

Presentation – October 13 or 14th, 2006
David Lochhead Symposium
By Gordon Laird

I wear this Ecunet Stole on purpose and in honour and recognition of Professor David Morgan Lochhead – 1936-1999. It was commissioned in Curt Ackley's time as President of Ecunet, fashioned by Sandy Johnson and first worn by Donel McClellan (who died in 2005).

Ecunet, for those of you not familiar with it, is the first Ecumenical Computer Network, founded under the leadership of David Lochhead in November of 1986 with several dozen members, and which continues to this day with a clientele just under 10,000.

Today I want to describe a "watershed" event which happened October 2, 1984 in the Epiphany Chapel here at the Vancouver School of Theology, an event which has become legendary in the specialized field of Theology and computer communication.

In the VST Library we have on hand some tangible symbols of that event: a tape recording and a written record. Some of you here today have never heard David Lochhead's voice. Many of us have heard his voice many times, in small groups and also his major addresses before large gathering.

Some of you will never have heard David's voice. Some of you will be very familiar with his wonderful speaking voice, but may never have listened to this early tape. Let's listen:

Play 8 ½ minutes of tape: October 2, 1984 Epiphany Chapel
Beginning with: "Access to computers was restricted to a small elite."

Ending with: "Never trust authority. Promote decentralization"

I maintain that David Lochhead on that night did something remarkable and historic. Consider this: October 2, 1984 was:

- Before the founding of UCHUG, the United Church Computer Users Group
- Before any established and intentional interaction across the United Church of Canada
- before any deliberate connection was made to other groups in the United Church of Christ, the United Presbyterian Church (USA) the United Methodist Church
- Before the full impact of the Personal Computer. Remember personal computers have only been in existence for six years (Apple). The IBM PC is less than four years old. It is very early for anyone to be reflecting *theologically* on the impact of personal computers!

David's full speech is available in detail in David's book "Theology in a Digital World", which was published by the United Church Publishing House first in 1988 (4 years after the speech!) were, I maintain, prophetic in the extreme.

It is true that by the time of his speech in Oct, 1984 there was nothing established as formal connections. But David had amazing *antennae* which were always probing for meaning and connections. Before the speech David had met Bob Cramer, Curt Ackley, George Conklin, Merrill Cook, Father Hal Stockert (Avatar), Gordon Laird, and Jim Collie and other significant computer communicators by subscribing to "The Source", owned by Readers Digest, in a Conference called "Religious Associates" which was set up by Jim Franklin, a Religion reporter for the Boston Globe. Others in "Religious Associates" were Iaian MacDonald, Chuck Austin, Nelson Murphy and Susan Peak. This is where David nourished the connections of those in other Churches, primarily in the U. S. A.

David was working away within the national United Church as well, as a member of the Task Force for Information Flow with a number of then computer gurus brought together by Randy Naylor, who was at that time Secretary of our Division of Communication. (Today

Randy is the General Secretary for "The World Association for Christian Communication"). The selection of the TFIF represented the stage in computers at that time: they were mainly "programmers" who were familiar with main frame computers. David bridged the gap between programmers and those intrigued with personal computers and computer communication. David was himself a programmer, and so much more!

The two aspects mentioned above were only two examples of David's remarkable "Antennae". He was always reconnoitering the leading edges of computers and computer communication. It was David who found "Unison" in Denver Colorado, a "Mom and Pop" organization owned and operated by Fred Dudden and managed by Fred and Diana Campbell.

In the VST Library are some important tapes and documents of David's. There you will find this tape of "Theology in a Digital World", but you will also find reference to an important unpublished document by David entitled: "Afterword". It was not dated but the internal evidence indicates that it was written about a year later.

Here are some excerpts of that document:

"It is not yet a year since Theology in a Digital World was written. In the world of small computer technology and use, even a month is a long time. We are still in the process of the discovery of what this technology means. The situation is a volatile one. What was true yesterday is not necessarily true today.

Since this essay was written I have had two important experiences. The first was to found and nurture an online network of computer users in the United Church of Canada. Since the beginning of November computer users in the United Church have been able to communicate regularly over the ENVOY 100 service and, since May 1985 over the UNISON system, a small teleconferencing system based in Denver, Colorado. The opportunity to see a community develop between people who may never have met has allowed me to test out some of the perceptions that I had advanced in the essay."

[The second experience was a TV broadcast from VST over the Knowledge Network]

David goes on to discuss the question of the traditional view of the authority of God and concludes with this paragraph:

"What I say in Theology in a Digital World about authoritarianism is, I believe, still valid. I am not satisfied, however, that we are able to distinguish as well as we might between hierarchy and authoritarianism. We tend to equate the two and, in our dislike of authoritarianism, do less than justice to hierarchy and authority. My own reflections on this point are very recent and very tentative. With more experience, I hope, more clarity will come."

Later in our program we will discuss David's work and trends within this work. One thing to note is how David was able to stand apart from the community he had part in forming and watch and analyze. He seemed to see the whole process as a "Action and Reflection". He was always reflecting theologically!

It is amazing that the early discussions between Marta Frascati Lochhead and Ken MacQueen have resulted in this gathering. It is an important gathering, the impact of which will carry on into the future. The fact that all the proceedings are being taped, distributed and preserved give me the hope that we will have created something here in the Spirit of what David created with his first speech on the subject, October 2, 1984.

We miss David's presence tonight. We will all try to bring the kind of imagination and prophetic vision to this task that David would have brought. But we have no illusions that we can take his place!