



Source: The Tablet 25.11.2000

# Church Steeple for Funcity

## Internet opens new Ways for Youth Apostolate

By Stefan Lampe

*For the past three years the Diocese of Hildesheim, situated in the north of Germany, co-operates in an outstanding Internet project called „Funcity“ which we felt may be interesting and inspiring enough to share with our readers in the south and east. The web site “Funcity” addresses mainly the youth and is based on an idea from the regional commercial radio network who asked the church to join the initiative. After checking the offer, the 32 year “young” priest Stefan Lampe was entrusted by his bishop to show responsibility. He went ahead to experience and verify new ways of church presence and its opportunity and limitations in pastoral work, on the hedgerows and fences of the Internet.*

Quite a few surfers who log in to enjoy electronic chat with others and to exchange emails on the web site of the virtual city [www.ffnfuncity.de](http://www.ffnfuncity.de), ask themselves the following question, when they see the picture of the somehow ancient looking Church in-between all the other buildings: Does the Church belong in the Internet at all?

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The Funcity Internet community registers around 1,5 million hits a month – and so belongs to one of the most well known web sites in the German speaking area. It is modelled on a real German city but with a comic like effect. Surfers find, above all, a multitude of chat rooms and many different homepages of the “fun citizens”, which is how the “inhabitants” of Funcity call themselves. The fact that a church can be found in-between banks, an apprentice agency, chat cafes, cinemas, insurance companies, a radio station and the many buildings of the over 150,000 “inhabitants” with their own homepages, is a surprise for most when they first visit the city and it makes them curious about what could be “behind” this picture. And when the mouse pointer suddenly changes into a “pointing finger” – well, then there must be something behind it. The question is: what?

“Up until about three years ago there was no church in Funcity” says Father Stefan Lampe, the priest in charge.

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Funcity is not an offer from the church, but came about through the joining together of north German commercial radio stations, who instructed a web design agency to develop a publicity platform for radio stations in the Internet. “I didn’t expect anything religious from the responsables; however they seem to have noticed that something is missing in a city without a church steeple, be it real or virtual. “We don’t want to substitute the village priest with the Internet church – we couldn’t”, says Father Lampe. “That’s why I question the term “Internet Spiritual Counselling” as it promises quite a lot. However, what we can do, in quite an uncomplicated way, is to show

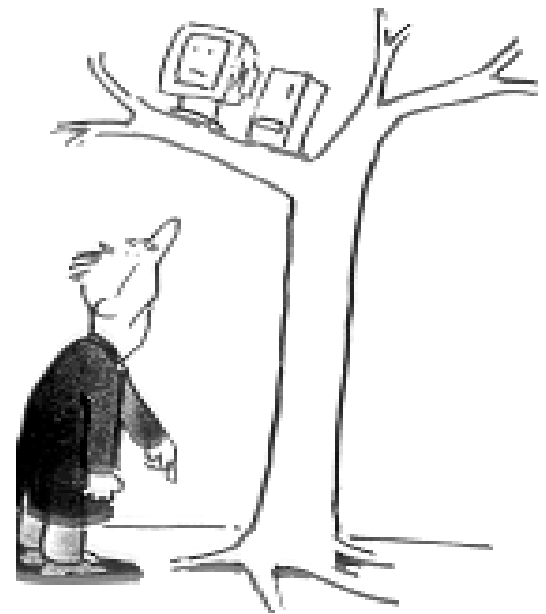
our presence in the Internet. But the time comes where our accompaniment on life's way over the Internet and our advice per email has to end and we have to point the way to spiritual counselling outside of Funcity." This transition usually happens without any big problems. The Internet church can be seen as an initial phase and would soon reach its limits without direct co-operation between the advisory offices and spiritual counselling offers in the different cities.

The numbers speak for themselves: after all, the web counter registers meanwhile around 80,000 clicks a month on the church building in Funcity. "With the number of visitors alone we could compete with a lot of cathedrals", Father Lampe thinks. Although there are distinctions: "The people who click on the Funcity church are usually not in the Internet to look for church web sites. On the contrary: in the Funcity context – nomen est omen! – foremost fun – enjoyment, contacts, chatting, are the main interests of the young Internet users. It's a weird mixture here", says Lampe, but then he tells us that the situation in ancient Korinth didn't daunt the Apostle Paul in preaching about Jesus Christ there.

"The people who end up in the Funcity church are just surfing by and get there just by chance, it is like falling into a funnel". "That", as the Internet spiritual counsellor says "is the difference between the Funcity church and the innumerable other church Internet pages. Our church visitors are usually people who haven't set foot in a real church in years." The mouse click can be compared to a real church door but there are no inhibitions about stepping inside, and the anonymity of the Internet, as the surfers don't use their own names but the fantasy names they chose for themselves, not only limits but is a chance for the project.

A counsellor is present live in the church chat room twice weekly for two hours. It is his task to initiate chat themes and to moderate and give impulses on the themes for those present. Many surfers take this opportunity to make contact with a "real priest" and to lighten their hearts. This doesn't work well in a big chat room. This is why there are private chat rooms for just two people, well protected from the eyes of others – easy to confuse with a "confessional box" as they are much the same optically. "Confession in the sacramental sense, is not, of course possible on the Internet", says Father Lampe. Nevertheless, the "confessional box" in Funcity has become a place for serious and intensive talks – which usually continue in emails with the counsellor, and in which problems are discussed, with which the German counsellors otherwise wouldn't or only in seldom cases, be confronted with.

The meanwhile more than 20 counsellors in Funcity introduce themselves individually, including a photo, in the priests' house in the Internet church, and can be contacted directly over their own individual email address. "We try to keep a consistent line and to answer emails within 24 hours" says Father Lampe, he estimates that they have answered more than 10,000 emails. The questions posed mirror the living situations of the mainly young surfers and range from simple praise that "the church is doing something like this" to questions on parent, school and relationship problems and even include intensive confessions. The demands on counsellors are very high. "To our knowledge there is, up to now, no special training method for this particular form of counselling, most of us do this in addition to our parish duties, it is more or less tolerated by the bishops, and a lot is done in our own free time. Up to now, Father Lampe is the only one in the team who has been officially appointed by the bishop to do his work in the Funcity church, but due to the heavy work load he is unable to manage the job alone.



Source: 2000 PC + Co

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Church is an „ecclesia semper reformanda“

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“A lot of guests just click on us to see what is behind the church in Funcity and to find out if it is all a joke. Nevertheless, they often leave very personal entries in the church’s intercessions book (a real kaleidoscope of the prayer language of the youth) or they send an email praising the counsellor’s team (which consists of one woman, some pastoral assistants, but mostly Catholic priests). An original email representing many replies is: Respect! We never thought the Church would show itself here. Keep up the good work!”

As the church is an “ecclesia semper reformanda” the same is true for the Internet church in Funcity. The counsellors are always trying out new forms of counselling and church presence. In the pre-Christmas period they have an Advent calendar with daily thoughts in preparation for the birth of Christ, and for the very interested a weekly “Funcity parish letter” is sent, in the slang language of the youth which gives an impulse to thoughts on religious matters. “Last Christmas”, Father Lampe remembers, “we could send this impulse to all of the 150,000 Funcity inhabitants over the CMS email distributor – this was without doubt the biggest circulation of a church letter in the German speaking area.”

Father Lampe summarises his experiences and thoughts as an Internet counsellor as follows:

“Our work at Funcity is very challenging. Problems and questions are brought up in a very direct way – these would usually need a very long warming up period in parish counselling, or are, unfortunately, not brought up at all any more. The inhibition level, that the surfer has to overcome to speak about such matters is quite low in Funcity (... “the priest is just a mouse click away”...). How is the situation in our parishes? Are we just as easy to reach there too? In the many duties in our “normal” parish counselling, we often dearly miss the real counselling side of our work.

The work we can do in Funcity has to do with selective points and is a noncommittal form of advice seeking, mainly for the youth, and for people who have few, if any, contacts to the church. In this respect I see the counselling aspect of the Funcity church as a link and it should complement pastoral work (in particular with the youth), but it can never be a substitute.”

Source: Internet [www.ffn.funcity.de](http://www.ffn.funcity.de)

