



The United Church of Canada General Council Offices Website 2005 Annual Report

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Introduction

This is the third General Council Offices website annual report, and the first composed by me. The response to previous years was quite positive, so I have opted to keep a similar format.

This report opens with a summary of the context within which the website operates. Included in this section are the website communications strategy, and a new vision and purpose statement that was approved by the Web Strategy Group in spring 2005.

The sections following include an overview of major content and service initiatives in 2005 and a web traffic summary. The later sections outline staff and governance changes, budget overview, and details of marketing and revenue generation.

The report concludes with an outline of the 2005-06 Web Redesign Project. This project will be a large undertaking for all of Church House, with high demands being placed on the Web Department, Creative Services, Resource Coordination and Information Technology Services. The redesign project began in June 2005, with a proposed launch date of December 1, 2006.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues for their encouragement and support throughout the year. 2005 was a transition period for the web department, with many staff and workflow changes taking place. Without their help the website would not uphold the high standards of quality, current information, and function that it currently reflects.

Bill Gillard
Senior Web Producer
January 2006

Website Communication Strategy

The website communication strategy articulates the assumptions that support our day-to-day thinking and production work. The strategy is comprised of two goals:

- Ensure that *united-church.ca* provides quick and easy access to useful information and resources.
- Support the efficient and effective use of Church House staff and resources.

This strategy identifies three specific outcomes:

- **High quality content:** All Web content should be useful, usable, and consistent with the polity, policies, and programs of The United Church of Canada.
- **High quality design:** All content production should comply with United Church of Canada website production and design standards.
- **High quality site management:** All content should be reviewed periodically to ensure it remains useful and usable.

Website Vision and Purpose

The vision and purpose statement describes what the website should do to be considered a success. In 2005 a review of the Vision Statement was undertaken by the Web Strategy Group. It was recognized that there is a need to shift our online presence to better represent our welcoming and diverse church, while still providing support to the various leaders and courts of the church.

To better express this new vision, a new statement was developed by the Web Strategy Group and approved by the Senior Leadership Team:

*The vision of The United Church of Canada website is...
to open the door to users with diverse backgrounds and needs to find out about the church and learn how the church participates in God's mission, and to provide relevant resources and services to congregations, church leaders, and the interested public.*

This revision of the former (2002) statement was formally accepted in June 2005. It provides the solid foundation for a major website redesign project that began in 2005 and will continue through 2006. The statement should be revisited annually.

Major Website Content and Service Initiatives in 2005

Content Initiatives

Once again, as in 2004, the updating of current content occupied most of our production schedule. However, several new content initiatives were launched during the year, including

- response items to the December 2004 Tsunami (Primarily January)
- United Church 80th Anniversary Resources (January)
- Worship Matters 2005 (January)
- redesign of the *Spirit Connection* website and e-newsletter (August/September)
- Emerging Spirit Campaign (September)
- Water in Focus inter-unit initiative (October)
- Faith in the City 2006 (December)

Online Communities

Online communities allow users to share files, calendars, link lists, post discussion topics, polls, and more. 2005 was an extremely busy year for United Church Online Communities. Taking advantage of the 2004 integration of our communities to one central interface, the web team worked with several staff and volunteers to launch seven new communities:

- MaST: Mission and Service Together
- Spin: Sunday School Rotation
- Pension Board
- Emerging Spirit
- The Worship Place
- Permanent Committees
- Arnprior Assembly

At the end of 2005, there were over 1500 members across 15 unique online communities.

The larger communities have an average of 250 members (up from 115 in 2004) and serve an average of 5000 page views each month (up from 1,025 in 2004). Eight of these 15 communities are public access, where anyone can apply for membership, while others are private, so that only those invited by administrators can enter (used by several United Church committees).

In early February 2006 the web department should begin a comprehensive review of the online community services, in preparation for negotiating a new contract with Ramius in March. It is likely that the new contract would expand from the current twenty community limit to include an unlimited number of communities. This can be achieved by switching pricing models where cost is based on number of users instead of number of communities.

There should also be an understanding that the increasing demand for online communities is greatly affecting the allocation of web staff time. Developing criteria for who can develop a community, and what basic knowledge is required of a community administrator, is also recommended in 2006.

It is anticipated that a further five to ten new communities will be developed over the next 18 months. Some of the currently operating communities have discussed expanding or modifying their target audiences to meet the changing and expanding needs of their users. These changes will likely take place early in 2006.

Content Syndication Services

In August 2004 we began offering website content syndication services, commonly known as RSS or XML feeds.

Syndication services enable two key ways of delivering information:

- Local churches and other organizations can include United Church content on their websites. This content automatically updates when united-church.ca is updated.
- Individual users can subscribe directly to the RSS feeds through their news aggregator or RSS enabled e-mail application or web browser.

In 2005, RSS became much more widely known, as many major companies adopted support for RSS technology, including Microsoft, Apple, Google, and Yahoo!.

The value of this service is twofold:

- The United Church of Canada nurtures a wider audience for its content
- Smaller websites get fresh content, which in turn brings people back to their websites

At the end of 2005, we were syndicating content from five areas of the website:

- Home page highlights (items in this feed appear in the other feeds)
- News releases
- Urgent Actions
- Emergency Responses
- UCRD products and services

As of December 2005, our feeds were syndicated on 71 web pages. There were 104,719 page views for those 71 locations. We expect it will take at least one more year before syndication generates even five percent of the traffic on our website.

For more information on RSS feeds and content syndication, see www.united-church.ca/xml.

E-Newsletters

Our e-newsletter service was a steady performer in 2005. The service is an opt-in model where site visitors decide whether they wish to subscribe to a specific newsletter. Our newsletter service provider, Got Marketing, manages our subscriber lists and distribution.

We had four e-newsletters in 2005:

- *Connections* (*Spirit Connection's* monthly information newsletter)
- *Emerging Spirit News* (to support the Emerging Spirit campaign)
- *Marketing News Update* (a new resources promotion newsletter)
- *United Action* (an advocacy and information newsletter published by the Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit)

According to the statistics gathered by our service provider, there was an average 50-60% open rate* (down approx 20% from 2004) for all newsletters and an average click-through rate** of 15-25% (up approx 5% from 2004). Increasing sensitivity of SPAM filters may be partially responsible for the reduced open rate.

The *Marketing News* subscriber base increased by 100 in 2005, ending with 600 for the December issue. The newsletter was published five times: February, April, June, September, and December.

The *Connections* newsletter grew by 70 subscribers in 2005, for a total of 450 for the December issue. The monthly newsletter published nine times in 2005, in conjunction with the *Spirit Connection* broadcast season(s).

Administration and distribution of *United Action for Justice* was taken over by the web department in mid 2005 from the Justice, Global, and Ecumenical Relations (JGER) unit. *United Action* was published five times in 2005 (February, April, May, October, and November). At the end of 2005, there were 605 subscribers to this newsletter (2004 subscriber information is unavailable).

Emerging Spirit News was launched in October 2005 to support the *Emerging Spirit* campaign. At the end of December, there were nearly 800 subscribers to this monthly newsletter.

*Open rate refers to number of e-mails sent that were opened.

**Click-through rate refers to the number of visitors who clicked on any link in a newsletter to view content on a website.

2005 Traffic Summary Report

Site Visitors and Page Views

Once again, web traffic to united-church.ca rose significantly in 2005. The average number of visitors per day increased over 75% from 2004.

Table 1: Site Visitors and Page Views

YEAR	USER SESSIONS/DAY	% CHANGE	PAGE VIEWS/DAY	% CHANGE
1997	156	--	606	--
1998	328	+66%	972	+60%
1999	533	+38%	1,839	+89%
2000	717	+35%	2,576	+40%
2001	982	+37%	6,874	+167%
2002	1,321	+35%	9,247	+35%
2003	1,520	+15%	12,160	+32%
2004	2,287	+50%	10,894	-10%
2005	4,057	+77%	14,031	+29%

Top Pages

Table 2 (below) shows the top 15 pages (by number of page views) in 2003, 2004, and 2005. The Home Page remains the most popular page on the website. In 2005, it logged over 500,000 views.

Once again, as in 2005, the majority of site visitors

- use site support pages (site map, contact, what's new) to understand and navigate the site
- seek general information about the church and its beliefs
- seek our unique worship and faith resources
- use the site as an online directory to the various church courts

Table 2: Top 15 Pages* on The United Church of Canada Website

	TOP PAGES 2005	TOP PAGES 2004	TOP PAGES 2003
1.	United Church home page	United Church home page	United Church home page
2.	Church Locator (quick link)	Gathering magazine home page	Gathering magazine home page (quick link)
3.	Job Opportunities home page (quick link)	Job Opportunities home page (quick link)	Church Locator (quick link)
4.	Contact Us home page (banner link)	Church Locator (quick link)	Job Opportunities home page (quick link)
5.	What's New page (banner link)	Gathering magazine S/A issue home page	Contact Us home page (banner link)
6.	Site Map Index (banner link)	UCRD Online Catalogue home page (quick link)	Beads of Hope home page (feature)
7.	Gathering home page	Contact Us home page (banner link)	What's New home page (banner link)
8.	Children and Young Teens home page	Site Map & Index home page (banner link)	Site Map & Index home page (banner link)
9.	UCRD Online Catalogue	What's New home page (quick link)	General Council 38 home page (feature)
10.	Books, Videos, ... home page (quick link)	Books, Videos, ... home page (quick link)	Conferences directory page
11.	A Brief History of the UCC	Conferences Directory page	What We Believe page
12.	Conferences Directory page	Curriculum & Resources home page	UCRD home page (quick link)
13.	Tips for our Users (quick link)	What We Believe page	Archives Network home page
14.	M&S Fund home page	UCRD Online Catalogue	Civil recognition of same-sex partnerships statement
15.	What We Believe	Beads of Hope (feature)	Tips for using our website (quick link)

* NOTE: This table excludes the first-level directory pages linked to the horizontal tab bar. These pages rank in the top 15 and help identify the most popular thematic areas of the website, but in and of themselves their content value is minimal.

Top File Downloads

Table 3 presents the top 15 file downloads for 2005. These documents are in the popular Portable Document Format (PDF). The following criteria identify when a document is offered as a PDF file rather than a traditional HTML Web page:

- legal documents and forms
- very long documents
- documents, regardless of size, where the original design and/or formatting is an integral feature of the document purpose

Table 3: Top 15 File Downloads 2005

	RESOURCE	DOWNLOADS
1.	Faith Talk II: A Draft Statement of Faith for Discussion and Response	4,701
2.	Policies and Procedures Writing Guide for Camp Administrators	3,546
3.	UCRD Advent catalogue/flyer	3,543
4.	<i>The Manual</i> (2004 edition)	3,420
5.	Curriculum Evaluation Tool	2,881
6.	Financial Handbook for Congregations, 2005	2,622
7.	UCRD Order Form	2,511
8.	Handbook for Ministry & Personnel Committees	2,348
9.	Curriculum at a Glance	2,302
10.	Employment Guidelines for Lay Employees...	2,203
11.	MEPS 433ap Record of Employment	2,146
12.	<i>Voices United</i> index of first lines	2,113
13.	Pastoral Relations Guide	2,043
14.	UCRD Lenten Journey & Easter Celebration catalogue/flyer	1,998
15.	<i>Voices United</i> index of tunes	1,786

For the first time in several years we are confident the above traffic information is accurate. This is the first time we have run the same software application and version (WebTrends 7) for two consecutive years, which helps to ensure our traffic was tracked in the same manner for this two year period. In the future it is recommended that we compare these statistics with an additional web tracking solution, possibly provided by a remotely hosted site. This could be considered when hosting of the website moves external in 2006.

Staff and Governance

A review of the website staffing model began in December, 2004. Two issues prompted this review. The first and most pressing issue was an increasing volume of work and limited excess capacity to complete that work. The second issue was an inefficient use of Web team skills. The review was completed in early 2005.

It was recommended that some reporting relationships be changed, and additional staff be hired to address the issue of increasing workload. In March 2005 the Web Manager position was eliminated, and a new Senior Web Producer position was created, reporting to the Senior Editor, Resource Coordination. After completing an interview process Bill Gillard was selected for the new position of Senior Web Producer, effective April 1. After another interview process in April, Rae Fletcher was hired as Web Production Specialist, reporting to the Senior Web Producer and filling the space left by Bill's promotion. Through the summer a search ensued to fill a new Web

Designer position. In September, Miyuki Fukuma was hired as the new Web Designer, reporting to the Manager, Creative Services. In addition to these changes Bob Paterson was hired on part-time contract as Web Consultant, working from British Columbia, reporting to the Executive Minister, RPD.

The Senior Web Producer also reports to the Web Strategy Group (WSG), an in-house committee chaired by the General Council Minister, Resources for Mission and Ministry and comprised of staff representing program and administrative units in Church House. The committee met on seven occasions in 2005. Issues discussed at those meetings included

- review and revision of website vision and purpose statement
- in-depth discussion about impact of a multilingual website (concerns and questions were forwarded to SPCG/SLT)
- website redesign project scope, development of Web Redesign Team subgroup
- online communities – centralized funding, discussion of staff impact
- request from FFE for uccancamping.org to be taken over by internal web staff

Budget

The website budget in 2005 was once again a modest \$5,000. Web team salaries and benefits, staff work space and workstations, production software, server hardware and software are funded from other budgets. There were also some non-budgeted charges to the website budget in 2005. These "over" charges were authorized by senior leadership.

Notable budgeted expenditures for 2005 included the following:

- Annual subscription fee for e-newsletter service (\$300)
- Annual subscription fee for content syndication service: RSS (\$100)
- Annual license renewal for site search engine (\$1,400)
- Marketing materials – bookmarks (\$580)

Non-budgeted expenses:

- Online communities (\$14,250 initial, \$1,500 upgrade = Subtotal: \$15,750)
- Overage fees for exceeding allocated page views in online communities (\$440)
- Web Consultant services

As well, there were miscellaneous expenditures for items such as USB Flash keys, technical manuals, minor software and service purchases and upgrades.

At a WSG meeting in February 2005, it was agreed that online communities should be centrally funded, and not left for individual units and areas to absorb the cost. It was announced at the March WSG meeting that the Senior Leadership Team approved this updated funding model, and that it would be reflected in the 2006 budget.

Marketing and Promotion

The website played an active role in various marketing and promotion initiatives in 2005, including the following:

- The *united-church.ca* URL is featured prominently in most advertisements and promotions, directing readers to specific areas of the website where they can get more information and/or download a specific resource.

- At the conclusion of each *Spirit Connection* program, the site URL is displayed on the screen. Promotional video clips for upcoming *Spirit Connection* programs are also available exclusively on the website.
- The website continues to offer short audio clips of UCPH authors reading from and/or discussing their publications. Select chapters and/or table of contents are also provided in PDF for most UCPH titles.

The last two items demonstrate how we are beginning to realize the unique features of the Web. We expect to develop new initiatives in 2006.

Revenue Generation and Online Registration

In 2005 there were two obvious channels on the site for revenue generation: the online donation service operated through the "How to Give" page, and UCRD.

Online Donations

The online donation service logged 602 transactions in 2005, nearly doubling the 302 transactions in 2004. \$118,116 was donated online, compared to \$49,318 in 2004, an increase of 240 percent. Three events should be considered when reflecting upon these numbers: the Canada-wide rush to donate money to victims of the earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Asia after December 26, 2004; Hurricane Katrina, and the Pakistan earthquake.

In fall 2005 the online donations and "How to Give" pages were reviewed. It is likely the current single online donations page will be replaced with several pages in 2006. This change will make Commemorative and Emergency Response Supragift donations easier for both users and the finance department by allowing them to specify more information. It is also hoped that we can add an option for donating to the Healing Fund.

UCRD Revenue

The amount of UCRD revenue attributable to the website was available for tracking for the first time in 2005. This new information is thanks to the new finance and order management system in use by UCRD (Navision Navigator).

1,398 invoices were generated, and total sales of over \$70,000 (before shipping and taxes) were attributed directly to the website as their source in 2005. This resulted in nearly 50,000 units being shipped to UCRD customers.

These are respectable numbers, considering that we do not offer e-commerce, or any way to directly place an order with UCRD through our website. The options for placing an order with UCRD include e-mail, telephone, or downloading a PDF version of the UCRD order form for faxing or mailing.

In addition to these directly attributed sales, we suspect other orders resulted from information attained from the website. All areas of UCRD are very popular on the site, especially the searchable online catalogue and seasonal print catalogues offered in PDF for download.

The reasons for not offering an e-commerce option in 2005 were similar to those for 2004: high start-up and maintenance costs, infrastructure (technical and personnel) requirements, and complex security issues. There have also been long delays transferring the Online Catalogue functionalities to the Navision system from the current Sybase system. E-commerce is not recommended until this transition is complete and fully tested. Further investigation into the viability and cost effectiveness of online commerce is highly recommended for 2006, as other

denominations are heavily promoting e-commerce services, which could begin to impact UCRD sales.

Online Registration

In addition to offering online donation services, we also offered online registration for Worship Matters 2005 and the fall meeting of the General Council Executive. Over 170 users registered online for Worship Matters, for a total of \$29,050. Figures for GCE registration were unavailable at the time of this report.

Website Redesign Project 2005-06

Early in 2005 the Web Strategy Group noted that it was time to begin development on a new website design and layout to address many issues, including but not limited to

- informal feedback, both internally and externally, that content is hard to find on our website, the search engine does not work well, and other problems
- recognition that the United Church is multilingual and the website should reflect this
- the site was originally designed for an audience mainly consisting of ministers, but with the new Emerging Spirit campaign we need to better communicate with users who are from the general public and not familiar with the church

In June, the Web Strategy Group approved the formation of a small Web Redesign Team to meet frequently and make decisions related to the redesign project.

Members of the Web Redesign Team (Chris Dumas, Adele Halliday, Rae Fletcher, Miyuki Fukuma, Bill Gillard, Sam Hou, Claudia Kutchukian, and Bob Paterson) began meeting weekly in June to coordinate the development of surveys, consultations, and researching of various new technologies. These meetings continued throughout 2005.

Website Survey and Unit Consultations

For the first time ever, a website user survey was completed between early July and late September 2005. There were four separate surveys offered:

- An online English version for general website users (502 respondents)
- An online French version for general website users (8 respondents)
- An online English version for Church House and DC Staff (93 respondents)
- An English print version distributed at various Annual General Meetings (20 respondents)

Throughout October there were 10 independent consultations held between the Web Redesign Team and unit appointed representatives from 10 of the 11 units. These consultations were based around a set of questions distributed in advance to all units by the Web Redesign Team. Units were also encouraged to voice any questions or comments they had relating to a new website design. The consultations were very engaging conversations and identified aspects of our United Church website that need to be changed to meet the needs of our staff and, more importantly, the needs of our congregations and the public at large.

Several common themes for changes to the website emerged from the surveys and unit consultations that will be used to shape the design and format for the new website.

Ongoing research, consultations, and site development will continue throughout 2006, concluding with a redesigned United Church of Canada website launching in December.