john truscott
church consultant and trainer

Create a quality website
... by asking the right questions

A14 Articles series: Communication

When this article was first written a website's purpose was to put across information. Unlike print, the site could be regularly updated and developed.

All that is still true, but sites are now becoming more interactive. Visitors can react with a site by asking questions, joining in a discussion, accessing social media, downloading files and playing recordings. And sites now need to be 'responsive' so they reformat correctly for tablet and smartphone viewing.

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

With this in mind here are eight key questions to ask before you talk to your designer (who gives it its look) and your developer (who makes the technical aspects work). You need to ask the same questions if you are doing it all yourself or using a simple template from a website company. There are also checklists for style and content.

Eight questions to ask

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);
- younger members of your church (as they interact with the web in a different way from adults over, say, 30);
- your local community and networks (most of whom may 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 members of any 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 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-type course.
- to feel confident about approaching the church to ask for a wedding, a baptism or a funeral;

Secondly, for your teens:

- to point their friends to a site that's cool and linked up to social media;
- to join in a discussion, to follow up last weekend's group, to link with your social media output;
- to feel good about belonging here.

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

3: How will we work with our designer/developer?

Your designer may be a professional web company, a member of your church who has the ability to undertake this work for you, or you may simply be using a standard church template of some kind. So you have to decide whether you are looking for a professional and relatively expensive piece of work that then stands out from the crowd, or one that is more basic. How easy does it need to be to edit pages?

IDEA 1

Before you start, ask different types of people what information and resources they would want to discover from the site, and how they might want to interact with it. When you have your site ready, show it to these people and ask for their honest reactions. Test it in different web browsers too. It may look different in Microsoft Edge compared with Firefox or Chrome, or in different versions of any one browser.

Whoever you are working with, you then need to consider what parameters you want them to understand about how the site will come across. The visuals, the design, the options and the structure will together create an image of your church.

How do you want to present yourself? 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 1 and 2.

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.

But these points apply to the style of writing for the whole site. Is this a site for intellectuals or for anyone living in your area? The way you write your material is going to have a major effect on the way the whole site comes across. Not many people have the skill to write the content for a successful site – so you may find that your leaders are not the best people for this task.

At this point, a word of warning. Unless you are going for a very basic site, be prepared to spend many more hours than you think in the initial development stages, even if you are relying on a professional firm to do all the hard work for you. You have to write the content, design how it will fit together (which pages lead on to others). Then when dealing with your designer/developer you will have meetings to instruct them, proofs to evaluate, questions from them to answer, their work to monitor, pages to rewrite, and so on. Be prepared to invest a considerable amount of time into this part of the process – long before your site goes live.

If your site is a complicated one, there will be numerous bugs to sort out too: it all takes time and, often, considerable frustration.

4: What resources are available to manage the site?

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 sites are becoming more sophisticated and it is easy to spot an 'amateur' one. Use a specialist agency to act as designer/developer (one-off cost) and to 'host' the site (annual fee). It is good and not expensive 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.

On modern 'web content management system' (WCMS) sites different people can edit their own pages with minimal training but this requires careful co-ordination. The basic design is fixed but users can edit most of the wording. Registered members can also have the ability to edit their own database entry, for example.

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

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

---

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'! Check if they have used a church website firm or not.

---

normally on the top or left, and modern sites have a 'breadcrumb' trail as you open a page to show where you have come from.

Map it all out on paper first. Choose up to ten main areas and make these your 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:

- Who we are
- What we believe (keep it very simple)
- Questions you may have
- Sundays at Christ Church
- Mid-week activities
- Youth and children
- Links to other sites
- Get in touch
- Members' area.

Confidential information for members goes in the final section here, but be aware that showing a separate members' area can act as a negative message to others.

'Who we are' might then have pages for:

- The congregation (emphasis on everyone but with selected life stories)
- 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 site plan and postcode link to map site or for sat nav)
- 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' needs to link to 'How do I find you?'). Next add in an outline of content for each page. But keep it as simple and straightforward as you can.

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

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 (best if all taken at about the same time with a common background). 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. Keep them up-do-date.

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. Devise criteria for checking success: monitor page hits, assess online comments, 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 to 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.) Include links to your Facebook and Twitter sites assuming you have these.

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 tries 'church Anytown', check that brings you up. Links from other sites help too so it is worth experimenting a bit.

8: What level of interaction do we want?

If you want to keep things simple, then you may want to leave the site as an information portal. But if you are keen to let visitors, whether church members or others, interact with the site in some way, you will need to consider what kind of things you require and check any budgetary implications.

Here are some possibilities to consider:

- A response form – the simplest type of interaction.

- Web forums – an online discussion on given topics (or 'threads') which allow people to react to each other's views.

- Comment facilities – where people can add their views at the end of an article.

- Editing facilities – where people can edit their own interest page or their entry on a database or address list.

- Payment facilities – perhaps by a link to PayPal or facilities for card payments for gifts or shopping items.

Be careful. Web forums and comment facilities need careful monitoring. People may put inappropriate, offensive or illegal comment on – and you are legally responsible for this. So make sure you keep a very careful eye on all such input.

IDEA 3

Include password-protected areas for certain groups (in addition to members in general), and especially for your teens pages which may be rather more wacky than the rest of the site. But be careful. Always assume someone's password will be discovered.

Work on the basis that nothing on the internet is ultimately safe.

A design/style checklist

A website is not the same as a textbook! Some members of your church will expect you to include content that is simply too formal or too turgid for this medium. Your website is more like a tabloid newspaper than a theological tome. So here are some very basic guidelines about layout and style. Your designer/developer should help you with all this, but you need to be aware of the issues.

Creating a positive image

Keep these points in mind as you put the site together.

1   The site needs a simple layout, with an uncluttered, attractive and consistent page design. Some churches try to cram far too much in to one page, but this creates a feel of untidy busyness. Link to your social media platforms on every page of the site.

2   The site should be easy to navigate, so that any child can find their way round. Try to avoid black holes where you end up on a page and cannot find your way out. Or home pages that advertise events without guiding you on to what matters.

3   Churches should be offering sites that are highly 'accessible' so that everyone, irrespective of disability, can use them. Instruct your designer for this. Examples include text equivalent alternatives to auditory and visual content, not relying on colour alone, using features that enable activation of page elements via a variety of input devices, user control of time-sensitive content changes, etc.

4   It is helpful if you can include one or two creative features into the design (but not gimmicks) to make the site stand out from others.

5   Try to introduce colour into the site, but unless you specifically want the pages to look zany (as a youth site might), it is better to use colour selectively. Remember too that black text on white background is easier to read than anything else.

6   Ensure that your graphics are large enough to see clearly, but small enough to keep file sizes down. You want pages to load quickly.

7   Keep the font size legible for the line length. Check out other sites for legibility but the smaller the print you use, the narrower the columns you should use.

8   Given point 7, do use different font sizes for headings, sub-headings and footnotes. Well designed variety will keep people reading.

9   Make sure the writing style is simple sentences, avoiding jargon, with short

paragraphs and gaps between them. It is very difficult to read a long paragraph of text on screen.

10   Go for bullet-point format rather than prose. Use numbered or bulleted lists – aim for a staccato effect.

11   Do not have long pages that all need scrolling down. Your main message needs to fit onto the first screen.

12   Make your web-links visibly obvious so it is clear what to click to move to other pages or files. A different colour for the text can do this nicely.

13   Typos, links that do not work and design faults will give your site a bad image. It needs to be tested regularly.

14   Ensure the site has appropriate

response routes: easy forms to complete, clear instructions for what to do next, and so on.

15   But the common fault of so many church sites is to be out of date. If you have a 'this week's notice-sheet' it needs to be this week's. If there has been a staff change, the new details and photographs need to be on the site immediately. Next week's services need to be next week's.

What matters is how the site appears on someone else's computer (perhaps more basic than yours, or using a different web browser). This is sometimes not straightforward.

Avoid 'Flash' or similar gimmicks. Remember that graphics can only support the words. It is vital to get your words both right and legible. So the skill of the writer is vital.

A contents checklist

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. Remember too that most modern sites are designed in columns so you can have details such as 'contact us', 'location', 'this week' on every page.

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 (or FRONT) 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 contact details (post, telephone, email) or put these on a separate 'Contact us' page.

Give a people-centred not a building-centred feel. You might include a personal welcome in the

form of a video clip. Many now use a series of changing photographs as a slideshow.

If you want to appeal to people outside your church, you need to give pride of place to you reception/administration staff (with photos) as they will be the first point of contact when people phone or call. Yet most churches do not seem to have appreciated this point.

You must include a clear link to your church safeguarding arrangements on this page.

This is your shop window. Dress it well. What one message do you want to put across about your church? Don't overcrowd the page.

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/video (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 through a standard form (to avoid spam).

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. Keep it short.

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

Newsletters and articles
Other publications or articles with comment facilities.

Recent news
Snappy outlines of recent headlines or press releases.

How to find us (linked throughout the site)
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 when in need.

Safeguarding information
Your commitment to safeguarding, plus policy.

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, (lack of) dress code, the welcome they will receive, what to expect, children/crèche, loos, disability facilities, refreshments, 'collection'. Ask your visitors what they want to know.

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).

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 that provide central resources.

Community links
Details of visiting programmes, events designed for the local community, compassion ministries, etc.

Way-in courses
As in section 3.

Other courses and training events
Whether regular and on-going, or one-offs, for church members or the wider community.

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, missional groups, outreach activities.

7: YOUTH AND CHILDREN

Overview
Strategy for youth and children's work. Policy on safeguarding children and vulnerable adults.

Students / 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 (linked throughout the site)
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.

Compassionate ministries
Details of specific projects of care within the local area or beyond.

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 rooms (you may need a separate, linked site).

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
Features of the building, if of special interest.

11: COMMUNICATION

Contact us
Details of church (office) postal address, email link, etc., office opening times with photograph of those who are likely to answer the telephone call. This page needs to be easily discovered from any point on the site.

Links to other sites
Links to other local churches, key national Christian sites, mission agencies, etc. But also to local sites for community information.

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

12: RESTRICTED ACCESS

In practice some of the above points may be included in a members' area. But there will be a range of other more content not suitable for the public domain. Consider:

Database
Online database or address list (provided everyone has given their permission) with the ability for each person to edit their own record.

Rotas
All current rotas with those listed able to make alterations within certain limits.

Prayer, minutes and other notices
Information and other news that needs to be available to members only. Minutes of members' meetings might be included here.

Web forums
Discussions on current issues in church life. Also, other interactive features as discussed earlier.

Now read Training Notes TN113. *What to avoid on your website,* to help you steer clear of the common mistakes that churches make.