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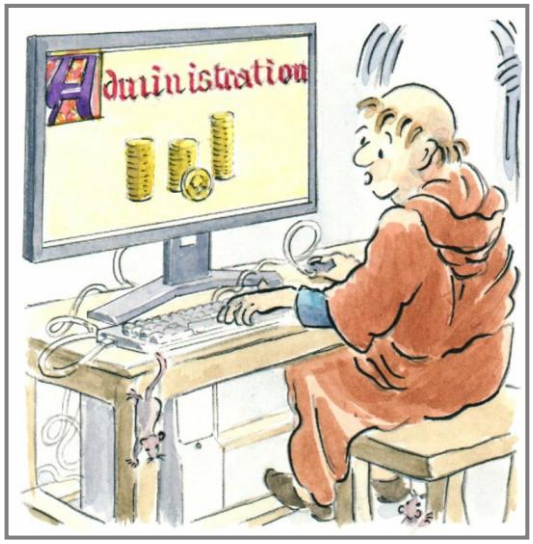

Keep all your seniors in touch

TN149 Training Notes series: Administration

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These notes are a joint venture with Peter Crumpler. Peter was Communications Director for the Church of England before being ordained. We have co-operated on a similar article over Peter's name. The impetus and basic idea for these notes were all his. The wording here is mostly John's but owes much to Peter's passion for what is covered.

Although somewhat slow to join the technology revolution, many churches are now very much online. Information and comment for church members and beyond is held on the website, on social media platforms, in SMS texts and on email. Many churches now have both liturgy and the words for songs and hymns projected on to screens in services and have open discussions on church 'WhatsApp' groups.

But this is leaving many in our congregations out of the loop. Not everyone has a PC or laptop at home, not everyone uses email or social media, and not everyone has a smart phone. On the whole this impacts older members the most, although many seniors have embraced the new culture with enthusiasm so generalities can be dangerous. Some younger people are non-tech too.

The position may right itself as time goes by and those growing older have been accustomed to the use of tech, but it remains a real issue today.

In the world outside church, public outrage has recently reversed an idea that railway stations might lose their staffed ticket offices, but lack of local branches mean that banking becomes wholly online for many and it seems booking appointments with your GP is going that way too. Parking can be difficult without a smartphone,

Age UK has launched an 'Offline and overlooked' campaign calling for all public services to be legally required to offer and promote an offline way of reaching and using their services. They point out that many people prefer to handle their finances, their bills or their health matters in person or over the phone.

They say 'Older people who aren't or choose not to be online are being locked out of essential services. It's discrimination – plain and simple. And it poses real risks to people's health, wellbeing, finances and ability to participate fully in our society.'

They add, 'No one should feel forced to perform important tasks online if they don't feel comfortable'.

Left behind at church

By no means is this a call to churches to hold back on the use of tech. Where would we be without our church management systems such as 'ChurchSuite', our finance packages and our online communication?

But it is a warning not to ignore those who are not into tech and who are in danger of being left out of things that matter at church. They are members of the church family but can easily feel ostracised by the rest of us if we ignore their position.

Here are a number of ways in which churches can show they care for those who have yet to embrace the digital revolution. But, first, some important principles to inform all we action.

Seven principles to follow

1 See the actions suggested below as a matter of pastoral care. They take people's needs into consideration. They enable a real sense of belonging.

2 Never give the impression that non-tech people are second class. You may be proud of your high-tech systems and, without realising it, assume that the non-IT alternatives are second rate. Tech has drawbacks as well as advantages. Some people feel threatened by and fearful of it. They are our sisters and brothers.

3 Don't forget that some people without tech may be in this position for personal, financial reasons. It is not necessarily an essential expense for those on tight budgets.

4 As you consider what to offer, put yourselves in the shoes of those who are not into tech in their lives or who are particularly cautious of it. Aim for alternatives in parallel which enable you to use tech for most people but which make proper allowances for those who either do not have access to it or who find it confusing or stressful.

5 Don't assume you can just place hard-copy items in pigeon-holes and so avoid distribution by post or direct delivery to people's homes. This might apply for those who do not get to church every week or papers with a response deadline such as on committee agendas. Be generous with delivery speed.

6 Appoint someone as a tech adviser to those who need help. This person needs to be a good and patient teacher – not all tech experts are! They could offer to help anyone on how to use their smartphone or laptop and be available when questions arise. They might also advise on how to avoid scams and on what to buy and how to buy it.

7 If you introduce a church management system like 'ChurchSuite', ensure there is proper training on how to use it for all the congregation. Many people who want to access it find it confusing at first but quickly pick it up with some help. Consider, too, people who join your church after such systems have been introduced.

Ten practical ideas

Given those seven principles, here are ten practical ideas of how to help those not into tech.

1 Ensure there are alternative ways of discovering information

- Have a telephone alternative for anyone who wants to approach the church for information or help. It could be landline or mobile. Of course you may have a weblink, a website online enquiry form or a QR code, but include an old fashioned telephone number too. Publicise this number on notice-sheets, sign-boards and any take-away literature.
- Publicise the telephone number clearly on the website. For many churches, this will take you to the church office. If this is staffed for only limited hours each week, have a helpful voicemail and ensure you phone back as promised. Many people who are online still want to talk to a human being rather than fill in a form or navigate a confusing IT system.

2 Include non-digital alternatives for booking events

- When asking people to book for a church event, remember that 'eventbrite' is not available to some in your congregation who, instead, need something straightforward such as a physical ticket or a sign-up sheet.
- If you organise concerts or other regular events in your church or halls buildings, let the church office sell tickets as well as having an online booking form.

3 Have a printed database available and remind people on rotas

- Those with a smartphone can easily check the online database, but some people with such tools find a print-out easier to access, even if it tends to go out of date as time goes on. Just make sure you have everyone's permission for this under GDPR.
- Most people may well receive software-generated reminders when they are on duty on a rota of some kind, but some people will not get these and need a phone call or other means built into the system so they are not left out.

4 Don't expect everyone to follow your church services on screens

- Some screens are quite high up and older people do not want to get a stiff neck from staring upwards for any length of time. Some projectors are not powerful enough for the size of building when sun is shining in through the windows which makes the text difficult to read. Some simply have text that is too small.
- So print a few service books, in good size fonts, and have them available. Do the same for what used to be given out as service sheets.

5 Don't disenfranchise people on networks

- If you have an email prayer chain, add a telephone system too so those not on email can take part. A co-ordinator rings those people up at each use of the chain. If there are a significant number of people not on email, have a two-

tiered system so the co-ordinator rings three people who each ring three others. And, yes, you may get message distortion if there are too many tiers!

- If you have' WhatsApp' groups, enable non-smartphone people to join in in some way, although this is not as straightforward as other solutions above.

6 Print a reasonable number of service/notice sheets

- Have these readily available at services so people can pick one up. Some may need to be in a large font.
- Do the same for weekly news-sheets, monthly newsletters, sermon notes, annual reports and occasional letters from leaders or the Treasurer. Encourage those who get these by email/'mailchimp' to leave the hard copies for those who really need them.

7 Distribute hard-copies of committee papers to those who opt for this

- You may not have people without IT access on your committees simply because they cannot easily access the papers. So have this available in any case so anyone can join the church council or committees. Include agendas, papers and minutes.
- Ensure such papers are in people's hands with the required notice, which may mean post or home delivery rather than assuming they will pick them up next Sunday from a pigeon-hole in church (see Principle No. 5 above).

8 Make an audio CD of your services

- If you record and/or livestream your services, you might make an audio only version available on CD for those who have a CD player but no access to 'YouTube' or 'Facebook'.
- You could then distribute this to any house-bound or care home residents who might value listening.

9 Include financial giving by cash

- This needs care. Churches may well not want to encourage cash giving, whether loose or in envelopes, and instead focus on standing orders, direct debits, card readers (and BACS payments for one-off gifts). But for some people who receive their pensions in cash, it makes sense to set aside part for the church so do not ignore cash giving completely.
- 'The offering' in a service is an important part of worship and should be emphasised to include standing orders, but not neglecting cash donors.

10 Create a printed library of these website resources

- Finally, a note about these Training Notes which are available on John's website and so require internet access to find them, which conflicts with what this item is all about! They are, however, designed for hard-copy printing so you might like to print out a range of relevant Articles and Training Notes from the

Resources section of the site and set up a church library for them. There is no copyright restriction for less than 30 copies.

- Promote the library. Have it available in church and perhaps have a booking-out system so people can take resources home to read and then return them.

These notes are designed to help churches take genuine care of those of their members who are not into tech. They aim to help such people feel welcome as church members, rather than being awkward in a world that has overtaken them and which frustrates them. Make sure your church does not have a blind spot on this issue and so causes hurt to a number of your members.

Set an example to the world of how to include everyone without leaving some people, many of them elderly, in the dark. Keep everyone in touch!

These notes are available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index then TN149. See also Article A53, *Organising pastoral care,* plus Training Notes TN46, *A beginner's guide to IT security,* and TN143, *Protect your church from scams.*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN149 under Administration (with a link to Communication).

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