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IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR ACTIVE CONGREGATIONS

Coeditors: Herb Miller, Lyle Schaller, Cynthia Woolever - www.TheParishPaper.com

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Cynthia Woolever

Going into all the World: Church Website Basics

Does your congregation need an electronic presence? Several trends suggest the answer:

- ◆ An estimated 238 million people in the U.S. use the Internet, more than double the number in 2000.

- ◆ Of the more than 70 percent of people in the U.S. who use the Internet, younger adults, who learned the skill in childhood, are especially likely to look for a church *first* on the Internet. For many younger people, if your church isn't "there" on the Internet, it doesn't exist.

- ◆ About one in seven Americans move each year. A large proportion of those relocaters are age eighteen to forty-four young adults. These young newcomers more often look for services, schools, and churches in their new community on the Internet than in the *Yellow Pages*. Some churches estimate that 90 percent of their first-time worshipers visit their church's Website *before* they arrive in person.

- ◆ At least 44 percent of Americans have switched denominational affiliation as adults. Switchers and unaffiliated seekers browsing for churches online ask, "Will I feel comfortable there?" If the answer to that question seems unclear, they mouse click to other options.

- ◆ Currently, 45 percent of U.S. congregations have a Website.

In addition to the *Yellow Page* presence they needed in 1970, churches also need an Internet presence today.

But do people really "Google" for a church? One Internet-savvy church member tracked Internet searches for congregations in his city. He learned that approximately one out of every seven people search the Internet for a local church each year.

To determine how many people in your city or town Google for a church, divide its population by seven. That is the number of Internet searches that could potentially lead visitors to your church doors this year.

- ◆ For Albuquerque, New Mexico—with a population of almost one-half million people—that calculation yields 64,000 Internet searches for local churches per year.

- ◆ For Mentor, Ohio—a smaller city of about 50,000 people—that statistic translates to more than 7,000 Internet searches for local churches this year.

To increase your chances of connecting with that one in seven people, advertise your church's Website address on all printed materials, newspaper and *Yellow Page* ads, and outdoor signage.

What should churches put on their Websites? One expert sums up the biggest Website mistake this way: "We designed our site to meet our organization's needs rather than our visitors' needs."

Who visits a church Website and what are their needs? Church Websites get three types of visitors: (1) people looking for a church who have never attended your services, (2) people in your local community, and (3) your congregation's regular attendees.

Each visitor-type needs different information.

What information is essential for church seekers? Under a button or link labeled *For Visitors*, organize information such as the following:



Where is the church? Give the exact street address, city, and zip code. Offer helpful hints about your church's location, such as "in the Hyde Park neighborhood"... "across the street from Lincoln Park"... "one block east of Main Street." Give directions to the church from the east, west, north, and south. Include traffic patterns (one-way or closed streets), nearby public transportation, and a Google or Yahoo map link.

What should I know about the worship services? List the times. Briefly describe each service. Is informal dress OK? Is the service designed for families with young children? Is it a Latin Mass? What is the music like? What languages are used?

Where do I park and enter the building for worship? Which doors are handicapped accessible?

What is available for my children? Include directions to the nursery and children's classrooms.

What other questions do visitors frequently ask? What happens during the service? What is the passing of the peace? How does the congregation observe communion? What is the church office's telephone number if I have other questions?

What information is essential for people in the community? A Website offers an effective way to tell parents about your excellent daycare and/or preschool ministries. Postings about enrollment periods, opportunities for visiting the school, open houses, staff profiles, and downloadable forms supply a welcome mat.

Other Website visitors are people who want to learn whether they can use your building (Boy Scout Troops, support groups, weddings). In your *Frequently Asked Questions* section, answer questions such as, "Can I get married in the church, even though I'm not a member?"

Even if you decide not to post all of your policies regarding weddings, meetings, or other events, provide contact information for the staff person who can answer these inquiries.

What information is essential for members and regular attendees? Consider an online newsletter, a church calendar, sermon transcripts, Podcasts of services, event registration, book recommendations or online church library card catalog, volunteer needs, online giving, online member directory (viewed on a secure link only), Bible discussions, or daily prayers.

The Top Ten Church Website Mistakes

1. Incomplete church address. Include your city, state, and zip code on the Website's front page. A home page with only "First Baptist Church" could be anywhere in the U.S.

2. An unusual and difficult-to-remember Website address. A www.FirstPresbyterianTulsa.org address is far better than a www.fpctok.org address.

3. No contact information for a human being. Provide a staff name and telephone number.

4. No information about the church's denomination or affiliation. If people have to guess, they often look elsewhere for a church!

5. Outdated information and small print. Poorly maintained church calendars and old content give a boarded-up windows impression.

6. Jargon or insider abbreviations. One church lists WBSAM. Only an insider knows the translation—Women's Bible Study on a weekday-morning.

7. No outside-the-building information, such as where to park, or enter the building for worship, or find handicapped access.

8. No inside-the-building information, such as nursery location, pre-school childcare, or a separate children's worship during services.

9. Inappropriate content. Confidential information such as prayer lists with members' names, illnesses, and surgeries; children's photos without their parent's permission (whether or not they are identified); new members' photos without prior consent; staff photos that detract from their professional image; and home telephone numbers.

10. E-mail addresses. "Spiders" or Web crawler computer programs read through Web page content looking for E-mail addresses. These programs then send ads and other SPAM that floods inboxes. Protect your staff and volunteers by creating a user link for sending E-mails.

Your congregation's Website ministry is important, but not its only important ministry. Websites cannot replace all other forms of communication. People without Internet access are also partners in your church's mission, so don't exclude them from your communication.

How can we evaluate our Website's effectiveness?

1. Consult expert resources, such as the following:
www.congregationalresources.org
Web-Empower Your Church: Unleashing the Power of Internet Ministry (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006) by Mark M. Stephenson

2. Meet with a group of eight to ten young adults who began attending your church within the last six months. Ask each of them to name one thing "I wish I had known when I was considering a visit to this congregation."

3. Does your Website information touch the head, heart, and body? Does it give me the facts I need (head)? Does it tell me the church's mission or vision (heart)? Does it tell me what I can do to answer God's call (body)?