

I took over my first parish Website in 2000, when I was still a catechumen. Back then I was working primarily in the mainframe space, and the Web was both new and somewhat scary. I got an extra copy of Frontpage 2000 at the office, and started putting icons and gold coloring on pages of my own for Holy Trinity in Maitland, Florida.

I stuck with static HTML development through early 2006. By then I was building Websites for customers, in addition to working on my parish Website. Around mid-2006, I moved from the Greek Archdiocese to the OCA and joined the Orthodox Church of St. Stephen.

Of course, I ended up with the Website as a ministry. Shortly after I got there, Father Mark Stevens, the senior priest, made an interesting request. He was the Dean of the Central Florida Deanery, and he wanted a way for priests and the people in the Deanery to interact more closely.

Interact was the key word here. I was already moving away from static HTML towards dynamic sites in my business, and here was a chance to go Web 2.0 for the church as well.

The basic needs were:

- Make it easy for people to post information.
- Make it easy for people to post files like flyers or invitations.
- Make it easy for people to find and read.

After giving it some thought, I decided that the best thing would be a bulletin board/forum system. I considered a calendar, but that didn't seem to be interactive enough. I also thought about rolling out a Content Management System, which was my plan for the church's Website, but the overhead on that seemed too high for this.

Also, if this project were intended to be for the *Deanery*, and maybe even a pan-Orthodox ministry, then I didn't want to tie the bulletin board too closely to a single parish's Website.

Therefore, I decided on a stand-alone system. I looked at the three most commonly used bulletin board systems at the time and evaluated each.

The three were:

- Simple Machines Forum
- phpBB
- vBulletin

Of the three, vBulletin was by far the most robust and problem free. Simple Machiens (SMF) was by far the weakest. phpBB was in the middle. I ended up with phpBB because of a simple fact - I had zero budget (as always) and phpBB was free. SMF was also, but vBulletin would have required a license. It isn't a very expensive application mind you, but when the budget is *zero* free is really, really attractive.

To get phpBB installed and running, I needed to upgrade the church's Webhosting to include a mySQL database. That cost an extra \$5.00 a month. That's highway robbery, of course, because most hosting companies will toss in mySQL databases for free for \$6.00 to \$10.00 a month *total*.

But, we had a really good deal going on a Shopsite Pro shopping cart for the church's gift shop, so the last thing I wanted to do was migrate to a new hosting company and have to go through setting up a new store.

After ponying up the money and getting the mySQL installed, I then downloaded the zip file containing [phpBB](#) from the community's site. I unzipped the install package locally, then transferred the files to the sub-directory I'd set up on the server for installation. To do the transfer, I used a copy of AceFTP, which is a free file transfer tool.

Like most such utilities, phpBB has a browser-based installation wizard. The Readme.txt tells you the URL to access to run the install script, and then a Wizard guides you through the whole process.

I won't say it was easy, but compared to a lot of other installs I've done, this wasn't that hard. The set up was relatively straightforward, and there was no need to actually work with the database.

I made some tweaks to the stylesheet, and then had the site up and advertised in the next few days. I gave the site a stand-alone sounding name, and intentionally did not integrate it closely into the existing Web presence. You can look at it [here](#) .

Reality - It can really be a harsh mistress!

Orthodox Christians in Central Florida seem to maintain a pretty lively email correspondance. Not a day has gone by in seven years that I haven't found at least one chain email from a local Orthodox Christian in my in-box discussing some topic or other.

Prior to launching this project, I had assumed that a good portion of that email traffic would migrate to the new bulletin board.

I had also assumed that since the site was commissioned by the Dean, other clergy in Central Florida would participate. I further assumed, that they would recommend the site to their parishioners, who would tell others, etc.

Reality, when it showed up, was a *bummer*.

First of all, it readily became apparent that my own priest was not really interested in turing out content for the new site. He was great at providing sermons and classes for posting on the regular Website, but posting to the bulletin board wasn't really something he was going to

pursue.

Then, of course, it also became apparent that the dozens of Orthodox Christians whom I had expected to get involved *just weren't going to*. Some did for awhile, but for the most part interest waned quickly. The email correspondence kept up, but they just didn't make it to the bulletin board.

Why? Lots of reasons were given. Nervousness about writing for a mass audience, inability to understand the fundamentals of a bulletin board, just plain forgetfulness.

And finally, the clergy of the deanery, and the rest of the clergy in Central Florida of other jurisdictions, heartily, roundly, and pointedly **ignored** the site.

They would comment about how they liked the site, and how they thought it was a great and marvelous thing to have.

It was just that, well, it was a great idea for *other* priests to be involved in it, just not them.

Despite these rather ugly facts, we were able to find just enough posts and contributions to keep the site active. We even had some good discussions along the way. And those discussions were popular reading. One thread on ideas for keeping young adults active in the Orthodox Church has been read by 1,999 unique visitors. One of our conversion stories was read by over 600 unique visitors.

And we have made contact with some seekers, looking for the truth about Orthodoxy. Many more have read the articles and discussions without taking the step to contact us directly. Who knows? Perhaps some of them are attending an Orthodox Church even now because of something they read!

Say what you will, but nothing beats the reach of the Internet as a cost-effective way of calling

people to Christ. Still, it could have been a whole lot more effective with more participation.

Lessons Learned

Which brings us to lessons learned for Orthodox Webmasters thinking of starting a bulletin board or some other kind of interactive Web 2.0 project:

1. **Make sure you have at least one priest on board.** And I do mean *on board*. It is good, even essential, for Orthodox laity to witness to the world. Venues that let regular Orthodox talk about their faith are a great idea. However, there are essential insights into the faith that only a priest or monk can offer. A grounding in patristics and a deeper knowledge of the Holy Spirit are things most of us lay people lack. So, a priest contributing to the project is a must-have item. If your priest, or

a

priest at least, isn't on board then you'll be rowing upstream the whole way.

2. **Decide how many people you think will participate.** Then divide that number by 10. Or maybe even by 100. That will give you a good approximation of your

real

level of participation.

Discouraged? Don't be. But do your work up front, before the project is built. You need a core of people willing to commit time to publishing content to the new outlet. You need contributors. Without them, your project is going to turn into a personal blog. That's great, if that's the idea. If it isn't, then recruit, recruit, recruit. *Then* build.

3. **Be vigilant against spam!** You will get spambots coming out of the woodwork. Do not allow open posting. Do not think that email validation and CAPTCHA alone will save you. One of the biggest sources of spam today, like it or not, is Russia and Eastern Europe. They seek out Orthodox sites. For every legit request to join your site, you'll get 20 spammers. The phpBB system came with CAPTCHA (thank God), but the image only stops automated spammers. It doesn't do a thing to prevent registration done by a real, live Russian human making \$1.00 a day by posting Viagra ads on discussion forums.

Each and every day I get at least 10 to 15 bogus requests to join our forum. So many, in fact, that I don't respond to membership requests unless you send me a personal email asking to join. Just filling out the form won't get you in.

4. Don't expect your teens or young people to be involved. Teens today are *Generation Blog*. More of them interact electronically than members of any other generation. But, getting them to abandon mySpace in favor of interacting on your Orthodox project is a tough sell. OrthodoxCircle seems to have done a good job, but you're going to have a tough time getting them to drop by much less join in.

5. Be prepared for a customer support nightmare. If you aren't in the software business, you may not be fully prepared for how bad this will be. I ended up shooting a training video on how to post to a bulletin board.

No joke.

Seriously - a video.

On how to click the *New Topic* button and how to click *Post Reply*.

Orthodox teens are unlikely to participate in your project. Orthodox young adults are as hard to find as the Loch Ness monster. I have heard they exist, but tracking them down can be difficult. That means that the majority of the people you will end up with wanting to participate are going to be older (okay, over 40), and often less computer savvy. This especially applies to a lot of Orthodox clergy, who are, as a whole, older and less computer savvy than the general population of the United States.

You will be tested. You must have patience. You will get phone calls during dinner, and you will get questions that you would never have thought of.

You will want to scream.

But you can't.

Just remember all the Saints throughout history who actually suffered physically for the faith. Compared to being eaten by *lions*, what's a few misplaced pixels, eh?

Perspective saves.

Wrap Up

The bulletin board was only the first Web 2.0 project we kicked off a year ago. In future blogs, I'll be talking about the remaining two which are a *photo gallery*, and taking the parish site to a *Content Management System* architecture using Joomla.

See you next time for that.

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