

# Church websites... How do I get started?

## Summary

This introductory guidance note is intended to help you consider how to give the visitors to your new website an excellent first impression and a useful service. Your options will boil down to downloading free or low-cost software from the internet, seeking help from an experienced colleague or negotiating professional support. Whatever you decide, it is worth thinking the project through before you start.

## Contents

1. Positive communication
2. What positive communication means for websites
3. Make your website Christian
4. Practical questions
  - Content
  - Presentation
  - Delivery
5. Where to start
6. Carrying out research
7. Guiding principles
8. Free websites
9. Monitoring and review
10. Contact for further information

### 1. Positive communication

Positive communication happens when people influence one another by saying and doing things which they find appealing, intriguing and challenging. This kind of communication relies on the communicator being open, authentic, altruistic and trusted. Their tone of voice will be personal and gentle. They will be seen in a personal light. Their friendliness, warmth and welcome will be an invitation to enjoy a conversation.

### 2. What positive communication means for websites

Now imagine someone who starts a conversation by reeling off long lists of facts and figures about himself. Unless you actually want to find out about these things at the time, your attention will start to move elsewhere. The principle is the same with a website except that no social niceties are involved. You can make a boring website vanish at the click of a mouse.

So a user-friendly website will make it easy for your visitor to find out exactly what he or she wants to know when they want to know it. Your website has to be comprehensive but also as simple, accurate and up to date as you can make it. Besides being clear and concise your website needs to be presented in informal, everyday language and pictures which are unambiguous and can be taken in quickly and easily.

A website should be easy to find, be easy to navigate and to search, and it should make sense not only to insiders who are already in the know but to outsiders who want to know more. There are a lot of people seeking spiritual good news online. Will your website help them to take a step in the right direction?

### 3. Make your website Christian

Your website will not be a *church* website unless it shares some aspects of the Christian good news in response to the interests and issues of the groups of people who visit the site. You will know that you are starting to whet spiritual appetites when you look at the Google Analytics figures for visitors to your website and you see that they are coming to the pages which are about prayer and faith. See section 9. below.

### 4. Practical questions

You will have several practical questions to face about content, presentation and delivery.

#### **Content**

How easy will it be to find your website, search it and follow its structure? Will it contain contact details, maps, services and events for adults and children, sermons, gospel stories and prayers? Include all the relevant contact details but do not publish any personal data without the person's permission. Use a contact form instead of an email address if the contact person wishes to keep their details private.

If someone is looking to arrange a wedding, baptism or funeral, will they be able to find out what to do? Will community events and courses be covered? Will you include newsletters and e-bulletins with a sign-up invitation to receive them? Will there be news and news feeds from elsewhere? Have you thought of making your website more intimate, immediate and interactive by incorporating social media? How actively will you signpost groups of people towards your website and stop it being passive and lonely?

#### **Presentation**

How will your website look and feel? Can you use short words and sentences and simple language? How will good design make the site easier on the eye, lift and streamline the content and make navigation more intuitive? Will you introduce audio and video as well as static images? Use images of people in preference to buildings but do not publish pictures of children under the age of 16 online without the written consent of their parents and guardians for this purpose. How accessible will your website be for people living with impaired vision?

#### **Delivery**

Do you already have in your church team, or can you obtain from elsewhere, an appropriate amount of time, skill, energy and money to invest in the creation and maintenance of your website? Who will be the architect and the builder? Can you ask around for recommended web designers and developers who will deliver your website to time, quality and budget? Can you work together on drawing up plans for the hierarchy of information on your site so that the designers will have a clear creative brief? Will they use free or low-cost software or build something very bespoke? Who will keep the website up to date and how, and will that be one person or a team of people who are interchangeable? Will the website be extendable and adaptable as your church grows?

## 5. Where to start

Those questions may be rather daunting but they will be easy to answer once your vision crystallises. A little analysis is a must to get your project going. This will stop you jumping to the wrong conclusions and getting off to a false start.

Before a detective story can be solved, an investigation has to be carried out. Only when this analysis has been completed will justice be done. The solution which emerges from your analysis will help you to formulate a strategy that is sound.

Imagine yourself as a virtual 'mystery worshipper' investigating how a church is perceived by an outsider. Ask yourself this: If I look through the eyes of someone landing on my website - either an existing or new one - for the first time, will I see what the Christian faith and this particular church stand for and do? What kind of worship services do they offer? Where and when do they meet? What kinds of people will be found in your church and will they look like they belong together? What difference are they making to the local community? Are they inviting me to try them out? Might I be welcomed in?

Take a peek at the websites of other churches. You may find further clues to creating or revamping yours by looking at what other churches are doing with their websites.

## 6. Carrying out research

Be objective. Start from what you can verify and what you can find out.

A survey will help. You will need some facts and figures from the users of the website (quantitative findings) but their opinions, perceptions and attitudes (qualitative findings) will be equally significant. Your survey could be paper based or electronic. Look online for SurveyMonkey to find out what kinds of electronic survey are possible.

Bringing a cross-section of users together in a focus group will be a useful further step to discover more.

Here are four qualitative questions which we in Chelmsford Diocese asked a focus group we facilitated in a parish as part of a local project:

- a) Who uses your website or might use it in the future?
- b) What do the users of your website want to do?
- c) How do you want your website to look?
- d) What are your priorities for the website?

The findings contributed to a strategy for delivering a new website which worked for this church.

## 7. Guiding principles

Christian website development fits into the bigger picture of benefiting people by making it easier for them to share in good news. The principles behind this work can be summarised in the acronym, 'RIDE' – Revolve, Involve, Devolve and Evolve.

**Revolve** 180 degrees to the places where your audiences, in other words the groups of people your church has contact with, are hearing and looking from. Communication is 'not about you' - it is not only what you say and do which counts but more importantly how

you are heard and seen. Your website should reflect your audiences' interests and issues. Reality as perceived by your audience is the only reality there is from your audience's point of view. But remember to 'Make your website Christian' (see above) and also bear in mind that it is not only first impressions which count: how your church is experienced by someone entering by the real church door should live up to the expectations raised by the website.

*Involve* these people groups in sampling aspects of the Christian good news in ways which particularly resonate with what interests, concerns and motivates them and how they live their normal everyday lives. Help them to experience this good news and the benefits it will bring them. Your website should invite and welcome them to events, services and courses.

*Devolve* your messages through the people who have been invited and welcomed in. In time they will make these messages their own and communicate them afresh as they live them out in their normal everyday lives. Your website should contain testimony from people and communities which are being renewed through contact with the Christian faith as practised by real people.

*Evolve* your website or in other words learn from feedback, actively seek this out, assess and evaluate it, keep on learning, and constantly refresh and refine the website. This is a long-term, cumulative process. Your website is a work in progress.

## **8. Free websites**

Various free websites are available on the internet. A popular option which is worth checking out is WordPress.

## **9. Monitoring and review**

You can find out how your new website is performing and gain insights into your visitors' interests with an easy-to-use free online tool called Google Analytics.

## **10. Contact for further information**

Email the Diocese of Chelmsford for further information at [internalcomms@chelmsford.anglican.org](mailto:internalcomms@chelmsford.anglican.org)