

Using Technology to Build Community

A good church website is a powerful tool to help fulfill the Great Commission

BY GLADYS THOMPSON

Most church growth today comes from the 18-to-18 range—people from 18-years-old to families with 18-year-old children—and they are the most frequent internet users of any demographic group. They're more apt to use the internet to find your church than to look in the yellow pages or newspaper. And if you don't have a website, they may not even know you exist!

Who are you trying to reach?

A church website must communicate with three different groups, each with its own needs and expectations.

- **Members** – They want details about upcoming events, to listen to a sermon or find Bible study notes. They may want to see photos of a recent event or contact information for pastoral staff or group leaders. Members only content, like a church directory or business meeting minutes, should be in a private members section.
- **Christians looking for a new church** – Families relocating to new cities often make their 'first cut' church list before moving. People interested in changing congregations want to know your church's beliefs, worship style and activities.
- **Non-Christians** – Faithhighway.com says the church website is the #1 outreach tool, perfect for people wanting information anonymously. Online sermons and photos of services and events go a long way toward making them feel secure about a first-time visit. They want to know you understand their problems and there is an unconditional welcome waiting for them.

With a high percentage of potential visitors viewing your website before they visit your church, you can't afford a poor quality one.

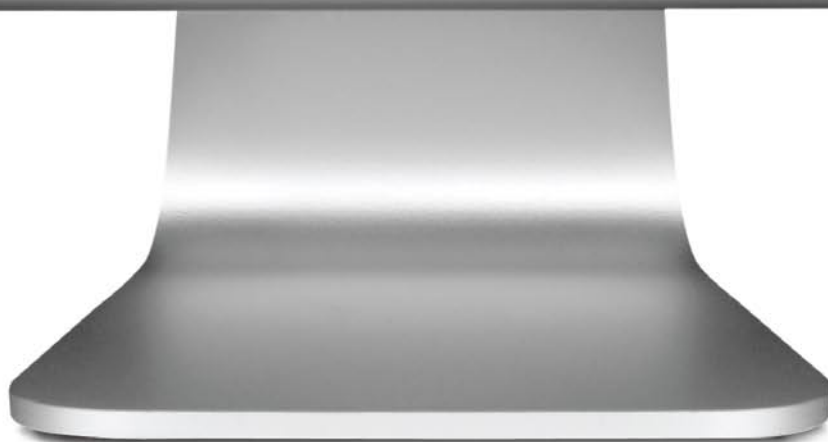
What makes a good website?

DESIGN

How you present your ideas is as important as the ideas themselves—an uncluttered design with a layout directing attention to the most important information. Get ideas from other sites targeting the same type of audience, using a pleasing balance of graphics, text and 'white space'. Things to avoid include distracting blinking text, animated pictures, background music, garish colours, run-on pages, scrolling text and pop-up messages.

Most people prefer to look at pictures of people, not buildings; people actively enjoying church activities, not head-and-shoulder shots of your pastor or church staff. It can be helpful to include a photo of the inside and outside of your church, but always include people in the shots. Include identifying captions with your photos, such as the name of the event. It's not necessary, and possibly unsafe, to identify the people.

If you have many photos of an event, they should be placed on a special 'pictures' page so people can choose whether or not to view them. Be sure to learn about the different image formats, resizing and how to compress images so they don't increase the load time of your pages. This is especially frustrating for those with dial-up connections. If images



HELPFUL LINKS



GRAPHICS

www.istockphoto.com
www.sxc.hu
www.cmalliance.org/resources/missions/peoples.jsp

LAYOUT AND DESIGN

www.alistapart.com/topics/design
www.oswd.org
www.freelayouts.com
www.greatchurchwebsites.org

CONTENT

www.ied.gospelcom.net/video-outreach.php
www.ied.gospelcom.net/church-site-design.php
www.wordsearchmedia.com
www.solutionsonvideo.com
www.faithvisuals.com/content
www.thoushaltlaugh.com
www.squidoo.com/ministryvideos
www.web-evangelism.com/church
www.faithhighway.com

are in any way blurry, grainy or distorted, they look unprofessional, reflecting badly on the website as a whole.

NAVIGATION

A basic menu, with obvious page titles, helps visitors navigate to the most useful sections of your site. If it is difficult to find information, the visitor will get frustrated and leave, generally within five seconds.

Avoid vague or churchy phrasing. Calling the Youth Ministry page *Quest Outreach* may work for your members, but visitors may miss learning about your dynamic youth ministry.

INTERACTIVITY

Interactive elements separate the web from other media. It helps your visitors to participate, not just spectate. This can be done through such things as message boards, real-time feedback, blogs, etc.

FUNCTIONALITY

Visitors to your church would be surprised and disappointed if you turned them away for a silly reason. Yet many church websites do exactly that, requiring visitors to have a certain 'plug-in' or a high-speed Internet connection.

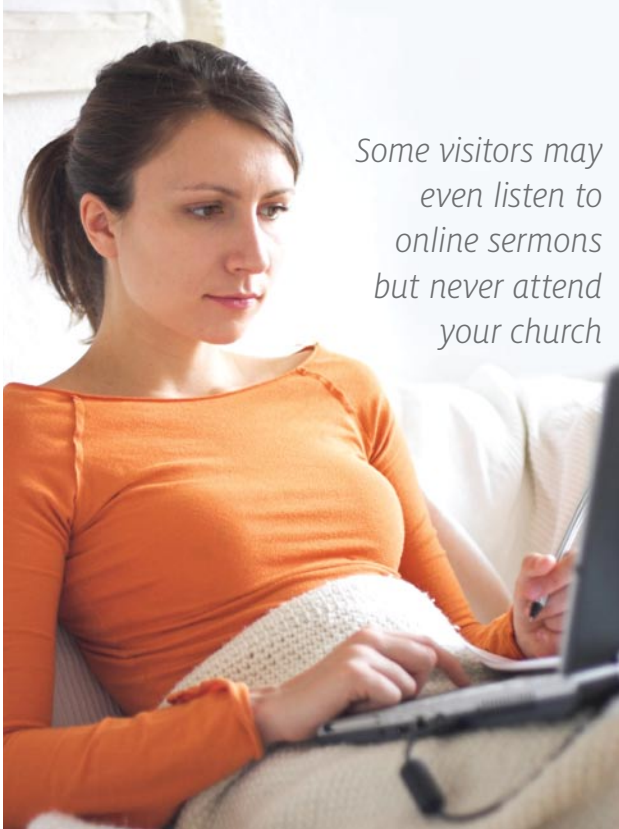
Access to Flash, RealAudio or Adobe Acrobat Reader should be provided if they are needed for your pages. The site must work quickly and well, with active links, etc.

AMBROSE
SEMINARY

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TODAY - SEE OUR WEBSITE
FOR FULL DETAILS!

Start another chapter
Calgary, AB ambrose.edu

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Some visitors may even listen to online sermons but never attend your church

CONTENT

Visitors judge the values and programs of your church from your website. You'll turn them away with poor spelling and grammar and 'upcoming events' that are two months old! They want answers to basic questions about your beliefs and church life. Service times, driving directions and contact information should be in plain view.

Church is scary to unchurched people. Provide information about what to expect when they visit, perhaps by using a virtual tour. Mention your services (type of music, how long, typical order of service, what to wear, childcare). But don't use churchy terms, such as 'contemporary worship'. Tell them about everything from parking to the warm welcome they'll receive. Then, when they do visit, be sure they actually feel welcomed!

Invite people to contact you either by email or phone with any questions they may have and be sure to check for, and respond to, messages regularly. Offering to pray for site visitors' needs can also be strategic, if you can do this with integrity and appropriate privacy.

Many church websites tell a lot about churches and staff—but not how to meet Jesus. You may want to offer a link such as "What is the meaning of life?" or "Finding real fulfillment", which do not sound preachy yet show non-threatening spiritual content. Some visitors may even listen to online sermons but never attend your church.

People are interested in people. You may want to include some 'meet our members' pages with brief informal profiles about their lives, jobs, hobbies, etc. This could be done through text, audio or video.

Jesus used stories with a message, leaving people to go away and think. It is possible to write a page on your site which brings out a parable or allegory. For instance,

an article about restoring cars could suggest that just as old cars need new engines, we need something new in our lives. This could then be linked to a page which explains the Gospel in a meaningful way.

If neighbours visit your home, you don't start preaching at them. Similarly, any link to a church's doctrinal statement is probably not appropriate on the homepage. Create a "What we believe" page which contains a simple explanation, avoiding Christian jargon. Then you can provide a link to the Statement of Faith on the National Ministry Centre website for those who are interested.

Some other things you might include: answers to problems (many non-Christians still look to a minister for help with problems of life), children's corner, games and competitions, humour, community news and activities, sermon summaries and Bible studies.

Let your visitors see the 'bigger picture' of the Alliance by linking to specific pages on your district's website and the National Ministry Centre (www.cmacan.org). In this way, you can take advantage of material already provided through your denomination.

Who should be involved?

There is a common misconception that a 'techie' is the ideal person to make a church website. But making a good website requires a range of skills including artistic design and technical abilities. In truth, few people have both, which is why there are so many truly ugly church websites.

Although control of the site may be in the hands of a committed administrator with an actual job description, that person does not need to do everything. There could be many gifted people in the church who could take photos, provide videos, handle email advice, writing, etc.

If nobody in your church is technical enough to take on the webmaster role, you could use a pre-designed template system. A larger church site can benefit from Content Management—a system whereby different people have permission to update content within a site, without reference to the webmaster.

Conclusion

Make your website an important part of your ministry. Choose a simple, easy to remember domain name. Encourage your members to understand the relevance of the site, pray for its effective outreach, and make it known to others.

Those members who have blogs or other types of sites can use them to give your church a higher profile. And be sure your website address is included on all church stationery and publications.

With a well-designed, interactive, functional website, you can clearly communicate your vision, activities, and, most importantly, the message of Jesus Christ 24/7 year-round.

Gladys Thompson is Communications Coordinator at The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada National Ministry Centre