The Kirk and the Internet

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I recently attended a truly twenty-first-century party. Every song we danced to was downloaded on the spot from the Internet and played directly on a PC. Instead of a DJ we had a group of teenagers tapping into a virtual jukebox with a play list as big as our collective musical memory. The soundtrack of all our lives is now available online.

There is a disconcerting tension in this: availability on this scale unveils the mystery while at the same time creating a sense of new and unfathomable possibilities. Here be a new culture. This unveiling perhaps offers part of the explanation of why the Church of Scotland (in common with almost all western European churches) has seemed to lose so much ground over recent decades. Knowledge is power and the growing immensity of available knowledge has demystified much of our traditional culture including our religious heritage. Knowing so much, people seem to be increasingly unwilling to accept received wisdom without question. Deference culture is being dismantled. And yet the old, haunting questions remain and I believe deeply that an unparalleled moment of possibility for a new sharing of the old, old story could open up before the Church. As with every opportunity of this kind throughout the Church's history, the only way to forge the key is the willingness to

take the risk of love and humility – to embody the message of peace.

In many ways the development of the Kirk's website is a tiny microcosm of the opportunities and deep challenges that the Church faces at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As the Church strives to find new ways to embody and communicate faith in the midst of ancient structures and forms, we are largely used to the often-painful process of pouring new wine into old wineskins. But this is different. This is more a matter of pouring old wine into new wineskins.

In some ways this makes things easier. Unlike almost every other area of church life there is no need to invent new approaches – they have already come into being with what seems like stunning rapidity. Or perhaps it only seems that way to someone of my generation or older. I left secondary school and had never so much as seen a computer in the flesh far less used one. All my essays at university were hand written. It is difficult for my teenage children to relate to this idea. For as long as they can remember there has been a computer at school and at home and they made the transition to the virtual world with enviable ease. It may have been a giant step for mankind but it has been just one small step for them and millions like them.

Underlying the emergence of these new forms of communication there seems to me to be a large and important cultural fault line. The casual techno-grace with which those who grew up with the technology have slipped into the virtual world is at sharp odds with the techno-fear still displayed by many. Although it would not be true or fair to suggest that age is the only factor at work here given the impact of silver surfers, the grey pound and techno-poverty. However, the Internet, instant messaging, email, and – certainly in the UK – texting are established tropes of youth culture, however you care to define youth.

There have been drivers ensuring that people like me have largely kept up with this revolution. The most obvious of these is work. Over the past twenty years in Scotland there has been a well-publicised shift away from traditional heavy industries to service-based industries, meaning that the new technology is an entirely commonplace feature of the workplace for most of us. There has been an additional incentive for parents and others caring for young people to get into cyberspace. Email and text are the premier ways of keeping in touch with young people who, in many cases, have the confidence and the means to explore the world with an extraordinary degree of enterprise and élan. This is equally true whether it is the world on the doorstep or further abroad.

Connectedness is perhaps the most distinctive feature of early twenty-first-century society. Actual and virtual elements of relationships are fashioned into one seamless garment. Online friends are seen as just 'friends'; day-to-day friendships in the so-called real world now have a large and important virtual dimension. People do not seem to me to have any difficulty with the realness of the online part of this exchange. Even as some people continue to mourn the lost arts of conversation and letter writing others are immersed in the deeply social business of practising them in the new forms of email, instant messaging and text.

As we all know, the permeability that this creates comes with a price in terms of new levels of risk. Some of us – too few still – have more powerful communication tools in our hands than would have been thought possible a couple of generations back. There is little doubt that this is creating new social, cultural and economic patterns and perhaps equally little doubt that we are just at the beginning of this process. Along with everyone else, we are travelling in the unexplored edge of cyberspace, not yet seeing where all of this is leading us. But while much of the impact to date has been positive and welcome, there has been a darker

side too. Children and younger adolescents are perhaps seen as being exposed to the darkest threat in the form of 'grooming' via the Internet.

This is where I think it gets thorny for the Church. Risk is entwined around the vine of faith; it is inseparable from it. I know of no other group of people down through the centuries who have taken greater risks than the Christian community – risks personal, social, intellectual, physical and moral; a truly humbling litany of risks in the search for truth and integrity of action. Across the world today this is still the case, and right here in Scotland one can see it at first hand. Yet at institutional level the Church often seems to be risk averse. But what is the Net if it no longer offers the rather risky, slightly unhinged thrill of surfing the big waves?

There is, of course, the understandable and proper desire to promote the Church's reputation as an organisation that seeks to protect all those who come into its orbit. The Church is not alone in this; witness the closure of web-based chat rooms by the Internet giant, Microsoft, for example. Initially, the Internet promised us its own brand of holy disorder and radical democratisation – a truly global power to the people. In reality, it has been a mixed bag not unlike television. There is no doubt that television has educated us and opened our minds to a bigger world but it has also led us into the wilderness of banal consumerism, celebrity culture, 'reality' shows and worse. We know it has changed us and yet it is curiously difficult to define just how or how much. As ever, the wheat and the tares are sown in the same field. Perhaps it is little wonder that those in positions of responsibility sometimes reach for the remote.

The struggle to find a balanced answer to questions like this has marked the early years of the Church of Scotland's website. The present site went online at the General Assembly of 2000. For a couple of years prior to that there had been a prototype site run by Iain Morrison, a

minister who was one of the first to see the web's potential for the Church. In 2003 the hit rate had grown to twenty-five times its original size. Responses to the site from users around the world have been overwhelmingly positive and those responsible for the site, including myself, are proud of developments so far. Some of the more recent innovations like the devotional section with a prayer that changes every day or the message boards enabling comments on Church initiatives have opened the door to new online possibilities. The look, feel and accessibility of the site have all been comprehensively upgraded in a rolling programme of improvements.

I watched the site come online section by section over the course of a weekend in May 2000. It struck me very forcefully that, perhaps for the first time, it was possible to see the range and scale of the Church of Scotland in one integrated picture. It was impressive then and it still is. However, from the outset this integrated approach was under pressure from the possible development of a range of satellite sites. The proliferation of these sites would, in many ways, have mirrored the Church's rather loose, federal organisational structure. However, within a year of the site being launched, the Kirk's General Assembly agreed to a proposal from the Board of Communication that there should be one integrated site in order to promote an online experience that would be consistent in terms of quality, accessibility, user friendliness, security and safety.

To achieve this level of cooperation and integration the board offered a *quid pro quo*. In exchange for being entrusted with lead responsibility for developing an integrated site with a uniform house style, the board agreed to consult other boards and to draw them into the process of developing the protocols that would govern all aspects of the site and how it was used. An Internet Forum was set up to give flesh to this process and the guidelines for the website were drawn up in the context of an open

consultation. Once these guidelines were written, all parties agreed to live under the rule of their own Internet law. To put the seal on this process, the board subsequently paid for the training of sixteen Internet 'coders' from across the Church organisation. Once trained, each of these was given the electronic key to their part of the site, which they can now update and develop within the agreed guidelines. I like to think of this as an authentically Presbyterian solution to the potential problem of disintegration – agreement being reached through including others in an open process of consultation. This form of power sharing seems to me to be close to the ethos of the Internet and, at the same time, an integral part of the Church of Scotland's culture at its best.

Of course, this has not been the end of the matter. I suspect – and sometimes even hope – that to this matter there will be no end. Pat Holdgate, head of media relations for the Kirk, has often remarked to me that the website is a journey, not a destination. There is a continuing exchange within the Church organisation on the subject of risk and where the lines should be drawn. How do we keep people safe without stifling the very thing that the web does so well – putting people right in the middle of the dialogue box? Here is the microcosm of opportunity and challenge, which I touched on earlier.

It seems to me to be significant that there are literally hundreds of pages of information on the Kirk's website and, at present, not one live dialogue box. However unfairly, this reinforces the impression – raised to almost mythological status by some critics – that the Church is much more at ease talking at people than talking with them, and that it is not very good at listening. What holds us back from having this dimension of live exchange is primarily a lack of moderators – that is Internet speak for the people who supervise the exchanges in live chat rooms, in line with Government guidelines aimed at ensuring online safety.

There seems to me to be a real irony in this, given that the courts of the Church – Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries and the Assembly itself – are all moderated. We have produced thousands of moderators over the course of our long history, yet for the want of a few more the Church has not so far been able to explore fully the interactive dimension of the Internet. There must be room here for us to stretch further and, at the very least, to recruit some virtual volunteers to be moderators in a new context. Old wine in new wineskins.

I am not suggesting that I understand fully all of the Internet's amazing potential to help the Church into a new form of connectedness. Nor am I suggesting that it is a communications panacea in this, or any other, context. What I am saying is that I believe it is worth the stretch. As Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador said in his celebrated prayer:

> The kingdom of God is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our imagination ... Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us ... We lay foundations that will need further development ... We are prophets of a future not our own.