

A WORLD-WIDE PRAYER

Families find encouragement and care in crisis through the Internet.

BOB SMIETANA

Since the earliest days of the Church, Christians have been finding creative ways to care for the needs of people in the body.

One of the disciples' first decisions in the book of Acts was to appoint deacons to care for widows and orphans in the community. And the Apostle Paul used his letters and travels to spread stories of Christians in need. "Bear one another's burdens," he wrote to the church in Galatia, "and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

Christians today carry on that same tradition of expressing Christ's love by sharing concerns through

prayer chains and newsletters and by acts of love such as organizing meals for families dealing with crisis or parents welcoming a new baby.

Increasingly, they are using the Internet—email, websites, and online journals known as weblogs—to coordinate those efforts and reach across geographical boundaries (and sometimes denominational boundaries) to care for one another.

This month, the *Companion* looks at the way three families have experienced that care and concern—in sometimes unexpected ways—through the world-wide web.

CHAIN



Carla, John, and Joey Agliata

before,” says John. “We think that the list grew into the thousands.”

One of the people who received the prayer list was Karen. While they never did figure out how the emails made their ways to Karen (they could find no common links) she and Carla began exchanging emails.

Their relationship deepened, when, as the Agliatas feared, Jacob died six hours after being born. Karen became a sounding board, someone who knew

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exactly what she was feeling.

“Her experience was a little different,” Carla says, “but the emotions were so similar—she could empathize with everything we were going through.”

Their friendship has continued to grow over the past two years as they now share the joys and trials of parenting a young baby—John and Carla’s second son, Joey, was born a year and a half ago, and Karen had a baby around the same time. Carla says that her relationship with Karen seems “perfectly normal.”

“It’s strange but it just seems natural,” Carla says. “It’s like we clicked—the same way we would if we met in person.”

John and Carla say they felt sustained by God during her pregnancy

Bob Smietana is the features editor of the *Companion*



How Long Is A Lifetime

THE AGLIATAS

(Fairfield Covenant Church,
Fairfield, Ohio)

When Carla Agliata wants to hear from someone who really knows how she feels, she gets in touch with her friend Karen from Mississippi.

Carla, a member of Fairfield (Ohio) Covenant Church, and Karen have many things in common—they are both mothers, both Christians. And they know what it’s like to lose a child, having both had a baby die soon after birth.

There’s only one thing—Carla and Karen have never met. At least not in person. “We’ve never even talked on the phone,” Carla says.

Carla first heard from Karen three years ago, when she and her husband, John, learned that their unborn son Jacob had a blockage in his kidney. The blockage, revealed during a routine ultrasound, meant that Jacob was

not producing amniotic fluid, causing a delay in the development of his lungs.

Though doctors were able to fix the blockage, that developmental delay meant that Jacob, then eighteen weeks along, would likely live for only a few hours after birth.

Not knowing what else to do, John began writing an email to six of their closet friends, asking them to pray. “This is probably the hardest thing I’ve ever had to write,” the email began.

After explaining their predicament, he wrote, “I’m writing this to you because you are our friends. Please keep us in your prayers. We’re not doing too good right now. I never thought we could hurt like this.”

That initial list to six friends eventually grew to a list of fifty family and friends to whom John mailed regular updates. Those fifty people began sending the emails to their friends and copying the email and sharing them at Bible studies and prayer meetings.

“We were hearing from people as far away as Japan and close as the next town over, people who we had never met

A SAFE PLACE TO PRAY

Elizabeth Sams, executive vice-president of Beliefnet.com, a spirituality website that draws 16 million visits each month, says that the site's most popular feature is its prayer circles.

Since the site was founded in 1999, more than 34,000 prayer circles—Internet bulletin boards—have been started. From the beginning of U.S. military action in Iraq, some 1,200 prayer circles were started to pray for people serving there.

The prayer circles often are ways to reach out and connect with other people, says Sams, but also looking to make some connection to others. "People would start a prayer circle by saying, 'I've just lost my job and I'm looking for prayer for myself and to pray for others like me,'" she says.

Sams believes the anonymity creates a safe space, where people can approach strangers and pray for them or correspond with them without the fear of saying the wrong thing.

"On the Internet you can ask something that is uncomfortable or might seem stupid," she says, "and the worst that can happen is that the person will think you are stupid. And since you are anonymous, they don't know who you are, how bad can that be?"

Guidepost.com, the online home of *Guideposts* magazine, allows visitors to submit prayer requests online. The requests are then distributed to one of the site's 300 volunteer prayers.

Earlier this year, Gail Orser, prayer department manager in *Guideposts* outreach division, told the *Washington Post* that the site had surpassed 22,000 requests a month. The website also posts requests that visitors can view and then pray for. □

and Jacob's life and death through their relationships in person and online. Sharing by email helped John, the editor of a community newspaper, talk about the anguish he was feeling, something he had a hard time doing face to face. And being able to send one email instead of fifty calls or emails was a relief on the days they didn't feel like talking to anyone.

"It just amazes me that God can use email," John says, "but I guess if he can use a burning bush and all these other things, he can use email too." □

Carrying Ben

THE GUSTAFSONS

(*First Covenant Church, Seattle, Washington*)

The first sign that something was not quite right with Mike and Arwen Gustafson's four-year-old son, Ben, came when he stopped walking last February.

Ben had recently had a bad fall, so at first they were not too concerned. But when Ben wouldn't get up and walk—even to the bathroom—they knew something was seriously wrong.

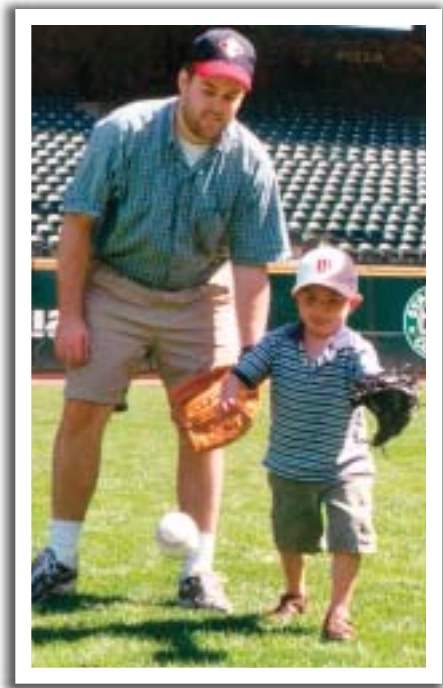
On February 28 they learned Ben had leukemia—the disease had been attacking Ben's bones, making it painful for him to walk. He was hospitalized immediately for ten days of intensive chemotherapy.

For Mike, a cancer researcher, learning that his own son had cancer was "like being hit by a train."

"My first thought was 'leukemia—he's got three or four months to live,'" Mike says. "I didn't realize how far the treatment has advanced, and that it's 90 percent treatable."

Besides caring for Ben, the Gustafsons had a two-year-old daughter, Annika, at home and Arwen was thirty-seven weeks pregnant with their daughter Lydia.

With all their worries and responsibilities, trying to keep friends and



Karl Nelson and Ben Gustafson

family informed proved overwhelming—during the first few days at the hospital the Gustafsons spent almost two hours a day on the phone, an emotionally draining process as they repeatedly shared the news about Ben.

While visiting the Gustafsons, Karl Nelson, a friend from First Covenant Church in Seattle, offered to set up a website to post information about Ben's condition. Arwen says she was skeptical at first, thinking a website would be "more work than it was worth."

But Nelson, a web programmer, convinced her that the process would be simple. He purchased a domain name (www.gustafson-family.com) for \$15, set up a simple website using free software, and by March 2, had posted the first web update.

During the first few weeks of Ben's illness, either he or Andrea Johnson, another family friend, would stop by, get an update, and post it to the site. Nelson also added a password that allowed friends and family access, but still gave the Gustafsons some privacy.

That first update included prayer concerns—that Ben would tolerate the treatment well and that Lydia would stay put until her due date (March 6) when Ben would be home from the hospital. It also included an update on Ben's surgery to install a port for che-

motherly, instructions for visitors (like not bringing balloons or plants to the hospital), and directions to the Gustafsons' home for those bringing meals.

During that first month of Ben's illness, the site attracted more than 4,000 page views, with another 4,000 since then. The traffic to the site, which costs \$10 a month to maintain, varied by the number of updates posted. In recent months, Arwen's brother Garth has taken over updating the site.

Arwen says that having the website "made a world of difference." Having people informed about Ben, and along with the meals that church members provided for weeks (also coordinated through the website) meant that "you didn't have to stress about the details and could focus on what was important," she says.

The website also made it easy for friends from college (the Gustafsons

attended North Park University in the early 1990s) who were scattered around the country, to pray specifically for Ben's needs. Mike and Arwen figured that 100 people from forty different

FOR MIKE, A CANCER RESEARCHER, LEARNING THAT HIS OWN SON HAD CANCER WAS "LIKE BEING HIT BY A TRAIN."

states were supporting them in prayer.

Arwen says that support was helpful, especially when they were coping with the side effects of Ben's treatment and having a newborn at home. (Lydia was born March 8, two days after Ben returned home.)

"It's amazing when you find out so many people care for you," Arwen says. "You think if all these people are praying for us we can make it through."

Ben's prognosis is good, though he will continue with a maintenance treatment—including quarterly injections

into his spine, daily oral medication, as well as occasional IV-treatments. The treatments will continue until April 28, 2006. Ben's immune system has recovered enough for him to play outside,

something that was forbidden during the early days of this treatment.

"He was so immuno-suppressed," Arwen says. "I would go to the grocery store and have to worry about every little germ. And we didn't let the other kids go anywhere, for fear they would catch something."

"Now it's nice to be outside . . . to smell the fresh, clean air," she says.

After physical therapy, where "we had to coax him step by step," says Arwen, Ben is now back running, riding his bike, and enjoying playing base-

The Danger of Promiscuous Prayer

In his book, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age*, Quentin J.

Schultze, professor of communication arts and sciences at Calvin College, writes about the impact that new technology has on human relationships. The *Companion* recently asked Schultze about using the Internet as a kind of "world-wide prayer chain."

What are the benefits of using the Internet to spread prayer requests? What are some of the downsides?

I think the best opportunities for using the Internet for prayer are all related to being able to find out more quickly and less expensively about others' needs. Churches rightly pray for missionaries after receiving regular online updates about work in the field. Parents often know more about what is going on with their children at college. Denominations and congregations can create new, faster prayer chains.

On the downside, some people are now spamming others—even those

they have not met—with prayer requests, and we know that some of these are bogus emails sent by non-believers. Also, chat room prayer can be enormously disingenuous. Finally, on-line prayer too easily becomes a substitute for praying with others in person. We know that many families are not praying much together—just as spouses tend to spend little or no time in daily prayer.

Is Internet prayer part of a larger trend of substituting electronic relationships for face-to-face relationships? Or is it a way for people to broaden the number of people they know and relate to?

When a new communications medium is invented people tend to get overly excited about it and invest too much of their time and energy with it.

We are still at this stage with the Internet. Prayer is no more powerful or effective because of the world wide web. Moderation is one of the great virtues that we need to practice in all things, especially because invest-

ing too much of our time in one thing will invariably take us away from other, worthwhile endeavors. We need to balance high-touch and high-tech communication in order to have well-rounded lives marked by the greatest of all commandments, namely, loving God and neighbor as self. Praying for everyone in general is akin to praying for no one in particular.

Have you had experience with receiving prayer concerns online?

I tend to stay away from online prayer unless I know the people involved. And I never spend time in prayer in response to unsolicited email. I think online communication can lead us to "promiscuous prayer" that is not anchored in any covenantal relationships with God or persons. The best prayer comes out of our intimacy with the real needs of others or out of the needs for others as expressed to us by friends, neighbors, and brothers and sisters in our churches—including missionaries. □

ball in the backyard with his dad, which had been one of his favorite things to do.

“We tried not to bring it up in March or April,” says Mike. “He couldn’t even stand up, never mind hit a ball.”

Then, around Memorial Day, Ben came up to his father and said, “Daddy, I want to go and play baseball.” □

Sharing the Journey

THE PALMERS

(Columbus, Ohio)

Last year, Mark Palmer, a Brethren in Christ church planter in Columbus, Ohio, launched “Palmer’s Place,” an online journal, as a way to keep in touch with friends living out of state or overseas.

His first post, dated May 1, 2002, was about a trip he made to the local fabric store. Over the next year, he filled his weblog or “blog” as online journals are known, with news of his family, including his wife, Jennifer, and their infant son, Micah; thoughts on books he read; and his reflections on ministry (www.livejournal.com/users/palmerlp).

When Jennifer was diagnosed with terminal cancer, the journal became a kind of lifeline for Palmer, a place where he could share prayer concerns and medical updates, as well as the struggles he and Jennifer were facing. He also stopped keeping a pen and ink journal, and began posting his reflections on Jennifer’s illness and the last few months of her life.

“I wanted people to be able to share the journey with us,” Palmer says. “So the online journal was the only one I used during Jennifer’s illness.”

From April to mid-August, when Jennifer died at age twenty-six, the Palmers’ story spread through the Internet, mainly through other blogs. Randall Friesen, pastor of Gateway Covenant Church in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, followed Palmer’s on-line journal, and asked people who read his



Jennifer, Mark, and Micah Palmer

blog (www.randallfriesen.com) to pray for them. It was “almost as if he knew them,” says Friesen.

Perhaps the most poignant of Palmer’s posts came at 10 p.m. on August 12, the night that Jennifer died.

“I am frightened of going upstairs to bed by myself,” he wrote. “I have gone to sleep with Jennifer every night for the last five-plus years, and now I am quite unsure of how to do it myself. If you are awake this evening, will you pray with me through the watches of the night?”

The Palmers received more than 1,000 emails, and hundreds of letters, cards, and phone calls from friends and family and from people Jennifer had never met. Palmer says that the outpouring of love from the broader Christian community, as well as from their local church, sustained Jennifer during her illness.

“It made her story known to so many people that wouldn’t have known it,” he says. “A thousand emails is probably not a lot for some people, but for us the support was overwhelming.”

That support ended up being worldwide. After Jennifer was diagnosed the Palmers got a map of the world and hung it on the wall, to chart responses to their story.

“We used push-pins to mark every place that we were getting emails from,” Palmer says. “We honestly had more pushpins from outside the U.S. than from inside—from South America,

“I WANTED PEOPLE TO BE ABLE TO SHARE THE JOURNEY WITH US,” PALMER SAYS.

England, Australia, Germany, and Japan.”

Palmer says he felt God working through the online journal, despite his failings as a writer.

“As I read back over the journal, there is nothing inherently eloquent or special about the words I wrote,” he said. “It’s encouraging to me to know that God kind of entered into those words and used them.” □

Software Suggestions for Creating Weblogs/Websites

from Karl Nelson, *First Covenant Church, Seattle, Washington*

Movable Type (www.movabletype.org) Free software that requires some technical know-how to install. Also requires a domain name and web host.

TypePad (www.typepad.com) From the makers of Movable Type, this is a hosted service (which runs on the company’s server) so there’s no need for additional software or a web host. Cost is \$5-15 a month.

Blogger (www.blogger.com) Blogger is a hosted service owned by Google, with free and paid versions.

LiveJournal (www.livejournal.com) Similar to Blogger with a free and a low-cost (about \$2.50/month) version.

Radio (www.radio.userland.com) This software runs on your computer (Mac or PC), and publishes pages to an Internet site. Installation is simple. Cost is \$40.

CityDesk (www.fogcreek.com/CityDesk/). Full-feature software that can produce newsletter-type websites. There is a limited free version and a personal version for about \$80. □