

A Quick Start GUIDE



WEB MINISTRY FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

A Quick Start Guide for the Web Ministry

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Introduction

You have been given the task of coordinating a website for your church. Though this job may sound intimidating if you haven't managed a website before, many new technologies and online tutorials make this task easy to accomplish without specialized technical knowledge. This manual examines and explains the key elements in an effective church website and explores various ways to create and utilize those elements for your own church's site.

An effective church website is not only for use by members; it also exists to introduce your congregation to newcomers, providing them with general information as well as an invitation. It's like a brochure for your congregation. Because a visitor's first impression can depend on your website, it should explain what makes your church special and why people should attend.

Job Description

As the webmaster, you may already be part of a communication team at your church. The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* calls for the formation of a communication committee when church officers are elected. Depending on the size of your church, this committee can include your pastor or an elder, a webmaster, a communication director, a photographer, or any other positions your church may find necessary.

In some churches, one person may function as both webmaster and communication director. If you belong to a smaller church, there may not be enough members to create a communication committee. It may be that you and the pastor are the only people involved in planning for the website.

There are benefits to working with a smaller group when making decisions about the website. While having a larger group for brainstorming can supply a bigger pool of ideas, there will inevitably be a clash of opinions and it can take longer to reach a consensus. It is more efficient to create a smaller committee, with just enough people to get the job(s) done.

Regardless of the size of your team, your job is to coordinate the setup and maintenance of your church's website. You must keep information on the website current, accurate and optimally organized. If you attend a smaller church, you may be responsible for creating all website content. If you attend a larger church, you may be able to rely on contributions from other members. For example, the church event photographers could supply photos; the pastor might regularly submit a worship thought; the A/V team could provide you with audio or video files of each week's sermon; etc. You will simply act as the go-to person for posting these items on the website. You could also give your church's pastor and select ministry leaders the capability to log into the website to post content in their respective sections. Other church members can also help with submitting content or photos.

Planning

Before you create a new website or begin a major revision of your current website, it is essential for your team to meet, submit ideas and determine your primary goals of the website. Start simple, working up to more detailed projects, and spend as much prayerful time as needed in this planning stage. Remember to consider the future of the website, determining what types of features you may want to add down the road. You will thank yourself later, as many church sites end up needing a redesign within six months because they were not thoroughly planned. A common oversight for a communication committee is to forget to consider possible additions or upgrades to work toward as they gain more experience.

Target Audience

Your website should target church members as well as the community—and remember that a community person may fall into many sub-categories. For example, one person may have a great deal of knowledge about the Adventist church, but has never been to one. Another may have a background in another denomination and little or no knowledge of the Adventist church. Another may have never actually set foot in any church.

Because of this diversity, your content should be arranged in such a way that it is easy for members and visitors to find the information they need.

Your Church's Mission

Many churches convey their overall mission through their website. There are many options for what to include on the website,

Tip: Browse other church websites for examples and ideas. Look at a wide variety and identify features that you would like incorporate into your church's site.

but you should focus on your local church's strengths. For example, if your church has a vibrant young adult ministry or an exceptional community services program, make sure it is prominently featured on your website.



Through Adventist Church Connect, the North American division provides free websites to every Seventh-day Adventist church, conference, union, and school in Bermuda, Canada, and the United States.

There is no charge for equipment, set up, or hosting. No technical experience is required. User support is free via 800#, email, and online. Video tutorials demonstrate steps to customizing your site. Choose from professionally designed layouts, or work with a designer for a customized appearance.

ACC's Free Modules

- Prayer requests
- Daily devotions
- Calendar
- Adventist Church News
- Email newsletters
- Photo gallery
- RSS feed
- Poll
- Shortcut redirector
- Member directory
- Guestbook
- Survey

For more information visit www.adventistchurchconnect.com, call 877-518-0819, or email support@adventistchurchconnect.com.

Designing Your Site

Your Home Page

A home page is an introduction, telling people what website they are viewing. A church's home page should include the church's complete name, address, and the words "Seventh-day Adventist." Your church's name alone isn't enough. With approximately 6,000 Adventist churches in the North American Division, there is bound to be overlap in church names and cities where they are located. If people can't easily find the appropriate information, they won't visit your site again and probably won't visit your church, either.

Following the church name and address, the home page could also contain a tagline. This could be a short description of your church (i.e. “The Grace Place,” “The Church on the Hill,” etc.) or your church’s mission statement, as long as it is short and concise. If your statement is longer, consider a condensed version, with the extended statement on the “About” page.

Keep the home page simple. You don’t need to list every announcement or recommended link—that information can be spread throughout the rest of the site. Rather, focus on prioritizing the general information and making the links to the site’s other pages clear and accessible. Pick only a few pertinent items to list on the home page, such as service times, address and phone number, and perhaps a short welcome from the pastor. Some churches might also choose to list a major upcoming event (i.e. Vacation Bible School, evangelistic series, etc.) on a section of the home page. Whatever you choose, make sure each item is placed in a way that represents its priority, determining where the viewers’ eyes will be drawn to first.

Content Management

After you settle on the content of your church’s home page, determine what information to include on the secondary pages of the website. That content should then be divided into titled categories that will serve as the links on the home page’s navigation bar. These categorical links should be self-explanatory and listed in a logical order. Possible navigation links for churches might include:

- About Us
- Visitors
- Calendar
- Ministries
- Bible Study
- Devotional
- Media
- Contact Us

Try to arrange everything in such a way that site visitors don’t have to use the scroll buttons to read the entire navigation menu. Keep the main menu simple, remembering that you can include subcategories on secondary pages. For example, under the ministries link, you might have another menu that includes links to other pages that describe each ministry. You can ask ministry leaders to submit photos and content for their corresponding section of the website. Later on, after the site is up and running, consider giving those leaders the capability to log in to the site and add their own content, or establish a system for how they will submit it to you.

Writing for the Web

The use of a copy editor is necessary before finalizing the website. Even small typographical errors can cause a site to be perceived as less credible or unprofessional. Ask someone (preferably who was not involved in writing the content) to read through each page, making sure the tone is consistent and the writing free of spelling and grammar errors.

Remember that you need to write for people in the community. Visitors and even some members do not know the meaning of such terms as ingathering, vespers, ASI, ABC, etc. Be sure to include a short explanation of any acronyms and ministry programs, or write in such a way that you can avoid using insider language. For example,

The church will be collecting donations to ACS (Adventist Community Services) during this heightened time of need...

We hold our weekly evening worship service on Fridays at 7:00 p.m.

This event is based on a program designed by John Smith, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor from Anytown, USA and founder of ABCDE Bible Ministries.

It is also exceedingly important that “Seventh-day Adventist” be written correctly when referencing the collective church.

Correct:

Seventh-day Adventist (first reference)

Adventist (subsequent references)

Incorrect:

Seventh-Day Adventist

Seventh Day Adventist

Keep in mind that basic rules for good writing are just as important online as in print.

- Stay simple and concise.
- Avoid excessive “to be” verbs: is, are, was, were, have, has, and had.
- Cut unnecessary words, sentences, and paragraphs.
- Always identify the source of quotes. If a name is not available, use descriptions such as “one of the fifth-grade boys” or “a first-time visitor,” etc.
- Be culturally sensitive, staying aware of any terms that may have double meanings.
- Spell out abbreviations.
- Don’t use exclamation marks.

- Revise and rewrite.

When writing for the web, avoid long sentences and paragraphs, which will be difficult for readers to follow. To help pages of text look interesting, add subheadings before some paragraphs and try using photos, graphics, and bulleted lists.

Evangelistic Content

People who have never been to an Adventist church may likely come across your website, so you will want to include information they will find helpful and meaningful. Here are some suggestions for increasing your site's evangelistic potential, encouraging website visitors to become church visitors:

- Post the Sabbath school lessons for the corresponding week
- Offer links to Bible study guides
- Upload each week's sermon in audio or video format
- Provide a form where visitors can email prayer requests
- Provide a form where visitors can submit requests for Bible studies
- Include links to Adventist media
- Include information about Adventist beliefs
- Encourage ministry leaders to update their pages
- Advertise upcoming special events that can involve the community

Posting Pictures

Interesting and relevant photos are essential for creating a vibrant church website. Members love to see pictures of themselves, families, friends, and especially children. High-quality photos will also tell visitors an unwritten story about your church. From these photos they will learn who attends, how to dress for events, etc. They will be introduced to your church's participating members and observe just how much they enjoy their church. From this they will construct a general idea of what to expect if they visit.

Whether you take the photos yourself or delegate it to other church members, make sure all photographers use a good digital camera. If photos are too small or the resolution too low, your website photography will look cheap or amateur. To double-check, view the photos in a photo editing program or use the software that comes with your digital camera before uploading to the website. Check that sizing and resolution are sufficient for how you plan to use the photo.

Photography Tips

- Look for subjects who are enjoying the activity.
- Make sure the subject is in focus.
- Strive for variety in people, angles, poses/positioning, candid vs. arranged,

- etc.
- Aim for simplicity. Make sure the subject of your photo is prominent and the background not too distracting.
- Pay attention to the photo subject's placement, avoiding distracting shadows or protruding objects.
- Long distance shots can show the scope of an event, but pictures in which the subject(s) fill most of the frame are more interesting.
- To ensure best results when using the flash, remember to be 10 feet or closer to your subject. Move in close for indoor photos.
- Take lots of pictures. Select only the best photos for publishing on your website.

Privacy Policies and Practices

Whether you are about to launch your church website or prepare a major update, now is a good time to make the church members aware of the privacy policies that need to accompany your church's Internet presence. Before you start posting photos on your church's website, you will need to officially obtain members' permission. Since these photos have the potential to be seen by absolutely anyone, it is crucial that the persons in the photos (or their legal guardians) approve their use.

A good way to obtain this permission is by distributing a release form during a church service (as well as making it available online or for pickup if they were not at church that week) that members can sign, confirming that they either approve or disapprove the publishing of photos with themselves as the subject.

A release form created by the General Conference Office of General Council can be downloaded at <http://help.adventistchurchconnect.com/release>. It is true that not every member will faithfully return the form to the church office, but you will just have to assume that they did not give their permission. Only post photos of people who sign and return the form.

Posting personal information or any descriptions that cause a person to become even the slightest bit vulnerable should be avoided. When creating photo captions, refrain from using last names; and in the case of children, you may not even want to include their first names. In most situations, reserve full names and personal descriptions for the pastorate or guest speakers.

Also be cautious about posting specific information about overseas missionaries. Depending on the political climate in the country where they're located, they could be in danger of arrest or persecution if the wrong person found that information. Refrain from posting names (even first names), organizational affiliations, email addresses, locations, or photos without the missionaries'

permission.

Prayer Requests

If your website has a section for submitting prayer requests, you'll need to officially decide how to manage submissions while ensuring confidentiality. Some churches have all requests sent directly to the pastor or secretary, who makes sure all identifying information is removed before passing the requests along to the prayer team. Prayer requests submitted to the website should not be used to generate gossip about people's physical or mental health, marital or financial difficulties, or other vulnerable details. Describe your process for handling prayer requests on the website, so those submitting requests will know what will happen with their information.

It may also be helpful to list a few tips for prayer request submissions, such as leaving out last names, company names, or other sensitive information. Point out that if a person is submitting a prayer request for someone else, they should leave out any identifying information about that person, lest it become an accidental invasion of privacy.

Website Media

Many churches now offer various types of streaming media on their websites. Years ago it was very cumbersome to put dynamic images, video, or audio options on your website, and not everyone had high-speed Internet connections. Now there are much more user-friendly methods for posting various forms of media on your website.

You can offer audio and video using options such as Windows Media, QuickTime, iTunes, and RealPlayer. This allows people to listen to a sermon, or share sermons, special music presentations, and other church features with their friends. Your audio/video team should be able to create files for you to upload to the church's website.

Promoting Your Website

Choosing a Domain Name

The first step to promoting your church's website is to select a domain name. A domain name, such as *www.google.com*, identifies an Internet site. If your church has its own unique domain name, it will be significantly easier for people to find. And since there are many other church websites, it is important to be creative in choosing your domain name. For example, domains such as *www.mychurch.org* or *www.myadventistchurch.com* are probably not available, and they do little for

the description of your church.

One example of a clever domain name is New Hope Church in Fulton, Maryland, whose domain is *www.lookingforachurch.org*. Some churches use their mission or ministry focus as their domain name. For example, Cherry Hill Seventh-day Adventist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, chose *www.preparingforglory.org*. You could also choose a domain name that includes your church's name and the city or town in which it is located.

Whatever you choose for a domain name, consider these suggestions:

- Choose a name that suits your church's personality.
- Make it easy to remember. Simpler names are easier to recall and pass on to friends and family.
- Remember that many church names use popular words or phrases such as "New Life," "New Hope," "Gospel Truth," etc. When choosing a domain name, reduce confusion by selecting a unique name, or using the town or street name.

Registering a Domain Name

Once your church has selected a domain name, you will need to register it with an approved registrar. Popular registrars include Network Solutions (*www.networksolutions.com*) and Go Daddy (*www.godaddy.com*).

Registration fees may vary, as many companies will offer add-on services or other products to go with domain name registration. Many churches or ministries register only the .org name, but the best solution is to purchase a .com, .org, and .net domain name, and then forward the .com and .net to the .org. This ensures that more people find your site, even if they type a different extension. Most registrars offer this service, though most likely with an additional fee. Research available domain name registrars, taking note of pricing and available options before registering.

Protect Your Church's Domain Name

It is important that you keep your domain login information in a secure place, preferably in the church office, and that you keep current the email address listed with the account. It is recommended that the domain account be registered with a church-specific email address, rather than a member's personal address. That way if a member moves or switches responsibilities, the domain name information will still stay in the right hands, and you will always be able to receive any notices and stay up to date.

Search Engine Optimization

When your church's website is ready, you'll want people to be able to find it. Search engine optimization allows your domain to appear on Internet searches when people are seeking churches or searching other related topics. You can easily add your URL to Google if you visit www.google.com/addurl/?continue=/addurl. Choose keywords that effectively describe your site. The better your website is designed and arranged, the higher it will appear in search engine rankings.

Links to your church's website from other websites will also increase your ranking. Make sure your church or conference clerk updates www.eAdventist.org with your domain name so it will automatically be linked from the official Adventist website. You should also link the church's social networking profiles to the church website.

Marketing

The church website needs to be established as a permanent fixture of church communication. Make sure the URL is printed in the bulletin and on church stationery and the pastor's business cards. Work with the communication director and pastor to ensure a consistent visual theme between the website and logos/artwork on church stationery and business cards.

Alert members to the website launch and any major updates. They need to know what's happening with the church website. Since you already need to make congregational announcements about photo permissions and finding help with photography and audio/video, take the time to tell the members what it means for your church to have a web presence. You could write up a bulletin insert about your church's website initiatives and how each member can contribute. Encourage ministry leaders to use the website for advertising events or chronicling ongoing outreach projects.

Using Statistics to Evaluate Your Site

Even if you do everything right, it can still be difficult to tell if your efforts are as effective as hoped until you collect some additional information. Keep in mind that no single piece of data can tell the whole story. For example, web server statistics may tell you that your website had "thirty visitors a day," but it doesn't tell you if they are members or visitors. In order to judge the effectiveness of your site's outreach, try a few of these methods:

- Set up Google Analytics for your website. Google Analytics will allow you to see how many visits your site receives, where they come from, what time of day they are accessing your site, and more. Visit www.google.com/analytics to sign up.
- Place a coupon on the map page that visitors can redeem at your church. Offer a free book or another incentive for them to visit your church.
- Ask people who have visited your website which features they found

useful and what suggestions they may have.

Evaluating Your Website

1. Does the home page load in a timely fashion? Less than 10 seconds is excellent. If it takes too long, visitors won't wait.
2. Is the home page understandable? Are the features easy to find and well presented? Are there any broken links, missing sections, or spelling errors?
3. Are the navigation options prominent and logical? Is little scrolling required? Are the navigation links sufficient for the intended functions of the site?
4. Does the website contain descriptive information about your church? Does it include ministries, events, and a pastor's bio?
5. Is the content up to date? Are future events announced?
6. Is contact information available? Can visitors find the address, phone number, email, and map?
7. Are meeting and worship times clearly posted? Are they easy to find? Are special events listed?
8. Do the colors and design themes complement each other? Do they look professional and give a positive impression of your church?
9. Does the site include an evangelism component? Is it warm and inviting, providing Bible study information? Does it encourage cyber visitors to become Sabbath morning visitors?
10. Is the content easy to read? Do you notice any grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors? Poorly written content is hard to follow and gives the impression that the website is not a priority.
11. Does the site help eliminate confusion about Adventists? Does it present mainstream Adventist theology? Does it avoid using jargon that would confuse visitors?

Taking It To the Next Level

Working with a Designer

While many content management systems, including Adventist Church Connect, provide a selection of templates to use, your church may choose to create a customized design. Maybe you want an exceptionally grabbing website that reflects the congregation's collective personality. If this is the case, consider contracting with a web designer.

When choosing a designer, first find out if there are any web designers in your church. You could also check with a local college to see if any design professors or talented students offer freelance services or ask the alumni office if they can recommend any recent graduates. You could also search for local design professionals or ask colleagues for a recommendation. Local business groups may

also be able to recommend designers.

During the initial interview you should check the designer's credentials and ask for samples of their work. You could also contact one of their former clients to get an idea of their skills and what to expect when working with them. Be sure to ask about what is included in the price so you can plan accordingly and avoid exceeding your budget. Once you have located a designer who meets your criteria, you will need to sign a contract before they begin working on your site.

Once your designer is hired, you need to make sure that your plans for the website are clearly expressed, or he or she may not be able to create the look you have in mind. Here are some items to cover at your first planning meeting:

- Discuss budget, keeping in mind that designers' costs vary depending on the complexity of what you want to do. Features such as video, audio, animation, and other interactive options will cost more.
- Show the designer samples of existing websites you like.
- Share samples of photos you would like on the site.
- Share your church's mission statement and ministry goals with the designer.
- Set deadlines—and stick to them!

No matter how wonderful your church may be, a poor website can give a different impression to visitors. You want your website to look modern, professional, and attractive. If you are designing the site yourself, here are some more items to consider:

- Select colors that complement one another.
- Make your site readable by choosing contrasting colors for text and the background, such as black and white.
- San serif fonts are more readable on a computer screen than serif fonts.
- Constantly flashing and moving items can be annoying and remind people of banner ads or spam. Use dynamic images sparingly.
- If anything is animated, make sure it loads quickly.
- Make the location of all buttons and links obvious, and routinely test them to make sure they work.

Conclusion

Thank you for taking on this important responsibility. Your church's website will help members stay connected and visitors learn more about your church. When members of your church work together to fill the website with photographs, audio and video, and information about each of your church's ministries, it will present a robust and accurate picture of your church to the community, while keeping members informed about what is happening.

Resources

The following resources are available from AdventSource. For a complete list, visit www.adventsource.org or call 800.328.0525.



The Blogging Church

By Brian Bailey (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)

The Blogging Church offers church leaders a field manual for using the social phenomenon of blogs to connect people and build communities in a whole new way. Inside you will find the why, what, and how of blogging in the local church.
Catalog #417569



Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability

By Steve Krug (New Riders Press)

Churches and religious organizations are starting to realize the importance of having a website that is attractive and easy to use. *Don't Make Me Think* is a guide to creating a site that is professional and intuitive.

Catalog #419150

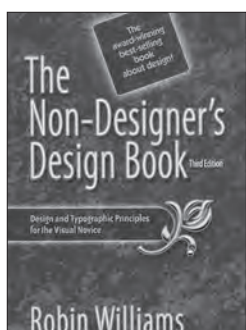


E-newsletters that Work

By Michael J. Katz (Xlibris)

E-newsletters are inexpensive to produce and publish, and they provide you with a systematic means for staying in front of your audience. Learn how to produce a compelling and fresh e-newsletter that people will want to read.

Catalog #272030



The Non-Designer's Design Book

Edited by G. Edward Reid

By Robin Williams (Peachpit Press)

This book offers quick and accessible design help from trusted design instructor Robin Williams. Using numerous examples, you'll learn what looks best (and why) on your way to designing beautiful and effective projects.

Catalog #272035

Web Ministry

This booklet will help you start or revitalize your church's website. You will learn about design basics, what to include in your site, recruiting a web team, writing for the web, promoting the website, and more. Whether you're a new or an experienced webmaster, this Quick Start Guide provide you with ideas and inspiration you can immediately put to use.

Other titles in the Quick Start Guide series include:

- Communication Director
- Youth Ministries
- Prayer Ministries

For a complete listing of Quick Start Guide titles visit www.adventsource.org



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