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MINISTRY RESOURCE CENTER:
ACCESS THROUGH A DATABASE-DRIVEN WEBSITE

The new Ministry Resource Center (MRC) of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary is a premiere collection of practical resources for all aspects of congregational ministry. To help MRC patrons locate appropriate resources, the College and Seminary's Hekman Library has created a website that combines information from manually created static webpages and bibliographic data imported from the Library's online catalog. The result is one website that gathers together, and provides access to, the entire MRC collection.

In January of 2003, Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary introduced the Ministry Resource Center (MRC).[1] Administratively the MRC is a department of the Hekman Library, which in turn serves patrons from the college and the seminary, as well as guest patrons from throughout West Michigan and beyond. MRC materials are drawn from both Reformed and other Christian traditions, and are represented especially in the areas of liturgy, music, and worship. To help provide access to the MRC Collection, The Digital Resources Librarian and the Library Systems Programmer have created a website containing information generated from a unique web database that incorporates data from various sources including the Library's Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC). With a minimal amount of time spent in maintenance of the MRC webpages, the Library is nevertheless able to offer search and browse access to every single MRC item.

Background

The MRC is designed to fulfill the Hekman Library's mandate of providing the best available resources for Calvin students and faculty. Housed in an area set apart on the fourth floor of a five floor library, it is a premier collection of practical resources, in print, digital, and audio-visual formats, for all aspects of college, seminary, and congregational ministry. In addition to benefiting the Calvin community, pastors, worship planners and leaders, church school teachers, small group leaders, and youth ministers from throughout west Michigan are invited to use the collection.

The MRC is staffed by a part time manager, and a full time coordinator, and several student assistants. Having received training to catalog materials, the MRC coordinator catalogs the majority of the MRC collection with MARC records downloaded from OCLC into the Library's online catalog (WebCat). While most of the MRC collection is cataloged with MARC records, the Library decided that some items would not be, including pamphlets, individual articles, and other ephemeral material. The intention was that these extra materials would be accessible through means other than WebCat, specifically a web-based MRC Database.

Accessing MRC Materials: is there

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a better way?

To librarians, it is obvious that a library's online catalog exists in order to provide access to a library's collection of material. What is not always so obvious is whether or not the online catalog is the *best* way to access a all portions of a library's collection. This consideration became prominent when the Library began to consider how users of the MRC would access the MRC material. MRC patrons, coming both from within and without the local Calvin community, would need to search in WebCat. At face value, this would be no different than a patron searching for any item in the Library. However, those coming to the Hekman Library in search of material specific to the MRC collection would need to learn how to use WebCat's advanced search screen in order to limit a search to the appropriate collection. Add to this the fact that the projected audience for these materials is, at least for the immediate future, far less technologically savvy than the average college or seminary student. These considerations, and the fact that WebCat would not contain records for the entire MRC collection, forced the Library to consider an alternate mode of access to the MRC collection if it wanted to prevent patrons from performing a shelf browse as the easiest means to locate resources.

ENVISIONING THE MRC WEBSITE

The solution to offering efficient access to MRC materials arose when considering how to design the MRC website. When envisioning a web presence, the manager requested that all MRC materials be listed on the website. Now for web designers whose sites include lists of data, creating and maintaining static webpages is understood to be an extremely time-consuming process. Related to this, and as mentioned above, patrons searching an online catalog for specific resources in larger collection know that they can easily be buried under an avalanche of cumbersome MARC records.

At the same time the Library was struggling how best to create the MRC website, it was also working to create a web-based database to provide access to the materials *not* being cataloged in WebCat. The Library had already gained valuable experience with database creation,[2] so the creation of one more database was not a major hurdle. Considering how MRC patrons would need to use two search tools (WebCat and the MRC Database) to cover all MRC materials, the idea arose to try to merge the data from one into the other. Merging the MRC Database information into WebCat was, indeed, already ruled out since the rai·son d'ê·tre of the MRC Database was to contain records not to be fully cataloged in WebCat. And as mentioned above, forcing MRC patrons to wade through all the Library's resources while searching only for MRC material was not the ideal solution. The only other option was to merge the OPAC MARC records into the MRC Database.

CREATING THE MRC WEBSITE

Creating webpages dynamically from a databases is by no means a new topic.[3] Many websites, including those in the corporate, non-profit, and education domain, are created "on the fly," generated in a variety of formats based on data from a database. Much of the Hekman Library website itself is already controlled by a series of My SQL database tables, and the expertise gained by the Library in using these databases was helpful in creating the MRC website.
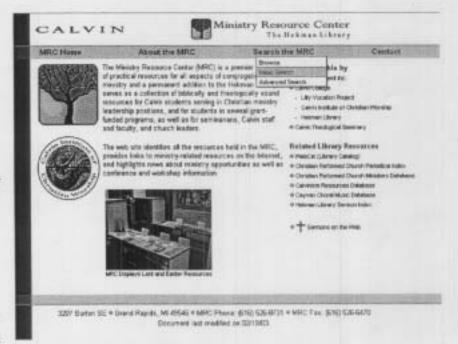

Figure 1 — MRC Homepage

At first glance, the MRC site (Figure 1) looks just like a regular website. A home page with basic information contains links to various informational pages. Server side includes (SSI) along the top of the site load java-script menus that lead to this information. The significant menu is "Search the MRC," for it is from here that MRC patrons can browse or search the entire body of resources collected by the MRC. The MRC Database (herein referred to as the MRCD) is populated through two means: an automated script pulls portions of MRC MARC records from WebCat, and entries made directly to the MRCD using a web-accessible administrative module available only to authorized Library staff.
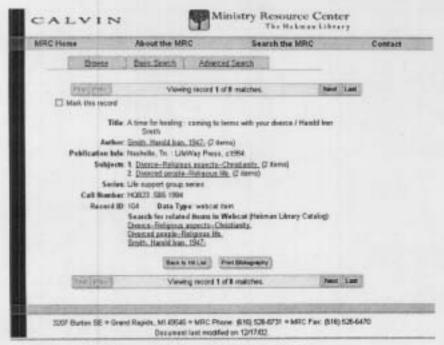
Figure 2 — MRCD record for item pulled from WebCat.

Basic bibliographic data are displayed in a detailed record (Figure 2), as well as the local call number and Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). If the MRCD contains multiple items with the same subjects, the headings are hyperlinked and when clicked will complete a search for similar items. In addition, the LCSH are also listed under a section called "Search for Related Items in WebCat." Clicking on this link will initiate a new browser window displaying the results of a WebCat search on that particular subject. This feature was added to open up the wealth of related Library resources for MRC users who may have come to specifically use the MRC collection. All MRCD records can be edited to include additional information, such as subjects from a local subject authority (based on a combination of LCSH and other subjects not included by LC), and abstracts written by MRC volunteers.[4] Records that are added directly to the MRCD using the administrative module also contain basic bibliographic information. Local call numbers are automatically added to each record as it is created (MRC1, MRC2, etc.), and copies of the articles themselves are placed in call number order in an article file. Subject headings are also added from the locally created subject authority list.

CONCLUSION

At the time of this writing, the MRC is only nearing its 4 month birthday, and already contains over 900 cataloged items. Accessing the MRC collection is possible through a basic or advanced search, or through a browsable subject list. As the collection continues to grow, the Library will refine the subject list to help guide users through the material. Displaying the MRC material through WebCat as well as on the MRC website has proved to be the ideal solution for both Library patrons, and those who specifically visit the Library for the MRC collection.

As with any website, the MRC pages are not cast in stone: additions and alterations will be envisioned, unforeseen issues will arise, and changes will be made. Instead of stone, perhaps a better analogy is LEGO®: like these versatile building blocks, the components of the MRC site – data, scripts, administrative tools, and public search functions – are presently in place in a certain order. Yet the structure can be easily disassembled and reassembled as necessary, ensuring that the MRC website will continue to be responsive to the changing research needs of both MRC and Hekman Library patrons. ❖

NOTES & REFERENCES

[1] http://www.calvin.edu/library/mrc

[2] The Hekman Library has created nine databases, see http://www.calvin.edu/library/database. Briefly, they include databases that control portions of the library's web site, a digital media archive, and several periodical indexes.

[3] Brown, K. L., & Candreva, A.M. (2002, Fall). Managing Database-Driven Web Content. School Library Journal Net Connect, 24-26.

[4] WebCat records are pulled over into the MRCD on a daily schedule. The script is set up to pull all relevant records even if they already exist in the MRCD. However, only certain fields are overlaid, so that any additional changes made to records in the MRCD, such as subject headings or abstract entries, remain in the record.