

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC RELATIONS

To the One Hundredth and Thirty-Sixth Council
Of the Diocese of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic
Of the Reformed Episcopal Church

The State of the Diocese report on our numbers is sobering. We have lost another parish, and several are on the ropes. Of those that bothered to report we are only up 16 congregants, while we are only up 50 compared to last year despite four more parishes reporting. General Fund income is down, while expenses are up.

Our faith is strong and true. Our parishes are welcoming and friendly. Our worship is easier to follow than the fourth repetition of a praise chorus. Could it be that we are simply failing to present ourselves to the world in the way that they seek?

Ask any under-30 person of your acquaintance how they find a place, or what they first do when they hear about a new thing, and they will respond "Google it". Most of them have smartphones, so they can get to your website in less than a minute. What do they find about your parish online? Have you been to your parish website lately? Are you on Facebook?

Once a year I compare all our parish websites to what they were last year, and ask two questions:

- Has anything changed in the last year?
- Would a young person be interested in this parish based on their website?

The latter question is more difficult to answer, but the former is easy. In the last year only two parishes have made significant changes to their websites. Three websites are gone completely, while another is disabled. Most have barely changed at all, while a few have 2015 or earlier events listed.

According to what I read, young people are interested in sites that are graphical, well-designed, have more pictures than text (especially pictures of people doing things), are easy to find important things, and are updated frequently. With the shift towards smartphones and tablets, an extra requirement of a good site is that it resizes itself to look good and be useful on a small screen. Only one or two of our websites would pass that test.

Who is in charge of the website at your parish? How much does your parish spend on improvements to your web presence? Does your website reflect what has happened at your parish recently? Does someone at your parish put updates on Facebook instead of the web? Think of your website as your primary "street sign" for the digital age, and spend some effort to make it friendly, informative, and up to date.

The Diocesan website, www.REC-NEMA.org, continues to be the hub of information for and about our Diocese. You should all be familiar with the page devoted to this Diocesan Council, as it is the center for registration, schedule updates, and downloading reports. Using the web and email has helped the Diocese cut mailing costs, but it does require some initiative on the part of you all in visiting the site frequently and distributing things we email you to the relevant people in your parishes. Please help us keep costs down and information flowing.

Keeping a website in the top rankings on search engines is important, particularly for potential visitors. One of the ways that happens is when there are frequent updates and visits to a website. We need more "current content" - things going on at the parish and Diocesan level that we can post on our website. Please encourage your parishes to send upcoming events, parish newsletters, and other interesting things to us at the Diocesan Office. The special webpages that list Advent and Easter events in the parishes is another way we try to promote visitors, and we've heard that several parishes have seen new faces who found them through one of those postings online. The more we post things and link together, the better our Google ranking will be. Contact Greg Wright at the Diocesan Office for help.

How is your parish prepared to meet a crisis? What if the crisis was the compromise or disablement of your rector? What is the plan if a person waving a gun enters your worship service? What if a tree fell on your sanctuary? What if the phone network was down for a few days, or electricity cut off for a week? What if your parish website was hacked with porn? What if your parish bank account was electronically zeroed, or worse yet what if your treasurer ran away with the books as well as the balance?

All these are different types of organizational crisis, and the term for preparing for them is called Crisis Management. The best way to handle crises is to plan for them ahead of time, and the best plans start with multi-path communications plans. We have done some research on communications and public relations in Crisis Management situations in the last year. If this is a concern for your parish, contact the Diocesan Office for help in these areas.

Of perhaps greater concern to us all is the number of online break-ins, theft of data and identities, and defacing or hijacking of organizational web presence going on today. Big companies like Yahoo, Target, Home Depot, and Staples have reported extensive break-ins to their customer databases. But there have also been a number of deep hacks, whether governmental or criminal, into non-profit websites looking for financial gain or just to damage their reputation. The primary ways of protecting our sites and data are to keep our machines and software up-to-date, to run virus scanners on all machines that handle business information (even the Macs - they may not get as many viruses, but they can still pass them on if they are not being scanned), and to use strong passwords that are carefully protected. If your parish has or suspects a break-in, or you would like to request a review of your security profile and procedures, contact Greg Wright at the Diocesan Office and we will see how we can help you.

If you have any suggestions or comments to help improve our public image and communications, please do not hesitate to get in touch with any of us at the Diocesan Office.

Respectfully submitted,

Greg Wright, Chairman
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Rev. Howard Currie
Dss. Olivene Brown
Mr. Scott Pineau