

RESPONSE TO THE GOULD DISCOURSE BY LINDA HODDY
“TWITTERED, TWEETED, AND STILL LONELY - CHOOSING THE ON-LINE CHURCH”
Richard S. Gilbert – May Memorial UU Society of Syracuse - APRIL 23, 2010

Thanks, Linda, for challenging us with a provocative and timely topic. My task as an “elder” is to provide some historical perspective on technology and the church. As you will see, I share some of Linda’s ambivalence. Two stories will suggest why.

Mark and Donna Morrison-Reed, while they were at the First Universalist Church of Rochester, were the first of our group (GRUUMPS Greater Rochester UU Messianic Professionals) to have a computer. At one of our monthly meetings they invited us to their home to try out their system. Liz Strong, MRE at Rochester at that time, typed a paragraph into the computer. We waited with baited breath as it printed out. The words were clear and bold and in *alphabetical order*. This caused me to wonder.

At last I was dragged kicking and screaming into the computer age by members of the congregation who thought their parish minister ought to be up to date. At the time I was using an IBM 2 Selectric Erasable typewriter, which I thought was the ultimate writing machine. You could actually back space and erase an errant character. I was going to use that machine as a metaphor in a sermon on UUism as a self-correcting faith. At the last moment I decided to take a risk, and in a hectic Friday afternoon seminar learned a few rudiments of computer word processing, which I would use during the sermon. I had the computer and screen all set up in the sanctuary to illustrate my thesis. As about 300 breathless souls waited, I tried to type a paragraph and then edit it. The computer crashed – or perhaps I crashed it. Another illustration fueling my ambivalence.

However, to illustrate my basic enthusiasm for the use of technology in the church, my notes for this response are written in hard copy, but also on my newly acquired Droid cell phone, which does just about everything. But notice the backup. Trust, but verify.

While I believe the various technologies available to us are great tools, I do want to suggest some caveats. Technology, I suggest, is a means and not an end.

The computer is extremely useful as a way to disseminate information. As a social activist, I find it helps to level the playing field between self-interested lobbying organizations and groups with which I work to promote the common good by progressive religious advocacy. It is economical, efficient and very useful. However, it can be dangerous with more sensitive matters. For example, I know of congregations which have unfortunately used chat rooms to debate the tenure of their minister with resulting hard feelings and broadcast of the controversy through the local newspaper. Not a good scenario.

I worry about the digital divide, both in terms of class and age. While it would be desirable for every home to have computer and internet capability, that day is yet far off. If we hope to appeal to all economic strata and assume everyone has high speed internet, we may exclude many. And, while our people are by and large tech savvy, some of our older members, and even some others not bitten by the technobug, do not have – or even want – access.

Another possible danger is that technology may have the effect of promoting individualism instead of membership in a community. Our vaunted individualism in theology is a virtue, but too often that individualism – I can go it alone – is reflected in a weak sense of participation in a religious community. If we do through technology what we used to do face-to-face, we may be in danger of further accentuating individualism and turned that virtue into a vice. As Linda asked,

what will be the ties binding us together? To the extent technology is isolating, it is detrimental to religious community. We will always need face-to-face interaction.

Years ago Marshall McLuhan wrote about the medium as the message, contrasting hot and cool media as central to consciousness. I fear that with our almost obsessive concern with the use of technology – used so effectively by the mega-churches and others – we will forget that it is our message that is central, not the technology that communicates it. The message of building Beloved Community and its meaning should not play second fiddle to chat rooms, video-streaming and virtual worship.

By contrast Angus MacLean's "the method is the message" theme is quite different. How we do religion in the world, how we connect with one another and with the wider community is at the heart of what we are. The way we practice what we preach, the way we embody our values, is central. As Angus said, you can't teach democracy through autocratic methods.

Linda talked a great deal about hugging as a metaphor for our personal relations, and that is hard to hug over the internet. As useful as our technologies are, they cannot replace human interactions. When a child is born, when a couple confesses their love, what we gather in worship to create a community greater than the sum of its parts, when a loved one dies and we celebrate their life, only a hug will do. Technology can never replicate true community.

Linda quoted the Pope as urging bishops to go forth and blog. And I would urge you to go forth and blog, but, more important, go forth and hug, because, as Linda said, our goal remains to build the Beloved Community in our congregations and in the wider world.