

Congregation Web Sites: A Quick Guide

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Congregational websites can be an important point of contact between the church and its members as well as a way for potential visitors to learn about the congregation's programs and personality before they come to the church.

Though websites require some basic technologies, they are not primarily technological projects. A website is first and foremost a communications project, a way of telling the congregation's story to the community and keeping members informed. Planning for a site, recruiting people to put it together and update it, and determining content should always be informed by principles of story telling and public relations along with tech considerations.

Prerequisites

Before you dive into building or buying a website, you need to have a couple of things in place.

1. *A domain name for your site, such as ministrylink.org or stjohnelca.org.*

Domain names are the Internet's address book, which allow people to type in a familiar name and be directed to the computer that hosts your site. A domain name should be easy to remember and type. And they must be unique, which means that if there is already a stjohnslutheran.org you need to find something different. Domain registrars such as Network Solutions (<http://www.networksolutions.com>) and 975Register (<http://www.975register.com>) allow you to experiment and will suggest possible alternatives if the name you want is taken.

Q: What is an appropriate web name for your congregation? Brainstorm some examples. Which are easiest to remember and type?

The last part of the domain name -- .org, .com, etc. -- is called the "top level" domain (TLD). Normally you will want a .org domain, as it indicates that you are a non-profit organization. You may want a .com address, even though it is commercial, because .com is the suffix most people think of when remembering a web address. You can also get .net addresses (normally for network providers but other uses are not excluded) or .info addresses. If several of these TLDs are available for your desired name, buy them! You can point all of them to your site, and it will avoid confusion if you are stjohnelca.org and there is another stjohnelca.com church site. Domains cost from \$10-25 per year depending on the TLD. Since you plan to be

around for a while, and the Internet isn't going away, I recommend buying the longest term you can afford. You will want to stay on top of renewing the domain, otherwise it can be sold off.

2. A plan for what you want to communicate on your site.

A website can be a living, breathing, interactive organism. Or it can be a simple static page – the web equivalent of the Yellow Pages ad – that allows people to find you by Google or other search engines.

Of course the ideal is to give an up-to-date picture of your congregation on your website. Look to have a current schedule of worship and events, messages from your pastor(s), articles and testimonies by members. In the Google world, people are likely to experience your church through your website before deciding whether to visit. Make a good first impression by being current, concise and relevant. Consider posting videos made by the congregation, sermon audio, and other ways people can experience the church. (Just don't post recordings of copyrighted music without the proper licenses!)

But if you do not have the people to have a regularly updated site, having a well-designed "ad" site with current information and up-to-date email and phone contacts for the congregation, as well as address and driving directions, can help you connect with people whose fingers now do the walking online.

Essential items for church website:

- **Location and driving directions**
- **Day/time of gatherings and special events**
- **Brief description of your mission and purpose**
- **A sense of the personality of the congregation**

Q: What local stories/content do you have available to post?

- **Sermons, devotions, spiritual guidance?**
- **Stories about events and activities?**
- **Stories of the congregation in mission?**
- **Personal testimonies?**

3. A team

Maintaining even a simple site requires some work. Once you know what information you want to publish, make sure you know who will write it, photograph it, and post it. Who will upload the pastor's newsletter article to the web? Who will update the calendar? How will sermon audio/video get into digital form and posted? You don't need a huge team or a detailed plan, but know how you will deliver your content, and make sure you are clear about what viewers can expect. If you post

sermons occasionally don't give the impression they will all be posted, for example. Know what you can manage and who is responsible, or your site can start with a burst of energy and quickly dwindle and lose relevance.

It is important to spell out in advance who is ultimately responsible for the site. It is good practice to have the pastor and council "buy-in" to the purpose and concept for the site. Then these leaders should trust the team put in place to manage the site. Having a staff member or committee have to approve every item on the site is a recipe for an out-of-date, uninteresting site.

Also get buy-in from staff, such as the secretary or administrator, who produces print items and will have to supply documents to be posted (or learn to post them themselves).

Q: Who will handle the technical end of your site – hosting, posting, etc.?

Q: Who will be the editor – the person who oversees all content? (They should have writing/communications skills, not just tech skills.)

Q: Who else will be part of the team and share posting?

Q: How will documents (pastor's messages, sermons, newsletter articles, etc.) and media (audio of sermons, youth group videos, etc.) be created and given to the team for posting?

Rolling-your-own site

The best way to set up a dynamic website is to use a content management system (CMS). A CMS is an automated system that allows you to set up your overall design once and then update the information in the site without any programming or design work. Essentially it separates your information, which is the core of your site, from the look-and-feel/design of the site, so that anyone who can use a word processor can update your site. Gone are the days of paying a web designer or finding a volunteer coder to do simple site updates!

The good news is that much of the software is free, and hosting is inexpensive. This leaves you free to devote your time and budget to the important stuff – your content and your design.

Software

A very popular, robust and widely-supported CMS is WordPress (<http://www.wordpress.org>). WordPress is a very flexible, skinnable framework that draws content from a database of articles to keep your site fresh. WordPress is actively developed and is always evolving. There are a variety of free "themes," as WordPress designs are called, that you can download and modify (or use as-is). (See

<http://wordpress.org/extend/themes/>). Most themes are simple blogs, as WordPress began life as blogging software. However, the capabilities of the CMS are robust and you can build a solid organizational site with it. If you don't have a designer or developer at hand, you can find a number of premium themes from vendors such as The Theme Foundry, Woo Themes, Elegant Themes, and others that can give you a strong head start on building a site appropriate for an organization such as a church. WordPress also has a strong ecosystem of "plugins," small programs/modules that allow you to do everything from making a mobile version of your site to building your own social network.

There are other free CMS programs, such as Joomla (<http://www.joomla.org/>) and Drupal (<http://drupal.org/>). You can find links to many others by doing a Google search for "free CMS".

The main thing is that you will want to look at the entire package – not just whether the software is free, but how well it is supported, whether complete themes/designs are available, and whether it has plugins you need. Most importantly, you need to ask two questions:

- Do you have the skills/expertise to work with the CMS and its designs? And
- Will the software provide the features you need for your site?

For example, in my experience it has been very easy to install WordPress, upload and do basic modifications to themes, and add plugins. I have heard stories of churches that have used other CMS programs and found that significant programming knowledge was needed, and that support was non-existent. As they say on the Internet, "your mileage may vary." Get some recommendations from people in your community who have created and use websites, and test drive the software before you purchase or commit to a platform.

Q: Do you have people in-house who can evaluate CMS options and install/configure the software? Do you need a consultant to do this?

Not too many years ago it was common to create sites in software programs on your computer that automated many steps, such as Apple's iWeb or Microsoft's FrontPage. Most of these programs and their hosting services are past their prime, however, and have been replaced by "automated" site hosting (see below).

Hosting

Web hosting is an inexpensive commodity these days. It can cost from \$5 to \$20 per month, and a search for "web hosting" will turn up many choices. One hosting company, Dreamhost (<http://dreamhost.com>) offers free hosting to 501c3 non-profits, and all congregations are covered under the ELCA's non-profit status, so they are worth checking out.

Dreamhost and many other hosts offer "one-click" installations of software such as WordPress and its related database. Many also allow you to have these installations automatically updated as security patches are released. This is handy, but updates can break themes and plugins, so a better approach may be to handle updates manually on a regular basis.

Q: If you choose to get your own hosting, who has the basic technical skills to set up and manage your hosted site?

Design

While there are free templates and inexpensive themes available for purchase, it can be worthwhile to hire a professional to set up the site structure and/or a customized design. Remember, your site is your first impression to online visitors, so it's not a place to completely cheap out. Hiring a designer to build out the site's structure and navigation – the most important feature for visitors – and add custom styling can actually cost less than some cookie-cutter automated hosts (below). Expect to pay \$1500 to \$3000 (one-time) for a typical church site, and more if you have a larger or more complex site. Given that your site design should be good for two or three years, it is really a small investment for what you get – an identity to stand out from the crowd. A good designer can also help you develop a structure for navigation and categorizing information (called a taxonomy) that will work for your church. Several synod sites have been developed this way, such as www.sepayouth.org and www.lutherancharities.org.

If you have people with the requisite knowledge and skills, modifying a pre-designed site template can be effective. The www.godisdoingsomethingnew.com site was developed using an inexpensive template (under \$100) and staff expertise. However, if you need customized sections such as calendars, discussion boards, etc. or a highly customized navigation/structure, it may be cost effective to use a designer for initial site creation and devote in-house resources to creating content and updating the site.

Q: Is a "cookie-cutter" theme that may be used on many other sites appropriate for your church?

Q: Do you have someone with the skills to design good-quality logos and graphics?

Q: Do you have someone with the ability to make simple modifications to the code of your web themes, or the willingness to learn?

If the answer is no to any of these questions, consider a consultant for site setup.

Automated sites

There are a number of sites that provide a hosted CMS and pre-made designs to make the process of setting up a site as easy as possible. A web editor or team with no design or programming experience can build a simple site in a short time. Generally these services allow you to choose from pre-built themes to create the look you want. Like pre-build WordPress themes, these designs are not unique, but there are usually enough options to stand out from the crowd. Monthly costs and up-front fees vary by host. Here is a table comparing some well-known services:

Host	Monthly cost	Setup	Free themes	Customization
Clover Sites cloversites.com	\$20	\$1000	X	
Gutensite gutensite.com	\$15-95	\$0 or \$2500 for 5 custom pages	X	X (\$2000 for hybrid theme, \$6500 for custom theme)
Squarespace Squarespace.com	\$12-36	None listed	X	Developer can modify themes

Most services offer a basic free trial so you can take a test drive and kick the tires. Check for special features that you may need. For example, Gutensite offers document and media libraries if you need them. Squarespace allows you to have complete control over your site's appearance by allowing a developer to modify the stylesheet that controls how the site looks.

Q: Does the system we are considering allow us to build the kind of site we want? Do we have enough pages? Are the features we need - document libraries, event calendars, a mobile-friendly site - available?

Q: Can we easily make the customizations we desire, or do we need to get a pro and/or pay for changes?

Q: What is the long-term cost (over 3 years), including setup, monthly fees, design customizations, etc.?

If you are more comfortable using templates as a guideline for what is possible, and dragging and dropping elements on a page rather than coding, an automated site may be for you.

Once you are up and running

Whether you have settled on an automated site or are creating your own, take time to explore tutorials and articles about the CMS you are using so that you can take

advantage of its features. If you hire a designer/developer to build your site, make sure that training for key members of your team is included.

Develop a schedule and workflow for keeping the site up to date. Will sermons and upcoming sermon topics be updated weekly? Will articles from the newsletter be posted monthly?

Activity: Use the grid on the following page to help you plot out a schedule of content updates and determine the workflows you need to put in place.

Content type	How often?	Format	Who creates?	Who posts?
<i>Ex: Sermons</i>	<i>Weekly</i>	<i>Word, audio mp3</i>	<i>Pastor, sound team</i>	<i>Sound team</i>

Content

While you can “repurpose” content from other media, it is important to note that the web is not print. Web visitors do not so much read articles as scan them, quickly. While brief announcements of upcoming services or next week’s spaghetti dinner can be scanned quickly, longer, chattier articles (such as the pastor’s message) should be edited for the web. People may read a block of text on a printed page, but when was the last time you read through many paragraphs of plain text on the web?

Try these ideas to make text web friendly:

- Be as concise as possible.
- Start with your main point or conclusion, so readers will get the message with even a brief scan.
- Use boldface or color to set off key words and phrases in the text. (Hyperlinks to other content will do this as well.)
- Break long articles up with meaningful subheadings.
- Use bullets or lists when possible.

Photos

Visuals are very important to web communication. As a local community site, your church website benefits from being able to show the life and mission of your

congregation. In general, photos of people and activities are most engaging and effective.

If you are photographing church events, it is good practice to tell people that photos are being taken for publication, so that they can opt out of the photos or let you know if they have a reason for not having their picture used. If photographing individuals or small groups, consider having them sign a release form giving you permission to use the photo.

Be especially careful with children. Consider including a disclaimer noting that photographs may be taken and used for publicity in registration forms for Sunday School, VBS, and other programs. Within your community let people know that photos are being taken for the website and let people know whom to talk to if there are problems.

Avoid photos that are out of focus, have distracting backgrounds, or have no real subject.

If you do not have photos, in general do not use clip art to illustrate articles. While this is a common print practice, it tends to look amateurish on the web as clip art is of lower quality than the full-color photos that can be published on a page. If you need an image you can purchase inexpensive stock images at sites such as <http://www.istockphoto.com> or <http://www.dreamstime.com>.

Syndication

You can keep your site fresh with regularly updated content from the synod and the ELCA that requires no work on your part (once it is set up). Most CMS' include the ability to include an "RSS Feed" – a list of recent articles published by a site – in a page or section of a page on your site. Once you integrate a feed, such as ELCA News or recent articles on MinistryLink, viewers will see new articles once the original publisher posts them.

For example, you can include the most recent articles from the Synod website by including this feed: <feed://www.ministrylink.org/mediafiles/articles.xml>

A feed of recent ELCA News releases is available at <feed://feeds.elca.org/rss/enc/>. A complete list of ELCA feeds can be found at <http://www.elca.org/ELCA/Feeds.aspx>.

Q: Will any of the following content feeds help to deliver our message – our mission, our Lutheran identity, our participation in the larger church?

New articles from Synod website

ELCA News Releases

ELCA Prayer Ventures (prayer prompts)

Daily Bible Readings

Final thoughts

The church is not a building; the church is not a steeple... So don't use your building as your logo or your main image. Web generation people will want to see who you are more than what your worship space looks like.

Honor privacy and security – do not publish individuals' addresses, phone numbers, etc. Do not publish prayer lists and health concerns unless you have some kind of security system in place, i.e. password protection for certain pages, that will prevent this info from leaking onto the public internet. (Developing a secure member portal is beyond the scope of this document.)

Unfortunately this means that you cannot just make a PDF of your newsletter or bulletin and post it, because PDFs, Word docs and other documents can all be searched and indexed by search engines such as Google.

Be very careful with photos of children. In most cases, do not use children's names. Get parental permission to use photos and/or names, in writing if possible. An ELCA site suggests this policy: Ask each congregational member/family to sign a photo permission release each year, asking them to allow images to be used in congregational publicity. Honor the wishes of those who ask not to be included.

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