.

The Swiss website www.seelsorge.net has a rotating ecumenical staff of thirty pastors and two psychologists who run consultations of all types 24/7, through their webpage, by email and by SMS. They are so busy that they are about to introduce call centre software to deal more effectively with the volume of contacts they get. The Danish website www.cyberkirken.dk gives you pastors by video conferencing or instant messaging, any time you feel the need, and other churches across Europe, from Iceland to Italy and from Finland to France are doing similar work. ECIC has set up a working group for Online Church to operate permanently between conferences.



Some religious web managers feel that the importance of their work is still not reflected in resource allocation. Lutheran minister Ralf Peter Reimann, Web Coordinator of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, www.ekir.de, explains that "as churches suffer a reduction in members, and consequently in income, the internet departments are having to bear their share of funding cuts, even though they are often the only departments with growing

workload and increasing demand". So, there is more work and less money for online services. His website on Grief and Bereavement, www.trauernetz.de, has recently become a runaway success, he runs this along with www.chatseelsorge.de, www.kirchenboerse.de, www.evangelisch.info and www.webandacht.de. Like most of the participants he deals with multiple sites, a growing user base and a workload that in a business environment might enjoy more corporate support.

Church administration, e-learning, the use of participatory content management systems, the widespread decision among churches to use open-source software in Church projects – all this is not terribly contentious. But, so much development into digital territory wasn't scripted or foreseen by churches, and is still happening at such a rate that the traditional churches are finding it hard to give their online departments a green light straight away at every juncture. How far should we go with online worship for example? Perhaps it isn't very far off, Father Thomas of i-Church suggests rather cautiously, "that we'll accept the consecration of bread and wine online – for people unable to attend a church". This certainly will raise a few eyebrows, but Thomas himself bears witness that prayer online is "not second best" but it allows us to find a "deep spirituality and sense the presence of God".

Church practice normally evolves very slowly, and some may feel that the online Churches are jumping the lights, a bit like some of the other traffic in Rome, but at this point there is no sign of Churches slowing their progress on the net. The Churches are assuming their places in the digital society.

Resource:

The ECIC book, *European Churches on the Internet: Challenges, Experiences and Visions*, is now going to its second edition, the first has already sold out. It is a selection of papers from the ECIC conferences over the last 10 years, and the Vatican Documents 'The Church and Internet' and 'Ethics in Internet'. Details are available on the ECIC website www.ecic.info

Link:

[Article on ECIC IX in Transylvania](#)