

Delaware man starts social networking site for Catholic parishes

WASHINGTON - Facebook and MySpace, the two most popular social networking sites on the Web, have practically become household names, but a Catholic Delaware man who has started a networking site for Catholic parishes hopes he can get some recognition of his own.

Shaun Gallagher said he took the “concept of social networking and centered it on a parish” to create www.parishnetwork.org.

Users go to the site to look for their parish and sign up through the parish, then they can communicate with other members of the parish through messages, forums and groups. Users also can connect with other Catholics in their diocese in the same way.

“It’s a matter of aggregating information to add parishes” to the site, said Gallagher in a recent telephone interview with Catholic News Service. He works on the site by himself, with no paid or volunteer staff to help, gathering information for all the parishes in all the dioceses in the U.S.

In a matter of weeks the site went from having 15 or 16 U.S. dioceses listed to 74 dioceses - and 9,635 parishes - listed as of June 23.

Even with such rapid growth, Gallagher said he expected it would take a few more months before all of the nation’s 195 dioceses and their parishes are uploaded to the site.

Gallagher said he has been trying to “get the snowball rolling” by contacting various dioceses around the country and spreading information about the site via word of mouth through his friends.

Gallagher first got the idea when he moved to Delaware from New York in August

2007. He found that he was only able to introduce himself to a few people and that it was hard to make connections with other parishioners.

His site is “a foundational tool that helps people along their religious journeys,” said Gallagher. He believes it will have an impact on users’ spirituality in a communal and personal sense.

“It gives someone an opening to introduce themselves,” Gallagher added. The site enables users to have a profile in which they can display information about their interests and hobbies.

“That alone can form Christian fellowship,” he added.

He also thinks the site can influence people’s prayer life; for example, he said he thinks those who feel they don’t pray as often as they should might pray more if they see a prayer request someone has posted on the site.

Gallagher also thinks the site might have more of an impact on younger Catholics, making them feel more a part of a parish community.

“I know several people who have left the faith because they thought nobody would care, nobody would notice” if they left, he said.

“If young people go to Mass and no one knows their name, it can be discouraging,” Gallagher noted, adding that the site can help people know each other’s name and give “people support to grow.”

Gallagher works as a full time Web editor for The News Journal daily newspaper in Delaware.

His vision for the site it is to have something different from other social networking sites.

“I don’t want to get into too many bells and whistles,” said Gallagher. He values simplicity and said he believes that philosophy came out of the time he spent as a DeSales Service Works volunteer in 2004.

Other Catholic social networking sites exist, but they cater to individuals, not

dioceses and parishes as Gallagher's site does.

Officials planning World Youth Day 2008 in Sydney, Australia, recently launched a networking site called www.xt3.com for those who will be making the journey to attend the six-day event in July.

Other sites include www.4marks.com, which focuses its target on young, single Catholics; www.cathcommunity.org, which focuses on individuals and on creating networks among various Catholic organizations; and www.mycatholicvillage.com, which aims to bring together individual Catholics from all across the globe.