



# REACH OUT

**CHURCH  
ONLINE**

**websites**

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‘Balanced, supportive, encouraging,  
practical... A total thumbs up!’

Dr Bex Lewis, author of *Raising Children in a Digital Age*

‘An essential resource for all  
church leaders.’

Jo Swinney, editor of *Preach* magazine

# Introduction

Does your church have a website?

- Yes—but it’s woefully out of date.
- Yes—but I know it could be better.
- No—and someone gave me this book in the hope that it would convince me that it’s really simple and worthwhile, but I’m not so sure...

This series of books starts from the understanding that it is primarily and ultimately God who communicates. He has equipped us to take part. Digital tools are a gift for this, and so are all the traditional church communication methods, but they’re more effective when used together. A church can run all sorts of events and groups, but it’s a waste of time if no one hears about them. This is where digital communication comes into its own.

Imagine this is you: you walk past the same church on the way back from work every day. Yes, it does meld with the landscape. But you’ve always secretly wondered what goes on behind those slightly grand doors, and what it looks like inside. You always read that crumbling noticeboard in the vague hope that something might catch your eye and show signs of

life. You like the idea of God. You don't know enough about Jesus to be sure. Now and again you idly search online for what your local church is doing. You've never had a friend who goes to church. Like millions of others, you'd happily go if you were invited—but you've never been invited. Perhaps this Christmas...

Churches have an immense opportunity! Not only do they get to be places of sacramental worship, teaching, communion, fellowship and all those other words that are understood by most UK Christians, but not necessarily by their neighbours. They also get to be lights in their community and centres of communication about what it is to be a follower of Christ.

Churches get to ask the big questions in the public sphere. Through every means of communication we have available to us—buildings, services, ministries, websites, printed invitations, social media, videos, magazines, news sheets, noticeboards, the smiles on our faces, the words out of our mouths—churches can fundamentally change perceptions of Jesus Christ and of those who believe he still has the power to change lives.

This series is for those who feel responsibility for church communications and for those who think it makes a difference. There is plenty that the world of corporate and charity marketing can teach the church. Free resources are more readily available than ever before. The options can seem overwhelming—but time, budget and, let's face it, imagination can be limited.

Hopefully the tools in these books will help you form a simple strategy and plan that starts squarely in the reality of your situation. It's written so that the intimidated can relax, the curious can explore and the goal-oriented can focus.

# 1

## Why it matters

I went to a Christian Resources Exhibition one year in London, and got an Uber cab afterwards to the hotel. The driver asked where I'd been. I tried to explain the concept of an exhibition hall full of organisations trying to help churches: 'You know, people who provide training, or chairs, or websites...' He was incredulous. 'Websites? *Churches* with websites?' 'Yes! And they're on social media too.' 'What? *Vicars*? On *Twitter*?' This struck him as incomprehensible and hilarious. I really hope he went home, googled 'church website' or 'church Facebook' out of pure storytelling mirth, and discovered something that blew away his assumptions.

There are plenty within the church who'd identify with my taxi driver. They would say this stuff is irrelevant; perhaps, if pressed, they might even assert that it's not part of the church's calling. They might be described as 'the unwilling'. However, you have chosen to pick up a book with both 'websites' and 'church' in the title. You have already squared what the driver saw as a crazy juxtaposition.



So perhaps you are in a second group: ‘the willing’. What would the church do without the willing? You’ve come to terms with the concept that church requires an online presence. You might say that websites and social media are a tedious, time-consuming necessity, but you accept that the issue needs ‘tackling’ and ‘sorting’.

A warning for the willing—this isn’t something that can be fully tackled or sorted in one hit (just as preaching, or a magazine, or any kind of active communication can’t be done in a moment). Chapter 3 contains more on how to move from quick progress to sustainability.

Or, finally, perhaps you’re excited by the potential in the whole area of digital communication and you feel that such a short book could never cover the breadth and depth of the subject. Plus, this is a printed book! Old school! However, you’ll find much here that affirms what you already know, and hopefully some things that will enable you to encourage others to explore. You are ‘the curious’.

The risk for the curious is in being overwhelmed by the potential, to the point where you can no longer see the worth of what you already have. You might know how cool your website could be, but being

too harsh about the current reality may just hurt someone's feelings unnecessarily. As we see time and again in the example of Christ himself, leading others with vision begins with really knowing, really loving and ultimately serving the people you are with.

So, we have three broad groups: the unwilling, the willing and the curious.

The church can be inward-looking. We can easily see the weaknesses of those who are in our 'body of Christ': the weak legs, the overly forceful thumb, the emotional brain or the pernickety eye. When we look outside and focus on the people we're trying to reach, we find the same groups: those *unwilling* to acknowledge the presence of the church, let alone listen to it, the *willing* and the *curious*. If all our communications are focused on the curious, we may be missing an enormous opportunity.

Recent research asked UK adults how they perceive Christians and the church.<sup>1</sup> It demonstrated that a connection with church still has an important part to play in many people's spiritual journeys. Other research, by the University of Lancaster, identified 13% as anti-religious.<sup>2</sup> The New Atheists punch above their weight in the public consciousness.

The church can hear their voice as the voice of the mockers. We imagine them laughing disparagingly at any church 'trying to be cool' by embracing digital technology. Remember my taxi driver. Cringe.

Fear of the mockers, fear of the bemused, fear of the sceptical, fear of not being heard—fear of anything—is a bad basis for a decision. Don't base decisions about your church communications on fear of anyone or anything. The Bible says, in 2 Timothy 1:7, that we do *not* have a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power (enough to put our heads above the parapet), of love (enough to put concern into action), and of self-control (enough to see it through).

There will always be those who respond badly to anything that points to Christ and his church. As the early church was taught, 'The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness' (1 Corinthians 2:14). However, 'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong' (1:27; read 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 to delve further into this topic).

## 2

### What to consider first

The Church of England project Evidence to Action concluded that churches that grow are ‘intentional about vision and strategy’, and ‘recognise the importance of a clear identity and not neglecting the spiritual health of the church’.<sup>18</sup> The strategy is where the church leadership should be closely involved, and then they may hand it on to others.

Before you set out to create or overhaul your church plan for websites and digital communication, there are six strategic questions which can form the foundation of a long-term plan. Take these questions and discuss them with a group.

- What is our current reality?
- Who is our focus?
- What is the core message we’re communicating?
- What is our approach to social media?
- Can we communicate an identity that is cohesive, consistent and credible?
- Are our expectations realistic and shared with the church?

## What is our current reality?

Some church strategies use the simple framework: what is, what could be, what will be? Here are some questions to get you started.<sup>19</sup>

- 1 Are we registered on any directories, for example, 'Find a Church'?
- 2 How would we describe the people most likely to be looking at our website? What do we know about them?
- 3 What budget could be released? In one amount or monthly?
- 4 If we have a website, do we really know how to edit it, how it is supported, and who is responsible for every aspect of its content?
- 5 Have we looked at every page with a pen in hand?
- 6 Is there anything on there which is out of date? If so, do we know why? What would we do to avoid this next time?
- 7 Do we feel that our website reflects our values and priorities as a church?
- 8 Look at the website from the perspective of a local person who has never been to church and never met a Christian. Is it easy to find out when we meet, who we are, what we believe and what's going on?

9 If we had to justify why we're putting effort into this, what would be our answer?

Hopefully you'll now know enough for a basic SWOT analysis:

- Strengths: what we want to keep
- Weaknesses: what makes us cringe (or sometimes, what makes us disagree)
- Opportunities: what we want to develop
- Threats: what could go horribly wrong, probably by accident

Ultimately the answer to the last question is key. The motivation, the vision, the 'why it matters' covered in Chapter 1, is the engine that will keep you going through the minutiae of planning.

Digital tools will never be more than part of the bigger picture of the whole of your church communication: the preaching, magazine, smiles, welcome, noticeboard, invitations, activities, publicity, and everything else.

Jesus said that his followers would be identified by their love for one another (John 13:35). When we use church communications to build community, it enables that community to grow in love, which in turn enables us to communicate better.

In 2001 Jim Collins wrote a seminal management book called *Good to Great*, which was later appropriated for churches in *Breakout Churches* by Thom Rainer. Rainer observed this:

*Breakout churches are not adverse [sic] to innovation... Once they accepted a new approach, they were quick to use it for the good of the church. They viewed innovation as an acceleration of growth, not a creator of growth.*<sup>20</sup>

In other words, first identify where you want to develop, and then use digital tools to support your development. If you ask UK churches what type of people they want to attract, most will answer, ‘Young families’—and for good reason. Churches with young people are twice as likely to be flourishing.<sup>21</sup> Don’t think that setting up a website aimed at young families is enough. It needs to support what is already taking root. Even just the process of planning your strategy may improve your communication internally, and therefore improve your outreach.

## **Who is our focus?**

Marketing organisations build ‘personas’ of target customers or donors, to hone their advertising. Recent research on ‘why Christians give’ presented