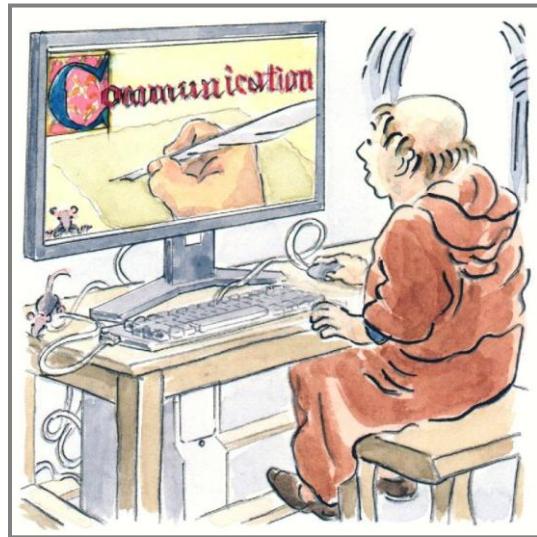


A church members' newsletter

An idea for a new publication



A9 Articles series: Communication

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This article puts the case for a new type of local church publication focusing on building community and promoting discipleship.

The idea is for a personalised newsletter for 'church members'. It would include information and stories about people in the church; it would also give the leadership a platform for information not suited to a more general readership.

This is quite different from a Sunday notice-sheet (with its brief items, mostly about activities), from local community or outreach literature, and from a traditional church magazine (which, where it still exists, often tries to do too many things all at once).

It would be personally addressed to each recipient. It would be a visual production with several photographs (mostly of people). It would have a very sharp purpose.

First, it would seek to **build community** in any church whose membership is rarely all together. It would be ideal for a multi-congregational church, or one where an increasing number of people come twice a month rather than twice a Sunday. It would also suit a church with a range of small groups, or one where there is little opportunity for children and adults to know what the others are doing when they are in separate activities.

Secondly, it would seek to **grow disciples**. It would encourage people to share stories of their journeys of faith and, especially, of how this faith impacted on their Monday to Saturday lives. It would also enable the church leadership to keep everyone in touch with the big-picture vision of the church and how that was being worked out.

A few churches publish something that includes some of this – but this article will take the idea considerably further than most of these go.

In my work as a church consultant I have become convinced that something like this is fast becoming an essential tool for lively churches today. This website article gives me an opportunity to make the case, to suggest how it might be applied, and to ask for your feedback and further ideas so that I can update and improve this idea.

1: Purpose and readership

The need

One of the privileges of my job is that I work in depth, even if for a relatively short time, with a range of different churches. Some of these are growing and needing to rethink how they are structured. Others are stuck and looking for an external perspective. A few are wracked by conflict and division.

Before suggesting possible ways forward in each case, I need to assess what the real problems are. These are not always obvious at first sight. They come in many forms, but in this article I have two common ones in mind. These are concerned with 'community' and 'discipleship'.

Building community

The sense of belonging to a community of people, at all stages of faith, is an essential element of any church. Increasingly it is what attracts newcomers in the first place. But maintaining church-wide community is becoming increasingly difficult. Here are some reasons for this.

- Some churches are simply too big for everyone to know everyone. If the only information shared is about activities (as is often the case), this hardly promotes any sense of belonging to the whole.
- Many churches are now offering different types of service, mostly on Sundays but with some interesting mid-week experiments. This multi-congregational approach has many advantages, but it comes at a cost: people no longer see everyone each week.
- Many people now attend main services much more sporadically than would have been normal in the past. So even one congregation each Sunday is never quite the same.
- Small groups offer the best context for belonging, but in many churches perhaps 40% or more of the membership is not part of such a structure. In any case the groups can become insular, unaware of what other groups are doing and who belongs to them.
- The pressure of life for many means there is less opportunity for 'catching up on news' with each other.
- There is a new interest in all-age church. But in many churches the adults have little idea of (or even interest in) what happens in the children's and youth groups.

Growing disciples

At the same time churches are not good at growing disciples. We expect children to progress from the crèche, through children's activities and on to the teen groups. But for adults there is little sense of progression once an Alpha-type course has been completed. We simply hope that people will grow in their faith through Sunday preaching and small groups.

In many churches that I see, people are stuck. Disciples should wear L plates. Many church members seem to have discarded theirs, feeling they have outgrown them. In particular:

- There are few opportunities for Christians to talk to each other (let alone to others) about their faith. For many it is still a private matter. But that does not grow disciples.
- Many church members are worryingly ignorant of what their fellow Christians do in the yawning gap between one Sunday and the next. They therefore do not see how their own faith needs to be applied day-by-day.
- Most churches I see fail to communicate vision and direction and do not help people to understand key decisions. They have no appropriate channel for such vital information.
- There is little opportunity in many churches to summarise a teaching series, to underline a particular sermon that made a special impact, or to remind people of key learning points from recent weeks.

Print has limitations, so my idea for an internal church newsletter makes no claim to solve all the problems. It does however claim to be one of a number of tools that could make a big difference in each case listed above.

It seeks to create community by being a communication channel (in words and pictures) between everyone in the church. And it seeks to grow disciples by encouraging people to share stories of their own faith-journeys, and giving the leadership an opportunity to share the big picture of where the church is going and what it is learning.

So my proposed newsletter has two sharp purposes: to help create community and to grow disciples. Putting it another way, it is to help people in their belonging to each other and in their belonging to Jesus Christ. A church that is strong in both these areas will be a healthy one, attractive to others.

The readers

The newsletter I have in mind is only for those who are in some sense 'members'. It depends on a discrete circulation list. Every copy will be named, either on the newsletter itself or through being placed in an addressed envelope.

In a Baptist or equivalent membership-based church, the distribution would be to each member, or at least to each family in the membership. But even here I hope there would be scope to include others who would see themselves as part of the community of the church, though not signed-up members.

Churches with fuzzier membership boundaries would need to define the circulation list. For example, a Church of England church might

define circulation as something closer to what in many churches is called a 'congregational list'. This would include all electoral roll members and others who attend on a regular basis (however this is defined).

Such a newsletter would normally be addressed to a family rather than to individual members of a family. But it should also be suitable for teens who may prefer their own copies rather than sharing with their family.

It's not that this will be a confidential document, but there will be a sense of privilege to receive it. It is designed to foster a sense of belonging. It is therefore necessary to define its circulation rather than simply leaving out copies for anyone to pick up.

2: Content

A: People-news

If you are to foster the concept of a Christian family, you need to be aware of events in people's lives (provided they are prepared to share them), plus everyday news (such as to do with work, local community, family and home).

Imagine that everyone in the congregation is encouraged to write the kind of prayer letter you expect to receive from a mission partner or a church member on a short-term spell in another country. Everyone is a worker for Christ and should be interested and praying for others in their respective roles.

Here are some examples of the kind of items that might be covered in the proposed publication. Photographs would be a vital part of almost every item.

Children and teens at church and school

It is all too easy for a church to see the children leave the Sunday service for their activities and then ignore them. If you are to be serious about current attempts to encourage churches to be all-age, then the newsletter offers a wonderful opportunity to share what the children are doing in their groups, and to let the children themselves speak on issues that are relevant to them. Here are some ideas:

- reports and photos from the various children's and young people's groups; programmes, news of recent events;

- views from children on current church issues: the kind of music they like, their feedback on recent church events;
- teens talking about what it is like being a Christian at school, with information about any Christian groups they are involved in there;
- interviews with members of older teens groups about their views of the Christian faith and the way it is expressed at the church, plus issues that are high on their agendas but not on the church's.

Young people away at university or on short-term mission assignments

What opportunity does your church provide to help students and others feel they are still very much part of your church? The newsletter could help this. Ideas include:

- a report of a first term away from home: first impressions, highs and lows, surprises, people met, university life, uni church;
- reflection on a year: a snapshot of life at uni, highlights of the past three terms, life in a Christian group or uni church, even something about course work!;
- plenty of scope for photos: zany activities, with the team winning the sports event, or just with friends.

Those in a work-place of any kind

Most churches ignore people's work. If you asked around, people would have very hazy ideas about where other church members worked or what their jobs were like. If this is the case, how can people understand the kind of stresses that others are facing and pray for them in the place where they spend a large part of each week?

There is a danger of course, and that is that you honour people in special high-ranking jobs and ignore those who work in more mundane posts. You need to assign value to everyone whether a head-teacher or a school cleaner, whether a managing director or a van driver, whether employed or unemployed, whether travelling the world or at home with children. Ideas:

- details of what it is like being a (whatever): where they work, what they do, the kind of issues they are dealing with, how they are finding it at present, highs and lows;
- special features on a particular kind of job: all teachers in the congregation, all vehicle drivers, all working in the open air, all self-employed people, or any other category you want to invent (but be careful not to miss people out);
- regular updates on changes of job or location, or promotions;
- requests for prayer for particular workplace issues: witness, ethics, relationships (protecting confidences may be an issue).

Small groups within the church

This might take the form of one or more groups per issue, designed to act as a communication channel between all the various types of group in the church. Although house or cell groups would be the obvious ones to have in mind, there is no reason why the net should not be thrown more widely to include activity groups (choir, planning groups) and other larger meetings. Ideas:

- a description of who is in the group, who leads it and where and when it meets;
- current programme and how it is going, things that the group has done together;
- news of particular issues that the group has been concerned with;
- recent group photographs with names.

Those involved in the local community

Many Christians are involved in local voluntary activities. Here are some examples to inform others and to encourage prayer:

- reports from those who are school governors or volunteer helpers in schools;

- news of those involved in local clubs and societies or political parties;
- information from those in local charities: hospices, charity shops;
- interviews with elderly members about their care homes or local interests.

Information from church staff and office holders

Do church members understand what the Youth Pastor actually does? There is often unhelpful ignorance of what it means to be the Treasurer, or a member of the church's council (or equivalent). Here is a chance to tell people what goes on, and also to let people express something of what drives them in these roles.

- 'A day in the life of' features on members of staff or lay office holders, with photos and details of families;
- the same from the Minister from time to time might be quite an eye-opener – does (s)he really only work one day a week?;
- descriptions of what is involved for the various office-holders would encourage prayer – include groups such as the flower arrangers, or the maintenance team;
- light-hearted pieces listing favourites are popular and eye-opening (favourite food, shop, item of clothing, hymn/song, Christian festival, etc. – or the opposites).

Other ideas

- Similar news items for your church's mission partners (instead of circulating long prayer letters perhaps);
- 'where are they now?' features on former members;
- a summary of births, deaths, celebrations, etc. although these would have first been included in the weekly news-sheet;
- other snippets of news such as those moving up to which secondary schools, house moves;
- and many other possibilities which you should be able to think up, for the above sections have only been given as ideas.

B: Stories of faith in action

So far I have concentrated on building community. But there is another aspect of people-news, one that will help grow disciples. A key purpose of the newsletter should be to encourage people to talk more openly about their

faith and the difference it makes in all kinds of situations. Here are some ideas of regular features that would encourage this:

- short pieces on how people have applied teaching in recent sermons to their daily life, or the impact that particular services or events made on them spiritually;
- answers to prayer in a wide range of applications;
- the difference it makes as a Christian at work, or in a family situation, or a story of how faith sustained someone through difficult times;
- a regular feature on ‘ten things I praise God for’;
- ideas such as ‘what the (current) season of the Christian year means to me’;
- stories of particular attempts at witnessing for one’s faith;
- interviews with newcomers to the church including, where appropriate, information about their faith journey;
- and of course stories of people coming to faith or moving on in their pilgrimage, especially from relative newcomers to the church, or those who have been through Alpha or equivalent courses.

C: Leadership contact

Although this section is brief, it would certainly be a major feature of the newsletter.

The point is that everything here is for the ‘membership’ rather than for the general public. The newsletter becomes a vital channel for the leadership to communicate with the membership. Which means there needs to be some kind of channel for feedback, although a printed format like this is not usually a good idea as it appeals to one or two who have much to say, and not to the silent majority.

The newsletter might well take over items currently sent out as letters to members. So not everything here will be new.

One very important point: this is not the place for a default ‘Minister’s letter’ (which in many magazines becomes a ‘what on earth can I say this month?’ kind of piece). Give leaders a platform for anything they need to say, when they need to say it. Never force them to say something when they have nothing to say.

- Any expression of the church’s vision or other big-picture issues, to help everyone own the vision and see their own activities in the wider context;

- issues that the Minister wishes to raise with the membership: perhaps input on a current church topic, news that the whole congregation needs to be aware of, or a scene-setting piece inviting discussion in small groups;
- news of a major feature in church life that is coming up (a mission, or a building project, for example);
- report from a recent meeting of the church’s council / diaconate or whatever – neither minutes nor turgid prose, but radio-news format: headlines, key points, summary of selected items;
- news of what is coming up at the next council or deacons’ meeting with a request for prayer, or for input of views;
- update from lay leaders in the church on particular issues in their own departments: new thinking about children’s groups, plans for visiting in the area;
- prayer news – in fact the newsletter might take over the separate monthly prayer diary that some churches produce;
- financial information relating to budgets and updates: the kind of information you might not want to make public in a church service but which people need to know if they are expected to support the church’s work with their giving;
- feedback on recent items for prayer and prophetic words.

What to avoid

It is always helpful to list what should *not* be included, to prevent the newsletter becoming a home for anything and losing its clear purpose.

First, it is not the place for material more appropriate for a weekly notice-sheet (with the possible exception of a summary of all family news announcements, as already mentioned).

Secondly, it should never include general items taken from national sources for hard-pressed editors, excellent though these may be. There is no place here for general interest items.

Thirdly, try to avoid the newsletter being hijacked by a group in the church that want to use it to promote their own views on particular issues. On the other hand it is not a Minister’s newsletter with a strong feel of coming from the top.

In view of all this, it would be wise to have a small Editorial Group of some kind (keep it very simple) to help the Editor with tricky decisions and to have oversight for the whole project.

Examples

Here are three sample newsletters showing the kind of content that each might have. For the sake of illustration, a number of items are shown for each one. It would be quite possible to have a simpler publication with fewer items included in each issue.

Issue 1

Main items:

- feature on four church members who all work in different capacities for one local employer: their jobs, issues they face, how they apply their faith at work, photos;
- feature on the children's group for 6-8s and their leaders, with group photo (take care over child protection issues);
- a news report from the recent council meeting, focusing on one major decision taken, and one still at discussion stage, asking for comments and prayer.

Other items:

- regular news of people's anniversaries and life events – photos where appropriate;
- summary of all children who have just started school for the first time and those who have now moved to secondary school;
- short paragraphs from three people on how they put a recent sermon into practice in their lives, with photos.

Issue 2

Main items:

- feature on one of the church's groups, how they worked out a recent series on prayer, and what it meant to different members of the group, with photos;
- piece from the Minister explaining plans for a major outreach initiative the following year and how to get involved;
- interview with someone now in church membership who came to faith through an Alpha group earlier in the year – photo.

Other items:

- regular news of people's anniversaries and life events – photos where appropriate;
- short items from recent mission partner prayer letters with encouragement for everyone to have a personal link with one partner – photos, maps;
- a 'my favourites' piece from a gap-year worker on the church staff – zany photo.

Issue 3

Main items:

- a photo montage on the flower arranging team, with a piece written by the leader;
- interview with the Church Administrator about her life, her work, and how her faith drives all she does – workplace photo;
- a piece about one university where two church members are students, with their description of what uni life is like, and what they would value prayer for – photos.

Other items:

- regular news of people's anniversaries and life events – photos where appropriate;
- news of the current children's programme on Sundays to explain what is being covered and in what kind of ways;
- brief news from one church member on how a recent request for prayer for healing has worked out in his life – photo.

Some special cases

Rural churches

The concept of 'membership' has to be rather different in a village community from that in a suburban or urban area. Many people who rarely come to services will regard the parish church as theirs (and this is mainly an issue for the Church of England). This means that there will be much less difference between what this article is proposing and a community newsletter. But there is still a place for maintaining a clear Christian purpose to the publication.

A rural church will often be small enough for people to maintain personal contact that is not possible in some other churches.

For reasons such as these, the issue of rural churches deserves a separate article. For now, you need to be aware that there are differences.

Non-book cultures

More print may appear a very unattractive option for churches where most members will not want to read anything other than a very basic message. In cases such as this the balance between words and pictures may need to be rethought. I have already proposed a publication that includes a considerable visual element. This can easily become more of a tabloid publication, with pictures becoming the main feature, supported by words. So the idea still holds.

3: Production and distribution

Editor

The choice of Editor is clearly crucial to the success of the newsletter. It is vital to have someone who:

- is trusted by both the leaders and the membership of the church;
- has journalistic skills, or at least a concise and engaging writing style using short sentences and paragraphs;
- understands what people like to read about and what holds their attention;
- goes out and commissions items rather than waiting for them to come in;
- is fully committed to the twin purposes of the newsletter and the values of the church.

This is quite a tall order for many churches. In some it might be possible for a member of staff to act as Editor, although this runs the risk of turning it into a staff production. In some small churches the Minister might feel this is a role that he or she should fulfil, especially in churches which simply do not have people with writing ability.

Much will depend on the importance attached to such a publication, and therefore whether the role of Editor merits relieving the right person of other current responsibilities. In any case, if a church decides to launch a publication of this kind, it should also decide some other activity to stop in order to release necessary resources.

The editorial freedom given to the Editor will need to be a matter for each church to decide. In some churches it would be quite normal for the Editor to have final say about all content. In others the Minister might want to check such an important publication prior to production.

In many churches the Editor will need a team of people who are alert to the kind of people-news to be included. Obvious examples include the church's pastoral staff, the church office, small group leaders, young people's group leaders, and those church members that are particularly well connected throughout the church community.

Style

A typical format would be A4 page sizes, mostly in two columns (like this article). This

gives it a newsletter feel, and is an easy format to email as an attachment.

The writing should be in journalistic style: paragraphs very short, phrasing direct, good story-telling, use of sub-heads to break up text. That means it needs an Editor who can turn people's turgid or rambling prose into something that is compelling and easy to read.

It would need to be highly visual. Digital technology allows you now to include plenty of photographs of people, preferably including several taken a matter of days before production. So it would be well worth appointing an official Photographer as well as an Editor (see Training Notes TN22).

Part of its attraction would be its visual look. Email versions could of course be in colour. Printed copies should also be in colour if at all possible (for photographs and for some headings or visual features). Try to get it designed well whether it is in print or being emailed or sent by MailChimp or equivalent.

Who writes

It's great when people can express themselves in their own words, but not everyone has the ability to do so with clarity and in a way that maintains the human interest. The Editor must not be afraid to edit!

Here are various ways in which pieces from people can appear in print.

Written by the person featured

This is the easiest format from the production point of view. It can work well with someone who knows how to write well, briefly and interestingly. So it is probably best if it is clear that the Editor can amend any piece as necessary (by shortening it, simplifying the sentence or paragraph construction, adding sub-headings, etc.). It would be wise to produce some standard instructions for how to write in a clear, journalistic way.

Written by the Editor from the spoken word

For those who are not confident that they can write well, the Editor can meet them with a recorder running or notebook in hand. The Editor then writes the piece up afterwards.

Always check that the interviewee is happy with the final product in this case.

Written up in interview format

This is a useful variation to try from time to time (but not too frequently or it loses its power). It takes the form of a two or three-way discussion with the speaker identified as in a play when in print. It can be done on a question and answer basis:

Janice Bill, how did you get involved in hospice work in the first place?

Bill My cousin twice removed works for a hospice in Newcastle and

A round-table discussion, possibly with three people rather than just two, can be more interesting. For a children's group it could take the form of an interviewer (or the leader) asking different children what they have enjoyed about the current programme or the latest trip.

Written by a group

This is a piece in 'we' format, perhaps even with some interruptions labelled from specific people. This is a possible approach for a teens group, for example, who may want to break all the rules but come up with a fun piece that has their stamp firmly on it. If you are seeking to be an all-age church, this approach is essential as teens in particular must feel they are just as much part of this publication as anyone else.

Distribution

Unlike most church notice-sheets or magazines, this is a publication designed for a specified readership, so it would not be appropriate to leave copies for anyone to pick up. The purpose will only be achieved if there is a more personalised approach than that.

One way would be to envelope copies and name each envelope. A better method, where the church has the technology to do this, would be to mail-merge each newsletter so it came in a 'Dear Peter and Mary' form. This then raises the issue of whether it should be signed. Possibilities include the following:

- Newsletter not mail-merged at all, but placed in a labelled envelope. Printed signature or no signature in this case.
- Unsigned – in which case the recipients' name(s) might be printed on the first page rather than put in 'Dear ...' format. No need in this case for letter format.

Printed signature on the first page, so that the newsletter starts off in letter format. The signature might be the Minister's or other appropriate leader or member of staff or the Editor's. This gives a letter feel to the publication.

- Leader's personal signature. This is clearly the most personal approach, and is easily possible for many churches where the number of newsletters may not exceed 100. Again it could be the Minister's signature or other appropriate leader even though they may not have been responsible for the editing.
- Editor's signature. An editor might be happy to personally sign larger numbers of copies.

For something like this it is essential that distribution is rapid. There is no such thing as out-of-date news and it is important that everyone receives their copy at about the same time. My suggestion would be to use church pigeon-holes or equivalent (or the named copies on a table at the back of church) one Sunday, and those not collected that day posted or delivered on the Monday.

Churches in the UK are not used to a posting approach and some would feel this extravagant. I see the advantages of everyone having received their newsletter by Wednesday to be well worth the postage charge.

This then raises the issue of emailing. This would appear to be a very attractive possibility. Print and distribution costs are both saved and copies reach people faster than Sunday pigeon-holes. On the other hand:

- some people open their email infrequently;
- some people will not have email so that means two distribution lists;
- emails have no personal signatures;
- multiple addressed emails run the risk of being deleted or put in 'junk' folders.

If the newsletter includes a significant number of photographs or other design, it will need to be sent in pdf, and this means all recipients need to have Adobe Acrobat Reader installed. Some churches will make use of software such as MailChimp to distribute copies to members.

My advice would be to offer email distribution to those who prefer this, and to have two lists. But be aware that a well-designed printed newsletter in hard-copy form can be more powerful than an email that gets lost in a packed Inbox. The older ways of communication can sometimes be better.

Finally

In this article I have proposed, it might well be said, one more pressure on church life. Many churches would argue that the last thing they need is one more task to organise, one more piece of print, one more exercise in communication to confuse or drown everyone.

If it was simply one more activity and one more piece of print, or if it ever became so as well it might, then I would be the first to cry 'Stop'. But to counter this argument, with which I have much sympathy, let me underline three points.

The first is that such a newsletter is only a means to a vital end. I have argued from the start that the purpose must be crystal clear, and have defined this as building community and growing disciples.

It is my experience that many lively churches are dangerously weak on both these. The newsletter's success should be measured in terms of what it promotes: people now talking openly about their faith to each other, real love shown across all the ages and congregations, a church vision owned by all the congregation, and so on. The possibilities are crucial for church health. Provided it is done well, such a newsletter could have a powerful ministry well worth the investment.

Secondly, there may well be current publications or other activities that would no longer be needed if the newsletter existed. I have already argued that other things should be closed to release the energy required to produce this new initiative. If this can be done, the new will not be as much extra burden as it appears.

The newsletter would replace occasional letters sent to members from the leadership (and most churches do this at some stage). It might replace occasional papers put out to give information, or a regular prayer diary. There

is, after all, little that is specifically new in what I am proposing. I am simply wishing to emphasise and rationalise what may already be happening in a less structured way.

For some churches it might well replace a church magazine, or some of the paperwork produced for the annual meeting. My advice would be only to start a project of this kind if other things are at the same time brought to an end.

But for those churches that continue with a magazine, there is now an opportunity to turn it into an outreach or community publication, to build bridges with those outside the church. That may need a completely new approach but could fulfil a very important purpose.

Thirdly, I have suggested ways of going about this project that are deliberately designed to maximise impact. There is far too much print of the wrong kind already. I have therefore made it clear that this is all about people-news (which people do want to read), should be highly visual (another draw), and is personally addressed. This is not just another bit of print, but a new approach to communication.

I do however believe that to undertake this project half-heartedly could be worse than not doing anything at all.

I admit that I am flying a kite in this article, and I am ready to rethink or adapt what I have written in the light of your response to it. So please email me with any comments and I will consider these at each update.

Whatever, may Christians seek to demonstrate real community to a world where relationships are so fragile today. May we grow up to maturity in Christ as disciples should, rather than being a church of people who simply 'attend'. May our churches be healthy and all that our Lord would have them be. And may the glory be his.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A9. For other resources on written communication see Training Notes TN38, *We've got news for us!*, and TN39, *We've got news for you!* among several others. You might also appreciate TN22, *Appoint a church photographer*, and TN63, *How not to write a newsletter*. See also Articles A21, *The use of print in outreach*, A29, *A basic guide to paper and print*, A39, *A plan for your communications*, and A54, *How to get a message across*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A9 under Communication.

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