

**CREATING
BETTER...**

Printed Church Communications

Printed below are the articles that were included in the Upper Susquehanna Synod *Headwaters* publication in 2011. These articles were written to give tips on how to improve your congregation's printed materials.

Web Pages

Here are tips and ideas to improve your congregation's web pages and how you can create better websites (or start one if you don't have one).

GET A SITE! A website is an important evangelism tool for any congregation. Recent studies show that those who are looking for a church do not find one by looking through the local phone book; they use Google, Yahoo, and other web search engines to find a church to attend. This is true for both those who live in your community who do not regularly attend a church and those who are visiting from out of town. So, if your congregation does not have a website, that is something that you should consider.

PLAN IT OUT! When working with your church's website, it is best to develop a plan for it! Take time to plan your site with a site map to make sure it is logically organized and information can be found easily. Have a strategy for developing content, for refreshing that content, and for retiring content when it's no longer needed. Your strategy should be realistic: How much time, effort, and commitment can you expect from those working on the congregation's web presence? When planning what pages you will have, focus on people! Use meaningful testimonials that point to your important story and do not sound like everyone else's.

Your webpage should look professional. There are lots of web designers who do good work for reasonable wages. You can get a lot of time tied up in trying to maintain a good website. Consider hiring a professional!

Define the content you'd like to start with, and design site navigation with growth in mind. Do an inventory of site features (e.g. congregation e-mail devotional, calendar with different views, private chat for youth, photo albums for congregation events, blogs for reports from congregational trips, private congregation directory, etc.). As you begin to design (or redesign) your site, some good resources for planning are available at www.elca.org/webministry

Be careful with color backgrounds, wallpaper and font colors. Be concerned about readability. The basics of good graphic design apply to Web page design, too. Use white space. Don't fill all the pages with text, photos or graphics. Give the page and the reader some white space to breathe in. Placement and amount of white space should be carefully considered. Think of "points of entry" where your reader will be "pulled in" to the text to read (such as pull quotes, photos, graphics, sidebars, bullets, subheadings, captions, etc.)



UPDATE IT! If you have a website for your church, but do not update it regularly, it's like displaying an "OPEN" sign in front of a locked door. It sends the wrong signal and leaves your visitor with a bad impression. Update your pages frequently. At least monthly, if not weekly. Make it someone's job to update and maintain your pages on a regular basis. But remember, old information is important, too. Archive what you had posted so people can refer to it later or do basic information that stays static and your home page and few other pages that are constantly changing.

CHECK IT! It is important to check your work on several browsers. Pages that look okay in one browser don't always look so good in another. Double check your links and buttons to make sure they work. Surfers can be frustrated and have a bad opinion of your church if there are broken links and incomplete information. You

should also try to think like the reader/surfer. Is your website easy to use, understand, and read? Is it logical? Make it a no-brainer for the user. Use the KISS technique (Keep It Simple, Stupid). You don't need to have all the latest graphics and technology. People come to your site for information. Have someone other than the writer look over your text to make sure there are no typographical errors, misspellings or grammatical or punctuation problems.

Your church website has three types of visitors. Each visitor type needs different information. Surfers are likely to include:

1. People looking for a church who have never attended your services
2. People in your local community
3. Your congregation's regular attendees.

Information that is essential for church seekers:

- Where is the church? Give the exact street address, city, and zip code. Offer helpful hints about your church's location, such as "in the Hyde Park neighborhood"... "across the street from Lincoln Park"... "one block east of Main Street." Give directions to the church from the east, west, north, and south. Include traffic patterns (one-way or closed streets), nearby public transportation, and a Google or Yahoo map link.
- What should I know about the worship services? List the times. Briefly describe each service. Is informal dress OK? Is the service designed for families with young children? Is it a Latin Mass? What is the music like? What languages are used?
- Where do I park and enter the building for worship? Which doors are handicapped accessible?
- What is available for my children? Include directions to the nursery and children's classrooms.
- What other questions do visitors frequently ask? What happens during the service? What is the passing of the peace? How does the congregation observe Holy Communion? What is the church office's telephone number if I have other questions?

Information is essential for people in the community:

- What opportunities are there for the community? Tell parents about your excellent daycare and/or preschool ministries. Post about enrollment periods, opportunities for visiting the school, open houses, staff profiles, and downloadable forms, which all supply a welcome mat.
- Can community members use your building (Boy Scout Troops, support groups, weddings)? In your Frequently Asked Questions section, answer questions such as, "Can I get married in the church, even though I'm not a member?" Even if you decide not to post all of your policies regarding weddings, meetings, or other events, provide contact information for the staff person who can answer these inquiries.

Information that is essential for members and regular attendees:

- What would church members like to know and have easy access to? Consider an online newsletter, a church calendar, sermon transcripts, Podcasts of services, event registration, book recommendations or online church library card catalog, volunteer needs, online giving, online member directory (viewed on a secure link only), Bible discussions, or daily prayers.

The Top Ten Church Website Mistakes

1. Incomplete church address. Include your city, state, and zip code on the Website's front page. A home page with only "First Baptist Church" could be anywhere.
2. An unusual and difficult-to-remember Website address. A www.FirstPresbyterianTulsa.org address is far better than a www.fpctok.org address.
3. No contact information for a human being. Provide a staff name and telephone number.
4. No information about the church's denomination or affiliation. If people have to guess, they often look elsewhere for a church!
5. Outdated information and small print. Poorly maintained church calendars and old content give a boarded-up windows impression.
6. Jargon or insider abbreviations. One church lists WBSAM. Only an insider knows the translation—Women's Bible Study on a weekday-morning.
7. No outside-the-building information, such as where to park, or enter the building for worship, or find handicapped access.
8. No inside-the-building information, such as nursery location, pre-school childcare, or a separate children's worship during services.
9. Inappropriate content. Confidential information such as prayer lists with members' names, illnesses, and surgeries; children's photos without their parent's permission (whether or not they are identified); new members' photos without prior consent; staff photos that detract from their professional image; and home telephone numbers.
10. E-mail addresses. "Spiders" or Web crawler computer programs read through Web page content looking for E-mail addresses. These programs then send ads and other SPAM that floods inboxes. Protect your staff and volunteers by creating a user link for sending E-mails.

Make sure that when you are writing for your website, you keep the text short as you would with any other publication. Build in links and hot buttons to pages with additional information. Only 10% of users scroll beyond the information that is visible on the screen when a page comes up. Avoid insider language and acronyms.

HOME PAGE: Make sure the home page generates quickly so the reader does not have to wait for photos or elaborate graphics to load. Web surfers get bored fast. Let them get to the “meat” as fast as possible. The home page should command attention and hook the surfer!

BASIC INFORMATION: Make sure contact information for your organization is easy to find and that maps, directions, and service times are easy to find.

MISSION: Will people be able to tell what your mission is? Do you identify yourself as an ELCA congregation?

BIOGRAPHIES: Users want to know the people behind the website. Biographies and photographs make the web a less impersonal place and increase trust.

PHOTOS: Use the best photos you have with good composition and clarity. Pick photos that draw the reader in through his or her emotions. Make sure they are not a huge file that take a long time to load. Make sure you have written permission to use that individual’s image on your website.

FRAMES: Splitting a page into frames is confusing for users; try to avoid them.

FONTS: Don’t use a font smaller than 10 pt. For headlines, use a font size that is 2-4 times the size of the text font. Make it bold. Use the same font throughout. Use bold, italics, and underlining sparingly.

COUNTERS: Who cares how many people have visited your site since 1996? Get rid of them.

FAQs: Consider a Frequently Asked Questions page that will answer virtually any question that is routinely asked.

SHOW AND TELL WHAT IS GOING ON NOW: Show who regularly comes to worship. Show people working on a current project. Tell about your most immediate commitment as a congregation. Tell about the great things your members are accomplishing.

Resources for Website Development:

ELCA Web Ministry: www.elca.org/webministry

Top Ten Mistakes in Web Design: www.useit.com/alertbox/9605.html

Web Design Features: www.ratz.com/features.html

SOURCES FOR WEB INFORMATION GIVEN:

Tips for Great Looking Publications by Rod Boriak (Former ELCA Staff); Web Design and Guidelines by Jon Skogen (Former ELCA Staff); Your Web Site by Steve Cony (Communications Counselors LLC); The Parish Paper, March 2009; ELCA Seeds for the Parish, July-August 2009

Social Networks

As you look at your congregation’s presence on the World Wide Web, having a website is only one component that you should consider. Today, there are many avenues on the web to have a presence for your congregation. Some church leaders may wonder if social networking is important in the church today. Many may think it is a waste of time. But the fact remains that over 50 percent of Americans are members of Facebook and younger demographics use Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube on a daily basis. It is also how these demographics interact with one another. To many of them, these relationships online are as important as those of older generations who got together for coffee every day with the same group of friends. Using these services for ministry is an aspect of faith life that’s waiting to be tapped! The ELCA’s publication *Seeds for the Parish* encouraged congregations to think of your web presence as a farm:

- Physical Brick and Mortar Church = Farmhouse. This is the heart of the farm, the home base for all operations. Notice that most of the work of the farm takes place outside the farmhouse, but most of the planning, preparation and refueling/renewing happens here.
- Your Web site = Croplands. Your Web site requires constant tending, following seasonal waves of the church year, which means more work in the Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter seasons. The web site should provide a positive drive-by impression as well as deeper content for those who linger.
- Blogs = Pigsty. The pigs are hungry, but if fed right they can “bring home the bacon” with improved search results in Google. Blogs are “web logs” that allow readers to comment on posts. Blogs can be used to tell mission stories, post devotionals or Bible studies, or can be a way for parishioners to comment on sermons.
- Facebook = Chicken yard. Facebook provides social interactions, quick ways to keep members in touch with each other and with congregational life—but watch out for foxes in the henhouse!



- Twitter = Cow barn. Twitter takes consistent, day-in, day-out maintenance. It is a great way to provide a steady stream of congregational updates and emergency info. Twitter allows you to provide short (less than 140 character) updates about what is going on in your congregation.

- YouTube = Horse stable. YouTube allows you to show off the best and brightest in your congregation; creating good videos can take a significant investment, but yields high rewards. YouTube is a place to post videos and could be used for video Bible studies, pastor’s sermons, children’s programs, etc.



Getting started on any of these is easy. There are free blog tools on the web for you to set up blogs (for free). One such service is www.wordpress.com. Facebook is free, too, but you need to be a registered user to access its services, including creating a “fan page” or a “group” for your congregation. You can sign up for a Twitter account at www.twitter.com. Again, your members would need to be registered users to use this service. YouTube is free and can be accessed by anyone with web access. To post videos, you will need to set up an account, which is also free.

By combining the above, your congregation can have a serious and comprehensive web presence, which will allow your parishioners to communicate with one another more effectively. These services can also be used to remind members of your church about upcoming events, special services, and prayer requests.

Connections with Facebook

Before we move to tips for church newsletters in this feature, let’s take a quick look at how your congregation could use Facebook. This information has been passed onto us from the ELCA’s Communicators Network:

1. **Be intentional about your use of Facebook.** Congregations often set up a Facebook page without a staff person or volunteer committed to developing it as a resource for congregational communication. Outline your intentions for the presence:
 - a. **Is it mainly for outreach** to reach people who would never end up on your congregation Web site? If this is true, how can staff and members be encouraged to post regular updates, questions, and information on your Facebook wall that will provide a window into congregational life.
 - b. **Is it mainly for members?** If this is true, is it primarily for member socializing, or committee work? Are active members and leaders using other collaboration tools now? Would the Facebook presence undermine the effectiveness of those groups? If it is mainly for socializing and connecting between all members, how can you stimulate that sharing and connecting? Is there a “member

care" or "fellowship" group who could intentionally post reflections, event images and videos, questions for members to respond to?

- c. **Is it an electronic bulletin board?** In the least, your Facebook presence might be a convenient way to get announcements out to members in a place where they are already visiting (and each announcement can be used to drive people to more information on your congregation Web site). The idea is that, in addition to collecting together updates for occasional publication in the Sunday bulletin or congregation newsletter, as soon as you hear about some event, deadline, news item, update, etc., you would do a wall post on the Facebook page. The best posts are ones that also invite members to comment.
2. **Be careful about staff and volunteer use of Facebook.** The main concerns here are for privacy issues and appropriate behavior. Use a password-protected service as a way to share directory information, photos with captions, etc. only among members. Facebook could be your more open community presence, but monitor it to make sure that member privacy is respected. This involves common sense concerns:
 - a. Don't post images of children without the consent of their parents.
 - b. Don't caption photos with full names of children.
 - c. Don't post member e-mail addresses or phone numbers.
 - d. Help protect members from fraud.
 - e. Make sure that church staff and volunteer leaders are using church computers appropriately.
3. **Look for models of effective use of social media in congregations.** A good example of a congregation with well-developed e-communication tools is Zion Lutheran Church in Buffalo, Minn (<http://www.zionbuffalo.org/>). A church staff person does regular Facebook posts and members occasionally comment (<http://www.facebook.com/ZionBuffalo>). It's interesting to note that, in general, discussion boards seem fairly quiet on Facebook, but people are often willing to comment and "like" wall posts. Polling congregation staff and lay leaders to see if others are willing to post and comment is an important step; otherwise, by default all posts will be from you, which may be helpful for members, but not as interesting as the variety you have with many people contributing. The "Welcome" page is useful for people who may be new to Facebook. Facebook has become the most popular photo-sharing site. Zion has built up a large library of albums that help provide a window into congregational life. Facebook's "tagging" feature lets parents or the people pictured decide if they will be identified in a photo.

The best congregation Facebook presence is one that "runs itself," with congregation members and staff contributing regularly in ways that enhance community and help make connections between members. This helps to make visible the real community that gathers on Sunday morning and during the week, and makes others want to get involved more or to consider joining.



Newsletters

Most congregations have newsletters, so it's important to make them a good tool for members and those who might be interested in your congregation. David Kandler, president of www.CompanyNewsletters.com, shares ten tips to make sure your newsletter gets read:

1. **Make sure your newsletter's name is an attention grabber.** You might use something simple which focuses more on your church name, but it's best to have a name that grabs the attention of your readers!
2. **Write your newsletter's articles objectively.** Your newsletter can be an excellent vehicle for promoting your church and activities, but it shouldn't read like a sales brochure. Articles should be written like in a newspaper-- objectively. If you want to insert opinions into stories, make sure readers know who is speaking.
3. **Write to express, not to impress.** The purpose of a newsletter is to communicate, not to see how many times you can send readers to a dictionary. Keep writing casual, non-technical, and conversational.
4. **Proofread, Proofread, Proofread.** Make sure that several people read it to pick out typos, grammatical errors, and other problems with the newsletter.

5. **Use front-page articles to draw in readers.** Prospective readers judge a newsletter by its cover. Make sure your main story is appealing and draws interest. Some churches like to put “pastor’s messages” on the front page. While that may boost the ego of the person writing it, it probably won’t draw in readers unless the person has some really monumental news to announce.
6. **Use at least one graphic per page.** Graphics include photos, artwork, charts, pull quotes, or even a colored or shaded box behind an article. Graphics help draw a reader into the story and provide visual breaks from solid blocks of text.
7. **Use image-editing software to sharpen your photos.** Adjust photos so they look good in regards to contrast, color, and brightness levels.
8. **Use accent colors and tints to make your newsletter eye-catching.** A black and white newsletter is better than no newsletter at all; but if your budget allows, add at least one accent color. You could also use a tint of the one color (gray, if you are only using black ink).
9. **Print your original.** If possible, print directly to a printer or copier. The copies are crisper and the graphics look better than photocopying.
10. **Use recycled paper.** Keep the world’s trees and your readers happy by printing your newsletter on recycled paper. Even if you are not a tree-hugging granola eater, many of your readers probably are. Remember, recyclable paper is not necessarily recycled paper. Make sure if you use recycled paper, you let your readers know. If you use recycled paper, be sure to let your reader know!



Here are some fundamentals of publication and brochure design (which can be helpful with newsletters and bulletins, too).

- **Define and survey your readers.** Who is the audience? Establish objectives for the publication, then make decisions about image, format, frequency, graphics, articles, etc.
- **Remember that what works for one audience won’t work for another.** Designs may be radically different and contradict what we think is “correct and acceptable.”
- **People decide to read or not read mail in a fraction of a second.** Does your newsletter have information the audience wants or needs and cannot get easily from another source? How do you slow the trip to the wastebasket? Layout and design get the reader to the page—good content and writing keep them there.
- **UZ, the reader’s eye usually moves in one of two directions when scanning or reading.** One way the reader’s eye moves is beginning in the upper left corner and moving down in a “Z” pattern towards the lower right corner. They also tend to look at a page in a big “U” starting from the upper left corner and swooping down the page and back up to the upper right corner. Graphics or photos will draw attention to or away from what you want them to read. Variety is okay if it isn’t disruptive to the natural flow of reading.
- **Put 1-3 lead articles on the front page.** Interesting lead articles increase the odds of capturing the reader’s attention. Conclude one article on the front page and jump the other article to conclude on page 2 or 3. To help draw the readers in, you should place your best articles on the front page. Use “forward-thinking” articles. Let your readers know what exciting things are happening. Save your “What we did last summer” articles for the inside.
- **Proof. Proof. Proof.** Make sure that there are no mistakes in your copy- proof, proof proof. Use your Spell Check. Find someone to objectively proofread your publication, looking for punctuation, grammar, spelling, and all other mistakes, please!

- **Never assume.** Okay, you can assume... assume that everyone will be reading your information for the first time. Put your church's name, address, phone number, fax number, e-mail, Facebook page, and web address on everything you send out. Remember the obvious.
- **Paper and ink colors.** 60% of newsletters are printed on white stock. 30% are printed on an off-white stock. 10% are printed on other colors. What does that tell you? Beware of these colors. Those obnoxious bright colors are just that. **Yellow, orange, or red inks are difficult to read.** Use them for highlights, accents, and attention-grabbers. Readers have a 40% better retention rate when color is used.
- **HEY!!!** Take it easy on the exclamation points! Not everything has to be exciting! If you use them too often, they lose the impact you are looking for!
- **Ask yourself: "Hey self, can the reader find the important information at a glance?"** Decide what information needs to stand out for the reader. What will they look for first? Use: boxes, graphics, sidebars, color, bullets, dingbats, or "hot spots."
- **Strive for readable copy.** If 70 percent of your copy has words of five letters or less, it's very readable. Keep your writing casual, non-technical, and conversational. Use short paragraphs (but not at the top of the page or column because it looks weird).
- **Use inverted pyramid.** A news writing technique is the inverted pyramid style. Place the most important information at the top and the least important at the bottom. Articles are always easier to edit from the bottom up.
- **The reader needs to rest.** So, give their eyes a chance to rest or refocus at every two or three inches down a column by using paragraphs and graphics. Graphics include photos, shaded boxes, colored boxes, pull quotes, artwork, charts.
- **Use active voice as opposed to passive.** Passive = You will be asked soon to send contributions to the church. Active = Send contributions now! Passive is when you use forms of the verb "to be."
- **Headlines grab reader's attention: DO NOT USE ALL UPPER CASE LINES, IT IS DIFFICULT TO READ.** When you use both upper and lowercase letters, you add texture and readability. Make headlines short and active, but complete thoughts or sentences. Break multi-line headlines logically or as complete thoughts. As a general rule, the headline font should be about 2 ½ times larger than the body text. Speaking of fonts, don't use more than 1-2 different font styles in the same publication. Use 9-12 pt font for text.
- **Columns:** Two or three column grid designs are flexible to lay out and easy to read. One column with a long line of uninterrupted text across a page is hard to read and to follow. It also makes for a very short paragraph.
- **To flush or not to flush, that is the question:** Flush left with jagged right margins are more readable, interesting, and add to the graphic image and white space of your text. It is important to create 20-25 percent white space on each page. Most people prefer flush left columns instead of justified columns.
- **"Say Cheese!"** Never print a photo of someone whose head is smaller than a dime. Large group photos are very difficult to see. Photos of objects or buildings are snoozers. Action shots are preferred to staged photos. Just because you know what the people are doing in the photo, don't assume your readers will. Always include a caption. Make sure you have permission from the people in the picture to publicize it.
- **Other tips:** Use a style sheet for consistency. The ELCA has style guidelines and the Associated Press Stylebook is a great resource. Also, place a dingbat at the conclusion of the article for effect. ❄❄❄

There is no one perfect or preferable newsletter design. We must see and critique through the eyes of the target audience rather than the eyes of management.

We've spent considerable time looking at how to make your church newsletters look better. The Director of Communications looks at many church newsletters each month to see what is going on in your congregation. A few general impressions about these newsletters:

- Many newsletters do not use anything but text. They are lacking graphics. Pictures, clip art, or articles in shapes would help tremendously.
- Don't underestimate the importance of white space. Your newsletter should have a balance of text, graphic elements, and white space. White space helps the reader be drawn to the other elements.
- Make sure that your pictures and graphics are not fuzzy. Many copiers are now equipped to print from computers and can aid in everyone getting a "clean" copy.
- Also make sure that people pictured are large enough for us to see them. Their heads should be the size of a nickel, at least.
- Headlines need to be larger than the article text.
- Put news on the front page. While pastor's thoughts are important, do they usually constitute news? Put the pastor's message on page 2 or on one of the last pages.
- Make your newsletter look like some thought was put into it and not just copying news items from other sources.
- Consistency is good. People come to expect to find certain things in their newsletter—so if you put *USS Ark* or *Camel Tracks* in the newsletter, it's a good idea to do that every month.
- The synod office probably misses seeing some church newsletters because they are only produced in electronic form or posted on church websites. If your church only does an electronic version, make sure that news@uss-elca.org is on your mailing list. Or if you just post it, make sure we know so we can keep up with your congregation news.
- We have some very good looking newsletters in our synod. From this editor's humble opinion, one of the best is Beaver Lutheran Church in Beaver Springs. Just so you know, their church secretary used to work for a newspaper doing layout, so there is lots of experience behind their editions. If you get a chance to see their work, it's worth it. The newsletter is crisp, clean, lots of good pictures, and a good mix of text, graphics, and white space.

Hopefully this series on Creating Better Publications helped you enhance your communications. If you would like help applying some of these tips, please contact Chad Hershberger at news@uss-elca.org and he'll do an audit of your newsletter and other publications for you to give you some ideas to improve what you are doing.