

Church communications should include a web site

The following is an article that appeared in the June 2007 issue of the *Clarion*, and is a summary of a presentation by Tony Karl at the 2007 Diocese of Fond du Lac Vestry School.

Q. Why is a web site important in church communications?

A. People are online! Wisconsinites have Internet access at home, at work, at school, in libraries, cafes and more. Internet use has been growing in leaps and bounds.

A study in late 2006 – conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project – showed that 70% of U.S. adults use the Internet occasionally, up from 45% in 2000, and the number is expected to continue growing. Two of three adult Internet users are online almost every day. That means about half of U.S. adults (including Wisconsinites) use the Internet almost every day. These numbers continue to rise, and they're even higher for teenagers and older children.

While gender is a negligible factor – 69% of females and 71% of males use the Internet – age is a more significant factor in who is online. More than 80% of those aged 18-50 use the Internet; as do about 70% of those aged 50-64. Only 33% of those aged 65 and older use the Internet, but this number is growing, especially among retired people.

People make use of the Internet in ways that are related to our churches:

- 1 out of 5 have made donations to charities online
- 1 out of 3 have looked for religious or spiritual information online; 3% do it daily
- 1 out of 2 have used the Internet to look up phone numbers and addresses
- 2 out of 3 have surfed the web for fun/recreation/enjoyment; 1 in 3 do it daily
- 2 out of 3 get news online
- 6 out of 7 look for driving directions and maps online
- 9 out of 10 search for information online; 2 out of 5 do it daily
- 9 out of 10 e-mail regularly, and more than half do it daily

A web site gives not only an opportunity for you to present yourselves to people in your community, but to people around the world. It can also be a helpful tool for communicating with your current members.

Q. What should we put on our site?

A. Start with basic information, including:

- 1) **Full church names** (and logo, if any); **full denominational affiliations** (and logos, if any); **full physical address**; **mailing address**, if different than physical address; **phone number**; and **contact e-mail address**.
- 2) **Schedule information**, including the time and style of worship services and Christian education opportunities. Use clear terms. Not everyone will understand terms that we all take for granted.
- 3) **Personnel contact information**, listing Clergy names and ministry/committee chairs and other contacts.
- 4) **Other helpful things**, such as: **directions** to physical address (maps help); **ADA/ASL** and other accessibility icons and instructions; and times that child care is available.

Beyond the basics, provide visitor information they need to know about your church. There is plenty more you can incorporate, including: calendars of events; news, updates recent events; photos; specifics about your church, the Episcopal Church, the Anglican Communion, etc. Finally, post newsletters, sermons, specific pages for ministries/committees, and links to other web sites.

Q. What are some site design basics?

A. There are several things to keep in mind:

- 1) **Not everybody uses the same operating system** (Windows, Mac, Linux, etc.) or web browsers (Internet Explorer, Netscape, Opera, etc.). Don't design a site that is unviewable in other formats.
- 2) **Not everybody has a huge monitor or high screen resolution.** Try to plan for no larger than 1024 x 768 if possible.
- 3) **Not everybody has high-speed Internet connections.** Images greatly enhance a site, but images that are not compressed and have huge file sizes take too long to load when a user is on dial-up. Don't assume everybody will think auto-playing audio or video files are cute.

4) **Your site is useless if it's not readable.** Use colors that give good contrast behind text (either light background with dark font, or dark background with light font.) Avoid overuse of stylized fonts. When it comes to fonts, simple and consistent is best. Avoid flashing, scrolling or other text that distracts or confuses. Don't have long strings of text that stretch the entire width of the screen. That is not easy for most people to read. Use 2 or 3 columns of text for more readability.

5) Your site should **capture the feeling your church wants to convey.** If your church has very contemporary practices, you don't want a site that feels like a nursing home. If your church has very traditional practices, you don't want a site that feels like a GatorAde commercial. Those are extremes, of course, but try to find a balance. Use of colors and images should reflect your church.

6) **Have navigation that is easy-to-use and intuitive.** Don't have too many menus and submenus that a visitor gets lost. Lay your main page (and additional pages) out and connect them in ways that a visitor can follow naturally, to communicate all you want to communicate to them. Contact information and schedules should hit them immediately. Links should be near the end — if you put them at the top, visitors might get distracted and leave your site.

7) **Pay for a custom domain name.** While the free options seem attractive at first, there is much that is unattractive, including banner or popup ads. You may be unable to easily fit your web site address on business cards or promotional items.

In summary, develop your web site so it conveys the feel you want. Layout and navigation should encourage a user to see what you want them to see. Use of images and graphics to enhance the experience, but not overpower it. Provide straightforward access to contact information, schedules, etc.

Q. What about advanced site design?

A. The sky is pretty much the limit when it comes to advanced design. Advanced design and content should enhance the goals of your site, not detract from them. They should never be a requirement for a visitor to access your site. Many resources are available online for advanced design. In general, keeping your site user-friendly, accurate, and frequently updated is much more effective than adding a bunch of "bells and whistles."

Q. Where do we start?

A. One option is to pay a professional to design your site. Find a local web designer that can develop and create a

site, and arrange hosting. This method will tend to get expensive and gives you less control and flexibility in the long run. After initial costs, you will pay for domain, hosting and updates.

Another option is to outsource development and creation, but use church staff or volunteers to update it. You still have the startup expense, but it's not as expensive to maintain. After initial costs, you will pay for domain and hosting.

A third option is to develop, create and maintain your site using only church staff and/or volunteers. You might be surprised at people who have gifts for web design. Many local tech schools and colleges offer short courses on web design — though a computer-savvy person could find most of that information online. You may find a member with the right hardware and software to develop and design, or your church may want to invest in its own. There are many options and price ranges for development software, including some free options. You may or may not have initial costs, and after that you will pay for domain and hosting.

An additional option is the Diocese of Fond du lac can host basic pages for you on the Diocesan site (www.episcopalfonddulac.org). In fact, every church in the Diocese has at least basic contact information on this site. No software is required, and there are no expenses for domain or hosting. An easy-to-use interface allows you to log into the Diocesan site and add information to your page(s). For more information on this option, contact Matthew Payne (mpayne@episcopalfonddulac.org)