

## EUROPEAN NETWORK OF HEALTH CARE CHAPLAINCY

### AN EXERCISE IN BUILDING VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

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*Abstract: The author describes the development of electronic communication which has enabled the development of the European Network of Health Care Chaplaincy. He argues that such electronic communities are real communities, but that in this case, the electronic community exists to foster a sense of community which reaches fulfilment in the face-to-face meeting of the participants.*

*Key Words: community, e-mail, e-group, European chaplains, website*

#### Introduction

Recently, access to the Internet and the use of e-mail has grown exponentially. For many years in the UK the National Health Service had resisted the charms of e-mail, long appreciated by the academics. But now healthcare services are wired up and more and more chaplains are on line, either at work or at home. This is not just a UK phenomenon and the opportunities offered by the Internet and electronic communication allowed the building of a “virtual” community among the members of the European Network of Health Care Chaplaincy (ENHCC). Before the 6<sup>th</sup> Consultation of ENHCC, held at Chania in Crete in November 2000. (Coutts 2001) few of the representatives had e-mail. By the time of the consultation, most had e-mail access.

Since 1990, European chaplains had been coming together every two years to exchange their experiences in healthcare chaplaincy. The Consultation in Crete decided to move on from this pattern of meeting and to form a network whose members were committed to one another and who could have common purpose. The outcome was the *Cretan Declaration* (initially called the *Chania Declaration*). The task allocated to the next Consultation in Finland in 2002 was to agree *European Standards of Healthcare Chaplaincy*.

The task was clear, but no clear structure was agreed to help foster the development of the new Network.

Kirsti Aalto (Director of Hospital Chaplaincy for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland) agreed to organise the next Consultation. A small working group was appointed to meet to prepare draft Standards. They met in Istanbul in January 2002. (Coutts 2002) Almost as an afterthought a website for the Network was agreed. (Eurochaplains 2000) In the end, it was the creation of the website which allowed the Network to keep together between the consultations and to give ENHCC a virtual presence. This paper describes some of the successes and failures of using electronic communication to build this virtual international community.

#### The problems

It was difficult to define who held responsibility for ENHCC. Kirsti Aalto was organising the next Consultation in Finland, Stavros Kofinas had organised the Cretan Consultation, a small group would draft a paper, but who should make editorial decisions about the website? Who should decide what the *domain name* should be? There were no official reports published from the Consultation other than the *Cretan Declaration*. In the end, the webmaster simply tried to reflect the spirit of the *Cretan Consultation* and referred to Kirsti Aalto and Fr Stavros for advice.

It was equally difficult to define who constituted ENHCC. The gathering at Crete had been smaller than some of the previous Consultations and those who did not attend had no easy way to discover

what had happened and to feel any ownership for the concept of the new Network.

Distance made meeting difficult. International telephone calls can be expensive and language difficulties make the use of the telephone less than ideal for many purposes. Mail takes a long time and does not encourage the cut and thrust of creative discussion when you have to wait a couple of weeks, at the best for a reply.

### **The website**

The website was created to try to give an expression of the identity of ENHCC, to try to create a fixed central reference point in the absence of any formal administrative structure. It has proved instrumental in defining the identity of the Network.

The years between 2000 and 2002 saw an explosion of interest in the Internet. As more and more people became aware of the Internet as a communication tool, so the importance of the ENHCC website grew and people looked to it not just as one means of communication, but as the main communication tool for the Network, a regularly updated source of information about ENHCC and health care chaplaincy in Europe.

The website really defined the virtual community which is the Network. Community is about common interest, about the ability to communicate, and about commitment to each other. Sociologists (Wellman & Gulia 1999) have described the reality of such communities held together by the Internet. Those who wanted more involvement could contribute material; those who wanted information could browse; those who wanted to make international contact could be enabled to do so. The Network followed many of the patterns described by Wellman and Gulia. The webmaster was able to link up a number of chaplains who were seeking to make contact with colleagues in other countries and at least two new contacts were made by people signing the Guestbook on the website.

The meeting of the pre-consultation group in Istanbul in January 2002 was a turning point in the life of the community based round the website. This group was able to focus on the next consultation in Turku, Finland and to publish their first draft of *European Standards for Health Care Chaplaincy* on the web-

site. The draft programme for the Consultation soon followed, as did background information and photographs of Turku, papers from the representatives and even train timetables for the Finnish railway. The website had more substantial content and became the focus in the preparation for the Consultation.

The content has grown significantly after the Turku Consultation. A data projector and computer were used at during the sessions, to allow the representatives to see the documents as they were discussed and amended. (Very useful when discussion is in a language other than your own.) The spin off of this for the website was that the reports and documents from the Consultation were already prepared by the final session and it was easy to upload them to the website for sharing with colleagues and others interested in the work of the Network.

The other consolidating factor was the decision of the representatives to elect a committee and coordinator. Now there was a point of reference for the website and the webmaster could seek guidance on development. The website is now acknowledged as one of the main tools available to the committee to communicate with the network community, as well as being a shop window for others about the network.

### **The use of e-mail**

Looking at a shop window can be interesting and stimulating, but before you purchase you must go inside and communicate with the staff. One of the factors in *community* as I have defined it above is the ability to communicate. E-mail now allows this to happen so much more quickly and easily than before, and across distances. Wellman & Gulia have drawn attention to factors in the past which have redefined community beyond the concept of the rural village (e.g. the telephone and the car). They rightly assert that virtual communities supported by technology are still real communities. E-mail has enabled the development of the ENHCC virtual community.

Only one of the 40 representatives from 21 countries who gathered in Turku was not contactable by e-mail. The invitations to attend and the official papers were mailed out, but more regular communication was established by e-mail with most of the representatives and with others who were not able to

attend. E-mail has advantages for such an international network - speed, virtually cost free, the ability to send messages to distribution groups, and the ease of seeking clarification on matters which are unclear.

Those coming to Turku were invited to prepare a short paper about themselves, and chaplaincy in their area. The papers were gathered, edited, then published on the website. They were subsequently printed in the information booklet given to all the representatives. It was only through e-mail that this exercise was possible. Some needed encouragement to write their papers: e-mail allows instant (and repeated) encouragement! Some representatives were not as secure as others in English (the language of the Consultation) and e-mail allowed quick editing to ensure that the final paper would be easily understood by other non-native speakers. Because of this exercise the webmaster became the main point of personal contact with many of those who would attend, again encouraging community. These papers gave significant substance to the website, providing a snapshot picture of health care chaplaincy in most countries of Europe in the first half of 2002.

One of the challenges facing the new Network Committee is to discover how to make good use of e-mail to communicate and take decisions. Finance and distance preclude meeting regularly. It is planned to have only one meeting before the next planned Consultation in Berlin in September 2004. All the development work and planning will have to be done electronically.

Already there is a noticeable difference in the willingness of some members of the Network to communicate by e-mail. For some there is an fear of cyber-technology. Evidence of this can be seen in the reluctance of many people to sign website guest-books and participate in on-line discussion. The nearly 100% response to the request for papers for Turku was only achieved by gentle pressure and a clearly set objective - "We need to publish this material before the Consultation!" With the Consultation over, there is less perceived urgency, and the reluctant users of electronic communication retreat from cyber-space. But is this any different to a real community where people participate with different degrees of enthusiasm or frequency?

One added difficulty in the ENHCC community is language. Although many are able to converse very well in English, there is renitence to risk the written word. The webmaster has tried to be as helpful as possible and offered non-threatening editing to aid comprehension, but it is a factor which must be considered in developing the ENHCC community.

## **E-group**

A new tool to help build community after Turku was the creation of a *Eurochaplains E-Group* using list-serve technology. (Yahoo 2002) Members send messages to the Group which are then forwarded to all other members. Any reply is also sent to the whole group. This was a new experience for many members of ENHCC, but the numbers of those who have joined is growing. Technical difficulties experienced by some people, exacerbated by the language difficulties have been addressed by the webmaster publishing very detailed help on the website and offering e-mail support when required. Since members must opt to join the group, the incentive of publishing photographs taken in Turku was used as a "carrot" to encourage membership.

The group has the potential to allow wide-ranging debate about chaplaincy issues in Europe. Already a number of people who have no formal connection with the Network have joined and are eager to converse with colleagues in other countries.

## **Face to face**

Some fear the Internet encourages social isolation, with its possibilities for on-line shopping, electronic communication and surfing from the comfort of your own computer rather than interacting with society and meeting people face to face. Wellman & Gulia dispute this. Only a very few people restrict their contact to such an electronic community. Most people interact with a variety of communities, the virtual cyber-community being only one of them.

It has never been an objective of ENHCC to be an exclusively electronic community. Rather electronic communication has allowed to development of the community in ways which would not have been possible even five years ago. The website, e-mail and the Yahoo Group are simply tools which can be used to allow people to feel part of a dispersed commu-

nity with a common purpose, and allow them to commit themselves to that community.

Face-to-face meeting and dialogue is important. Wellman and Gulia rightly point to the regular use of e-mail in some circles to arrange face-to-face meetings or to prepare for them. This is echoed in the experience of ENHCC. Because of the cost of travel there was a suggestion that the planning group for the Turku Consultation should carry out its deliberations by e-mail. In the end, rightly, it was decided that more creative work would be done face to face and the group met for a concentrated period of work as the guests of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul. It was only with the ability to think together, to discuss, to bounce ideas around that the draft *Standards* document emerged and was published on the website for further debate. It would have been virtually impossible to carry out the drafting process by e-mail. There was also the added bonus of growing friendships, as the members of the group got to know one another better as they spent extended time together.

The Turku experience was the same. Electronic communication had allowed the preparation to take place, but it was only when one met face to face with people who had previously been little more than e-mail addresses, that the feeling of community was really established. Chris Levison (Healthcare Chaplaincy Training & Development Officer for Scotland) described his experiences of the community which was built at Turku: "Probably the most exciting and stimulating aspect of the consultation was simply to meet and share with the immense variety of people and traditions and yet to discover that through our chaplaincy work we have a great deal in common. I had never before discussed the concept and experience of family with an orthodox priest (from Romania) a Lutheran (from Sweden) a Roman Catholic (from Germany) and a protestant (from Latvia), and I doubt if I ever will again. Other conversations, around the sauna, the pool, and the table, were equally fascinating if often more light-hearted. Friendships, contact and conversations of such kinds are so enriching." (LEVISON 2002)

## The future

The virtual electronic community is not an end in itself but a tool to allow EHNCC to grow and de-

velop. The website itself will grow with the Network and the expectations of those involved. The first new development in the months after the Turku consultation has been the creation of a Euro-Chaplaincy News page which will feature news of chaplaincy interest. It is hoped that the next stage will be a page which allows for an exchange of resources and information about journals, papers etc. Already a request for English language prayers for a chaplain in the north of Finland has been met. There is no limit to what might be possible.

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