The Virtual Chapter: a Web Conference Experiment

We have been using web conferencing (group "telephone calls" made over the internet) as a way of keeping in touch with our oblates and associates. Since November 2009 we have also been hosting public web conferences we call **Virtual Chapters.**

These **Virtual Chapters** grew out of a commitment to using contemporary technology for spiritual outreach. Their open nature encourages participation and we have had people joining in from Australia, Canada, Japan, and the USA as well as the UK.

We see such **Virtual Chapters** as being complementary to the **Benedictine Forum** (www.benedictineforum.org.uk) we set up earlier in the year: two ways of encouraging and facilitating communication and engagement among disciples and friends of St Benedict. You are welcome to take part in our Virtual Chapters, and if you are interested in setting up a web conference yourself, the following notes may be useful.

Benefits

The key benefits for oblate participants are that such online meetings are

- low cost
- simple to use
- green in energy terms (no long journeys to make).

Participants have found that they

- help maintain personal contact with their monastic community, irrespective of location
- help make/maintain contact with other oblates
- allow people to make a "first approach" to a monastery informally and anonymously.

You will find responses from some of those who have taken part in **Virtual Chapters** on our blog, Colophon.

What you Need

The host, whether community, oblate group, or individual, **must have**

- **a computer with a Broadband connection and a headset (earphones and microphone)**
- **a plan for the web conference** to avoid red herrings/having the conference "taken over" by a troublemaker of some kind.

for everyone else

- **a computer with Broadband connection is best**, although you can use an ordinary telephone/ mobile if you don't mind paying call charges
- **a headset with earphones and microphone** if possible, otherwise speakers and inbuilt computer microphone (although, be warned, this will require muting of the inbuilt microphone whenever the user is not actually speaking or there will be a distracting "echo chamber" effect).

The Choice of Web Conference Client

We wanted a web conference client which would

- be **free** for all users, irrespective of location
- provide **high-quality audio** for participants
- **allow online chat** (texting) for those who don't want to talk (or don't have a microphone)
- enable **recording and streaming the audio**
- **give the host some control** so that attention-hoggers or anyone making unsuitable comments could be discreetly silenced
- offer maximum **cross-platform compatibility** (Linux, Mac OS, Windows).

We also wanted a system which ideally would

- **provide a "back-end"** with widgets for our web site, and feeds for iTunes, etc. without our having to do too much manual coding
- **be secure** without our having to install separate encryption software.

We were not interested in video conferencing (which can put a strain on system resources and works best among small groups), so we looked only at voice clients.

After some research, we chose TalkShoe™, based in Pittsburgh, USA, which provides a good service, including an easy means of setting up VOIP connections (computer-to-computer telephone calls over the internet which do not attract call charges). It also hosts recorded talkcasts, so we do not have to use our own bandwidth for the audio stream. In fact, we have just moved our podcasts over to TalkShoe™ and so far it has worked well.

Skype™ only offers free calls between Skype users; others, like the SJPhone softphone, are a bit complicated to set up. The purchase by Google of Gizmo5, a very nice OpenSource VOIP client, looks promising and is something we shall be keeping an eye on. There are other VOIP clients available, but for us cost and cross-platform compatibility were determining factors.

Format of the Virtual Chapter

We wanted to be true to our monastic character, so our **Virtual Chapters** have followed the classic pattern of

- prayer;
- conference or some other form of input;
- discussion.

This has been well received and gives people time to familiarise themselves with the TalkShoe™ interface before plunging into discussion.

The Virtual Chapter in Action

You will find a recording of the most recent **Virtual Chapter** on our podcast page or you can use the widgets on our blog or web site to access earlier recordings.

Learning from our Mistakes

For our first **Virtual Chapter** we made the mistake of thinking everything would go as smoothly as with our private, unlisted conferences. We assumed everyone would have sorted out their software/connection difficulties before coming online. So, we didn't appoint one of the community to address such problems (usually indicated by a flurry of chat [text] messages onscreen) with the result that there were some awkward silences. We also didn't know that the use of an inbuilt computer microphone would lead to an "echo chamber" effect if not muted when not in use.

We now have **one person appointed to deal specifically with chat [text] messages**. She also has at her fingertips instructions for dealing with the commonest technical problems for all major operating systems. That leaves the person acting as **host or overall organizer** free to cue speakers in and out and keep the conversation going. Some people prefer just to listen, or just to chat (text), so it is important to keep an eye on the chat screen.

We have drawn up **an informal guide to installing and using the TalkShoe™ software** (which is free) and put in place **a form** to encourage submission of ideas/questions in advance of the actual Chapter so that there is more opportunity to prepare. It should be straightforward to adapt these for another web conference client.

Choosing a day/time for the web conference needs thought, especially if one is aiming to involve overseas participants. Our first public venture was timed to ensure that we didn't get too many people joining in, although the TalkShoe™ interface will allegedly allow up to 300. In fact, we had about 29, of whom the vast majority were listeners/chatters (texters) rather than talkers. We have varied times since, to allow more widespread participation. Our biggest mistake was scheduling one **Virtual Chapter** during the American Thanksgiving holiday period: the TalkShoe™ servers were rebooting so our session began half an hour late.

Help and Advice

We hope others will be encouraged to try this idea for themselves. Virtual meetings can never be a substitute for personal encounters, but they are a useful way of supplementing existing arrangements for oblate meetings. We are happy to give whatever help we can but please bear in mind that we are not experts, and as a small community we would prefer an email to a telephone call or letter.

Sr Catherine
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