

MySpace page helps minister stay online with youth

When St. William of York, Baltimore, youth minister, Wayne Hipley, started his youth ministry career five years ago, he was told to “go where the kids are” - meaning find out what activities young people are interested in, what music they are listening to and what is “cool” and incorporate it into the youth group program.

It didn't take the 48-year-old youth leader long to realize the popularity of the online community MySpace among the young people of his parish.

So Mr. Hipley, who has 25 years of experience in the media/video/film industry, decided to create a parish youth group MySpace page, which has been under his operation and direction for a little over a year.

The site features events, contests and youth group photos.

“I really didn't know a lot about MySpace at first but I started to check into it and before long I made my own site,” said Mr. Hipley. “I know my kids are responsible with their sites.”

MySpace is an online community where anyone can create their own Web page including pictures, colorful backgrounds and music. Launched in 2004 by Chris DeWolfe and Tom Anderson, the site had nearly 50 million users in January 2006, according to a USA Today.com article. People can reconnect with old friends and stay in touch with new ones by “adding” them to their friends list while leaving messages for them on their site like an interactive answering machine. The St. William site has 40 ‘friends,’ according to Mr. Hipley.

A person can set their site to “private” so only those on their friends list can view the page. Most of the young people in the St. William of York youth group said they restrict their personal pages so they don't receive spam or messages from people they don't know.

“The random people wanting you to add them and the spam are the down side to

MySpace,” said Rachel Caslin, 16 who said her site is a way to express herself. The young people agreed that MySpace is the easiest way to contact people. Casey Wheetle, 16 and a student of Mount de Sales Academy, Catonsville, said she tends to send out bulletins to her MySpace friends asking for help with homework or alerting them to a new play she is in.

“People don’t check their e-mail as often,” said Katie Parry, 15 from the Institute of Notre Dame, Baltimore. “This is the best way to contact people.”

With all of the fun and positive aspects of MySpace, it still has its downfalls, like Internet predators. That’s why Mr. Hipley does not allow anyone he doesn’t know to view the site. He wants the page and the youth group to be a safe place online.

“It’s a lot easier for people to find out you name and where you live on MySpace and that’s scary,” said Chelsea Redding, 15 from the Institute of Notre Dame. Her friend Casey added, “It’s about being responsible about what you put on your page. It’s the way you are portraying yourself to others.”

Out of the some 87 youth ministers in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Mr. Hipley is one of the only ones to have a youth group MySpace page. He sees the pros and cons of this form of communication. While the events and activities successfully reach the intended youth, he feels their personal communication skills are suffering.

“The youth are losing the real one-on-one relationships with e-mails, MySpace, text messages and instant messages,” said Mr. Hipley. “It’s important to have that one-on-one contact with people.”

The Internet savvy youth minister said some young people see that the youth group has a MySpace and join in the activities because the group must be “cool” if they are on MySpace.