

# Webmasters Build a New Church Online: Transylvanian ECIC Internet Conference

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As churches are finding it increasingly difficult to get ?bums on pews?, an emerging new breed of church leader is bringing millions to church. They administer pastoral care on a one-to-one basis and in group sessions, provide religious and educational information and services, run diaspora and administrative services. Best of all, from the point of view of the Churches, they are engaging with ever-increasing numbers of the most elusive and high-potential group ? youngsters. The unlikely heroes for the Churches are webmasters.

Clutching their laptops, thirty of these faithful geeks arrived from all over Europe to meet in Cluj, northern Romania, last month. The conference centre, run by the Transylvanian Reformed Church, was temporarily wired with hubs and cables and buzzed with the sound of gadgets that the gathered nerds were unable to leave at home. Delegates sat illuminated by the light of their computer screens.

We?ve all heard that most web-surfing is related to pornography. But lesser-known is that nearly 70% of web-surfers, many with lifestyles that sometimes don?t leave much room for spiritual sustenance, have also searched at some time for religious material and services online. ?The internet is a place to find the most unholy of things but it?s also for holy things? laughs Juha Kinanen, Finnish President of the European Christian Internet Conference.

Slowly, the Churches are realising that, against a backdrop of waning church attendance, this booming area of growth might even be vital to them. Many of the Church websites get more visits than the average Cathedral. Churches have stood back for while, perhaps because fast change isn?t always their greatest strength, and also because of who controls and initiates, who owns the church online. The internet is structurally opposite to church, it is anarchic and chaotic with no central authority. An individual may command the same attention and space as a global organisation, it?s a free-for-all. Online religion shifts power away from traditional hierarchies towards horizontal church, a church of equals, one-to-one chatroom interactivity instead of the one-to-hundreds power relationships of priests behind altars and people sitting silently in the pews. It gives space for doubt and irreverence. Kinanen explains that ?Churches can?t wait for people to come to them any more, people are not going to come. We have to bring church to where young people are now, and young people are on the net?.

The conference charted a huge spread of online services provided by religious organisations, from responding to requests for baptismal certificates, to enabling diaspora communities, to spiritual and developmental matters.

But, how serious can virtual church be? Can pastoral care be provided online, for example? Counselling manager Hans Peter Murbach told the conference how he works with 40 other Pastors to respond to a large volume of religious, spiritual and personal questions through chat rooms from people, who he says ?often do not go to Church? and hints that this is a new type of Church for those alienated by traditional Church.

Andreas Rickerl a German chatroom host, relates that the most profound, and sometimes disturbing, questions arise in the anonymity of the website. One young girl recently sought advice online on dealing with abuse at home.

One conference session was gripped by polemical discussion on the question of online

sacraments. Can Holy Communion ever be given online, and can this provide the deepest fulfilment? What about a housebound person, who cannot be reached in any other way, would it be possible to administer Holy Communion via web conference? If it can be accepted in such a case then it must also be accepted in other instances. Someone described a case of a baptism where a distant Godparent could only participate by webcam. Parallels can be made with virtual sex, says Kinanen, "it might get very popular but it's not as satisfying as the real thing?". What is becoming clear is that real relationships are built online, real emotions are communicated, real problems are solved and real people are helped. It cannot be denied that human development happens online, as well as the communication of ideas.

The use of internet by Churches for political subjects was also demonstrated by the webmaster of [www.greco-catholic.ro](http://www.greco-catholic.ro) which shows photographs of Romanian Bishops, not in mitres and silk robes but striped prison uniforms, jailed by the communist regime in the 70s.

Not everyone on the web takes online church so seriously though. Peter Hofland, Dutch webmaster of Jacob's Ladder ([www.dejacobs ladder.nl](http://www.dejacobs ladder.nl)) told how he had to moderate the site's forum because "some people wanted to say really nasty things to offend Christians?". Nevertheless, he went on to show that his site had become popular, partly because of its mystical, philosophical design but mainly because many people were taking it seriously.

The title of the conference "Open Content for Open Society" brought the principles of free information to the fore and found broad agreement that Churches should take a stand on media ethics. Participants endorsed the view that open content is one of the areas where Churches need to speak out. The passing on of the content of the bible is a paradigm for how the church should work on the net: the Gospel is freely available and we should maintain this principle in our online work: our web content should also be free.

Online religion in its many forms is booming, and Churches need to embrace it as one of their only growth areas. There was a tangible sense of excitement among the delegates, of being on the cutting edge of ecumenism and religion, pushing the barriers and forging new territories.

Next year is the tenth annual ECIC meeting and will be held in Rome.

**Link:**

[www.ecic.info](http://www.ecic.info)