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MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR CHURCH WEBSITE

By Hugh Bourne

I wonder what your church website is looking like at the moment? Perhaps that over-enthusiastic youth group member has just relaunched version 72 of the site, or maybe the neon hit counter has got stuck on 999 hits. Could it be that you've lost the passwords or the webmaster has moved to the other side of the country? Do you even have a website? If not, let me gently suggest that you're doing your church and your community a disservice.

In the previous issue of *Crossway* (Spring 2013) we explored how churches can "sell themselves", presenting a credible image in print and online to their communities. The online presence of your church is vital, visitors to your church will probably gain their first impression of you from your website. After all, how often do you visit somewhere new without first finding out more information from their website?

How can we make the most of our church websites with limited time and resources? How can we present ourselves effectively online? Here's a few steps that you might want to consider taking:

Keep it Simple

While I'm sure we'd all love a church website with bells and whistles, the truth is that simple is best, with current web design approaches tending towards minimalism. All I (prospective visitor) want to know is, where you meet, when you meet, and something about who you are which isn't veiled in Christian jargon. It's too easy to let important information which your visitors need to know to get crowded out by the "business" of church. I used to think the primary church web site user was the church member, so naturally you'd fill your website with rotas, programmes, diaries, but in reality most of the visitors to your church website won't be your members. Keep your website, especially your home page, simple, clear and focused towards non-Christians in your community.

Keep it up to date

There's something appealing about an online calendar, details of who's preaching next week - not least for the congregation as they can pick their favourites! However, as soon as Sunday has gone the website becomes outdated. There's so much information that we could add to our websites, but let me encourage you only to add information that you can keep up to date. Out of date information shows to the visitor that this church doesn't care about them. The implication of this is that your website needs to be simple to administer and easy to delegate tasks to others. The best tool to do this is a website software system called Wordpress, used by over 60 million websites worldwide.

Engage your community

When you go to a restaurant, the cinema, theatre, sporting event or shopping centre you'll undoubtedly check their website first, to find the necessary details. Potential visitors to your church will do the same. Whether they come for a wedding, funeral, baptism, school event, or a community group meeting in your building, they will want to know the basic details - where is the church, can I park nearby, and just maybe I might want to know what you have to offer on a Sunday and throughout the week. Use pictures of people who might be known locally, use iconic images of your local area to show people you have a concern for the community, but most of all make sure your church has the best website among all the community groups in your area!

Use Video and Social Media

Did you know that YouTube is the second biggest search engine globally? People expect content to be available in video format, since we're too lazy to read long text-based pages. Video content is great if you can produce it, but the equipment needed can be expensive. Work on readable, engaging copy first, invest in video content if you have the resources. In the UK there are over 30 million Facebook users and over 10 million on Twitter. On platforms where many are deliberately engaging in their local communities as well as in topical discussion it would be crazy for churches not to be engaging with these people, meeting them on their forum and seeing social media as a legitimate means of engaging people with the gospel.

Money!

If your website is as important as I suggest, effectively your 'shop-window' for visitors and your community, then you'll want to invest your time, budget, and gifts of your members to make it great. There are lots of free and cost-effective ways to improve your church's website. However, sometimes you won't have any expertise in your congregation, or you may want to initially deter some well-meaning amateurs from getting involved. You may have no budget at all, but you can still set up a free site at Wordpress.com, while Twitter accounts and Facebook pages are both free. Or you can pay for a professional to do what they know and help you sell yourself effectively online.

There's lots of tips, tricks and recommendations that could be made. Hugh has helped many churches get online and is willing to consult with specific advice on any website questions from Church Society members - hughbourne@students.oakhill.ac.uk

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