

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP:

COMMUNICATIONS

Steve Dennie • Communications Director

What I Do

As of 2009, my work can be divided into these areas:

1. *Publications*: writing, editing, design, and printing.
2. *Internet services*: websites, email, blogs, online forms, etc.
3. *Computer support*: Macintosh hardware and software set-up and support.
4. *Filemaker database*: design, maintenance, expansion, the web interface.

National Conference consumes an inordinate amount of my time during the year leading up to the conference (and ravenously devours said time in the last five months). Now that we hold these conferences every two years, perhaps “National Conference” should comprise a fifth item.

Branding

One of Bishop Ron Ramsey’s strategic initiatives was to brand the national office, giving the office its own identity and mission. We started some work with an agency prior to the 2007 US National Conference, but we weren’t satisfied with the results. The only thing we liked was the eventual name: Healthy Ministry Resources.

After the conference, Bishop Ramsey contacted Dave Van Loon, someone he knew from his Scripture Press Days who now works with a Chicago firm called DesignCorps. They provided a variety of logo concepts, and before we knew it, we had a logo.

I designed a new website for Healthy Ministry Resources, and began applying the logo to our various media—stationery, labels, websites, outdoor sign, email signature, etc. (DesignCorps did the stationery.) We officially unveiled everything at the April 2008 meeting of the Executive Leadership Team.

Websites

UB.org. This is the flagship site for the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, USA.

It contains over 900 pages (plus more, when you consider the pages generated by our online church and missionary directories). I implemented the current design in early 2005 (check archive.org to see the different designs through the years, beginning in 1998) and have tweaked the design in various ways since then.

UBMissions.com. Jeff Bleijerveld and I are working with Anti Static, a Christian design firm out of Dayton, Ohio, to create a new website for Global Ministries. We’re still in the early stages, but hope to unveil a new site later this year. It’ll use a content management system and be located at UBGlobal.org.

HealthyMinistryResources.com. This is the website for the national office and its ministries. The BishopBlog is also located here (though you can go directly by typing BishopBlog.org).

Our internet access is provided by Huntington University, something for which I’m highly grateful. They spend big bucks managing their system and fighting off spammers and hackers, and we benefit from all of that, especially in regard to the web servers in my office (UB.org, UBMissions.com, email, and Filemaker). I appreciate being able to contact Gary Campbell, HU’s tech honcho, when I have a problem or question.

UB News

Our news page is actually a blog located at UBOnline.org (hosted by Aplus.net). The design integrates with the UB.org website. I intend to phase out the [Aplus](http://Aplus.net) account and move the blog elsewhere. The big chore will be moving six years of news to a new blog with a new hosting company (I did this successfully with my personal blog, so the idea isn’t as daunting).

AtMyChurch.com

In my 2007 report, I mentioned my desire to start a service which would provide websites for UB churches (aimed especially at small churches). I launched that service, called AtMyChurch.com,



in the fall of 2007. For a mere \$150, I'll design a basic website for a church (using one of several templates), and host it for three years. That's an extraordinary deal. The catch: churches can't update it regularly. We're talking *basic*.

The purpose is to provide a nice-looking website that is search engine friendly, so that potential visitors can find the church on the internet and not be revolted by what they see. I call it a "sign" on the internet. This is all that many churches want or need. As a church grows and their needs change, they'll move away from AtMyChurch (as one did already).

Bluehost enables me to host unlimited domains. We currently host websites which I designed for six UB churches.

Churches occasionally invite me to review their website and offer suggestions. I enjoy that.

I'm thrilled about the quality new websites I'm seeing from some UB churches.

Blogs

The BishopBlog premiered in January 2006 and found an immediate audience. But it was difficult keeping fresh content, even after adding contributors. Fresh content is the lifeblood of blogs. Without it, blogs get ignored.

So we relaunched the blog in May 2008 in conjunction with the branding; it was combined into the Healthy Ministry Resources website. This time, I assumed the role of "publisher," ensuring that new stuff was posted six days a week. I've been able to maintain that.

We wanted more interactivity around the BishopBlog than has happened. To a large extent, it's a reflection of our small size; only a subset of any constituency will access an institutional blog, and a minority of them will interact. It's a critical mass issue. You can't force community; you can only provide opportunities to engage. That, we can continue doing.

I use a blog platform in several other ways: UB News, Staff Openings, Communications ideas, and internal staff communications.

Denominational Email List

The email list, which now has about 1150 addresses, may be our most effective means of communication. The BishopBlog and UB News pages provide good information, but people must go to them. With the email list, we go to the people. It's a "push" medium.

I'm selective about the type of news we send out via the email list, and the frequency. If we get too trivial or frequent, people will ignore the

emails. (A lot of people probably do already.) My desire is that when a UB News email shows up in a person's inbox, he figures there must be something worth reading. That's the happy theory.

Since 2006, we have used Constant Contact, an emailing service, to send mass emails to our constituency. We have email contacts in nearly all of our US churches, plus in each Canadian church. Emails are sent on an as-needed basis, not according to a regular schedule.

I also use Constant Contact to send Tom Blaylock's "Harvest Prayer Update" (now 189 persons), and a new "Here and There" newsletter from Jeff Bleijerveld (for a restricted group).

Twitter

In May 2009, I began using a Twitter account that I had created several months before. I had reserved the "unitedbrethren" name for future use, with no immediate plan to implement anything (you need to anticipate this stuff; once a name is gone, it's gone). However, Twitter integrated well into other things I was doing, and requires minimal extra work. So I went ahead and added it to our communications mix.

I know of very few UB people currently using Twitter. However, it is exploding in popularity, and is a good way to push information. Right now, when we post something new to the BishopBlog or UB News, a "tweet" automatically goes out. People who subscribe to our FriendFeed also receive notification via email.

Twitter: twitter.com/unitedbrethren

FriendFeed: friendfeed.com/ubic

Other Things I Do

- I edit and design the Worldview newsletter, plus a newsletter for Miriam Prabhakar.
- I respond to lots and lots of information requests that come through our websites.
- I do other stuff.

Plans for the Next Two Years

AtMyChurch.com. I want to investigate moving the sites to a blog platform, which would give churches more control and flexibility. That may or may not be a good approach.

UB website. The UB.org website is four years old and is working fine. But I want to begin planning to redesign it, possibly in 2010 or 2011. To take it to the next level, I'll need to hire it done, at least to get the framework in place (I can take it from there). That will be expensive.

I also want UB.org to encompass the AtMyChurch and Healthy Ministry Resources web-

sites. I've decided it was a mistake (on my part; my bad) to create separate sites. Too confusing and non-user-friendly for the typical web user. That's my thinking, anyway.

Just as a denominational magazine was once a denomination's flagship publication, a website now fills that role—and is a whole lot cheaper.

Facebook. We have a United Brethren in Christ group on Facebook, but I'm not doing anything with it. Yet. There are significant possibilities for using Facebook. My own church, with an attendance of around 110 people, has 100 Facebook users associated with the church. I'm sure thousands of UB people already use Facebook. It's a good chance to engage in an existing online community.

Filemaker. I need to convert the Filemaker web interface to the PHP language. I started doing that earlier in the year, but National Conference stuff intruded too forcefully. Also, it's time to revamp various aspects of the database.

UB Booklet. The little UB Booklet has been very popular, and we've sold thousands of them over the years. But it's been woefully outdated since 2005. We need something which accomplishes the same purposes—can be used for membership training, and also to give to people who want to know more about the UB church. I'm working on a new concept for that. A number of people have been requesting at least an update to the UB Booklet.

We live in fast-changing times. New technologies—websites, services, hardware—regularly come along, and we must weigh if and when to adopt them. Some things we do now will be ruthlessly axed as their time passes. Twitter and Facebook will be in vogue for some years, but they will eventually be overtaken by The Next Hot Thing, and we'll need to move along. AtMyChurch is only temporary; a better way to accomplish its ends will emerge, perhaps soon.

Fortunately, we've been good, as a denomination, about letting go of the old and embracing the new, at least when it comes to communications. Sure, we kick ourselves around. But in our corner of the evangelical landscape, I think we do pretty well. We replaced our denominational magazine with a newsletter strategy, and from there have moved strongly to the internet. Our web presence and internet strategy far outdistance most other small denominations.

One fact remains: no matter what we do, people will always say we don't communicate enough. No matter how often and in how many ways we broadcast something, people will say, "I never heard that." Such is my life.

Conclusion

June 1, 2009, marks my 30th year of fulltime employment at the national office. I graduated that year from Huntington University, having worked part-time during my senior year as associate editor of publications. With a degree in hand, I went fulltime.

Having moved around a lot as a kid—Indiana, Pennsylvania, Arizona, California—I'm amazed that I've stayed put. But the nature of my work has kept it challenging and changing. In 1982 I became editor of the denominational magazine, and that was my focus for 12 years. Then in 1993 my job was centralized as Communications Director, and we went to a strategy based around newsletters. That brought freshness and new challenges. Then the internet crashed into my job description, bringing all kinds of new learning curves and fun.

So it's been anything but boring sameness. The world of communications keeps evolving, and at an ever-quicker pace. It's fun trying to keep up and determine when the United Brethren church is ready for, and would benefit from, a new communications bandwagon.

The national office is a fun place to work. We have a quality group of people who get along well, we have a nice building, and we're blessed with quality equipment for doing our work. And there is never any shortage of work.

I've appreciated working with Bishop Ron Ramsey and Pat Jones during the past four years, and will miss them. They've been dedicated, hard-working servants of the church. Their relentless focus on outreach has forced us in a much-needed direction, and the new bishop will be able to build on that.

In the same way, Jeff Bleijerveld—a truly wonderful find for us—has built on foundations left by his predecessor, Gary Dilley, a friend whose daily presence I miss. Jeff fit into our staff like a hand in glove, and I see the same dynamic as he mixes with our churches and people.

The other addition is Cathy Reich, with whom I work more closely than with anyone else. We all sing her praises. She worked at the national office even before I did, and left in 1984 (after nine years) to raise a family. Now she's back, and we're all better for it.

It's a joy serving my denomination. Always has been.

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