

Thoughts about Our Church Website

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Non-techie stuff

Why should we have a church website?

The website offers Communication, both with members and outsiders.

It is a convenient way to see what's coming up in the weekly Bulletin, usually posted on Friday.

The visitor can preview - or review – the sermons. (Pastor Kerra wants all of hers posted.)

And the visitor can explore the church history and various happenings.

Who might visit the site?

Members – to get information, names of people on committees etc

Interested outsiders and potential members – to find out about us

Robots ☺ – to add us to Google and other search engines

What should it do?

Allow members on a trip to “check in” and view the weekly Bulletin and Pastor Kerra's sermons

Paint a picture of us as a vibrant congregation

Answer questions about us

Help the visitor (non-members might become members) and direct them to further information

How should the website do these things?

It should accomplish the tasks as simply, easily, pleasantly as possible using both text and graphics.

Navigation through the various pages must be straightforward.

Does the website actually attract visitors?

Yes! We have had repeated instances of feedback that families have visited us as a result of visiting the website. I don't know if they have continued to do so.

Interesting is that in most cases teenagers found the site

Who is involved with “doing” the website?

Right now, just me (JimT). Hopefully we’ll have some kind of committee guidance, meaning both content and format. Perhaps have individuals do their own page? If that is done, the general appearance of those added pages must be similar to the other pages.

Is there a philosophy involved in writing a given page?

I always imagine that I am writing any page as if I was still in another city looking for a church. I want the page I’m writing to answer the questions I might have about the subject on that page.

The site should be kept simple so that us mere mortals can maintain it. It should never require the use of any expensive software, as an example, unless the Session is willing to buy it. The currently used software is all free. The pages are edited using NotePad++ and are uploaded using FileZilla. Both of those programs are well suited for their tasks and are free.

Does PCUSA offer any help?

My e-mail inquiry to PCUSA resulted in a return e-mail to the effect of “look around at other churches in your area.” This came as a surprise to me; you’d think they would want to help big time and so have a “suggestions” or “checklist” page. They do have a somewhat private page which is written to offer guidance for those team members who do their (PCUSA) site. This is so that their own site appearance is consistent even though different persons might do different pages on that site. But a guidebook or something along those lines for the individual churches to use is not available from PCUSA. There was some kind of workshop in Maryville a few years ago but I failed to attend and there seems to be no way to retrieve the information that was presented.

What can be posted on the website?

Just about anything. We do not have streaming audio (or video) capability but we do have quite a bit of storage space. Copyright issues must be respected. I have been in contact with Bob Duncan about posting some of his original work as performed by our choir; this could show off both the choir and the organ. Bob has given his OK to post his creations.

How can an item be posted?

By sending it to the webperson. This is done as an e-mail or as an attachment to an e-mail. This holds true for both text and graphics.

How about on-line pledging?

I would seriously discourage such; some credit card company or bank somewhere along the line will take a percentage. The donor would have roughly 4% taken off the top in any event. The Presbyterians I know would much rather contribute directly than have someone skim even a small portion.

Speaking of money, how much is our website costing us?

About \$70 a year. I think this is quite the bargain!

Why don't we have a calendar on the website?

This is very doable but if it is done then it must be kept up to date. This requires man-hours. I don't think it wise to palm off such an additional workload on the church office staff. It must be kept current, including every event by every group, or it will develop a reputation of not being trustworthy. The weekly Bulletin (which is posted weekly) and the monthly *Banner* already have such information. I really discourage an online calendar because of the man-hours required and of likelihood that it would not be updated and so would develop that negative reputation.

Why does information about our church goings-on appear in the *Ridger* but not on the website?

I post what I receive. The bottom line is "If I didn't get it I can't post it." If I get wind of an article in the *Ridger* I can link to it. The editor of that newspaper has given us his full support in this. Per an agreement with Pastor Kerra, an item that seems to be controversial is first run by her prior to posting.

Just how would a committee use the website?

Right now we have a "Committees" button (with individual committees having their own "flyout" buttons) on the website homepage. This takes the visitor (logically) to a Committees page. Each Committee has a listing of their chairpersons, members and meeting times. Easily added for each committee would be a button labeled "Current tasks" or something like that, which button would take the visitor to a new page showing just what that committee is doing. At this time no committee has any of their activities shown. No goals or accomplishments are shown. I think each committee should have posted any change of purpose or membership. I do not think minutes of every meeting should be posted. Unless it is important, the man-hour count for posting should be kept low.

I see that some organizations recommend that photos of active individuals be used on the various pages because "the church is people, not buildings." Comment?

This is a sensitive issue. Ideally the individuals should give their permission up front to post photos of them. In general only first names are used in the caption or associated text unless it is a copy of a newspaper article (in which case the name is "already out there"). The word "privacy" comes into play. Absolutely we should not post an identified image without at least verbal permission.

Why is the weekly Bulletin not always on the website (or perhaps its last week's)?

I didn't get it. Fortunately this is not a common event.

Why is the sermon sometimes not on the website?

I didn't get it. Again, this is not a common event. Sometimes we have a guest pastor who chooses not to post their sermon.

"I don't think the website is doing what I think it should"

Please tell me what you think it should be doing, and how.

Techie sort of stuff

Can anyone do a page?

Anyone with the minimal apparatus and knowledge of HTML could in theory jump in and help with the site. This might, in fact, be a good idea to consider. But we must have a uniform appearance for the various pages, standards that should be at least loosely followed.

What kind of "programming" is involved?

Only that language called HTML.

What kind of software is needed?

For editing (creating) a page, a text editor is all that is needed. For editing I use NotePad++, which is free. Uploaded files are in text format. Those who write web pages for a living use specialized tools to save time; they are expensive. Since I spend perhaps an hour or so each week on the website, such programs are not really cost-effective in our case. To post the page to the server a file-transfer-protocol (FTP) program is needed. I use FileZilla, which is free.

What kind of equipment is needed to do the website?

All that is needed is a computer with a text editor, an FTP program and an Internet connection.

Why do you have subpages? Why not just put a bunch of buttons right on the home page so you can go directly to any item?

There is a rule of thumb regarding how many endpoints (color that "buttons") there should be on a given page. I try to keep the number of buttons to below a dozen or so. If on the homepage you have a button for every event, for every page, I think we would have perhaps 100 or more buttons on that page. A hierarchy seems to be by far the best way to go navigation-wise. That is why I have finally switched to a menu system using flyout buttons.

Some sites I have seen use a kind of movie on their web pages. Why don't you?

These little gems are a result of using a scheme called "Flash" and they are generally inappropriate. As I see things, they are a waste of both time and money; Flash is a pricey program required to generate these things. Most of those presentations are time-wasters that seem to be done by people who are doing them only because they can. My negativism is especially valid for home (opening) pages. Some website homepages have a button labeled "Skip intro." If you can skip an intro then why have it in the first place?

I see the various pages have a consistency to them. Is this difficult?

It is fairly simple because a scheme called "style sheets" is used to accomplish this. It is one step up from a pure beginner-level.

What is done to insure that most browsers can view the pages? Do Macs see the same thing as Windows machines?

Hopefully, yes. Each page after writing or modifying it is run through a "validator" (a kind of grammar checker for webpages) which checks for formatting errors. The exception to this is the weekly Bulletin, which is a machine translation of the actual bulletin from Word (as I receive it) to PDF format (for posting). In addition, most pages are designed so that computer monitors of various resolutions yield a satisfactory rendering of the pages. (This involves fixed-width columns on the left and right and a "floating width" column in the middle.)

Does the visitor need a high-speed Internet connection?

No. Each and every graphic on the site has been individually run through color-correcting and size-optimizing routines. Then they have been reduced in size so that they typically load in a second or so on a dialup connection. They load very fast indeed on a cable connection. Text-based buttons also minimize download time. This discussion is moot since all but one of the church members has at least a DSL connection. Statistically speaking, most of the likely visitors outside the church also have a high-speed connection.

I have seen sites where there is a background image, such as a cross (in the case of a church). Why don't you do that?

Fixed backgrounds are becoming more and more passe. Along with the spinning globe they are falling into disfavor. If nothing else they are distracting.

References:

Here are some items which may be of interest. One is a truly easy to read and use “how-to” book. It is somewhat beginner oriented but covers the basics nicely, writing for us mere mortals; note that there may be later versions of this book:

“HTML For The WorldWide Web – 5th Edition”

by Elizabeth Castro

Peachpit Press

ISBN 0-321-13007-3

Here is the link to a very helpful website for churches:

<http://www.InternetEvangelismDay.com/church-site-tips.php>