



# Create a quality website

... by asking the right questions

**A14** Articles series: Communication

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**You build a website to put across information in an appropriate way. But, unlike print, this is a dynamic medium in that the site can be regularly updated and developed. It is also possible for the visitor to react with a site by asking questions, making comments or joining in a discussion. The visitor may also create images, and play sound and visual recordings.**

A website is your church or organisation's stand at the virtual Christian Resources Exhibition and your shop window in the virtual High Street. Putting it together requires appreciation of stand design and window dressing.

With this in mind here are seven key questions to ask before you talk to your designer (who gives it its look) and/or your developer (who makes the technical aspects work). You also need to ask the questions if you are doing it all yourself. The article concludes with a checklist for possible content.

## Seven questions to ask before you start

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Avoid the temptation to rush into words. It is much better to spend time planning the kind of site you want and the way you hope it will be used. Use this list as a guideline for this process. It is written for churches, but easily adapts for a mission agency.

### **1: Who is the site for?**

Start here. There are probably several different answers. You might list:

- members of your church (and/or specific groups within your church);
- young members of your church (as they interact with the web in a different way from adults);
- your local community (most of whom will have little understanding of the Christian faith);

- Christians looking for a local church;
- people wanting to get married, to find a grave, to follow up some publicity.....

Which of these groups are your priorities? Answering this will help you decide something about how the site is structured and what the home page says. For example, a rural church might supply the site for the local community. A site prepared primarily for those who are not yet members of the church should be different from a site designed to inform its membership alone. It needs a different approach, starting from where people are.

## 2: What impact do we want it to have on these people?

Instead of listing what you want to tell them, think instead of the changes you want to see in their lives. Describe where you want them to be and what you want them to do after their visit.

Here are some possible answers for two groups of potential visitors. First, for people in the local community:

- to feel confident about approaching the church to ask for a wedding, a baptism or a funeral;
- to realise that the members of this church are normal people who have found something special;
- to come to a service or an activity or an Alpha course.

Secondly, for your teens:

- to point their friends to a site that's cool enough for any teenager;
- to join in a discussion to follow up last weekend's group session;
- to feel good about being a church member.

Any website should be helping people to change in some way, through informing, encouraging, intriguing, or resourcing them.

## 3: What effect do we want the site to give?

The wording, the visuals, the design and the structure will together create an image of your church. How do you want to present yourself

### IDEA 1

*Before you start, ask different types of people what information they would want to discover from the site. When you have your site ready in draft, show it to these people and ask for their honest reactions. Show it to them, too, on different web browsers and in more than one screen resolution.*

and is this sufficiently accurate for someone arriving at your door to find it true?

Some churches are formal and safe, others are wild and unpredictable. Some are family-friendly but noisy, others are more reflective. Ensure you tell your designer how you want your site to come across, given the answers to questions 1 and 2.

In general, a site will create a positive image if it:

- has a simple layout, with an uncluttered and consistent page design;
- is easy to navigate, so that any child can find their way round;
- is highly 'accessible';
- includes one or two creative features (not gimmicks) to make it stand out;
- is colourful (but black text on white background is clearest);
- includes graphics, large enough to see clearly, small enough to keep file sizes down;
- keeps the font size legible for the line length;
- uses different font sizes for headings, sub-headings, etc.;
- is written in simple sentences, avoiding jargon;
- has very short paragraphs, with gaps between them;
- goes for bullet-point format rather than turgid prose;
- does not try to put too much on each page;
- makes the hyper-links visibly obvious;
- is error-free (spelling, hyper-links, etc.);
- loads quickly on a non-broadband computer;
- includes a simple response form.

What matters is how the site appears on

someone else's computer (perhaps more basic than yours, or using a different web browser). So restrict text fonts to Arial or Verdana, and avoid 'Flash' and similar gimmicks. Remember that graphics can only support the words. It is vital to get your words both right and legible.

The home page is especially important. It needs to look good but to load quickly. Ideally you should see it all on one screen. It should have one simple, uncluttered message, but be intriguing enough to draw visitors on to look round the rest of the site. Change it regularly, if only to highlight new items on other pages.

#### 4: What resources are available?

It is wise to assess the work involved not only in establishing the site but also in maintaining and developing it.

Initial set-up may be done in-house if there is enough expertise, but it is easy to spot an 'amateur' site that has used Word to prepare the pages. Use a specialist agency to act both as designer/developer (a one-off cost) and to 'host' the site (an annual fee). It is good and relatively inexpensive to register your own domain name.

Unlike a printed leaflet, a website then needs constant updating. For most this means each week if you are including the coming weekend's programme (vital), weekly notices, small group material and sermon recordings. An out-of-date site presents a particularly negative image.

Think carefully who will do this work and whether this has cost implications. You need a responsible 'webmaster' but it is good if you can involve plenty of people in on-going maintenance, including teenagers.

If you use a professional agency to design your site, ensure that it is set up so that you can update the text yourself. Software exists for this (another one-off cost). More adventurous churches may like to investigate subscription schemes such as [www.churchinsight.com](http://www.churchinsight.com).

Now at last you are ready to ask the question most people rush to first.

#### **IDEA 2**

*Look at other church sites to gain ideas, but check them out against the advice in this article. Note 'errors to avoid' as much as 'lessons to learn'!*

#### 5: What information do we need to put across and how do we structure it?

There are two major questions here but it is helpful to tackle them together.

Your information needs to be written in a style that is engaging and easy to read on screen. Each page should be short. Sentence construction needs to be simple.

Designing good 'navigation' is a key skill. First-time visitors need to be able to find their way round easily, without the feeling they are in a maze where they keep on ending up back at the same point when they are trying to get somewhere else. Navigation graphics are normally on the top or left, and the text repeated at the foot of each page (for those who have switched off graphics).

Map it all out on paper first. Choose up to eight main areas and make these your main navigation list on each page. For each of these have two or three other pages, which can then go into more detailed sub-pages if required. A designer can show you different ways of doing this.

So after a home page a site might have pages for:

- Who we are
- What we believe
- Questions you may have
- Sundays at Christ Church
- Mid-week activities
- Youth and children
- Get in touch.

This list has been designed for someone who is not a church member, but within the substructure will be everything that your members need. Instead of one of these you might want to include a 'links' page and make the site a portal to other Christian sites.

'Who we are' might then have pages for:

- The congregation (emphasis on everyone)
- Staff and leaders (with pages of individual biographies)
- Workers worldwide (pages for those supported by the church)
- History (...of the church if appropriate)
- Meet us (see below).

'Questions you may have' might go to:

- How do I find you? (a plan, and perhaps a postcode link to a map site)
- How do I ask about a baptism, wedding or funeral?
- How can you help me explore the meaning of the Christian faith?
- What is a Christian?
- What can I expect if I come on a Sunday?
- What other churches are there locally? (if you are generous!)

Now, still on paper, show the links that will be helpful (eg. 'Sundays at Christ Church' above needs to link to 'How do I find you?'). Next add in an outline of content for each page. Keep it all simple.

A checklist of possible ideas for content is included in the final part of this article.

Only now are you ready to start writing.

## 6: How do we create interest?

One important answer is to focus on people, not on history or buildings or worship or activities. Tell some real people stories with plenty of good quality pictures. Here are some ideas.

### Who's who

Include some brief biographies of leaders, staff and office-holders. Use language that people will relate to (avoid Christian jargon), and choose photos with care! Look at local newspapers to see the kind of information they give in people-stories (eg. ages, area where they live). Information should include some basics but include unusual snippets that will make people curious or make them laugh. Interview format can be useful, but keep it very short.

### Typical members

Try a page listing a few members (again with photos) and some straightforward reasons why they belong to your church. Avoid being pious; it must be language that an outsider can relate to, such as a sense of belonging, or purpose, or fun. Change the selection regularly.

### News

Group photos or pictures of recent activities can be powerful.

## Coming soon

List what is coming next week or month, but be sure to keep to what you promise.

### WARNING

*Don't forget that the web is global and very public. If you list email addresses, remember that spammers will pick these up (use addresses based on your church domain name if possible). Never identify children (so avoid family photos of leaders), and never show photos of children other than in groups of a reasonable size. Always obtain people's/parents' permission to be included. It's a dangerous world.*

## 7: How do we encourage visitors?

Having invested in a website, you want to make sure people are visiting it, staying with it, and coming back to it. Try to devise some criteria for checking success: monitor page hits, survey the congregation, etc.

Within your church, keep mentioning the site and pointing people to material going on it that week. If you have sermons recorded by MP3 files, encourage everyone who missed that Sunday to listen during the week. Don't forget, however, that many people will not have web access and it is important to offer alternative means of receiving information.

Encourage everyone to add the site to their 'favorites' or 'bookmarks' list, and to return regularly to see what is new. (Make sure there **is** something new each time and highlight it visually.) The more adventurous can consider on-line forums and other interactive features.

For people outside the church:

- Have a short but memorable web-address so people can find you easily.
- Display the web address prominently on all your printed materials, and on sign-boards large enough for passers-by to read.
- Encourage members to talk about the site within their networks. Staff can drop it into the conversation with people they visit, in schools, and for all who ring asking for advice.
- Create reciprocal links with sites such as the local authority, tourist board, neighbourhood sites, and other Christian

sites. Remember though that traffic that comes your way through such a link can also leave by another such link.

- Learn how to get key phrases into your pages so that search engines take people to you. If someone on Google UK tries 'church Anytown', check that brings you up.

### **IDEA 3**

*Include password-protected areas for certain groups, and especially for your teens pages which may be rather more wacky than the rest of the site. But be careful. Always assume a password will be discovered.*

## A contents checklist

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Note that this is not necessarily a website structure, but the kind of items you might like to consider for inclusion. Depending on your answers to the questions above, you will then need to consider the best way to divide and group the information. For example, under question 5 above, there was a section entitled 'Questions you may have'. This is one way of grouping various headings shown below for a defined user-group.

A key feature of any site will be the navigation links that allow the user to move around the site, preferably without getting lost in the process. A checklist such as this does not show possible links because, once again, their design will depend on the answers to the questions already raised.

Your site will not need to include all the items shown here and, in any case, some will not apply to your church. If starting from scratch, it may be better to go for something quite simple but with a structure that allows for further pages to be added.

### **1: HOME PAGE**

This needs to fit onto one screen, be simple enough in design so that it loads quickly, be changed regularly, and offer a positive and personal welcome to the site and to the church. The navigation directions here and on every other page will play a major part in the success or otherwise of the site. Add church office details.

### **2: WHO WE ARE**

#### **Members**

Overview of the congregation, possibly a group photo. See also 'People stories' below.

#### **Minister**

Message of welcome, perhaps in audio (possibly expanded from the home page).

#### **Leaders/Council**

Listing and photographs of elders or church council, etc. Brief biographies. Explanation of basic church structure.

#### **Staff/Office-holders**

Listing, photographs and brief biographies as for leaders. Possibly email addresses or other contact information.

#### **Workers worldwide**

If the church has members it supports by prayer and/or finance, some details about them and their work, whether UK or international.

#### **Central church information**

Brief details of denominational structure, local and national, as context.

#### **History**

The story of the church as a community to provide background and perspective.

#### **People stories**

Individual stories of the faith-journeys of members of the congregation, or reasons why they belong to this church (short and snappy, changed regularly.)

#### **Photo galleries**

Pictures of the church and activities, other than those included on other pages.

### 3: WHAT WE BELIEVE

#### Foundations

The church's purpose, values, vision, aims, theme for the year, etc.

#### What is a Christian?

A simple outline of the Christian faith, possibly with links to national sites.

#### Way-in courses

News of Alpha, Christianity Explored or similar courses or events.

#### Baptism/Confirmation

Information about ways into church membership. See also section 8 below.

#### Downloads

Resources available on the Christian faith, etc.

### 4: CHURCH INFORMATION

#### This week/month/term

Outline programme for the week, month or term, plus future diary dates of significance. There may need to be individual pages for specific events coming up.

#### Notice-sheets

Files for recent notice-sheets or other publications providing general information. (There is little point in keeping these on-line for too long.)

#### Newsletters

Other publications for comment, etc. as for notice-sheets.

#### Recent news

Snappy outlines of recent headlines or press releases.

#### How to find us

Details for church and/or office, public transport links, with link to appropriate map, etc.

#### People to contact

Names and suitable links for anything from booking the hall to asking for pastoral help.

#### The parish or area

Map or other details of the local area.

#### Baptisms, weddings, funerals

Details of what to do and who to see to make arrangements. Some churches include various pages on arranging a wedding or funeral with advice on hymns, etc.

#### Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

A summary of some of the above areas. See also items under other sections.

### 5: SUNDAYS

#### Visitors welcome

Introduction for visitors: where to park, where to come in, the welcome they will receive, what to expect, children/crèche, loos, disability facilities.

#### Sunday and other services

Details of times and places, some idea of lengths and any other information to put people at ease.

#### Music

Information about the style of music used, music group, choir, etc. MP3 files of songs, etc.

#### Teaching

Explanation of teaching programmes and links between services and small groups.

#### Sermon files

MP3 files of recent sermons or other teaching input, or full services (or printed downloads if not MP3).

#### Music files

Recordings of services, music available, podcasting, etc.

### 6: ACTIVITIES

#### What's on this week

Outline of the week's programme (up-to-date).

#### Weekly programme

Outline of a typical weekly programme.

#### Small groups

Explanation of small group structure and details of how to join. There may be links to individual details of each group or cluster. Downloadable notes of that week's sessions for churches who provide central resources.

#### Community links

Details of visiting programmes, events designed for the local community, etc.

#### Way-in courses

As in section 3.

#### Other courses and training events

Whether regular and on-going, or one-offs.

#### Prayer

Information about prayer groups, prayer ministry, prayer chains, etc. Possibly opportunity to put in a prayer request.

#### Other

Groups and other activities that do not fall within the above categories, appropriate for your church: young adults, students, elderly, gender groups, outreach activities, etc.

## 7: YOUTH AND CHILDREN

### Overview

Strategy for youth and children's work throughout the church. Child Protection Policy details.

### Older teens

Details of group, details of leaders.

### Younger teens

Details of group, details of leaders.

### Infants and junior groups

Details of each group and their leaders.

### Crèche

Information and details of leaders.

### Members' pages

Password pages for teens and children to access regarding their groups and other news.

## 8: MEMBERSHIP

### Joining the church

Details of procedures for those wishing to join. With a link to Baptism/Confirmation in section 3 above.

### Opportunities to serve

Information about what is expected of members and processes for linking people with areas of service.

### Financial giving

Information about the financial needs of the church, the responsibilities of membership and the means by which to give.

### Welcome pack

On-line welcome leaflet or pack with information for those just looking or intending to join.

## 9: LOCAL COMMUNITY

### Church in context

The church's place in the local community and the ways in which it serves the area.

### Community information

General information about public services in the area ranging from doctors' surgeries to bus routes. Local news. Details of other churches.

### Map

Map of the area, or links to a mapping site.

## 10: THE BUILDING

### Hiring the building

Information for those wishing to hire the church or halls or other buildings.

### Graveyard

Information for those wanting to find family graves.

### Retail information

For churches with coffee shops or bookshops within their building.

### History

Information about the church building, if of historical interest.

### Architecture

Architectural features of the building, if of special interest.

## 11: COMMUNICATION

### Contact us

Details of church (office) postal address, email link, etc.

### Visitors' book

Comments requested.

### Links to other sites

Links to other local churches, key national Christian sites, mission agencies, etc.

### Response page

Page to be filled in for automatic emailing to the church regarding any request.

This article is available at [www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/articles/a14.pdf](http://www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/articles/a14.pdf). There are several other resources on a communications theme including Article A11 *Become a better emailer*. For indexes of all items available on the site, visit the [resources page](#).

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of using his consultancy or training services.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A14 under Communication.

69 Sandridge Road, St Albans, AL1 4AG Tel+Fax: 01727 832176 Web: [www.john-truscott.co.uk](http://www.john-truscott.co.uk)