Websites that WORK

Lynne M. Baab

Your website is your front door

These days, most congregations have a website. But quality of congregational websites vary widely. Some offer a rich sensory experience of words, images, sound and video. Others are little more than a perfunctory brochure and an outdated one at that. Like a magazine, a website is made up of words and images. But it is also built on hyperlinks. Just as photos can communicate values in a nonverbal way, links on websites communicate a great deal about the congregation. What aspects of the congregation's life are so significant that they get a prominent link on the home page, a link with bold print or perhaps a graphic? What activities get links on lists, menus, or navigation bars? Which outside organizations does this congregation value highly enough that a link is provided on the home page? Are newcomers appreciated enough that a prominent link is provided with information just for them? Are potential questions significant enough that there is a link to frequently asked questions?

Everything on a website communicates what the congregation values, and those values inform and nurture both members and visitors.

What do your members need? Ask them!

Home pages matter

Some home pages are sparse and bare, with little information and only one photo, often a photo of the building. Some are quite unattractive to look at, with a bland layout, poor quality photos, and unharmonious colors. Some are cluttered with too much information and a hodgepodge of fonts, colors, and styles. An attractive home page that presents key information about a congregation's heart and soul is an excellent investment of time, money, and energy.

Your home page is very likely the most visited page on your site. Here is one month's hits for one congregation:

Home page—2,112
Congregational values page—311
Audio and media page (includes sermon downloads)—232
How to get involved in ministry page—222
Marketplace (a place to exchange things and services)—185
News and events—184
Pastors and staff—175
Contact us—121
Small groups—119

Congregational websites have 3 audiences

Congregational members come to the website primarily for sermons and information. What did the sermon cover last Sunday when I was out of town? What time is that missionary speaking tonight? What else is on the calendar? Keeping the website updated with factual information, especially up-to-date sermons—whether in audio, video, or written form—is key for this audience.

Potential visitors may want that same information. But they are also looking for answers to such questions as: What time is worship? How do I find the church? What can I wear to worship? Make sure you have links to such basic information. Keep in mind that they may be looking for insights into your congregation's culture, priorities, and values. What messages does your website convey? Are spiritual seekers welcome? Is the congregation active in the community? Is the congregation affiliated with a denomination?

A careful audit of the website, evaluating whether the needs of these audiences are addressed, can be helpful in assessing the effectiveness of a website.

People looking for resources are a third, often overlooked audience. Perhaps someone visits a congregation on vacation, enjoys the sermon, and comes back to that congregation's website each week to read or listen to the sermon. Perhaps a children's ministry leader is looking for new ideas, scanning other churches' websites to get ideas for ways of serving children. Think about how your site is not exclusively about serving or attracting new members.

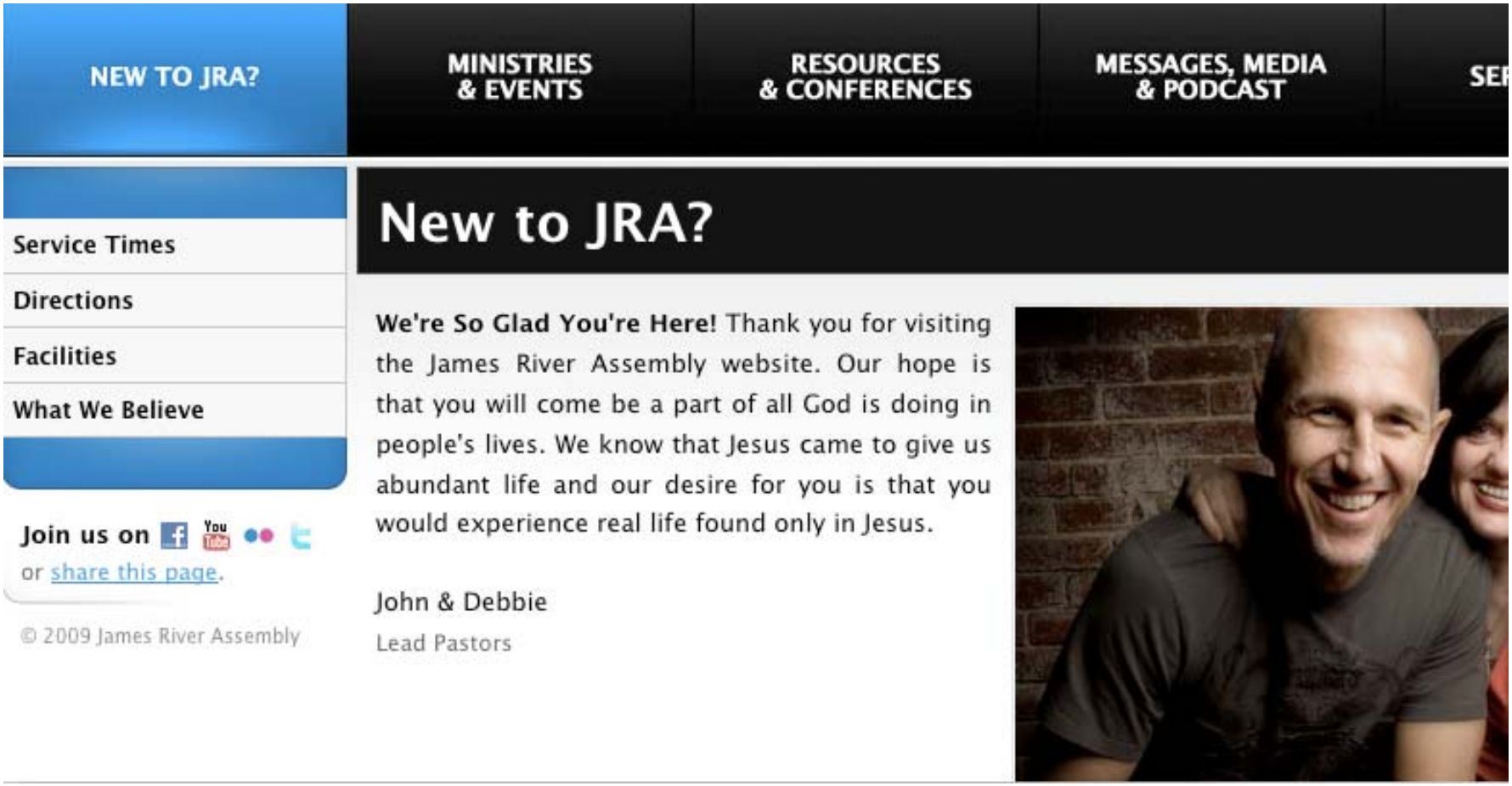
Look at some megachurch websites for ideas

Saddleback Church

James River Assembly

Crossroads Live

Crossroads Cincinnati



Think visually

We live in a visual age. Experts say our brains process images much faster than words. Thus, web viewers have an immediate impression of the overall arrangement of words and text on a Web page. Visuals carry the primary impression. Only secondarily do web viewers absorb the content of the words on the page.

Pastors are usually word oriented. They and other congregational leaders generate announcements of events and descriptions of the church that are usually designed for newsletters, brochures, and printed bulletins. Web designers edit these verbal texts, usually shortening them significantly, and pair them with photos and other images to create a pleasing whole.

Note the disconnect here. Congregational leaders are charged with shepherding the congregation and communicating its vision, yet the aspect of the website that carries the greatest impact—the visual components, such as photos and graphics, as well as the overall visual structure—is usually determined by one person, the web designer. This person is usually a member of the congregation who volunteers to create the site, a paid employee, or a paid independent contractor. In very few cases is the designer a leader of the congregation.

Many congregational websites are quite effective and interesting, but are they communicating the values of the congregation in ways that mesh with the vision for the congregation established by its leaders? Unless leaders of congregations take websites seriously, websites will continue to be the work of one person, or a small number of people, who may or may not be closely connected to the leaders and their vision.

Photo by Andrea Nilsson

Photo by Old Shoe Woman

A word about images

Demand images

When the person is looking into the camera, it creates a kind of demand, because the person's gaze "demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relationship with him or her." (Kress and van Leeuwen[1])

Versus

Offer images

Kress and van Leeuwen use the term "offer" to describe photos in which the people look away from the camera, indicating that these photos propose or suggest something rather than insisting. Also, photos of a person's upper body or head communicate more intimacy than photos that include the whole body.

[1]Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (1999). Representation and interaction: Designing the position of the viewer. In A. Jaworski, & N. Coupland (Eds.), *The Discourse Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 381.

Using photos…

In all the websites I pored over, I found that photos of people felt more invitational than photos of buildings. Photos of people seemed to be more in harmony with statements of welcome. But there were limits. Some websites had so many photos of people looking into the camera that after a while, those websites felt overwhelming and even pushy, as if too much was being demanded of me. Photos of people involved in congregational activities, not looking into the camera, gave me a window into the congregation's life without demanding anything of me.

…tells a story

This issue of demand versus offer in photos is worthy of discussion. What do you want your website to communicate? That all are welcome? Or that you strongly urge people to attend? Photos contribute to this message.

Groupings of people in photos also communicate the kind of relationships that are valued in a congregation. Photos of people from different generations involved in activities together communicate that the congregation values and nurtures intergenerational activities. A preponderance of photos that appear to be traditional nuclear families indicates that nontraditional families may not be welcome. Photos of groups of people who appear to be from various ethnic backgrounds communicate an openness to diverse cultures.

Consult some “critical friends”

One of the premier researchers on online religious community, Heidi Campbell, uses the term *critical friends* to describe the role of religious leaders who affirm the opportunities provided by the Internet, while also being cautious and careful about the possible negative repercussions. I found that this “critical friend” role is often absent in congregations. Many web producers work quite independently because of lack of interest or knowledge on the part of congregational leaders. Critical friends among the congregation’s leaders would bring an additional set of eyes and an understanding of the congregation’s priorities, enabling websites to represent congregations more accurately.

In addition, critical friends are urgently needed in congregations to minimize the growing tendency toward a consumerist model of faith and congregational life. Congregations are not commodities to be picked up and then discarded with every passing whim. Congregations demand commitment that is sometimes challenging and sometimes painful but also yields deep and meaningful fruit over time. Because websites use visual communication in similar ways to the advertising industry, congregational leaders need to think carefully about the ways their websites tap into consumerist practices.

Website producers risk a wholesale embrace of secular marketing strategies to promote their congregation and to describe its uniqueness. Critical friends, with an awareness of the risks inherent in the consumer model and perhaps with theological training, need to be in dialogue with website producers as choices are made regarding website content.

5 practical ways to improve your website

1. Write for the Web

Words on a computer screen (or mobile device) read differently than in print. Generally speaking, people read faster on the Web. They scan for meaning. Be concise. Choose your words carefully.

2. Simplify

Giving people fewer navigation choices improves their experience. Think about what people want from your site. Why are they there? Can you think of logical categories for your information? Can you make some information more prominent than other information? Can you combine links? Replace a lot of words with bold graphics or visual images when you can. Take advantage of white space to create contrast and emphasis.

3. Be selective about fonts

Fonts are divided into two main groups—serif and sans serif, which means without serifs. Serifs are the tiny horizontal lines added to the top and bottom of letters in fonts such as Times New Roman and Georgia. This text is in a serif font. Sans serif fonts lack those little lines and have a cleaner, simpler look. Examples of sans serif fonts are Arial and Verdana.

Mixing and matching different fonts usually results in a chaotic looking page.

By Cloudsoup

Georgia Font

Verdana Font

5 practical ways to improve your website

By Wallyg

4. Don't confuse your building with your congregation

Many congregational websites feature a photo of the building at the top of the home page. Often that photo is the only photo on the home page. If a congregation wants to communicate that its values are closely connected to its building, then a photo of the building is perfectly appropriate. However, I imagine that most leaders of congregations would not talk about their building first when they discuss their congregation's values.

5. Offer more ways for people to contact you, then be sure to respond promptly when they do

I can't tell you the number of websites I've visited that make it difficult or impossible to find a way to contact someone—anyone—in the congregation. Or how often I've e-mailed a main contact e-mail and never received a reply. Even if you prefer for all web inquiries to go to a main contact e-mail, make the it easy to find from the home page, and make sure it goes to someone who can respond within a day. If you want to thwart spam robots, format it as an image file or do not make it clickable (e.g., pastor [at] ourchurch.org).

Visit: www.lynnebaab.com for more information about my books

If you enjoyed this e-book, you might also enjoy:

My "On Demand" Webinar, Websites that Work: Identity and Mission Online

My seven books and one study guide that cover a range of topics.

Resources for congregations and their leaders from The Alban Institute:

Reaching Out in a Networked World (2008) helps leaders of congregations understand the opportunities offered by many of the new forms of digital communication. (Link. See next page.)

Beating Burnout in Congregations (2003) looks at causes of burnout among congregational volunteers, with ideas for prevention and healing. (Link)

Embracing Midlife (1999) presents ways congregations can do a better job supporting people at midlife. (Link)

*Personality Type in Congregations (*1998) gives an overview of ways the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator can be used in congregations. (Link)

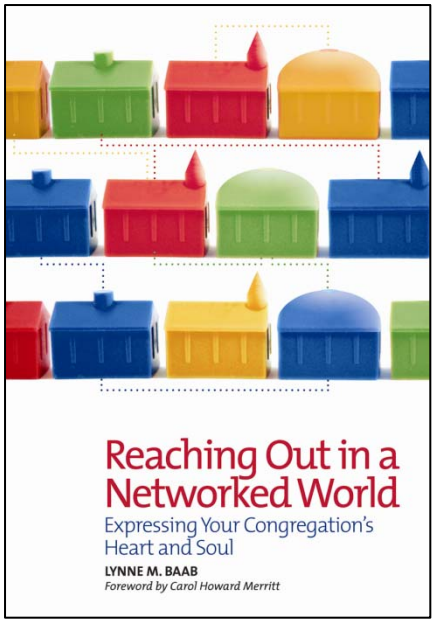
Books on personal Christian spirituality from InterVarsity Press:

Fasting (2006) is a practical book with stories of people who fast both from food and from other things, such as media, shopping, and technology.

Sabbath Keeping (2005) is an introduction to ways of keeping the sabbath with stories from many people who observe the sabbath.

A Renewed Spirituality (2002) discusses patterns of midlife spirituality, along with six spiritual paths that people at midlife find helpful.

Sabbath: The Gift of Rest (2007) explores eight biblical passages with theological and practical themes that undergird the practice of sabbath keeping.



What else I cover in my book *Reaching Out in a Networked World*

- Paradigm shifts in communications
- Myths about identity, values, and communication
- More about effective website design
- Where communication is heading with e-mail, blogs, and social media
- Building online communities
- Reaching the younger, networked generation
- The problems with desktop publishing
- Using A/V tools in worship
- How to conduct a communications audit
- (Visit Alban's website for more information o to buy)

"Every church I know is adopting **new technology** in their communication, but often without considering whether it is being used to express the personality and values of the congregation with clarity, authenticity, and beauty. After reading Lynne Baab's book, I will never look at websites, newsletters, worship bulletins, projected images, or even email messages the same. Here is a **practical, understandable, and faithful guide** to the use of **new media** in congregational life. **It is a must read.**" — *Dr. Stephen Hayner, Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth, Columbia Theological Seminary.*

About Lynne M. Baab

Lynne M. Baab is the author of numerous books, magazine articles, and online resources. Her most recent book, *Reaching Out in a Networked World: Expressing Your Congregation's Heart and Soul*, discusses communication issues faced by congregations in our networked, digital world.

Lynne served in pastoral roles in two Seattle churches before earning a PhD in communication at the University of Washington in 2007, focused on congregational websites. She currently teaches pastoral theology at the University of Otago and the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership in Dunedin, New Zealand.

Visit Lynne's website at www.lynnebaab.com for information about her books and to read articles she has written.

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