

Remote Communities

Topic: Linking Remote Communities through Technology

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Aloha kakou. My name is Bob Harrison, I am an alcoholic and I am honored to serve as the Hawai'i Area 17 Panel 67 Delegate. Today I'm sharing on, "Linking Remote Communities through Technology."

I would love to stand up here and tell you that Star Trek teleporters are just around the corner. I would love to tell you that some new and better technology is going to solve the challenge of staying linked with remote communities. Even more, I'd love to tell you that right now we have the technology to keep linked with remote communities, that enable us to get to the heart of A.A., one drunk talking to another.

In truth, I am going to tell you that last one, but it's probably not going to be what you were expecting to hear.

First, let me say a little about my qualifications to address this topic.

I am indeed a techie, for the past 18 years I've been working in IT in the health care field. In A.A., I've served in many positions, those relevant for today are webmaster for our area, our annual convention, and as tech consultant for several intergroups. I get more calls for help with tech than for help with our Traditions.

And I'm from Hawaii, a remote community of, yes, remote communities.

I did a bit of research on this topic when I was asked to share. I called on my fellow Pacific Region Delegates and asked what they might be doing. Further I dropped a line on the NAATW mailing list and asked the same question.

Before I tell you what I learned and what we, in Hawaii, have been doing, let's make sure we've defined technology. I tend to think of the latest gadget, but the definition really is:

Technology ... is the collection of techniques, skills, methods and processes used in the production of goods or services or in the accomplishment of objectives, such as scientific investigation. (Or carrying the message.)

It's a broad definition covering quite a bit more than the latest gadget.

This really hit home when I was talking with Laura, the panel 66 delegate from Alaska. Alaska is an area also familiar with remote communities, geographically, linguistically, and culturally. Laura said that much of their work involves flying into remote settlements to carry the message of A.A. It occurred to us that flying absolutely constitutes the use of technology. So does driving a car or using a boat, both used regularly on Maui for the Hana Caravan and multi-island event, The Crossing.

But what about those newer technologies, in particular those related to telecommunications? What's being done and how successful are they? The March 2017 issue of the Grapevine had an article, "Connected," about a member connecting with their old home group using video conferencing. It also highlighted at least one problem they had, an out of order microphone. Linked? Yes! But how well?

To be honest, I'd expected to hear lots of stories of using technology to connect communities. There weren't. I did hear a lot of good information about connecting service bodies using the latest and greatest website, tool, or technology, but not so much on bringing members together to share the language of the heart in fellowship. It is being done using technology, but not necessarily with cutting edge technology.

In Hawai'i we've not used video conferencing to link remote communities so much as to connect service bodies. Our PRAASA 2011 team used laptops and video conferencing at committee meetings for other island members. WACYPAA XVIII used video conferencing to hold their committee elections and phone conferencing during committee meetings. And our annual Hawai'i convention has tried it to connect steering committee members from different islands when necessary. How well has it worked?

In truth, phone conferencing seems to work much better, when it works, than does video conferencing. The reason for this is simple, bandwidth and stable connections. Currently, outside of locations designed for use in video conferencing it can be very hard to establish connections on both sides which can be counted on. More than once in our attempts we've had to give up on video and simply use our phones. And, while we'd think that phones work everywhere, at least in Hawai'i it is not so. In many of the places we hold assemblies and committee meetings there is no cell phone signal and no landlines are available. "Can you hear me now?" No.

The degree of success in linking remote communities through technology is going to be directly related to the infrastructure available both locally and remotely.

District 8 in Alaska has had much success with an ongoing weekly telephone meeting where remote communities call in and participate. It's worked well enough that there has been discussion of starting a second meeting. But note, they are using telephones and not video conferencing.

We must also keep in mind that while advanced technology is wonderful, not all of us have the same set of skills. My own experience in trying to implement video conferencing has

shown me that not everyone can successfully install and use the software without assistance and that may mean visiting physically and dependence on having tech help available on both sides. Phones, however, have been around long enough that most of us have no problem using one even if some of the finer points of conferencing escape us, “please mute your phone while that plane goes overhead.”

Areas have been exploring the use of internet technologies to create bonds between communities, to allow one alcoholic to talk with another, but for the most part they are experiments. I think we absolutely must continue trying to implement these sorts of links. But I also think we need to remember that the link is more important than the technology used to create it. In order to carry our message to the widest possible number and the remotest of communities, we have to rely on the lowest common denominator, even while we strive to bring in the new. Driving somewhere may top a spotty phone signal, and a phone conference may top a wonky video signal.

Let’s also remember that our efforts in uniting remote communities through technology may at times be surpassed in surprising ways outside of our own service efforts. I’m thinking here of a “secret” Facebook group in Hawai’i, “Friends in the Fellowship.” With over 1500 current members, this group, outside of the A.A. structure, has in fact linked members from all over our islands. I don’t want to get into social media policy or discuss how the Traditions apply here, and good discussion could, should, and will, be had. I do, however, want to point out that our collective A.A. experience shows that members want to connect with each other, indeed we must connect with each other, and that this drive will bear fruit, even when we, as service bodies, have not been the prime instigator.

Connecting communities separated by language is another area where we aren't currently able to go as far as we'd like. I think we can expect that online language translation will become better, and, even if it's not up to our A.A. standards for communicating the spirit of message, it can help in bringing us together and bridge linguistic barriers. We tried online translation for our PRAASA website and didn't hear any complaints, but that was for information about time and place, not nuance.

Finally, let's be open to surprises, things we hadn't yet thought of but other communities may already use. I was at a chain coffee shop with good internet a few days ago and saw someone signing in ASL to their laptop, connected I noted when I peeked, to another member of that community – the broken microphone mentioned in the Grapevine wouldn't make a difference. Were they alcoholics? Probably not, but it reminded me that good ideas can come from anywhere and when considering how to link to remote communities we must think not only of the technology we possess, but what that community possesses and may already use effectively.

It may sound like I'm pessimistic. I'm not. The leaps we've taken since the birth of the Fellowship are huge and will keep happening as long as we are never afraid to try something new. But let's not forget to use what we have, even as we wait for those teleporters to be perfected.

A hui hou kakou, malama pono.