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Your Congregation Needs a Strong Website

Use the following tips and suggestions to help ensure your congregation's site is useful and effective

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Social Media vs. Websites

On October 4, 2021, Internet users around the world were startled, annoyed and even frantic over a global service interruption to Facebook and its subsidiaries like Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp. For up to six hours, millions of users were affected by the outage, for both personal and business interactions.

The outage brought to light how much we have come to rely on social media. Recently, I've noticed that some congregations have also observed the rise in popularity of social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, and have decided that their congregation should have a presence on social media. I'm encouraged to see this kind of interest in new outreach activities. However, some congregations have been considering social media platforms as a potential replacement to a congregational website altogether, even going as far as to question why they should bother continuing (or would start) to pay for and maintain a congregational website when social media platforms are free and easier to maintain for those who are already familiar with them from their own personal use.

I know of several businesses in my own community that have gone this route and conduct all promotional and engagement activities through Facebook. But rather than seeing social media as something to replace a congregational website, congregations should be looking to social media as something that can extend the effectiveness of their website and overall online presence.

Websites and Social Media Can Work Together

Whenever I give workshops on websites and social media, I often like to say that websites are information and social media is conversation. They offer different ways of connecting with people that can work well together. It's important to remember that websites and social media platforms are not the same things. They are different tools, which do different things, and have different strengths and weaknesses, and, as such, should be compared separately. It doesn't have to be an either/or decision. In fact, a great social media presence is often fuelled by a strong website and vice versa.



Social Media Challenges

Before you take on the challenge of developing a social media presence for your congregation, consider your reasons for doing so. Not long ago I helped a congregation set up a Facebook page. In our discussions, I learned that they felt that being on social media would be their method for reaching and engaging with youth, believing that it would help bring more young people to their weekly worship services. I didn't know how to tell them how incorrect this thinking is. If only it was that easy!

Never mind that online engagement doesn't necessarily equate to Sunday morning parishioners, the situation on who uses social media is changing all the time. Facebook claims they have nearly three billion active monthly users, and while it's generally considered the biggest social media network worldwide, there are strong indications that trends are shifting. In addition to anti-Facebook campaigns, like "Quit Facebook Days," that have popped up in response to a variety of concerns like how Facebook handles user data and the discouraging amount of unverified false news that circulates, recent research showed that in the 12–34-year-old age group, 32% identified Facebook as the platform they use the most. This is down considerably from the 58% reported only five years ago. In fact, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter and Snapchat were all down in primary usage, but the "Other" category was notably up (Edison Research and Triton Digital, 2020).

Social media can be a fickle friend. With more and more variety in the social media scene, it becomes harder to choose which platform is best to reach your target audience. Other organizations feel this pressure as well. At the PCC national office, we are active on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and Instagram, but we are always looking to expand to additional channels. It can be overwhelming.

Social media can be a wonderful way to connect with people. You can share important information, receive valuable feedback and feel a greater sense of community. However, too frequently I see congregations take on the task of having an active, dynamic digital presence, only to have it fizzle out in a few months. With the rate of speed that things are shared online and the vast quantity of it all, you need to have a consistent, valuable presence. A social media content calendar can help keep you on track, as well as a clear mission statement and realistic goals (just watch out for getting overly focused on your stats). You need to post consistently with informative content to make it onto people's feeds.

Your Website is the Foundation

A goal of creating a dynamic social media presence is a good one, but before any social media endeavours, I encourage congregations to build and maintain a strong website, which will form the backbone of all online activities. These days, there is often an attitude that if something doesn't have a website, it doesn't exist. Don't fall into that category.

A website should be your foundation for ensuring people know about your congregation. And I fully acknowledge that there are difficulties to building a good website. It doesn't take long for



content to become outdated, arguably doing more harm than good. This is a problem I've come across many times when browsing Presbyterian websites.

Remember, a website is not an archive—there is no reason to still have the picnic lunch from 2011 featured on your website's homepage. What kind of message does that convey to newcomers? The content on your site should be current, relevant and accurate.

I understand the challenges that congregations are often confronted with in maintaining their websites. Too often, there is not enough staff or volunteer power to keep a website up-to-date and maintain a strong online presence. Budget may sometimes pose a problem as well. Curating content from the appropriate people can be another hurdle.

However, if you're struggling to keep your website populated with the latest news and events, remember that it doesn't take a lot of effort to ensure the basics are available. Websites are arguably most useful to those who are considering visiting your church and are looking to learn a little more about its ministry. (Your regular congregants already know where your church is located, where to park and what to expect.) So, make sure your website is newcomer-friendly (so try to avoid using inaccessible church lingo!), has current information and answers general questions a new visitor may have. Yes, that will take some initial effort. But it is effort that could help someone decide whether or not to visit your church.

Tips for Creating a Strong Website

Now is the time to ensure you have a strong website. As more and more people engage with churches electronically, invest in sitting down and taking a careful look at your website. Do you have the following key—but far too often missing—elements on your homepage? And are they easily available to find with no clicking and very little scrolling necessary?

- Church name and location. Many churches fail to mention their city or town. When so many of our churches are named "St. Andrew's" or "Knox," you can see how this could be problematic for someone doing online research before visiting in person.
- A welcome message with a welcoming photo. Featuring a nice, high-quality photo of your church with front doors open wide, a group photo of smiling faces or a recent photo of a church event or activity is an opportunity to convey a warm and inviting presence.
- Time of worship and how to take part. For example, online via live stream or video recording, or in person, and if in person, whether advance registration is required.
- Opportunities for fellowship. While COVID-19 may have disrupted this temporarily, one of the things I rarely see online is any information about coffee hour after service. Why not take a line or two and encourage visitors to join the congregation after service for a time of fellowship? What a wonderful way to visit with someone new.
- Important details that you would want new visitors to know, such as accessibility accommodations, front entrance, parking, activities for children, etc.
- Contact details and leadership names and information.



Think about your strengths and what makes your congregation unique and what you can do to highlight these features prominently online. Are you particularly mission focused? Do you have a strong community presence? Is your children's programming top-notch? Think about these things and make sure your site represents who you are as a congregation.

Now that you've created a strong website, consider how your congregation can best use social media, such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, to bolster that website. The work you've done to improve your website will serve you well by providing fodder for your activities on social media. Social media can become a very useful tool that will help share your congregation's mission and ministry with others. But is social media a replacement for a website? Definitely not.

If your congregation needs a reliable platform for hosting your website, consider PCCWeb, a free website hosting service for congregations and groups of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Learn more at presbyterian.ca/pccweb.