

Web Site UPDATE

YOUR CHURCH WEB SITE MATTERS!

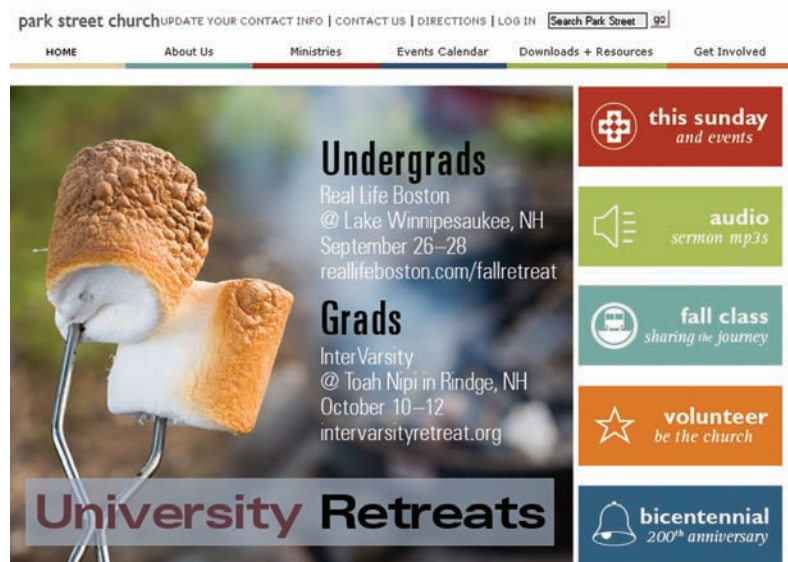
by Lauren Hunter

Much has been said, suggested, implored and recommended on the subject of how a church should handle the building and maintaining of their public Web site. It seems to be a complicated landscape, one that is continually changing and adjusting to incorporate new technologies and ideologies. This is no secret. In reviewing other articles on this topic and looking at many different Web site solutions, I found myself slightly overwhelmed with the plethora of available options; however, I've tried to simplify the Web site landscape in order to help churches wrap their heads around this topic and work to either improve what they have, or build something new. With Web 2.0 technologies available that enable today's Web sites to have far greater impact, it's worth your time to revisit the topic to improve, readjust and even rebuild your church Web site to reach people for Christ.

The Big Picture

The purpose of a church Web site, at its very core, should be threefold:

- 1) To provide an initial outreach to the community with basic information about your church and programs it offers (service times and locations, mission and vision of your church, program details, etc.);
- 2) to provide tools for attenders to connect with the church and with one another (online registration for events, online ticketing for concerts and productions, online giving, online community, volunteer opportunities);
- 3) provide outreach beyond your church community to the Internet community at large (podcasting, vidcasting, blogs, forums, social community).



Provide outreach beyond your church community.

Web 2.0 is a living term describing changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and Web design that aims to enhance creativity, information sharing, collaboration and functionality of the Web.

I spoke with a number of industry leaders in the Web site development market in order to surmise the most important aspects of building a church Web site. Brandon Steiger, founder and “Big Idea Guy” for Synergema (www.synergema.com), provider of dynamic Internet solutions for Christian organizations and nonprofits, commented that he sees a number of church staff asking for cool features on their Web site that they are requested to build. Often times these “cool features” are never really used because the congregation didn’t need them. Steiger implores, “It’s important to know and understand your audience and then build features that meet the needs of their users. Some of the coolest features that we build are hardly ever used by visitors because they are highly desired by someone on the staff.”

So this is my first recommendation to you if you are looking to change, update or improve your church Web site: *Make sure the features and structure of your site adequately reflect the needs of your congregation.*



Your Web site should provide an initial outreach to the community with basic information.

You might then ask, “how does one know what the congregation needs?” It’s vital for churches to evaluate their membership and attenders in order to know what it is that they would look for and use in a Web site. Does your congregation cater to younger, under 40 year old members? Are these people using social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook to communicate? Do they buy tickets and register for events online? Or, is your congregation mainly over 40 years old, and more apt to communicate through traditional methods? Many churches are somewhat intergenerational, which means that a variety of communication methods must be employed to reach everyone adequately. All these things are necessary to take into consideration in order that you not waste your time building a really fabulous Web site with amazing features that no one will use.

Steiger adds, “Usability is really thinking through the process that a user would take through navigating a site. Studies have shown that users will click more than three times to get to content as long as they are confident that they will find what they are looking for. So this means for the church, it’s very important to think through the process a user must go through in finding content.”

Control Issues

Through my blog on church technology, ChurchTechToday.com, I’ve heard from many

churches that are embarrassed about their bad Web sites. One pastor expressed concern because there had been several companies and pastors responsible for the site at various times and cause confusion and lack of focus in terms of who handles the work of keeping the site up-to-date. Another reader was frustrated that her church Web site had so much flash animation that it took eons just to get the e-mail for a pastor in order to send them a message.

These comments scream out that there is a lack of focus and designation of control over the Web site.

That brings me to another recommendation that can save your church time and energy: *One person needs to be selected as the Web ministry coordinator in order to oversee the Web site and have the time and ability to keep up with the technological needs of your church.*

This is not to say that this person needs to know HTML and other Internet languages, but they need to be willing to keep up with Internet technology enough to foresee the changes that need to be made online. Even more so, they need to be a point person so that someone is officially “in charge” of the Web site. This does not mean that this person is the only one updating content or making site changes; it just means that one person needs to be the “point person” to take the Web site by the horns and steer it where the church decides it needs to go. Too many irons in the fire pretty much guarantees a disjointed, unfocused Web site. This brings me to the next area of concern, the actual Web site structure itself. Hold on tight and stick with me.

Web Site Platform Options

As I was reviewing Web site options and trying to determine which ones seemed the best, it occurred to me that there are lots of great options out there in the church market and in the secular market. The choices that seem to make the most sense blend these two options by incorporating design features and functionality needed by churches together with cutting-edge tools that the secular market requires. Some churches out there are doing a pretty good job, but could just stand to add a few Web 2.0 features such as a blog, RSS feeds of content, or sermon podcasts; other churches out there (you know who you are) really need a Web site overhaul. I’m going to briefly breakdown three good options if you’re in the latter category, as many churches are:

A Web content management system is a CMS designed to simplify the publication of Web content to Web sites, in particular allowing content creators to submit content without requiring technical knowledge of HTML or the uploading of files. (Source: www.Wikipedia.com)

1) *Robust Web Content Management System with custom design:* For larger churches that need to give multiple people at the church access to update and add content, a robust content management system is a great option. A content manager makes it easy to assign rights and roles to users so that each minister or leader in the church has the ability to edit their section of the Web site, but not anyone else’s. Some providers such as the Extend Platform™ (www.extendplatform.com) by ACS Technologies, offer template sites in addition to custom Web design, which are a great option for churches that want a pleasing, well-designed, functional site built quickly and affordably. Most of the content management offerings out there provide both template site designs as well as custom design. While custom design is always more expen-

sive, it can be totally worth it to have a one-of-a-kind site that reflects your church culture. Here's a great example of what Extend can do: www.parkstreet.org.

2) *Simple Web Content Management System with customizable template design:* One thing I hear many churches complain about is that content management systems are too complex and offer too many options. One would think this would be a good thing, but in the world of churches, the simpler the better. There are several newer Web companies out there offering extremely simple to use, yet well-rounded content management systems that offer a great variety of features and nice templates. One such company, Element Fusion (www.elementfusion.com), provides a great option with their SkyCMS™ offering for churches and ministries. They have built a very simple to user interface that allows even the biggest technophobe to build a Web site very quickly and simply. Plus, they offer multiple design options that can fit any budget, starting with free, quality design templates all the way up to full custom design. One such service is Design Xpress, an inexpensive option allowing churches to customize a free template with their own logo and information.

Says Tim Wall, product marketing director for Element Fusion, "Creating a simple-to-use CMS is not easy; in fact, most CMS systems on the market are still unnecessarily complex. Building a simple CMS requires the developer to have a mindset that prefers keeping things simple over packaging it full of every feature. Our goal is to provide what 80 percent of churches need and do it in a way that keeps the learning curve very short." To view a high-quality church Web site by Element Fusion, visit www.campuschurch.org.

3) *Web site built on WordPress or similar platform open-source platform with custom development or theme:* Many, many people (including me) use WordPress for their blogs. Now, more and more "themes" are available that combine static Web pages (think traditional Web sites) with dynamic pages that include changing content with RSS feeds. www.egracecreative.com recently

announced their new "Ministry Theme" that is a nice option for many churches. This theme can be edited or customized by any Web designer, because WordPress is an open-source blogging tool with many features of a content management system.

According to Brandon Cox, pastor, blogger, Web designer and founder of eGraceCreative, "WordPress themes can be tricky to implement, but offer a virtually unending list of options." More and more content management providers are offering dynamic Web 2.0 options, but some do not offer as many as others. Also, note that going with a WordPress theme means that you'll need to hire a Web designer to set up your site, and possibly get your hosting set up (although this is pretty easy to do yourself), there are a few more variables involved in the process. It's not free, but often the costs can be significantly less if you're willing to deal with some of the variables involved in using an open-source blog platform that does not have the service and support of a Web company that is focused on ministry. If you have a good design partner in place that is available when you need them to be, this can be a great solution as well. To see the Ministry Theme in use at Cox's own church, visit www.bethelbentonville.com.

Many of the choices I mention below have similar costs: a minimal set up fee or design fee, with a monthly service charge that is dependent on the size of your Web site (how many pages and users). The WordPress option



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could be less expensive, or more expensive depending on the amount of customer work and ongoing help from a designer your site requires. There's no monthly service fee, just annual hosting of the site through a hosting company, cost of the WordPress Theme, plus hourly fees associated with hiring a designer. If you have a Web ministry coordinator who knows some coding language and is handy with WordPress, even better; however, if the person in charge of the Web site needs help each step along the way and is not especially technologically savvy, I would recommend going with a Web site provider that specializes in working with churches so that you have the service and support there 24/7 when you need it.

One last option is to work with a company that can build a content management system to fit exactly what your organization needs. Synergema (mentioned earlier in the article) is one such company that can do this. It's a unique option because each organization has specific goals and needs for their Web site. Some churches might not want to go through this process, and would rather use something "off the shelf" so to speak, but I just thought I would mention it because it's a very unique service for the nonprofit market.

Working Well Together

There's another topic related to Web design that I'm passionate about, and that's integrating features that churches use within their church management software (ChMS) together with their public Web site. Most of the top church management software providers are now building features that can "speak" to and through a church Web site. For example, being able to seamlessly integrate features like online calendars, small group search functionality, community login, online forms, online giving, online registration and even online ticket sales can make your Web site truly usable and functional in ways you've never imagined.

Web-based church management software provider, Church Community Builder (CCB) (www.churchcommunitybuilder.com), recently aligned with Element Fusion to provide more churches with a well-integrated, customized solution for both their public Web site and private member communities. Through this

alliance, Element Fusion's straightforward design and intuitive management tools will allow churches to easily connect CCB community access points to the appropriate page on the church Web site.

"At the end of the day, churches must recognize that, with today's generation of churchgoer, the public Web site is often the first impression," comments Steve Caton, vice president of sales and marketing for CCB. "People that use the Web to manage much of their daily lives expect to do the same with their church. If churches can help people easily connect and communicate with those that they are in relationship with, not only does the church Web site become more relevant, the church itself can become a 'stickier' place for its members and attenders." To see an example of this integration visit www.capecodchurch.com and click on "Group Life and Events."

Another example of this can be seen with the solutions offered by ServiceU Corporation (www.ServiceU.com). ServiceU has been in online events management for churches for 10 years, and is the only Payment Card Industry Compliant (www.pcisecuritystandards.org) company in the nonprofit market to date. They too provide easily integrated access points for online giving, online registration, online giving, online ticketing and online calendar pages. Their solutions do not offer complete church management solution (like CCB does), but rather they specialize in online resource and events management, and are experts at integrating these services within a church's public Web site. They can compliment any church management platform out there currently on the market. To view an example of how ServiceU integrates with a public Web site, visit www.gatewaychurch.net and click on "Donate Online."

Adds Tim Whitehorn, founder and CEO of ServiceU, "A church's public Web presence is critical to a healthy church, and that's why we feel it is so important to offer tools and services such as secure online giving, online calendars and online registration for church's to make the most of their online identity."

To bring it all home again, if you finish this article with one overarching theme, it's that your church Web site matters; and that it is important to be intentional about what you want your site to accomplish in terms of appearance, ease-of-use for both the church and the site visitor and general purpose. Don't be afraid to ask people in your congregation what they think and how they would like to personally make use of the Web site. Ponder, pray, and ask the Lord to lead and direct this very important ministry of your church. Just like the children's or youth ministry curriculum should be considered with extreme care, so should your church Web site structure, layout and features. If built with great forethought and care, your Web site has the power to draw people in and save just as any other body part of the church can. Use it to its fullest capacity for the Glory of God!❖

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Lauren Hunter is a freelance writer and owner of Lauren Hunter Public Relations, a communications firm dedicated to the faith-based technology market. For more information on how Internet technology can improve your organization, contact Lauren at lauren@laurenhunter.net or visit www.laurenhunter.net. For ongoing discussions regarding church technology, visit her blog at www.ChurchTechToday.com.