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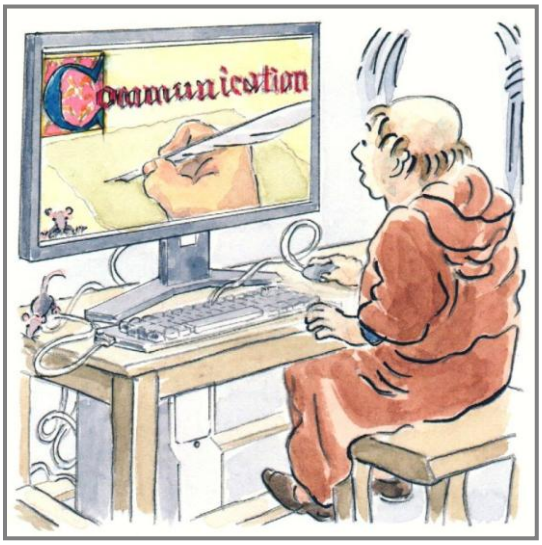

A plan for your communications

A template for churches

A39 Articles series: Communication

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If there's one thing churches should excel at it's communication, the art of sending a message so that it is heard, correctly understood and acted upon.

God is a Communicator, so this is a topic that should have a high priority in our churches. We should be passionate about getting our messages across: to each other and to the world outside. We should find real enjoyment in getting through to others.

Yet we mess it up. Some preachers can make even God's great news sound dull. Many churches don't exactly broadcast messages of joy and hope to their local communities. We are often poor at keeping everyone in touch with immediate news. And at most churches I visit I am told that one thing that needs improvement is … yes, communication.

We live in a global society where news of every kind is pumped at us every minute. How can we, in our churches, show what really good communication looks like? This is an urgent need. And what we need first is a plan.

This has been written to help you devise such a plan. Good communication is not flinging ever more pieces of information at other people, but of understanding who needs what and when and how, of taking an overview and deciding on priorities.

To develop a **Church Communications Plan** think in terms of ten questions.

1 Why are we doing this? – *purpose and motivation.*
2 Who's got something to say? – *those who have messages.*
3 How can we get it across? – *understanding those we are trying to reach.*
4 What basic data do we need? – *the information we need to hold.*
5 What are we trying to say? – *something that is worth communicating.*
6 What should work best? – *principles for how to be effective in communication.*
7 Where might things go wrong? – *mistakes to avoid.*
8 Who's responsible? – *putting someone in charge.*
9 What are we going to change? – *drawing conclusions to form the plan.*
10 How does this work in practice? – *some practical details.*

This article will look in turn at each of these ten as a framework for your plan. ***This is not about how to communicate but how to establish a coherent plan to link up all your communication.*** So the thinking will be in big-picture mode, rather than tackling the detail of what the Sunday notice-sheet might look like or how to use social media well. This analysis might just show that your notice-sheet needs to be replaced by something different and social media might not be a priority for you just at the moment.

1: Why are we doing this?

This article will use the terms of a 'sender' sending a 'message' to a 'receiver'. To do this the sender needs to 'code' the message into a 'language' that the 'receiver' can decode and use a 'channel' that both have access to. The point of sending the message is to impact the receiver in some way, so the first question to ask is 'Why are we sending this message?', and the answer must be to bring about some change: whether in action, in attitude or in new knowledge.

Consider the responses required from the way God communicates with us and expects us to communicate with him and others.

We serve a God who wants us to hear him so much that:

- Genesis starts with the repeated phrase 'God said…', St John's Gospel with 'The Word';
- God provides us with Scripture – the written word;
- he longs for us to pray – to communicate with him.

We do so much of it to each other that we ought to be a quality act by now:

- we preach good news week by week;
- we seek to be local communities of Christians who love each other;
- we produce quantities of print or digital media to stay in touch.

Our job is to proclaim the good news that God has passed on to us by:

- living out our faith to others as a constantly open book;
- telling other people about the gospel we have been given;
- acting as salt and light in a society that desperately needs putting right.

It is helpful to understand the purpose of church communication in the same structure as the purpose of a church. What we put across should result in some form of change or growth. Following the threefold division above:

1 Communication serves the purpose of growing in our relationship with God as we seek to be disciples. There are, for example, liturgy, Bible teaching, course notes, small group discussion.

2 Communication serves the purpose of growing in our relationship with each other as we seek to be members of his community. There are, for example, newsletters, information for meetings, sharing our experience of God.

3 Communication serves the purpose of growing in our relationship with the world as we seek to be witnesses. There are, for example, promotional and evangelistic materials, talking to our work colleagues and neighbours, all forms of community involvement.

Communication is a key means by which we achieve each of these three aspects of church purpose. It is at the very heart of what it means to be 'church'.

A good Church Communications Plan should benefit your church in that you will be:

- better at promoting the Gospel;
- utilising your resources more effectively;
- targeting your messages more accurately;
- growing closer to becoming a united church;
- clearer, more compelling and more consistent in what you say;
- enabling everyone's active involvement in the life of the church;
- hearing fewer complaints that people have not been told.

> Website resources
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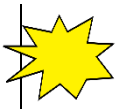
> There are other items on this website that back up this article. These will be noted in boxes for most of the ten sections.

In addition, when thing go wrong, and they will, you will know how to put them right.

Each of these ten sections will close with a summary list of what your church's communications plan might helpfully include under this heading. And so for this first question of purpose:



Your plan might include in its section 1:

- an introduction with a list of sections, perhaps based on these ten;
- a straightforward definition of 'communication' and the need to know what response you are looking for;
- some form of biblical basis for the subject;
- the purpose of communication – perhaps based on the threefold division above;
- the benefits of such a plan.

2: Who's got something to say?

So who in a church wants (or needs – which is not quite the same) to tell other people (receivers) something? Here are some broad categories as suggestions for headings in your plan. Note that the category for church members has been split into three aspects but, in this analysis, has not been broken down by age groupings.

1 Church leaders

This could be the Minister, Trustees, Elders, Council, Leadership Team. Leaders need to share vision, plans, direction, news of events, needs for finance, needs for people to offer for service, and much more.

2 Group leaders

There will then be leaders of activities, committees and groups who need to give their members information (eg. about the next gathering), to provide reports for a business meeting, to tell parents of their children's next activity, or to enthuse about a special event.

3 Organisers

Organisers of activities and rotas will need to give details of what is happening and when, whether to church members or to people outside. The pastoral team will need to share prayer news of people who are ill.

4a Church members as disciples

Leaders will teach the faith to members, members will want to put across messages of love and care for each other. A communications plan should not restrict itself to business matters but cover discipleship.

4b Church members as members

Church members may need to respond to leaders and organisers about what they have been told, to complete sign-up sheets, to offer their services.

4c Church members as people

Everyone will also want to express something about their life, their needs, their opinions, whether in a session specially designed for this (coffee after a church service) or informally (when they meet in the street).

5 Visitors

Visitors may have messages to pass on as to how they found a church service (whether they say it or not), the state of the church loos, and much else. Members of an Alpha-type course will be asked for their views on issues of life.

6 Neighbours

Those living near your church building may have messages about the noise levels on Sundays, or people parking across their driveways. Those who are hiring your church rooms will want to discuss arrangements.

7 The world

'The world' extends the idea of neighbours to your local community and its leaders, to the police or social services, and at national level to the Government, or to the society that the Church exists within.

You might consider these groups forming concentric circles working outwards.

Note that you could well add **God** himself as the most important Sender and Receiver of all. When Christians gather on a Sunday it is to hear God's word read and explained and in their worship they express their love for their Master and Saviour.

A relatively new development is the recording and streaming of church services on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook.

Here we have Receivers who we may know little about, but such forms of communication have significant possibilities for both people unable to get to church and for reaching out for those who are not yet ready to brave coming to a live event.

Receivers

The same groups are also receivers of messages. Church members communicate to their leaders about the value they place on a special meeting simply by turning up (or not). Someone signs up for a work-party or offers to join a new group.

Visitors receive all kinds of messages in a church service, ranging from the directions to find the venue to the welcome on arrival, from the state of the building to how many people talk to them over coffee afterwards.

The world receives messages from national Church bodies or from Christian pressure groups who happen to have the ear of the national media.

Similarly, receivers almost always become senders too. You receive an email and you reply (which sends back one kind of message) or you ignore it (which sends a different message). You speak to someone and their facial expression and body language tell you immediately something of how they are reacting to your message. All communication is two-way.

The above is only one way of analysing senders and receivers and for your church you may prefer to see it in a different way. For example, a small rural church may find that a clear delineation into members, visitors and neighbours does not make sense.

It may also be wise to consider how different age groups receive messages. Don't ignore your children and teens. Then consider millennials (broadly, those in their 20s and early 30s) who take in messages in a very different way from previous generations. They expect to be online continuously, tweeting during church services,

Website resources

To train lesson readers in church see DIY Workshop W1, 'How to read the Bible out loud'. Be aware that body language is a powerful means by which a receiver sends back messages to the original sender. For this see Training Notes TN158, 'Body language: take care' in the Resources section of this website. For the issue of who sees minutes of meetings, see Training Notes TN45, 'Are you sure it's minutes you need?'

using a QR code to transfer church news to their mobile rather than being given a piece of paper, donating on impulse through their phone and communicating one-to-many through a wide arra of social media. Many traditional means of church communication are simply irrelevant to them. But they exist in congregations made up of people who do not have any form of computer at home or mobile in their pocket. Welcome to Diverse Church!

Who does not need to know?

A message from the Treasurer about increased giving probably needs to go to all members but not to visitors or neighbours. This rules out some means of putting the message across (such as a spoken announcement in services or a promotional leaflet about the church) and prioritises others.

Who should not know at all?

This runs into the more specific area of confidentiality. Who alone needs to know that Jim and Jenny's marriage is in trouble? Or that Jacob's appointment as the new Minister will be announced publicly in two weeks' time but is not yet cleared?

Your plan might include in its section 2:

- a set of broad groups who will be both senders and receivers, perhaps based on the list above, but perhaps adding different age bands;
- some description of who needs to know what within the church family;
- pointers for tackling the issue of confidentiality such as who should and should not see papers and minutes from key meetings;
- possibly a visual representation of this.

3: How can we get it across?

Here the idea is to identify the intended 'receivers' (see point 2 above) and then to list 'channels'. Each of these channels provides a different kind of coding for the message. To make right choices you need to understand what might work for the groups you are trying to reach. See also DIY Workshop W3, *How to get a message across,* on this website.

A key to good communication is an understanding of those for whom the message is intended, the 'receivers'. Much church communication will be designed for all church members, but some needs to be targeted for sub-groups: newcomers, teens, leaders, etc. But messages intended for those outside the church will need a very different approach from those in-house.

Once you have identified the receivers, there are five 'channels' you can use.

1 The written word

This includes any means that puts the message into printed format. The outcome is print on paper or another medium.

This requires people to have sight and to be able to see adequately the surface on which the message appears. Receivers will need to be able to read in the language that is being used.

Examples range from a personally written card, through a printed notice-sheet, to a glossy magazine. Emails are included too.

2 The spoken word

Many messages are passed on orally. This involves people talking and listening. This may be someone passing on a message but is just as valid as a church member chatting to a newcomer at an event. They are communicating not just information about the church but acceptance, normality and love.

This requires people to have hearing (or lip reading) and not to have too many conflicting items of communication at the same time.

3 The demonstrated word

This is often ignored but is one of the most powerful means of communication. You can write all kinds of messages, you can speak them too, but it is only when you show the truth of what you have written or spoken that the communication becomes sure.

People turning up at an event communicate a message. Responses to a financial appeal give immediate feedback. Actions often communicate more powerfully than any words.

4 The digital word

Group under this heading items like website, social media, texts, PowerPoint, video. These are all the 'printed word' but in new media.

Most people today are on social media for a large part of each day, and younger people use it as their communications tool of choice. Not to be investing in at least a Facebook and a Twitter account might make the church seem remote from reality. Many older people are now well used to Facebook and it is a powerful means of putting out a message to a wide body of people and getting instant feedback.

The digital channel is rapidly developing and no one is quite sure what it will turn into next.

5 The visual word

This would include the use of pictures, photographs and diagrams in print, a video-clip instead of an announcement, the use of story-telling in speech, and perhaps the use of drama and mime in the demonstrated word. But it might also include what your buildings and the state of your site 'say' to those who live in your area. Buildings communicate too.

Website resources

The following may all be found in the Resources section of this website. In addition to W3:

For print
For basic information see Article A29, 'A basic guide to paper and print – helping you to communicate well'.

For writing clearly see Training Notes TN63, 'How not to write a newsletter'. For new approaches see TN69, 'Creative prayer diaries'. But is screen always better than print? Not so, argues Training Notes TN82, 'Print or screen?'

For speech
For how to come across well in speech, try Article A19, 'Speaking so that people listen – for all leaders and preachers'. For taking part in church services, Training Notes TN1, 'Preparing to read the lesson' TN16, 'Interviews in church services', TN47, 'Breathing life into the intercessions', and TN93, 'And now for the notices'.

Exercise

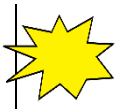
Consider the four Gospels. Consider how each of the written, spoken, demonstrated and visual word are used by God to communicate to us.

Website resources

For digital
Many churches are now in hybrid mode with live streaming of their services. You will find Training Notes TN123, 'Speaking-to-camera tips' helpful for all who speak, read or lead intercessions.

For advice on planning a revision of your website or if starting from scratch, read Article A14, 'Create a quality website … by asking the right questions'. Also TN113, 'What to avoid on your website.' Training Notes TN52, 'The perils of PowerPoint' give a warning that this tool needs to be used well.

For visual
For an example of the 'visual word' communicating to your 'neighbours', see Training Notes TN44, 'The message of your buildings'. And in a more general context see Training Notes TN22, 'Appoint a church photographer!'.



Your plan might include in its section 3:

- a call to identify the intended receivers for each item of communication, then to target the communication for them;
- a listing of possible channels to use, perhaps based on the five given above;
- some description of the need for all of them to be used rather than focusing on one or two;
- the likely development of the digital channel as this is the one that is changing;
- some examples of how existing messages could utilise more than one channel (eg. sermons backed up by printed notes, PowerPoint slides, etc.).

Note that your plan would benefit from use of the visual as well as print (one feature this article lacks in its printed word format!). Diagrams and pictures would help get your message across. After all, your plan must communicate well!

4: What basic data do we need?

To develop a clear, consistent Church Communications Plan, there is a certain amount of background information required. Often a church flings messages at everyone because they do not have the information to enable them to target messages at appropriate receivers. Here are some examples.

Data on people

A church database is a vital tool. Some churches still print rotas for stewards, readers, pray-ers, flower arrangers and others on the notice-sheet every week. But no one needs to know this unless they are on duty and many of those will miss the announcement anyway.

A regular newcomer to the list is the use of Church Management System software as an online church office, holding much of the key information from database, rotas and event organisation. There is a range of options on the market at present, with ChurchSuite as the definite market leader.

Examples of data to hold (watch GDPR) include:

- church database including contact details, needing constant maintenance to keep it up-to-date;
- rotas / address lists / prayer diaries;
- personal knowledge of current pastoral needs – normally held with some degree of confidentiality by a pastoral team;
- your receivers outside the church membership: giving a clear understanding of those you are trying to reach (ages, understanding of Christianity, perception of your church, felt needs, etc.).

Statistical information

Some churches collect statistical information just to satisfy the requests from a denominational body. But data of this kind is a vital resource to understand what is happening to a church: growth or decline, age-profile changes, connections with the local community.

Examples include:

- membership numbers, age profiles, movements, etc. however defined;

- attendance figures for different services over each year;
- financial budgets and accounts, including regular management accounts;
- local community statistics.

Programmes

Church programmes and calendars/diaries announce the church's activities and allow some measure of avoiding double-bookings and clashes. But often such programmes are fixed by different people for different groups and double bookings do occur. What matters is one central hub for all programmes so that these can be spotted early.

Examples include:

- room bookings for church premises;
- annual church calendar as an overview;
- teaching programmes whether in sermons or small groups;
- programme cards for church and children's groups;

Big picture vision

The church's agreed vision, its set of values and its purpose form key foundational documents for every activity. Too often they are agreed, filed and ignored when they should be impacting every group and activity. All communication should be in tune with such basic agreements and so they should form a key element of any communications strategy.

Examples include:

- the church's agreed vision and values;
- the church's mission plan working towards the vision;
- the plan broken down into component parts for different groups or activities.

Feedback information

Every receiver becomes a sender with a message going back to the original sender. Some of these may be too subtle to be noticed but there are official feedback opportunities which need to be kept, analysed and acted on. Examples include:

- feedback forms from main church events;
- suggestion boxes;
- open forums in church meetings;
- correspondence received giving views on aspects of church life;
- church publication surveys.

Committee information

Church business meetings need 'papers' (whether in hard copy format, as email attachments or in a Dropbox folders) and information about memberships, regulations, and archive files.

> Website resources
>
> For advice on agendas and minutes see Training Notes TN61, 'Mapping out a meeting', TN45,' Are you sure it's minutes you need' and TN97, 'How to minute a meeting', all in the Resources section of this website.

Your plan might include in its section 4:

- a listing of data you currently hold in useable forms, based on the above list;
- a similar listing of data that needs work on it to make it useful;
- a listing of data you do not hold and may need to discover;
- some examples of how such data might inform your communications.

5: What are we trying to say?

This is the key issue, and one that is often not thought through properly. Good communication is not a matter of throwing messages at as many people as possible, but of getting through to people so that they make the kind of response that you are seeking.

At the heart of this there needs to be a clear understanding of the key message you want to put across of who you are as a church and what you are about, the one thing you want everyone inside and outside the church's membership to grasp.

Here is a possible analysis of the types of messages you may want to put across within a church's membership and then with those outside. The categories overlap.

Internal messages

1 Discipleship training

One of the key purposes of any church is for its members to grow up into Christ. Church communications should not ignore this vital aspect of church life while focusing on the business side. Examples:

- sermons;
- public reading of Scripture and intercessions;
- service and hymn/song books or screen-based liturgy/songs;
- small group work;
- children and young people's ministries.

2 Keeping groups of people in touch with each other

This covers a wide range of applications. It is all about people stories and about events when those people will meet or work together. Examples:

- annual reports from all church groups;
- distribution of a church photograph;
- children showing their activities at the end of a church service;
- a website listing groups that meet;
- a display-board showing all the small groups and their leaders.

In all but the smallest churches people will belong to different groups. Without some form of connection between them there will be a loss of sense of the whole church.

3 Sharing personal news across the membership

This comes in two different forms: across the whole church, and across each individual group.

Across the membership:

- members sharing stories ('testimonies') of their discipleship in church services;
- the same in printed form in members' newsletters or magazines;
- interviews in services;
- news spreading on the grapevine.

Within each group

- a small group sharing news at meetings or by email;
- news sessions at a Sunday children's group;
- social media used within a teens group;
- informal chats over post-service coffee.

4 Leadership information

This is a crucial area of communication but often not given the attention it deserves. It can be seen in two different directions.

From the leadership

- the passionate sharing of vision;
- financial budgets from the Treasurer;
- website listing of key beliefs and values for the church;
- searches for volunteers.

From the membership

- letters or emails sent by members to the Minister;
- church meetings feedback from the floor;
- people attending or staying away from events (or leaving the church);
- someone telling the pastoral team about a member in hospital.

5 News of activities and events

This is perhaps the best-known type of internal church communication, but far from the most important. Examples:

- church notice-sheets;
- programme and sermon cards;
- screen announcements at services;
- brochures for special events;
- text reminders for meetings sent out to members of groups.

External messages

6 Community presence

If the church is to identify with and be valued within the local community there need to be wide open channels, especially in people-involvement. You also need to be crystal clear as to what message about your church you want to present: what exactly do you want people to grasp about your church, its people and its message? Examples include the following.

- community newsletter or magazine;
- leaflets for door-to-door distribution or member-pass-on;
- media releases to newspapers and local radio;
- advertising and signboards;
- the state and design of your buildings.

7 Evangelism

But there will also be a desire to be drawing people into church activities that present the faith and enable people to become Christians. Two types of event are worth focusing on for publicity: any kind of way-in course such as Alpha, and the use of Christmas events. Ideas:

- promotion of Alpha-type events;
- explaining the gospel in all kinds of ways;
- distribution of evangelistic literature;
- Harvest promotions for rural churches;
- Christmas promotion for all churches.

Your plan might include in its section 5:

- a succinct statement as to the one key message you want everyone to grasp of who you are and what you are about;
- a listing of different types of message – a sevenfold division is suggested above but you will probably need to adapt this;
- some idea of strengths and weakness in these different divisions;
- and so a list of priorities: which types of message using which channels do you need to major on this coming year?
- perhaps, at this stage, some listing of what you already do, and can see you need to do, under each heading, rather as the examples given above.

Website resources

For the issue of communicating finances, see Article A18, 'Administering church funds'. where the second section deals with the idea of financial story-telling.

If you want to see an idea of how to enable the communication of both personal and group news across the membership (sections 3 and 4 above) and leadership information to the membership (section 5 above), read Article A9, 'A church members' newsletter – an idea for a new publication'.

If you want to think through aspects of your communication to the 'visitors' and 'neighbours' categories in section 2, see Articles A21, 'The use of print in outreach – rethinking your church's practice' and A31. 'Helping people back to church – basics we often overlook'.

To consider the appointment of a Press Officer and to work well with your local media try Training Notes TN9, 'Which newspapers do people read?', TN75, 'Writing for the media', and TN89, 'Hold the front page!'.

All these may be found in the Resources section of this website.

6: What should work best?

Your Church Communications Plan might well include one section of principles to help everyone communicate well. Here are ideas for some of the points you might want to make. But these are only starters, designed to lead you in to providing your own list tailored to suit your church.

Use print for detail, speech for effect

A spoken announcement is not a good means of putting across detail (times, dates, names, etc.). Print can be left in sight and reread as required.

But a printed message is unlikely to motivate people in the way that a spoken message can. When speaking one can incorporate so much variety of emotion into the voice and body language, especially if one-to-one. And there is immediate response and a chance to recast the message.

So to repeat things said in a printed notice sheet in spoken service announcements makes no sense: these channels have different strengths and need to be used in different ways.

Demonstrate the message

Asking people to join the coffee rota makes a much greater impact if the notice-giver shows that he or she is doing their stint on the rota. It can be even more powerful if the church's leaders can be seen to be part of routine assignments too.

What does not go down well is when an appeal is made for people to arrive on time at services (to give one example) but some church leaders are seen to continue arriving late.

Seek passionate message-givers

The message-giver must believe in the message. So to ask an enthusiast to put it across will usually be better that having someone who is simply concerned with communicating information, however well they do it. It is rarely a good idea for a church office-holder to give out announcements about a range of topics. Better to get individuals who are passionate for their topic to put each item across, provided there are not more than two or three.

Value personal communication

We are so used to the soul-less email, that when we receive in the post a hand-written message on an attractively printed card it stands out. Most people will treasure a 'thank you for taking part in this morning's event' in this format rather than a general email to everyone which has no personal address at the start.

This of course costs – in time and possibly finance for card and for posting. But the cost may prove to be worthwhile if this motivates someone to offer to help again.

If you want people to offer as volunteers, it rarely works to put out a printed request. You may attract those who are not really gifted and at the same time the best people may be uneasy about putting their name forward. So received wisdom is that personal approach is usually best, probably coupled with public advertising so that the process can be seen to be transparent.

Focus on news

Even if announcing an event or giving annual reports, seek to make the item newsworthy with a clear headline (spoken or written), punchy content and people information. Communication is not just about giving out messages, but of so coding those messages that people listen to them, take them in and act on them. The concept of making the message into 'news' is a vital one.

Use several channels

In a commercial office everyone can work in one way so that messages can be conveyed by an intranet or via relatively few channels. But a church made up of diverse people is different. Those in their teens will be different from those in their twenties (let alone those in their seventies!). Techies will be different from those who do not own any kind of computer.

It therefore becomes necessary to use a variety of channels to put one message across. This can still be planned in a coherent way rather than just using everything that comes to hand. Spread your means across the channel list already identified rather than restricting yourself to three types of print, for example.

Keep it simple

When putting across anything, aim for one simple message. Put out different messages on different occasions rather than combining several different messages in one piece.

One useful way of ensuring this happens is to work out the one headline for the message in as few words as possible. Then start with the headline and work in as much detail as is required further along. Follow the example of a newspaper news item which does just this.

It is also important for a smaller church not to feel they have to ape their larger neighbours. Keeping to these principles does not necessarily involve high fees or expensive software.

Build a quality brand

It is well worth having one consistent type of design for print and digital use (to give everything the same 'look'), one logo with one distinctive colour. You then use this on all literature, displays, digital advertising, letterhead and website.

If you are serious about quality you should also have a 'House-style document'. This is a paper which determines how you seek to be consistent in what you write and how you present it (layout, spelling where there are permissible variations, forms for referencing Bible verses, etc.). Another area of quality concerns accurate proof-reading.

But you can over-professionalise your communications so that only the church office is trusted to produce anything. It may be better to ensure all your church materials pass a quality-assurance test, but that individual groups can produce their own leaflets to less stringent requirements, possibly with templates provided centrally.

Avoid false pictures

This is a contentious point but avoid stock photographs. Is it right to show a website page about church membership with a photo of smiling people who bear no resemblance to your church members? You also need to be careful with the use of photographs including children (always in groups, never singly, always with parental permission) but groups of the whole congregation looking to camera are good.

Whatever you communicate needs to be true. To 'sell' your church as vibrant and for people to turn up on a Sunday to find it is anything but, does no one any favours.

Tell stories

People are attracted to stories. Whether it is the parables in the Gospels, TV soap operas or real-life drama, people listen. So encourage your church members to tell their stories of how they came to faith, of how their relationship with Jesus Christ applies to their daily life at work or at home today, or what they are learning as disciples as they grow.

Invest in social media

As already mentioned, social media is the communications means of choice for many younger people. It is a powerful means of reaching large numbers very quickly and can be used to point people to the website or other forms of communication.

Pray about your communications

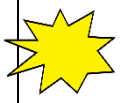
By now it should be apparent that communications comes at the heart of all church activity. So one extra principle may be to ensure that it is included in Sunday intercessions, church prayer gatherings, and monthly prayer diaries.

Website resources

This principle of news is described in more detail in Training Notes TN38, 'We've got news for us!' (internal communication) and TN39, 'We've got news for you!' (external).

For more information on producing a brand image in a straightforward way, see Article A2, 'Watch your image! – visual design for churches'.

For further ideas for principles of good communication see Training Notes TN2, 'Ten steps to help you communicate'.



Your plan might include in its section 6:

- a listing of key principles for everyone who has specific communications responsibilities to follow – base them on this list by all means, but make them your own and add others that are appropriate for your church;
- perhaps some examples for how these work out in practice.

7: Where might things go wrong?

Here are some of the main fault-lines that I observe in my consultancy work with churches and from surveys I have conducted in the past.

Lack of an overall plan

The No. 1 in my list – with churches aware that communications is not what it ought to be but continuing with an approach that throws messages around without clear thinking about a more effective way to go about this. The hope is that this article will start to improve matters for you here.

Lack of creativity

Intercessions that are the same every week, a notice-sheet without a sense of humour, a website that holds no surprises, the same old means used year by year without thought for variety.

Insufficient variety in channels

An announcement is made at church services one Sunday and the assumption then is that everyone has heard it.

But people were away, many attend erratically, those leading young people's groups were out of the building, and others had switched off because announcements are dull.

Incorrect use of channels

Examples include detailed information given out in a spoken announcement, a plea for volunteers in print as one item on a notice-sheet, a feature on the website when people have low expectations and rarely look at the site.

Last-minute information

Many churches fail to plan ahead and so announce special meetings only days in advance or explain about an important change in church life just as it happens when there is no opportunity for feedback.

Inappropriate coding

The papers for Church Council meetings run to many pages of closely argued text, which means that many potential, good Council members never stand because they are not word people. Or sermons are couched in such an academic language and style or delivered in such a boring monotone, that many people cannot take the message in.

Lack of confidentiality

Most churches spread confidential information (for prayer of course) far too freely. Some information will be sensitive and of a pastoral nature. If this then gets out it destroys trust and panders to everyone's personal need to know stuff that is none of their business.

Copyright violation

Most images found on the internet are protected by copyright and to reproduce them in a PowerPoint presentation or on the website will be illegal if without permission. There are sites with copyright-free images.

Too much information

Some notice-sheets are crammed full of print – when the amount of white space is a key feature for effectiveness. Some annual reports on church activities go on for pages and are of little interest to many people. Treasurers tend to produce full accounts for church members when what they need is one side of A4 with the headline information.

Lack of feedback

Many churches have messages coming from the leadership with little opportunity for appropriate feedback and comment. This then becomes an issue of leadership control. People want to feel they have been heard even if the final decision goes against them.

> Website resources
>
> For more on the issue of confidentiality see Training Notes TN110, 'It's confidential: but it still leaks out'. For how to avoid mistakes on phone messages see Training Notes TN105, 'Recording a voicemail message'.

Data Protection issues

There are dangers inherent in storing information in IT systems or in the cloud whether from theft, system failure or malicious interference.

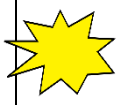
No crisis plan

Churches have been caught out when the press smell a scandal or a safeguarding issue erupts. You need to know those to contact who can offer professional help.

Attempting too much

Some churches seek to ape their larger neighbours but do not have the resources to do this. They put out a newsletter every week when monthly might be more sensible, or several Twitter feeds a day when this work diverts someone's time from something more useful.

There are many other dangers which you might like to identify in your church.



Your plan might include in its section 7:

- a list of faults you are aware of at present in your various forms of communication, with a check of the list above for others to add;
- how often you feel you can, without overstretching your resources, put out specific pieces of communication (such as a weekly news-sheet, two Twitter posts a day);
- points such as to include a Minister's letter in a publication only when they have something to say rather than forcing a monthly contribution and ending up with space-filling.

8: Who's responsible?

Communications suffers if no one person takes ultimate responsibility. So here is advice for your plan on a Co-ordinator, a team and a hub.

The value of one person responsible

Some large churches will have a member of staff as a Communications Co-ordinator, but this will be beyond what most churches can consider. Just as you have one person with overall responsibility for finance (the Treasurer) though, so it makes sense to give one person (usually as a volunteer) overall responsibility for communications. If you rely on a team alone, no one takes ultimate charge. If you rely on your leaders, this topic will not come to the fore.

This is not the same as someone responsible for one means of communication. The Co-ordinator takes an overview of every aspect of the subject. See Training Notes TN90, 'Put someone in charge' which suggest the Church Communications supremo as an official church office-holder.

The possibilities for this role of Communications Co-ordinator include:

- a member of staff in a larger church, sometimes combined with a role in materials design and production;
- a church Operations Manager has this as one element of their overall role;
- a Church Administrator has it in their role – the danger being that they focus on their likely speciality of weekly print;
- a volunteer congregational member, preferably in a leadership position;
- each church group with its own communications person (this has been tried but lacks the overarching view).

Whoever is appointed needs a short but clear job description highlighting the work of developing a Church Communications Plan and then operating it effectively. Key responsibilities might include:

- operating the communications plan as outlined in this article;
- leading a team of specialists: Administrator, Webmaster, Church Secretary, etc. to form a Communications Team (see below);
- trouble-shooting problems and putting in systems to avoid future difficulties;
- use of data and the application of a Church Management software system;
- design work, branding and media releases and links;
- oversight of all social media platforms in use, including church policies;
- compliance with copyright and other legislation;
- developing new and creative forms of communication within and outside the church.

On a related point, do you allow people to express views that will not necessarily be endorsed by your leadership? Would your internal newsletter allow an article from a member on a contentious doctrinal matter that would not be church policy?

Should the Minister see the notice-sheet before it is printed? Who authorises content on the website? Who can add notices to a board? Points such as these need to be clarified and the Co-ordinator given a clear remit.

The value of a communications team

Although it is helpful to have one person in overall oversight, the breadth of channels available point to the value of a small team of people skilled in different types of communication.

Skills would include the use of social media, print-design, website content, coding messages for those outside church circles, working with the local media.

You may want to send members of the team on local training events: on the use of software like MS Publisher, on the effective use of Facebook, or on courses run by CMS providers for their own software.

You may be tempted to make the team those who are already involved: the newsletter editor, the webmaster, and so on. That is fine if they are people who can think big-picture but if they are going to see every form of communications centred on their particular project, the team may always be dragged back into present methodology.

The value of a central hub

It is important for there to be a physical or virtual location where messages can be channelled through. This will normally be a church office where one exists. The Administrator plays a key role in understanding all the messages that will be flying around and recognising which ones need to be linked up with others to avoid double-bookings, duplication and frustration.

The value of a communications survey and review

The team might want to carry out a survey across the church's membership (and beyond?) to see how people react to existing communications. If you do this you need to keep it very simple or people are confused and you are swamped with data you cannot handle.

You might devise a simple questionnaire listing some of the forms of church communications listed in this article and ask for a simple scoring system for levels of effectiveness with space for comments. But be ready for the feedback you receive: someone will need to spend some time analysing it and presenting the findings. If you then devise a plan, ensure it remains a living document rather than one to file and ignore. Give it an annual review and update.

> Website resources
>
> For ideas to make the church office your communications hub, see Article A33 (second part), 'Roles for a church office' in the Resources section of the website.

Your plan might include in its section 8:

- the role of Communications Co-ordinator with job description;
- the role of the Communications Team;
- any needs for a survey, and the importance of an annual review;
- something about control/censorship.

9: What are we going to change?

There now needs to be a linking-up of the eight sections covered to date to provide a clear strategy for the use of communication within your church and to list priorities for action. How do the eight fit together? What do the findings imply for what should be your messages, from whom, to whom, using what data, in what ways?

This could be the most important section in the plan – but it is not possible to write a full template here because it will depend entirely on everything you have put together so far.

The first part will be a statement of a direction of travel, ideally with a clear vision of where you would love to get to. This should be followed by a listing of a few priorities. It is this ninth section that provides your outline plan for the effective use of communication.

You might now write a one-year plan with a limited number of specific aims to achieve in that time. Each aim can then be given a few date-specific targets to help you achieve the aim in one year.

This then needs updating and revising year by year so that once the first year aims are achieved you are moving on to further developments.

You may need to consider:

- What are we doing at present that needs to come to an end?
- What are we not doing at present which should become a priority for us?
- How are we going to effect this change?
- What is this going to cost?

Your plan might include in its section 9:

- some kind of statement of vision of where you want to get to in the future;
- a listing of general priority actions that will enable you to move in this direction;
- a one-year plan as a set of aims;
- each aim given some date-specific targets to reach – without being too ambitious;
- any financial budget issues.

10: How does this work in practice?

Only now are you ready to tackle some practical issues of detail. You will have to decide what the key ones might be in your case but here is one example.

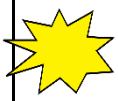
You agree that spoken announcements at Sunday services should continue. You need to ask:

- What are the criteria for what kind of items are announced in Sunday services?
- When in the service should these come: beginning, middle, end, as part of the intercessions, changing each week?
- Who should give them: Minister, office-holder, a gifted communicator, people responsible for the issue in question?
- Who authorises which items can be given out, how long is allowed, and what notice is required to enable the service timing to be properly planned?
- Are the announcements then part of the worship or an interruption to it?

For more ideas on these see Training Notes TN93, 'And now for the notices'.

You might then follow the same ideas for media releases, communicating finances, Church Meetings, use of social media or a variety of other possibilities.

To take you forward from this article, read the book '100 ways to get your church noticed' by Neil Pugmire, Church House Publishing. This may be a Church of England book but it applies to everyone and is warmly recommended.



Your plan might include in its section 10:

- A number of specific examples of communications with some of the detailed points worked out.

So there are ten questions to ask, each with some ideas for what a Church Communications Plan might contain on them.

One final warning: this article has taken this subject in some detail and a first draft of such a plan might be best done in outline so that the work does not swamp you. Smaller churches in particular will need to focus on a limited number of options. But the hope is that these ten sections provide a helpful structure for a plan that will impact your communications for the spiritual health of your church.

A listing of sample means of communication under each of the five channels already identified follows in an appendix to this article.

This article is available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index then A39. See also a range of other items on the website identified in boxes within the text above, but especially DIY Workshop W3, *How to get a message across.*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A39 under Communication.

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Appendix: some means of communication within the channels

Although shown under one channel heading, some items listed work across several channels.

Print channel

Agendas and papers for meetings
Annual accounts
Annual reports
Bookings schedule
Brochures for the church
Budgets
Church heritage guides
Church magazine
Community magazine
Diaries
Doctrinal statement
Emails
Internal newsletter
Lists of all kinds
Management accounts
Media releases
Minutes from meetings
Personal letters and cards
Posters and flyers
Prayer diaries
Printed letters
Printed records and archives
Programme cards for young people activities
Programme cards for groups
Programme cards for services
Questionnaires
Rotas
Sermon notes
Small group notes
Statements of vision, values and purpose
Weekly notice-sheet
Weekly service-sheet
Welcome packs

Speech channel

Church meetings
Church sound systems
Council and committee meetings
Grapevine / gossip
Group discussions
Interviews
One-to-one conversations
News shared in groups
Other business meetings
Prayer chains by telephone
Public reading of Scripture
Public intercessions
Refreshment post-services
Sermons and up-front teaching
Service announcements
Staff meetings
Telephone calls

Demonstration channel

Attendance at services and events
Body language on hearing messages
Christian living
Compassionate ministries and littler picking
Driving and parking behaviour
Keeping confidences
Music
Offers for volunteers
Punctuality
Role modelling in family life
Signing up on lists

Digital channel

[Many of the items under PRINT]
Blogs
Church Management Systems software
Data projection for songs and liturgy
Data projection for sermon back-up
Facebook
Google Docs, etc.
MS Office: use of Networked computers
Other social media
PowerPoint and presentation software
Scrolling notices
Shared diaries
Skype calls
Smartphones for notices etc.
Streaming of services
Tablets at meetings
Texts
Twitter
Video clips and messages
Website (mobile friendly)
Website forums
Website sermon audio files
Website service videos
YouTube channel

Visual channel

Display maps
Drama and mime
External sign-boards
Financial information on display
Internal notice-boards and displays
Leaflet racks
Logo and branding design
Name badges
Photographic displays
YouTube videos

Means of distribution

Announcements
Dropbox and equivalent
Email
Handed out at events
Leaflet racks
Mailchimp and equivalent
Media releases
Notice-sheet QR codes
Personally delivered
Pigeon-holes in church
Royal Mail
Social media
Texts

Policies you may need to write

Authorisation for public documents
Confidentiality issues
Copyright and performance
Data Protection / GDPR
Doctrinal matters clearance
Email etiquette
Photographs of young people
Use of church logo
Use of social media