Why Have A Website?

So, why should you have a website for your church? Isn't it just another thing to add to the to-do list? Or will it really be useful?

Obviously, 'everyone else does' it not a good enough reason for you to go to the trouble (and possibly the expense) of setting up a website for your church. But there are definite advantages in having some kind of presence on the internet:

- It shows that your church is active, and is a useful way of telling your community about your church and any organisations or activities they might be interested in.
- Many people, especially young people, turn to the internet before anything else when looking for a church. If you have a simple web page with a list of service times and a welcome message, people will be able to find you more easily.
The website can provide a handy source of times and dates for people who are involved in church activities – if they forget what time an event is happening, they can easily look it up.

In other words, an effective website is a useful way to enhance communications among the congregation and with the community around you; it should not be thought of as an alternative to face-to-face contact, newsletters etc., but as an addition to them.

Where do we start?
So, you've decided that your church needs a website. Where do you start?
Before we get technical, there are a few decisions to make:

What is the purpose of your website? Will it be a simple site which provides straightforward information such as service times and contact details? Do you want to use it to tell people in the congregation what's happening in the church week by week? Are you aiming to attract the local community as well? For most churches, the answer will be a mixture of these things and more, but it is helpful to get a rough idea of what you're aiming for before you start.

Remember that it's always easier to start off small and build the site up. A huge website can quickly get out of date if no one is keeping an eye on it – it's better to have a smaller site with information which doesn't need to be changed.

Who's going to be in charge of the site? It's best to have one point of contact for all things website-related. You may want to have a team of people, but even then it is good to select one person who has overall responsibility, particularly when it comes to deciding what can go on the website. You may have someone who builds the site and then hands it over to someone else who will keep it updated.

What should the site look like? You want your website to reflect your church – so, should it be 'funky', stylish, fun or something else? You may be able to leave this up to the designer, if you have one, but even then you will want to give them some guidance.

Domain Names
One of the first steps of getting a website is to register a domain name. This means the website address that people will type in, to access your website. So for instance, www.irishmethodist.org is the Methodist Church in Ireland’s website domain name. You can register your domain name from a variety of providers but you need to check to see if it is available first. You can expect to pay around £6-£20 for this, depending on what extension you have (.org.uk .org etc.).

Some useful websites for registering domain names and checking if yours is available:
http://www.domainmonster.com/
http://www.123-reg.co.uk/
**Website Hosting**

Along with your domain name, you will also need to pay for ‘Web space’ from a website host to store all your web pages, images and other documents. You can buy your domain name and web hosting from the same company, which can be very convenient. Again, there is a cost involved and it is anything from about £15 + per year. Companies that offer good web hosting and domain names:

http://www.123-reg.co.uk/
http://www.justhost.com/
BUILDING A WEB SITE

There are several ways of building a website, and which you choose will depend on how big the site is going to be, and the available technical expertise. The three main ways of building a site are:

1. Use a blog

You can use software like Wordpress to build a small site relatively quickly. You'll need a bit of expertise, but it's not too difficult. A number of churches use this method and find that it works well.

It works like this:

- Go to wordpress.com (or whichever site you are using) and sign up
- Choose a name for your site (probably xxx Methodist Church), and pick a template you like
- You will be given a home page, which you can update straight away, so add whatever information you want there
Advantages of blogging software:

- It's quick – if you know what you're doing, you can set a site up in 15 minutes
- It's usually free
- It's fairly easy to update once you know how

Disadvantages of blogging software:

- You need a certain amount of technical expertise to set it up, especially if you want extra pages
- You have very little control over the site appearance – you choose between a number of pre-set templates. Your site may end up looking like a lot of others out there
- It's hard for someone with no technical skills to change anything on the site
- It doesn't work very well for large sites

Cost: usually free
Time needed: half an hour will get you a basic site
Flexibility: not great – the site can end up looking generic; you may not be able to customise it much if it doesn't fit your needs
Skill needed: some technical skill is needed, both for setting it up and updating information

2. Build the site yourself

Another option is to build the website yourself (or get someone in the congregation to build it for you). If you have someone who has the necessary skills, then this is often the best thing to do. You'll need to give them a good brief explaining what you want, and then they should be able to get on with it.
Advantages of building the site yourself:

You get exactly what you want – you can build the site to look how you want it, and you can add as much information as you want

Disadvantages of building the site yourself:

- You need to have someone who really knows what they're doing
- You may have to pay for hosting, unless someone offers to host the site for free, the person who builds it will be able to advise on this
- It is easy to end up with a site which can only be updated by the person who set it up. You need to make sure that someone else can do it if that person goes on holiday, gets sick or just gets too busy to handle the site. This should be discussed beforehand – is the person building the site willing to update it, or can they build it so that other people have access? Are they responsible for deciding what goes on it?

Cost: hopefully free, although you may need to pay for hosting (about £100 a year)
Time needed: generally a few weeks
Flexibility: excellent - you can have the site exactly how you want it
Skill needed: you need someone who really knows what they're doing

3. Get a web design company to build it for you

There are plenty of web design companies around, and they will build (and host) the site for you. They will also be able to advise you on site content and
on the appearance of your site. They can build in a Content Management System so that a number of people can have access to the site and can update it easily.

A number of web design agencies specialise in church-related sites, and will be happy to talk to you about your needs.

**Advantages of using a web design company**

- You don't need any technical expertise – just tell them what you want, and they will do it
- The company can advise you on what to put on the site
- A Content Management System provides an easy way to update the site, even for people who do not have technical expertise. This usually allows you to add as many pages as you want

**Disadvantages of using a web design company**

You'll have to pay for the site design and a yearly hosting fee

**Cost:** generally a few hundred pounds for a static site, or up to £1000 for a large site with a Content Management System. You will also have to pay about £100 per year for hosting.

**Time needed:** most agencies will build the site in about a month

**Flexibility:** Good – you can specify exactly what the site should look like

**Skill needed:** none
WEB SITE CONTENT

It can be hard to know what to put on a church website, and the exact content will depend on what the site is for. As a bare minimum, the site should have:

- Church name & address
- A phone number for the church office
- An email address so that people can contact you
- A welcome message to say that visitors are welcome to come to services
- Times of Sunday services

If you have more than one page on your site, then the things above should be on the front page, or very easy to find from there. This is the kind of information that people who don't know the church will want to see, so they need to be able to find it quickly. If they can't, they may go somewhere else.

You can also add:

- News items – have a 'news feed' which gives recent news from the church. This shows visitors that you are active, and it allows you to get information out to the congregation quickly. It will have to be kept updated, though, so only do it if you know you'll have the manpower to keep it up-to-date.
- Upcoming events – a good way to invite people along.
- Photos – it's good to have photos of church life, so that visitors can get a feel for what goes on there. See the section on 'Precautions' below to see what you can add.
- Who's Who – let people see who does what in the church. This is helpful for members of the congregation who need to approach someone but don't know who to talk to. Include photos as well – otherwise it can feel exclusive to outsiders, who may have been told to 'contact Mary' without having a clue who she is!
- Activities – include details of things that go on, including times and places and a brief description, especially if it's not obvious from the name. Larger churches and those with a lot of activities may want to have a separate page for each activity.
- Location map and a photo of the church – if people are coming for a christening, wedding or other event in the church, they may be travelling some distance, so it's helpful to have a map to show where the church is, and a photo of the church so that they know what they're looking for. Google Maps is a useful way to create a map for your site.
- Links to other sites – for example, other churches in your circuit, useful resources and so on. Remember that it's better to have a short list of relevant sites than a long list of irrelevant ones.
PRECAUTIONS

Very often, churches are unsure about what can and can't be displayed on websites. Photographs, in particular, can be problematic. It's a good idea to draw up a set of guidelines from the start, and stick to them. You may wish to ensure the following:

- Photos of individual people or small groups should only be used with permission. If anyone in the photo is under 18, get written parental consent before using the photo, and explicitly mention that it's for the church website. Most parents are used to filling in consent forms for photos, so it is usually not a problem. For general photos (e.g. A church service) you don't need permission, but it is often polite to ask.
- Do not include names or other identifying information alongside children in photographs of them. This can include blurring out name badges if they are visible.
- Photos can be taken down if someone objects. Don't fill your website with bad or embarrassing photos of people. If people know that you don't put bad photos up, they're more likely to give you permission to photograph them!
- Only use photos you have permission to use. Don't take them from other sites unless you have permission first. If someone in the congregation is a keen photographer, get them to supply you with photos of events.
- Do not allow photos of people to be copied from your website for other sites, unless you have permission from the people in the photos (or parents/guardians for children).

As well as photographs, other web content which you may need to think through includes:

- Personal information such as phone numbers, email addresses, home addresses etc. It is best to include only the church office and email address.
- Times of children's activities – in particular, if there is an unusual or special event like a sleepover, for security reasons it may be best not to give details on the website.
- Deaths, marriages etc. - it is best not to put information like this on a website without permission from those concerned. Often, newly-married couples will be happy to have a wedding picture on your site, but always check first, and only use photos you have taken yourself or which are given to you.
- Adverts – sometimes you can get free web hosting from your broadband supplier, but in return, they will often insist on putting adverts on your page.
- You don't know what these adverts are going to be, and in some cases they will not be appropriate, so it's best to pay the extra to have an ad-free site.
• Audio files – a number of churches put weekly sermons online. However, this can mean that you need to upgrade your web hosting package, and you will have to arrange for them to be edited and uploaded every week; in reality, the sermons are very rarely downloaded, so it could be extra expense and lots of extra hassle for very little benefit. Also bear in mind that it is illegal to make hymns and songs (or any other type of music) available for download, and this includes congregational singing, so an audio file of your service may well be illegal. If you want to have audio downloads, stick to the sermon.