

Planning Your Web Pages

The following is from the Hartford Institute, org encourage you to click here for some very good detailed information

Beginning the process - A congregational project

The web site of a congregation can be the most public portrayal of itself that it can have. Potentially, millions of people could enter into your virtual sanctuary, meet your members, sample your ministries and learn what your congregation believes. This self-presentation should be a product of the entire congregation.

- The content must be as prayerfully and spiritually discerned as the creation of a congregation's statement of faith.
- The effort must be shared by as many members as planning your worship service or newsletter is.
- The task must be as reasoned and serious as that of calling the next minister. Like each of these tasks, planning what your congregation's web site will look like and contain should be a group effort in several ways.
- The entire membership should be informed of the effort, invited into the process, and asked what they want in a site.
- Members with internet access can be encouraged to visit the web sites of other churches to get ideas and see what they like and don't like.
- A method of collecting suggestions, ideas, and feedback from all the membership should be set up.
- A web design committee of both knowledgeable and interested members should be created.

We are convinced that the more your congregation's web site reflects the unique body of believers that is your church the better your site will be able to inform and attract members and guests alike. Because of this we maintain that designing a congregational site is as much a self-exploration as it is a technical process. Simple design or minor flaws are forgivable if the site shows the congregation for who it is, its strengths and flaws while graciously inviting others into that community of faith.

Remember your site exists to enhance the community and fellowship among the members. It is also there for the stranger to explore and experience your congregation's ministries and beliefs. But the web site, like anything a faith community does, is mostly there for the glory of God.

Determining the type of web presence

The initial task your congregational web planning team has before them is to assess the parameters of the site.

- What is the audience? Will the site be for outsiders? Will it focus inward and offer interactive features for members?
 - What is the scope? Is it a glorified brochure or bulletin or is it an engaging, multimedia advertisement for the church?
 - What is the aim? Do you want it to bring the unchurched in? Educate and inform your members? Or be a resource for pastors, the seeker, or other churches around the world?
 - What will you emphasize? Will the site focus solely on the worship, or on a major ministry, or on the youth? What is it about your church that sets it apart from other in the local community? What features are you most proud of?
 - Who will produce it? Will you try to design it from within the talent of the congregation, hire outside help, or use one of the many established host sites complete with design template where you just plug in your information on a form?
- Who is responsible? Where will the content come from? Will you just put the newsletter directly into HTML? Will the pastor's sermons be content? Will the text for pages be written fresh and new each week or month? Whose email goes on the site and who will answer the email inquiries? And who makes sure everything gets done?

We hope to take your answers from the questions raised above and put to good use on your website

Advertising your address

When your web site is designed and ready to go, what will you do with it? Hide it under a bushel? NO! Once your web site is posted, you have to find ways to let its light shine. Just because you built it does not mean folks will flock to your pages. There is nothing more depressing than a site with a counter registering 14 visits in the past 2 years. But there are ways to avoid this. First, don't put a hit counter on your page! Second, advertise your site.

This is where the Digital Faith Community can help you in many different ways.....

Purchase a domain name (your web address – like www.trinityclanton.org) that is descriptive of your congregation and easy to find. Post, print and plaster this web address everywhere. Every piece of the church's printed material should have the address. Newspaper and yellow page ads should feature it prominently.

It goes without saying but is seldom a guarantee, make sure your clergy and your laity know the site is there. I bet if most churches polled their community about the website address, there would be many who did not know, or did not know the address.

As part of the Digital Faith Community, your diocese will post a link from their site. Inquire at the town hall, chamber of commerce, tourist bureau, etc. if they will link to the church's site. Submit the site to other religious sites, especially those with a similar mission focus.

How the Search Engines Work.

Search for anything using your favorite search engine (Google, Yahoo, to name two) Nearly instantly, the search engine will sort through the millions of pages it knows about and present you with ones that match your topic. The matches will even be ranked, so that the most relevant ones come first.

Of course, the search engines don't always get it right. Non-relevant pages make it through, and sometimes it may take a little more digging to find what you are looking for. But, by and large, search engines do an amazing job.

One of the the main rules in a ranking algorithm involves the location and frequency of keywords on a web page. Call it the location/frequency method, for short.

To give you the reader's digest version, these are the most important things

Location, Location, Location...and Frequency (and Spice??)

Here is more information:

Sounds almost the mantra of what are most important factors in buying a home. The same characteristics can also apply here. When search engines go looking for the keywords. They will usually use the following pattern

Location of the person entering the keywords

If you are looking for a church, the search engine is going to give preference to results that are closest to the location of the person entering the key words. If you are in Birmingham and you type in the word "MacDonalds" The first result should be on in the Birmingham area, and not one in Washington DC

Location of the Keywords in the Website Page Title

The next location is the words in the title of your website or website address. In your DFC site, you have a page title that you should complete especially for the main page. The Search Engine looks for the main page title and church name.

Location of keywords in the content of the website

The search engine then will start looking for the keyword in the first paragraph on the landing page. And then will search remaining pages if they find links or other keywords that may have some relation to other key words on other pages.

Location of Keywords

- * The the website title or page title
- * The use of the words in the first few paragraphs on the main page
- * The use of the key words in other page titles especially in news/story format
- * Dedicating a page in your website to talk about these key words as content.

Frequency

Frequency is the other major factor in how search engines determine relevancy. A search engine will analyze how often keywords appear in relation to other words in a web page. Those with a higher frequency are often deemed more relevant than other web pages. Chief among these is link analysis. By analyzing how pages link to each other, a search engine can both determine what a page is about and whether that page is deemed to be "important" and thus deserving of a ranking boost. In addition, sophisticated techniques are used to screen out attempts by webmasters to build "artificial" links designed to boost their rankings.

This relation of keywords in relation to other similar content is an important factor. If you just use the word worship in the main page of your website and no other usage, Not so good. The search engine will stop there. You may get the word worship mentioned in your results, but that might be it. But if worship is related to other words on the main page as well as link to other content in the back pages such as "children's worship, Why We Worship, Worship Activities, New stories about various worship service.

Another factor that is used to provide authenticity to the search is "clickthrough measurement." and "link analysis". In short, this means that a search engine may watch what results someone selects for a particular search, and eventually drop high-ranking pages that aren't attracting clicks, while promoting lower-ranking pages that do pull in visitors. So if you just add keywords that do not have any relationship with content of your site. With link analysis, systems are used to compensate for artificial links generated by eager webmasters.

The other part of frequency that is important are the number of "trusted links" and "clickthroughs" that are collected on your site. One of the advantages of the Digital Faith Community is that the search engines are not just collecting information from one church site, but as many as you might

have active in your faith community. These other parish web pages are deemed by the search engine to be part of a larger website, this making your website many times larger than you think.

To help with understanding this concept, suppose some one enters the key word "mission". With just one church, the word "mission" may only be found 3 or 4 times, but if the search engine looks at your parish site and also finds all the links to the other parish sites as well as the diocesan site. it will find several hundred references and you site either using you parish as a portal, or the diocesan site as it's portal, either way, you will get a higher ranking on the search engine's results page or at least several mentions.

To make the most of these concepts, is to not only take advantage of your keywords on the main page, is to link them to content on other webpages, especially "news stories", as well as links to other parishes in your community and the diocese.

Using Key words to add spice"

Imagine going into a library and going to the front desk and just use the word "church". If she can not ask you follow up questions unless their servers have developed the ability to ask the person follow up questions, all the librarian (search engine) can do is start looking for results to your request

They need to find books to match your request of "church," so it makes sense that they first look at books with travel in the title. Search engines operate the same way. Pages with the search terms appearing in the HTML title tag are often assumed to be more relevant than others to the topic.

Search engines will also check to see if the search keywords appear near the top of a web page, such as in the headline or in the first few paragraphs of text. They assume that any page relevant to the topic will mention those words right from the beginning.

All the major search engines follow it to some degree, in the same way cooks may follow a standard chili recipe. But cooks like to add their own secret ingredients. In the same way, search engines add spice to the location/frequency method. Nobody does it exactly the same, which is one reason why the same search on different search engines produces different results.

So if you can't ask clarifying questions to the searches "general term such as "church", the next best thing would be the one result that would stand out when the searcher sees the results of their search.

Adding the "spice" to your website can also make for better search results.

Imagine the search engine results as being the final presentations in a chili cookoff. The judges go from table to table testing each presentation and each presentation while good, is very similar to the others. Suddenly one the presentations contains a new and interesting "spice". Suddenly, the judges notice a different taste that intrigues them to find out more. They will want to investigate further and will probably be very pleased with what they find. "the winner".

This works the same with the search engine. The only words the search engine finds on your site are "church name" "city/state" "demonination" and address. So the results being will see will be something like this:

Your Name Demonitation Church

Your name, Demoniation church, 1222 Main street, Your Town, Your State, Your Zip
<http://www.yournameyourtown.org>

You say great, there is my website address and location. However,, must of the other competing church sites have alot more going for them in content and keywords and their result looks like this

Chruch Name Demoniation Church

Chruch Name Demoniation Church 1222 Main street, Your Town, Your State, Your Zip.
..discover together what it means to be a diverse congregation in Atlanta and to worship and serve Christ in an urban setting. ...Provides schedule of Worship times, information about parish programs and groups, staff and vestry, pastoral care and an archive of recent sermons.

<http://www.theirnameyourtown.org>

Which listing would attract you? Add some spice to your own chili, make use of keywords and descriptions to get resutls from Search Engines. The "keywords" descriptive I have used as a general term above and more specifically called "Meta Tags" and Meta- Descriptions".

Use of Meta text and keywords

The most important component of advertising your web site is to have an accurate and descriptive title, description, and keywords embedded in the HTML of the web page – its meta text. Search engines are not "intelligent" but rather are mechanical in their analysis of a page or site. The programs "spiders" or "robots" (how they are usually referred to) are sent out to catalog your site - basically count word frequency, read the title, description, metatags or keywords, and examine a few other things, like the title, heading text, hyperlinks, text, and how high up on a page certain words are or how often certain words occur.

What are meta texts?

These phrases are embedded in the HTML code on each page of the site. To look at the HTML that creates the web pages you see in your browser, Click on the "View" menu on the browser bar, choose "source" and it should open a page that has gibberish all over it and starts with <html><head>

You should see the meta text – if you have any - looking something like this:

Meta title – Title of the site (and subsequent pages) Page Title - Trinity Parish Ministries

Meta name – Description

<META NAME="Description" CONTENT="Trinity Clanton welcomes all newcomers into our community with plenty of parish activities, opportunities for spiritual development, and stong focus on childresn's spiritual developmet and activities.">

Meta tags – Keywords

<META NAME="Keywords" CONTENT="religion, worship, organizations, research, congregational resources, bookshelf, learning communities, press resources, denominations,

judicatories, congregations, megachurches, megachurch, new religious movements, parachurch groups, women and religion, church growth, church decline, religion and the family, religion and the web, theological education, pentecostalism, homosexuality and religion, church inventory, statistics, designing church sites,"

More About Keywords

As described in the image above, the "ideal keywords"

- * are ones that both the parish/group (client),
- * the keywords that are easily recognized by the search engine (includes the purchase of keywords)
- * and words that most visitors would use to search to find a church/group such as yours.

Where all three groups agree on these keywords, those would be the best ones to use. Sound Simple?

These are the three different perspectives you have to consider when choosing keywords. If the group or parish leaders pick keywords that they feel are important, but the folks were enter the keywords into the search box are using other words, than you, you will not get a high rating in the search result. Words that you may take for granted like biblical tradition, christian theology, sunday school, etc., you may assume is people may not use to find an "Episcopal Church" (insert your own demonination), but alot of "unchurched" that may have experienced other traditions, might use some of these words, that could be very applicable to the Episcopal Church and worship.

How does meta text get read?

A "spider" or "web crawler" visits the URL and captures/saves portions of your page and may follow hyperlinks deeper into your site or follow a link to another site. You can't guarantee a spider that visits your site will go beyond the home page. In any case it is wisest to have quite a few links to your inner pages from your home page. Plus spiders read and record both text and hyperlink text. Be aware that if your home page has only images -- image links have little text for spiders to record -- unless you use ALT tags to identify your images and you should!

Load down your home page with metatags and hyperlinks if possible. For instance, examine the Hartford Institute home page. We have all the navigation links on the left, additional links at the top, text links at the bottom, several ALT tags on our images, and descriptive links in the body of the page totaling roughly 70 links into the site from this one page.

What good are meta and ALT tags?

The more accurate these tags are, the better job a search engine does of categorizing your site. It is equally important that the metatags be descriptive and yet commonly used search terms. Here are a few sites that provide helpful information:

You should try to have your home or index page tags reflect the entire site in the metatags. Then tailor each set of tags in subsequent pages to reflect exactly what is on each internal page. Sometimes this is just a matter of re-sorting the tags from the front page. Consider making the first 5-6 tags on our inner pages reflect the page accurately and then the other 15-20 are identical to the front page. It is especially important if you have pages within the site that are quite unique from the rest. A section on "mdg's" imaybe unlike the rest of your site in some ways but is heavily traveled because it is a hot topic at present, so be careful to make the metatags fit the content of that page.

There are a number of web sites (especially the submission service or news story sites) that will help you generate the HTML code that defines these titles, names and tags. All you have to do is go to the site and answer questions and the site will generate the correct HTML tags. So when using your DFC site, make important news and events using our "news/stories" format, to get better search results.

It is also important to title all your pages and file names accurately and with descriptive phrases. This helps:

- * with search engines,
- * with returning to bookmarks or favorites, and
- * by giving the visitor clues where he or she is in your site.

Getting ranked at the top

As mentioned above, using good meta text in the title, image and links tags, thinking about your key words, and having these metatags reflect the content of the page all help in your ranking. Also helpful in a high ranking is the number of links into and out of your page. Some engines favor sites with many links pointing at them. They want to have the main pages of a site, like the home page, in their search file rather than minor pages deep in a site. There are other tricks that folks use to get ranked in the top 20 but many are not legitimate and should be discouraged. Maintaining your presence

Once you have established your web site, you must maintain your presence by keeping your site fresh with content and free of errors. We offer several thoughts to keep in mind to be sure that your site stays useful on a daily basis:

- * Update event calendars regularly - Your visitors, whether first time or frequent, will be interested in knowing about your congregation's activities. Out of date information gives the impression that providing activity information is a low priority. If weekly calendar updates seem overwhelming, consider creating a monthly event calendar so you need to update less frequently.

- * Check the status of the site often - It is a good idea to visit your site at least once a week in the most frequently used browsers - Internet Explorer, Netscape Navigator and AOL's browser to check for errors. Always check the site after you make changes or additions. Regular periodic checks are necessary since your site might experience a problem, and if so you will want to know it as soon as possible. You might consider asking a group of volunteer teen web surfers to spend a few minutes visiting the site in different browsers each week. They can notify you of any problems they encounter.

- * Respond quickly to email requests - Whether the request is for more information or a correct link, a quick response to visitors shows that you are not trying to hide behind the "web wall." Just as you would greet visitors to your service, follow up any email to the site with a quick thank you, even if you need to hold off on actually fulfilling the request. You may want to consider having web site emails routed to an address that you know will be checked regularly. Don't leave your virtual visitors waiting at your door.

- * Add new information continually - One thing that keeps visitors coming back is knowing that they will find new information each visit. This new content might be links to web sites that are useful for your members, your pastor's sermon text, or articles of interest. For example, you may want to bring the recent release of survey information from the Faith Communities Today project

to your congregation's attention, or provide them with links to your town's informational sites, or the best web sites that offer parenting tips.

If your site serves as an information directory for your web users, they will be more likely to come to your site first rather than go it alone on the web and conduct their own searches. This encourages a sense of community and trust in your web users, with your or the church leadership acting as editors and screeners of web content. The web can be scary and overwhelming for some persons; but you can help put them at ease by giving them what they need to know in one trusted location.

* Encourage feedback - An easy way to maintain and develop your site is to encourage visitor feedback. You should always ask for suggestions and provide an email address, guest book or feedback form to facilitate the sharing of these suggestions. Listening to your users helps you to create new information that those travel your site really want.