

Ministry on the Web

The thoughts of David McFarland of 2hearts Ministries

We live in an age when it is almost essential for every church to have a web presence. Many churches aspire to use a resource that is new to them but often do not know how best to begin. As a result, they can be led into paying exorbitant fees for more than they need or they might produce something in-house that is of poor quality or not fully thought through and so become disillusioned.

I humbly ask to contribute the following thoughts, based on more than 10 years of ministry on the Web, beginning with moirabaptist.org in 1998, and then through the voluntary ministry of 2hearts. (<http://2hearts.co.uk> and <http://2hearts.org.uk>) Although I have been responsible for more than 20 ministry web sites, I am by no means an expert. I have had no training and am not skilled in the finer points of Web Design. But because I have been a Pastor and a web-master, I have learned some things that may be useful to you and your church starting out on this journey.

I begin with what I believe is a fundamental statement. **A church web site must serve the Lord in the local church and community.** It is easy to get distracted by the appeal of the world wide web and lose our God-given commission to serve Him where He has placed us.

What does our church web site do for us and our community in Moira?

- It is a tool for our own use, providing such things as reminders of our programme, dates and details of planned events, and reports of services and events our members could not attend.
- It strengthens our existing efforts to reach our community. When we advertise or distribute literature, we use the web address so people can access much more detail about us. This is particularly effective during times of special outreach. Our experience is that numbers of visitors on our site rise very dramatically after a publicity drive such as for a mission or special services.
- Our message is always available, even when we are not. This allows people to find, see and even hear our message when it is convenient for them. Indeed they may not want us or anyone else to know they are seeking. For example, our Baptism page is regularly read and on a number of occasions has led to anonymous email questions about our beliefs.
- Being online helps us to communicate the message that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is still relevant and essential in the 21st C. We seek to present eternal truth to a modern society using this tool the Lord has given us. People regularly log on to the pages where we show what we believe and preach.
- Our web ministry is one of the most cost-effective ways of reaching out to and relating to our community. We seek to make the site attractive without being “gimmicky;” comprehensive without being difficult to navigate and regularly updated, yet still familiar.
- Our web site has been of particular benefit to some people moving into the area. Families relocating will often use the internet as their primary means of research for homes, schools, youth activities, and churches. Having a good presence on the web with lots of local information, introduces us to people, sometimes even before they live here and has led to a number of families joining our church.
- The site has been designed to attract those who live around us who are not even seeking church information. Local photographs, local history articles and photos of Moira in past generations; local news and places of interest locally are all a means to an end. We are encouraged to see how many visits there are to our local news page and community pages. These suggest that local people are dropping in and learning about us. Even some in the immigrant community appear to be visiting the pages that are in their language. A local college uses photographs on our web site to help students learn Geography. Others learn about what Baptists believe. Year after year young people are visiting our pages to help them with their assignments and perhaps will be drawn to read more. Now our latest local History pages with

accounts of life in Moira over 1400 years will create similar interest in schools and community.

- Former residents of the village or their relatives are often in touch, appreciating the information supplied and hoping one day to visit Moira. They invariably get directed by us to specific parts of the site and an invitation to join us when they are next in the village.

Temptations we try to avoid

- We don't want to get caught up in the statistics "craze." It was easy at the beginning to get sucked in to watching how many "hits" we had and become proud of our impact around the world. It is helpful to be aware of the habits of visitors to our site, but our emphasis has to be on attracting local visitors to whom we then seek to minister directly.
- Another is the temptation to feel we must get on the "sermon download bandwagon" and hope to have our ministry heard around the world. Of course there will be people who have little other option but to hear the Word preached online but we believe our focus should be the exposition of the Word for the local church. As I ministered, my sole focus was on what the Word of God had to say to my people in their need; if others heard copies of my messages (on cassette tape at that time) and found them helpful, that was encouraging but I was charged to be a shepherd to my own sheep. Sermons online and recordings of special services (and even live streaming of services perhaps) may be of use to those who are shut in or miss meetings, so long as we remember how easily internet ministry can distract us from our primary focus.
- A third temptation is to feel we must have an "all-singing all-dancing" web site. Our church web site must inform, not entertain. Having said that, it must be attractive. It is a "shop window" to our church and if it is shoddy, difficult to navigate or weeks out of date (or months and even years in some cases!) then it is unlikely to attract visitors. Our web site is the "first impression" many people have of us.
- We avoid using language that is difficult for the community to understand. This does not mean we suggest Churches should compromise on their use of a particular Bible translation or avoid Biblical terminology. Of course not. But we must speak in a language that communicates truth and presents Christ to today's generation which has little Bible background. This is particularly relevant to the home page, or those pages of testimonies or Gospel presentation.

Questions I have been asked over the years.

1. What factors does a church need to consider when thinking about having a church web site?

Make sure the church sees this as a ministry of your church, requiring it to be led by the right person/people, getting the necessary funding and resources and prayer support. Web ministry is not a gimmick; not mere publicity but a ministry for the glory of God.

Make sure the church owns the web site, owns the domain name, knows the relevant passwords and, if using purchased web design software, owns that too. Churches have lost their websites because the web-master left the church, wiped the information, kept the domain name and software etc. Make sure you have up-to-date backups with the hosting company or on another computer or DVD. Do not allow the website to be dominated or hijacked by an individual.

2. What domain name to choose?

If your town name/ village name appears in your domain name and keywords etc. then everyone in your community who goes online is likely to see your site. We all like to search for local sites. The name should not be too long or too short. For example we do not use moirabaptistchurch.org because it is longer than we need; nor do we use MBC.org because it does not say enough. I recommend the use of a something.org domain but the choice is yours. Domain names are not expensive.

3. How much hosting space does a church web site need?

Basic commercial hosting packages are adequate for most church needs unless you are using a lot of bandwidth for sermon or video downloads. There are services offering free web hosting but they invariably add advertising over which you have no control. It is important to find a reputable and reliable web host. If you have the technical ability to do everything yourself, hosting can cost from as little as £40 per year. It is possible to find a Christian company offering a package that takes care of all your domain name registration, email setup, site submission and hosting matters for a very reasonable fee.

4. What dangers are there?

The web opens us to abuse by those who serve the Devil. You must pray for your web-master and the ministry he/she exercises.

You must decide how much private detail you give. You may wish to avoid publishing personal phone numbers or addresses and use only the church phone number and address. Obviously you need to publish a contact email address and you need to be prepared for extra emails. Some may be abusive; some will be spam and may include material that disgusts you. Filtering will be important. Always ask permission before adding personal email addresses e.g. of your Sunday School superintendent.

A useful tool is a guest-book where visitors can leave messages or make comments. Several Christian companies offer this service free. But never use a guest book that you cannot edit or delete before the message appears online.

Take the greatest of care to protect children. Your Church Child Protection guidelines must be followed rigorously.

6. How many people does it take to maintain a web site?

A team sounds like an excellent idea but in my experience it is difficult. A website with a youth section and a young adult section and a Pastor section may be good in theory but the design appearance may be very disjointed. You need an overall look and feel. It is possible for one person to do it but you need people always supplying up-to-date information. Your web site can be set up so several people can update certain parts but this needs great care and some expertise. Alternatively, you may wish to use outside support. They will agree a contract to take care of all your updates. In the commercial world this is expensive but there are more cost effective options for churches and missions.

7. How often should a church web site be "updated"?

Regularly - this is VERY important. It depends on the information you have on it. If you use it for announcements, rotas etc. then you need to update weekly or monthly. Reports of events should be published quickly and then deleted before they are too old. Regular updating will encourage people to return and see what is new. There is nothing as bad as a web site that is long out of date.

8. How much time a week do you think is necessary for maintaining a well-run church web site?

Again it depends on what you have on it; very little time if you keep to basic information. An announcement page or a monthly/weekly message from the Pastor will be added in a short time. Once the initial design work is complete, maintenance is relatively easy. If your site grows or if you have a lot of activities, then the work is greater.

9. How much is a web site likely to cost?

You may have within the church those who have expertise and see it as a ministry to design a site. You may want to sign up for some of the sitebuilder packages e.g. Yahoo sitebuilder and do a cheap job on basic templates. But sooner or later you may discover their limitations. Nothing beats a well designed, purpose-made site for your church. You would not employ an inexperienced architect to redesign your

church foyer or a novice to build it. In the same way, the money you spend on getting a well designed, attractive and informative web site will be very worthwhile. Commercial rates are often exorbitant but there are other resources available that will provide excellent value.

10. Who should we get to do take care of our web site?

Option one is to leave it to professionals That is what most businesses do but since we are serving the Lord, it is best to look for those professionals who understand your ethos and values and who will work with you. Northern Ireland has several Christian web design companies. Professional web design and management need not be very expensive. Some churches spend more each year on advertising in the secular and religious press and this is generally agreed to be less effective in reaching their non-Christian community. However, using this option, you will still need one person who will communicate the Church's needs and provide regular information to the Company looking after the site.

Another option is to get professional help to design your website, perhaps provide some training or support and then leave you to keep it updated. This is probably the most common option but again needs the right person to keep the site operational and maintained.

A third option is to have a church member (or more than one) who has the ability to design and maintain your site for you. That is likely to be the cheapest option for the individual may be willing to do it free of charge or with honorarium or expenses. Often a student with some IT expertise may seem the best person to do this. In some cases the church may see this as encouraging a young Christian with potential. But early enthusiasm can lead to disappointment. The student may become busier with studies, relationships or move away and the site will suffer or die. (I have used a student as an example but I should stress that it is not only students who can let us down.)

So I suggest the following guidelines.

- The person with responsibility should be **spiritual** and view the task as a spiritual service, done with meekness unto the Lord and with submission to those the Lord has placed over him.
- The person should be a **committed, well respected, faithful member** – not a novice. He/she should have a good knowledge of what is happening in church life and be prepared to keep themselves well acquainted with all aspects of church and community life. It is important that, as far as possible, the web-master should be prepared for a commitment of at least several years. It is sad to see Church sites, begun with great enthusiasm, sitting on the internet gathering no more hits than cosmic dust.
- The person should have a reasonable level of **competence** in Internet Technology with a willingness to keep learning. Web design, web promotion and web management require skills that the average computer user does not have.
- If the person involved has all the above qualifications, but lacks other essential skills such as creative writing, good grammar and spelling, photographic or graphic skills, then others should be used to help and support the web-master.
- The person in whom this responsibility is placed must have someone in leadership to whom he/she is accountable and to whom they can go to help with decisions they feel unable to take.
- The person chosen must be given a brief of what the church wants but also must be given reasonable freedom to produce the site. I strongly suggest that only a few people are involved in this briefing. Do not leave this to an office-bearers meeting, where too often, those with no knowledge of FTP, HTML and IP addresses feel they must have an input. The web site may never materialise.

I hope these thoughts prove helpful. I am open to questions, suggestions or comments on david@2hearts.co.uk. I pray God's blessing on you and your Web Ministry, that in all things He may be glorified.