

Catholic launches Parish News Network

Written by Sam Lucero | The Compass

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Network offers free Web sites, hosting to parishes

GREEN BAY — Jim Rafter sees the computer as more than a tool for work or recreation. Linked to the Web, it is a modern evangelization tool and the church needs to take greater advantage of this technology, he believes.

Rafter, a software salesman with years of computer programming experience, recently launched One Body Communications, LLC, a company that provides online tools and services to parishes. The company's product is called Parish News Network, a Web-based network that Rafter hopes will link Catholics to the parish, diocese and universal church.

Rafter, a member of St. Bernard Parish, began his information technology career in Chicago when he served as a Cobol programmer for the Chicago Police Department. He moved to Green Bay with his family in 2005, when he was hired by Relevant Radio to serve as director of parish relations.

It was at Relevant Radio where Rafter said he learned of the challenges church organizations face "in simply getting the word out."

As he worked with parishes to make them aware of the Catholic radio network, Rafter thought to himself, "There has to be a way to use the Internet to help parishes evangelize."

He had read about Pope John Paul II's call to a new evangelization and that inspired him to write down his own ideas. The result was what Rafter called his "white paper." Titled "Using the Internet as a Tool for Evangelization," the 1,200-word document outlined the challenges and the solutions of evangelizing in the modern world. The white paper became the map for Rafter's One Body Communications.

The plan really took shape nearly two years ago during a parish council meeting, said Rafter. His pastor, Fr. Dave Pleier, lamented about all the positive events going unnoticed in the parish.

"He said, 'We have to let all the people know of all the good things going on. People give of their time and talent all of the time,'" said Rafter. "He also wanted to find a way to engage young families and young adults."

That is when Rafter told Fr. Pleier about the ideas laid out in his white paper.

"I told him maybe we can find people to help - and get it running," he said.



Jim Rafter, a member of St. Bernard Parish in Green Bay, launched One Body Communications to help Catholic organizations communicate more effectively online. Through Parish News Network, Rafter offers free Web sites and Web hosting to parishes. (Sam Lucero | The Compass)

Rafter's vision was a network of parish Web sites that are linked together, but maintained by each parish. The main objectives would include sites that are easily updated by parish staff members who lack technical skills; that are cost-efficient; that allow interaction with viewers; and that connect viewers with the larger church.

Since St. Bernard is linked with St. Philip Parish, the plan was to begin with these parishes.

With the help of John Walczyk, owner of Webfitter, an Internet development company in Green Bay, the Parish News Network was launched last year. Walczyk, also a member of St. Bernard Parish, helped Rafter start the network using a custom Web content management system. This system lets non-technical users make changes to a Web site with little training. Webfitter also provides the free Web hosting service.

The pilot project was launched last summer. Since that time, four other parishes around Green Bay - Resurrection, St. Matthew, Prince of Peace and St. Mary of the Angels - have joined the network. Another parish, Ss. Peter and Paul, will soon join.

The common denominator of the parish Web sites is the network; not just the parish network but the news network.

Taking advantage of the latest Web technology, RSS feeds, used by The Compass and Catholic News Service, the parish Web sites offer Catholic news from around the diocese and around the world. "It's bringing the news on the Web through the eyes of the local parish," explained Rafter. "It's an electronic gateway to their faith."

While all of the bells and whistles draw attention to the Parish News Network, it's the price that is the selling point. It's free.

"I wanted it to be a ministry more than a product," said Rafter. He and Walczyk offer their time and talents at no cost to parishes. The network does solicit sponsors through advertising.

Rafter said that his faith guides his work, especially since surviving lung cancer.

"I was 40 years old when I was diagnosed with lung cancer and telling my young kids (about the diagnosis) was the hardest thing that I ever had to do," he said. Rafter found support from his parish, Our Lady of the Wayside in Arlington Heights, Ill. "I didn't know what the true beauty of belonging to a local Christian community could be. I found out that I had friends I didn't know I had. Now I help others experience that link of faith."

He believes it is important for the church to be part of peoples' lives and the Web site initiative is a way he can help.

Next February, the Green Bay Diocese will launch Catholics Come Home and parish Web sites will play a key role in helping people reconnect with the church, said Rafter. He is encouraging parishes around the diocese, especially those without Web sites, to take advantage of Parish News Network.

While the network is ideal for parishes lacking a Web site or in need of a new one, Rafter said that those happy with their own Web sites can "plug into the network" by adding a linked page. Since the Web site structure has already been created, Rafter said parishes can have a site ready for launch in a matter of days.

As the network expands, Rafter sees more interactive features, such as pastors sending e-mail alerts to parishioners who have created a log-in account; parish ministry directors sending schedules and reminders to ministers; and parishioners submitting news and photos for posting on the parish Web site.

Rafter is planning two information sessions in December and invites parishes and Catholic organizations to attend. The first will be Dec. 7 in Green Bay and the second will be Dec. 14 in Appleton. For times, locations or more information call (920)819-7652 or visit www.ParishNewsNetwork.com.