

# Websites and Missions

Reaching Out in a Digital World



How do we build an “evangelistic” website?



Where does our website fit into our overall outreach strategy?



How can we get people to visit our website?



## Websites and Missions: Reaching Out In A Digital World

© 2009 Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod



Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 United States

### You are free:



**to Share** — to copy, distribute and transmit the work



**to Remix** — to adapt the work

### Under the following conditions:



**Attribution** — You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).



**Noncommercial** — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

### With the understanding that:

**Waiver** — Any of the above conditions can be **waived** if you get permission from the copyright holder.

**Other Rights** — In no way are any of the following rights affected by the license:

- Your fair dealing or **fair use** rights;
- Apart from the remix rights granted under this license, the author's **moral** rights;
- Rights other persons may have either in the work itself or in how the work is used, such as **publicity** or privacy rights.

**Notice** — For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to this web page.

# Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<i>Getting Started</i>	<i>1</i>
	Mobilizing For Outreach . . . . .	1
	Organizing . . . . .	1
	Planning . . . . .	2
<b>2</b>	<i>Twenty Guidelines for Evangelistic Websites</i>	<i>4</i>
	Twenty Guidelines . . . . .	4
	Summary . . . . .	6
<b>3</b>	<i>Content and Features</i>	<i>7</i>
	Content . . . . .	7
	Devotional . . . . .	7
	Informational . . . . .	7
	Inspirational . . . . .	8
	User Submitted Content . . . . .	8
	Features . . . . .	9
<b>4</b>	<i>Web Services, Hardware and Hosting</i>	<i>11</i>
	Domains . . . . .	11
	Hosting Services . . . . .	11
	Hosting solutions with built-in CMS . . . . .	11
	Hosting providers and custom CMS . . . . .	12
	Totally custom . . . . .	12
	Hardware . . . . .	14

---

<b>5</b>	<i>Marketing and Measuring</i>	16
	Marketing . . . . .	16
	Search Engines . . . . .	16
	Social Networks . . . . .	17
	Measuring . . . . .	18
	Tracking Tools . . . . .	16
	Just Ask . . . . .	16
	Summary . . . . .	19

# 1 Getting Started



Websites remain the centerpiece of most digital outreach strategies. Some would argue that websites are even “old school” these days when social networks, mobile devices and text messaging are so popular. Yet studies continue to show that potential church visitors rely heavily on what they find on your website as a determining factor for a decision to visit in person. However, all websites are not created equal.

Most church websites provide “some” visitor information like service times, directions and a brief statement of belief. Yet a majority of the site is probably more helpful to members. This section deals with how to plan for the development of an “evangelistic” website and two key questions that must be answered before proceeding.

## Mobilizing For Outreach

Congregational outreach doesn’t happen by itself. It takes planning, dedication and continual encouragement and management. Using technology within your outreach program is no different. An intentional and systematic review of the available options is extremely important before determining what, if anything, you will use. It is also necessary to take a realistic look at these things in light of your outreach goals. Who are you trying to reach? It’s probably not enough to simply say we are going to “reach the lost.” Different technologies are likely better choices than others depending on who you are specifically trying to communicate with. And, of course, there are many, many other considerations. So where do you start?

## Organizing

The first essential step in reaching out in a digital world is delegating the organization and planning of it to a group of people who would form a Communications Technology Committee. This could be a subcommittee of your existing Outreach Committee or a couple of people on the Outreach Committee assigned these responsibilities. You may also want to have this as a stand-alone committee that would serve both outreach and in-reach purposes. Whatever you call this group or where it reports in the organizational structure of the congregation, the members should have certain characteristics:

- ◆ **Passionate:** This is probably the most important characteristic of any committee member, even ahead of specific skill sets. Passionate people show up for meetings, volunteer to work on projects, are generally good encouragers, and are often great mentors and role models. They are also contagious. It goes without saying they are then passionate about reaching out with the gospel. Now it is likely that these passionate people are already serving elsewhere, so choose carefully. You don’t want to overburden the same people as that will dilute their effectiveness.
- ◆ **Organized:** People who can think systematically and are good at making sense of a lot of different options are valuable to a committee. In the fast moving world of technology there will always be something new or changing. Someone who won’t be overwhelmed by that will be a great asset.
- ◆ **Communications Savvy:** Technology is just a channel

or vehicle for the message. A good knowledge of how to communicate, identifying target audiences, crafting effective messages and the like are even more important than technical know-how. A degree in Communications or Marketing would be great, but not essential.

- ◆ **Technically Inclined:** You do not need a committee full of geeks! However, the members of the committee should not be afraid of technology and perhaps enjoy trying new digital tools. Perhaps they already have a blog or have done some website building or management. It is okay to have one very technical person on the committee, but not a committee full of them. This characteristic is later in the list for a reason. Passionate, organized communicators will learn on the job quickly. It is harder to take a technologist and make them passionate, organized and communications savvy.
- ◆ **Multi-Generational:** In order to achieve a balance in your digital outreach strategies it is going to be important to consider view points from all demographics. Without young, old, middle aged, men and women on the committee, you may overlook some potential approaches or not consider how best to communicate with all segments who fall within your ministry reach. Try to blend different ages of people. Technology these days is not just for the young.

If your congregation is small or lacks the resources to form a committee for the purpose of digital outreach alone, insure that the person responsible for the development and maintenance of the website has a majority of the traits above. It should be said that this person should not be the pastor. He is obviously a major content contributor, but he should not spend time in all the other activities necessary to develop and run a website.

## Planning

The second logical step after forming the committee is to develop a comprehensive Digital Outreach Plan that will guide the committee's actions and help the congregation see how everything fits together. This may take some

time to accomplish. A template and links to sample plans are available online at <http://welstechwiki.wels.net/page/Technology+Planning>.

Obviously a big part of any plan today will include a website. However few take the time to determine how their website will be used. In fact, how it will be used is a result of how you build it. There are two very important questions you must ask before any development is done.

### 1. Who do we want to visit our website?

Defining your audience is a step you must take before redesigning an existing website or building a new website. Who is the website for? Is it for visitors, prospects, members, teens, seniors, moms, church leaders, school children, parents, etc.? If it is for prospects, what do those prospects look like? Are they young families, middle aged, women, men, white collar, blue collar, etc?

It's often wise to create a simple chart to formalize all possible audiences for your website. Once complete you can intentionalize how you are going to build the site, what content and features it will have, and who should be involved in maintaining the site. The chart should have two columns: 1) Group name (example: New parent of prospective Sunday school student or new resident of nearby subdivision or couple looking for a place to hold a wedding) and, 2) What will they want to find on your website? (example: What is the theme/topic for this Sunday or how do I register my child for Sunday school).

### 2. What do we want the visitor to DO when they visit our website?

The church's website exists for very specific reasons. You will want your visitor to take specific steps once they finally do come to your website. This is related to the first question about audience type. Depending on who you suspect will visit might determine what you want them to do. If this is an "evangelistic" website, you must determine what you want the prospect to do once they arrive. Do you want them to come to church as a result? Do you want them to read or watch the sermon from last week? Do you want them to fill out a form requesting more information? The

answer to this question along with the last one will have a significant influence on how you design the home page, what content you put on the page, and many other decisions you will make along the way to develop and maintaining your evangelistic website.

You may have noticed we've used the term "evangelistic" website a number of times already. This assumes that as a mission church you are most interested in a site that attracts prospects. Therefore we should provide a more formal definition of the term.

**An evangelistic website definition:** A website that looks to introduce and invite a visitor to your congregation AND keeps them coming there long enough so they can make a determination to DO something.

It's important to recognize the "process" sometimes necessary that takes a web visitor to a church visitor or Bible class visitor or event visitor (whatever your outreach strategy is). Notice the definition suggests that the web visitor may need to visit numerous times before they decide to do something. This suggests that your content needs to stay fresh, but all with a singleness of purpose. It may also mean that you need to anticipate different "entry points" for visitors. As you know prospects aren't all cut out of the same mold. They may all be looking for different things. The rest of this guide addresses some of those "different things" as well as how to build a site that makes it easy to add and maintain them.



# 2 Twenty Guidelines for Evangelistic Websites

As with most things there are fairly common do's and don'ts when considering the development of a website. We'll cover those as well as a few other suggestions that will help your mission create a website that will meet your digital outreach needs.

## Twenty Guidelines

Let's start with five basic no-no's. Then we'll address the positive side.

1. ***Don't mix internal and external communications.*** Does that mean you need two different websites, one for your members and one for prospects? Ideally yes. However, that can still be easily done with one web address. With products like FinalWeb, the synod's web hosting partner, you can create a site that can have "sub-sites". One of those sub-sites can be dedicated to members and "out of the way" of the visitor. It can even have a unique URL or web address. Your main site could be [www.yourchurchname.com](http://www.yourchurchname.com). This would be for visitors to find. Your sub-site could be [www.yourchurchnamemembers.com](http://www.yourchurchnamemembers.com) or [www.yourchurchname.com/members](http://www.yourchurchname.com/members) or [members.yourchurchname.com](http://members.yourchurchname.com). All of these are possible and help to segment content by audience type.

2. ***Don't oversell your church.*** Soon enough the visitor will know what your church is REALLY like. The objective is to give your web visitor an honest look at who you are and what you have to offer...and obviously why they'd want to come there.

3. ***Don't forget about your content.*** Your website can look beautiful, but if it lacks solid content, the visitor won't

return. This is really the hard part. The content needs to be fresh, relevant, well written and presented. Keep in mind that your content must be specific to the audience you are trying to reach. Consider using RSS (Really Simple Syndication). This technology allows you to pull in content from other websites. For instance, you could "subscribe" to the synod's daily devotion RSS feed and have that display on your website. This would allow you to have fresh content on your site everyday without having to write it yourself. Visit [www.wels.net/rss](http://www.wels.net/rss) for a good introduction to the concept and what feeds are available from WELS.

4. ***Don't let the visitor leave without knowing why you exist.*** This doesn't mean to publish your mission statement. Craft two or three words you want to stick in the visitor's mind before they leave the website. Is it friendly, Bible-based, positive, caring, etc.? A good website to link to is <http://www.whataboutjesus.com>. This will provide solid information about Jesus and faith to address the needs of those looking for general information about Christianity.

5. ***Don't let the visitor leave without knowing what your church is like.*** With the use of images, video and audio make sure that the visitor has a good impression of what they will find when they come to your church. This doesn't just mean a picture of the outside of your church, but pictures of people, audio clips of the sermon or even video of the service. We'll talk more about these in a later chapter. In general, you want to create as much of an "immersive" experience as possible. Caution...this will take work.

The next five are must do's that every evangelistic website needs.

6. **Dedicate enough staff.** It is important to realize that creating and maintaining an effective evangelistic website takes dedicated people. For medium to larger websites you might find that three categories of people will be required: 1) Content Providers - those who have content they want posted on the website (youth group leader, pastor, teacher, congregation chairman), 2) Content Managers - those who are responsible for making sure content is fresh on the site or a portion of the site and relevant to the audience, 3) Website Managers - essentially the webmaster or person responsible for everything on the site including the functionality and support of users.

Chances are as a mission church you don't have a lot of people to fill these roles. You have two options: 1) Outsource the initial development of the site, or 2) Have a very narrow focus of what the website is for and the features and content within it. If a website is developed smartly (more on this in a later chapter), content can be easily updated to keep things fresh and on point. Outsourcing is a good option in this case pending the available budget. We'll discuss options for this in the next chapter. It is also possible to create an effective site with just a single person doing the initial development and maintenance. Hopefully not the pastor however. In order to do this the scope of the site will need to be carefully managed. You don't want to get too ambitious and have areas of the site grow stale. That, of course, sends the wrong message to the visitor.

7. **Focus on quality.** Your website may be the very first impression given to a prospect of your church. Make it a good one. Use good photography, perhaps even stock photos. It isn't important that the people pictured on your site be your members. The visitor will not know the difference. Stock photos usually have much better lighting and framing. If you do have professional photographers in your congregation use them. Don't use clipart. This is not a newsletter. Of course, no typos. And finally remember that your site is not only being compared against other church websites, but against all websites, period. You might want to look at <http://www.ministrycss.com/category/church> for examples of well-designed church websites.

8. **Make sure you can be found.** This is the number one question that congregations typically have. How can we get more traffic to our website? There is no easy answer. Google, the most popular search engine has a complicated algorithm, but mainly it ranks your site based on the number of incoming links to your site by other popular sites. So spend time trying to increase the number of external links coming into your site. Obviously, take some time to insure that your website address is listed on all your print material, ads, etc. There are other methods that are covered in more detail in a subsequent chapter called "Marketing and Measuring."

9. **Focus on events, not institutions.** The biggest mistake churches make with their websites is to think that a picture of the church, times of services and a map are the core elements of a website. While these are things people will need eventually, those will not drive the visitor to make a decision about attending. Prospects are intrigued by "events", not the simple fact that you have a building and you meet there. Create events that you can promote/market.

10. **Get help.** The web is a wonderful place to find more information on creating great websites. Perhaps the first thing to do is search for examples of good websites. There are many out there...even sites devoted to the cataloging of them. A simple Google search should net good starting points. Also take advantage of the Synod's resources at [www.wels.net/technology](http://www.wels.net/technology).

The previous ten guidelines are core to the effectiveness of your web development and maintenance. The remaining ten are written from the potential visitors perspective.

11. **You don't need to put a picture of the church building on the home page.** Again, this suggests to the visitor that you are all about the institution, not the people or activities that make up your church. For that matter a picture of the pastor and his family isn't all the helpful either.

12. **Be careful in your color selections. Be a student of color.** There are plenty of sites to help with this. Your use of color schemes will suggest different things to the visitor (i.e. peace, strength, stability, progressive, conservative, etc.).

13. **Use animation and “intro” screens sparingly.** As a general rule flashy (or flash-based) intro screens or page elements, while interesting the first time somebody visits, will be a distraction and even an annoyance for future visits.

14. **Keep your home page simple.** Try not to overload that first page with links to everything on your site. The first page should be one screen full (i.e. no scrolling) and include the two or three things you want your target visitor to see. Note: A good rule for screen sizing is to design for 800 x 600 pixel resolution screens. This may change soon as screens are getting larger.

15. **Don’t try to include information about every ministry you offer.** Keep in mind that you will need to differentiate the visitor from the member who is visiting. Include member informational content else where on the site. Not on the home page.

16. **Make sure basic information is clear and easily found.** A map, service times and even dress code, are certainly things most people would want to know about. Make sure they are on the home page, but they don’t have to always be the first thing they see. A nice example of a visitor’s guide can be found at the Cross of Christ Lutheran Church, NY website: <http://bit.ly/crossofchristvisitorguide>.

17. **Provide examples of what is important to you.** Devotional materials, prayers and sermons are all things any visitor might find helpful. Keep them fresh however. Refer to previous guideline on RSS.

18. **Make use of quality multi-media.** If possible give the visitor an “immersive” experience. Answer the question, “What is it like to visit your church?” This can be done by posting audio or video clips of sermons, Bible classes, etc. Photographs can also be useful. Make sure they are of good quality however.

19. **Regularly measure the effectiveness of your content.** Use tools like Google Analytics to see what parts of your site are trafficked as well as the average length of a visit. You should also poll visitors if they do decide to visit regarding your website.

20. **Be personal and professional.** Strike the right balance between being real and being real good. This is always the hardest part. You want to come across as warm and friendly, but not such a close family that you don’t allow outsiders in. You want to portray excellence in your website, programs and language, but not too corporate or “organizational.”

## Summary

There are many top twenty lists, tips and tricks and the like that you might find useful in building your website. However, the best advice of all is to THINK LIKE YOUR PROSPECT THINKS. This assume two things: 1) That you are committed to building a website for a particular audience, and 2) That you can find ways to know how they think. The latter is not always easy for those of us who have grown up in the church or even within one church body.

The next section called Content and Features is only useful if you can think like a prospect. Shall we give it a try?

# 3 Content and Features



With the guidelines behind us it's now time to focus on the options your mission church might consider in populating the site. We'll divide this into two groups, content items and features. Content items are self explanatory. This is the stuff you write, create (or borrow from other sources) and then place on the site. Features are elements, sometimes interactive or multimedia based, that provide some kind of functional "value add" to the site. Let's start with content.

## Content

If you are thinking like your prospect thinks (this assumes that is your target audience), we now must determine what kinds of content they want to see. You may rightly be thinking a "prospect" is still too broad an audience. After all most missions will want to minister to prospects who have some Christian church background and are looking to return. Their previous experience with the church wasn't overly negative, but perhaps they think church is boring. Others may have been turned off by the church or the people in it. Still others may have never stepped foot in a church before. We haven't even touched on different life circumstances, age, gender, etc.

How do you develop or choose content that would be of interest to all of these groups? The short answer is, you don't. And you don't have to. You do need to provide enough variation in content to be of interest to all your target audiences. The trick is directing the right audience to the right content.

## Devotional

An obvious candidate for inclusion in a website is devotional material. After all the Word of God is THE way people come to Christ. If you don't write a daily devotion of your own, the synod does have five new ones available each week that can be plugged into your site via RSS. If you are unfamiliar with RSS, be sure to visit <http://www.wels.net/RSS> for more information about how to automatically bring that content into your website each day. These are available in written or audio form. Daily bible readings (Through The Bible In 3 Years) and Daily Prayers are also available.

Prospect newsletter content is also available from the synod that can be used in this category. Don't forget about newsletter articles the pastor writes. Many of them have a devotional element.

If you are ambitious, consider writing short devotional thoughts that "introduce" the theme for the Sunday. The readings could also be incorporated, thus making use of sermon study time. This approach would reinforce the "event" idea of the Sunday service. Asking intriguing questions makes for easy and bold attention grabbing web headlines. As you write be sure to THINK LIKE YOUR PROSPECT.

## Informational

There are certain staples that should appear on every evangelistic website's home page. Service or Bible study times, maps/directions, Bible study topics, sermon/service themes, email addresses, phone numbers, and upcoming events that

will be of interest to the visitor. Remember to THINK EVENTS. Just a note to pastors on sermon themes. As you are crafting them ask yourself how interesting or compelling will they appear as a standalone on the website? Keep them catchy.

One obvious omission from the list is the church calendar. While studies have shown this is the most used item on a church website, it is not the visitor who is interested, but the member. Tuck the calendar in a member focused area of the site. The visitor shouldn't be forced to trudge through the shortened titles and acronyms often sprinkled throughout a calendar grid — essentially meaningless to the visitor. In addition, it tends to have that “insider” feel to it.

The final item in this content category might be confessional material. If somebody wants to know what you teach/believe, posting *This We Believe* or other confessional statements is entirely appropriate. This is especially important if a segment of your target audience might be looking for a church based on a disagreement with their current church bodies theology. I wouldn't advise putting this content “front and center” on the page as it lacks context for most, but it should only be a click away. Deeper theological conversations should be left to in-person contacts, or through a “contact us” form.

## Inspirational

The first two categories serve important purposes. Devotional content encourages people to return regularly (if well-written and targeted). Informational content gives visitors the facts should they decide to act. The third and last content category is inspirational. It is the most important, but unfortunately the most difficult as well.

If your website is for prospects, and if your goal is to turn virtual visitors into real visitors, you must “inspire” them to make that decision. The content in this category convinces them that time spent with your mission church would be time well spent. So how do you do that?

Sermons are a good place to start. Good Law/Gospel

preaching can be as effective on the internet as it is in person, at least in short spurts. Publish or post sermons. If you can post high quality audio or video of the sermon, do it. Be consistent however. If you start make sure that you keep the content updated so a visitor isn't presented with a sermon that was preached 6 months ago. In the case of video you will also want to include shots of the congregation. This allows for that more “immersive” experience we talked about earlier.

A two or three camera setup is ideal to get that immersive experience. If you need guidance on how to do audio or video, a good place to start is: <http://welstechwiki.wels.net/page/Church+Media>. Calling the Synod's Technology Office for help is always an option as well. In the hosting, hardware and software section we'll provide examples.

Some missions have determined that inviting a prospect to the Sunday morning worship service is not the best introduction to the church and have setup classes or other events as that preferred entry point. If that is the case, try to include pictures, audio clips or video of those. In short, you want to give the visitor a healthy clue as to what to expect. Give them as much of a virtual experience as you can. Answering questions in their mind about how threatening is this, will I fit in, or what am I getting myself into? Don't make it a secret. Your website can put them at ease and “inspire” them to try it out.

## User Submitted Content

I know I said there were only three content categories, but there is a growing trend in church websites to add a fourth — user submitted content. This is traditionally found on more internal facing sites, but more and more evangelistic websites are also considering greater use of mechanisms to allow “participation” of site visitors. The three main ways to allow visitors to add their own content are through discussion boards, blogs (with comments turned on), and general comments attached to content.

Your mission church will have to determine whether this is something desirable for your site. You never know what

users will submit. There are of course ways to “moderate” comments, but that takes time and it also might be seen as censoring — equating that to a closed top-down organization that is not interesting in listening to the people. On the positive side, if you join that conversation by answering questions or reacting to other comments, you generate interest, foster deeper discussions on topics and finally gain the right to dialog on things that matter. Perhaps you will even have the opportunity to extend a personal invitation or setup a meeting. Discussion boards and blogs are typically a feature or module that comes with your hosting service/software. If you want to add a more generic commenting engine, two very popular ones right now are Echo (<http://js-kit.com>) and Disqus (<http://www.disqus.com>).

## Features

In the User Submitted Content section above we began to touch upon some site features that are essentially “containers” for content. Comment boxes for instance are site features. Some are rather standard internet faire, but it’s good to review these components and determine what’s best. Here is a starter list of other things you may want to add to your site:

- ◆ Discussion Board
- ◆ Audio Podcasts
- ◆ Videos
- ◆ Blogs
- ◆ Links
- ◆ Image Galleries
- ◆ Downloadable Documents
- ◆ Content delivered via RSS feeds
- ◆ Lists (directories, ministries, etc.)
- ◆ Calendar
- ◆ Visitor Profiles
- ◆ Search

- ◆ Forms (Surveys, Polls, etc.)
- ◆ Maps
- ◆ Images

In order to integrate these features into your website you may have to make some decisions about which module or service to use. If you are using a web hosting solution like FinalWeb (the Synod’s hosting partner), many of the above will be included. Other more sophisticated Content Management Systems (CMS) like Drupal, Joomla or Wordpress may also have a nice set of all these features. Here are a few suggestions if you want to use outside tools regardless of what hosting provider or solution you use.

**Discussion boards** can provide a forum for visitor questions and answers. For example, the synod’s Q&A section on WELS.net is one of the most popular features on the site. There are any number of free solutions to choose from. Google Groups (<http://groups.google.com>) should suffice for most uses. If you want to integrate a more full featured option into your site and don’t mind getting a little “geeky” one of the most popular open source solutions is PHPBB (<http://www.phpbb.com>).

**Audio Podcasts** (for sermons, Bible classes, etc) get a bit more complicated, although most of the hosting providers mentioned above allow these without too much setup. A good guide that will help you setup a podcast can be found at <http://www.how-to-podcast-tutorial.com/00-podcast-tutorial-four-ps.htm>. Don’t forget to post your podcasts on iTunes (<http://www.itunes.com>). You may have web surfers stumble on your content.

Online **video** is an area of the web that is exploding. Most have heard of the success of YouTube. It is almost an assumption that websites have video. Fortunately it’s not hard to get video online. We’ll discuss the equipment necessary for video in the next chapter. You will probably not want to house your video on your own website, but use an outside service that you can link to, or embed a player on your site. One of the better services today that allows regular and HD content at a very low cost is <http://www.vimeo.com>.

**Blogs** are a very common feature on sites today. In fact many sites are only blogs. Essentially they are chronological entries made by an individual or group of individuals. Again, the hosting solutions we discussed earlier all have some kind of blogging component. However there are many other free blogging solutions available, including Wordpress (<http://www.wordpress.com>) and Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>). Blogs can be a great place to capture “inspirational” content, or allow church staff and members to “journal” spiritual items that might help visitors get a flavor for the things that are important to the bloggers.

**Image galleries** provide any easy, but professional way to display images around topics or events that visitors can “page” through. The most popular image sharing site is <http://www.flickr.com>. Your congregation can post photos there and then embed the gallery on your website.

As we discussed before **calendars** are primarily tools for internal communications, but they can serve as a nice feature to make visitors aware of upcoming events. One excellent service to consider is <http://www.mychurchevents.com>. Another free resource is to simply use Google Calendar (<http://calendar.google.com>) and then embed the calendar on your site. A WELS church that is taking this approach is St. Johns Lutheran in Sleepy Eye, MN ([http://www.stjohnsse.com/site/cpage.asp?cpage\\_id=140021877&csec\\_id=140005469](http://www.stjohnsse.com/site/cpage.asp?cpage_id=140021877&csec_id=140005469)).

With the growing amount of content on websites these days, the **search** function becomes even more important. It’s important to make sure your visitors can find information on your site. Most hosting providers or solutions offer basic search. If you would like to harness the power of the largest search engine on the internet – Google – you can use it to index your site and then allow your visitors to use it. For more information go to: <http://www.google.com/coop/cse>.

Finally **forms** are an important part of most websites. They allow your visitors to provide valuable information to you or seek information from you. Again most hosting provid-

ers or solutions have built in abilities to create forms. If you see the need to get a little more sophisticated, or perhaps you want to take a survey or post a poll, you may want to consider other options. Visit <http://welstechwiki.wels.net/page/Online+Forms> for a nice introduction to forms tools.

# 4 Web Services, Hardware and Hosting



In previous sections we have discussed overall strategy, content types and general guidelines. It's time to get more specific. So how do you setup a website? What equipment do you need to add video and audio to the site?

## Domains

Beyond the planning steps we outlined in an earlier chapter, an important next step is choosing a domain name for your website (if you haven't done so already). You will want to choose one that is both short and memorable. It's often wise to include the name of your town in the domain somehow. For instance, if the name of your church is Peace Lutheran and it is located in the town of Austin, you may try to secure [www.peaceaustin.com](http://www.peaceaustin.com). One of the reasons to use the town name is its likely that web visitors who are using a search to find you will try to narrow their search by using the name of the town in which they live. Having your name in the URL will elevate your website in the search results.

Also try to secure all appropriate top level domain names. So you would want [peaceaustin.com](http://peaceaustin.com) and [peaceaustin.org](http://peaceaustin.org), especially since securing domain names is very inexpensive (usually under \$10 a year).

Email is beyond the scope of this guide, but just as a reminder to always use your domain as your email address. It gives a more professional appearance to have [john.doe@peaceaustin.org](mailto:john.doe@peaceaustin.org) rather than a Hotmail account.

Once you have secured the domain name, you can then go to any hosting provider and transfer that name to the service. We'll discuss providers and solutions next.

## Hosting Services

The next step to creating a website is to select the platform and provider you'd like to use. Gone are the days of using proprietary tools like Microsoft FrontPage or Adobe Dreamweaver. Your congregation would be best served using a Content Management System (CMS) to host your site. This makes it easy to add content via a web browser and share the load of keeping the website content fresh. There are three approaches that could be taken and we'll discuss them all here.

## Hosting solutions with built-in CMS

Good news for many mission churches is that the synod has provided a hosting solution through a partner, FinalWeb, that will meet most needs. For \$21 per month your website can make use of predesigned templates that will give your site a quick and easy professional look. The system will also provide many of the features we talked about in the last chapter. Email addresses come with the solution as well as excellent support and training videos. This kind of system allows your mission church to concentrate on adding content rather than figuring out the technology that runs the site. To find out more visit <http://www.wels.net/web-hosting>.

There are other options that provide online content management that allow more sophisticated customizations if you desire more flexibility than the rather structured FinalWeb solution. Two to consider are Squarespace (<http://www.squarespace.com>) and Wordpress (<http://www.wordpress.com>). Squarespace allows you to "build" your own

website by adding components. It does not have ministry specific features, but most can be constructed to meet your needs. The business account option (which would be most appropriate for missions) costs \$30/month.

You may have been curious why we mentioned Wordpress as we brought this one up when talking about blogging software. While it is primarily a blogging solution it can be easily re purposed into a full-fledged website solution. There are thousands of modules that give you endless options for feature additions. There is a bit of a learning curve, but there are many tutorials available. With premium features added in, which gives a domain name and extra storage, it costs about \$100 per year.

## Hosting providers and custom CMS

The section above looked at fairly turnkey solutions that allow you to apply templates and get posting content almost immediately. For a majority of mission churches these will suffice nicely. However if you would like total flexibility in features you can consider securing raw hosting space and then installing your own open source CMS.

A bit of caution before going down this road however. This can be very overwhelming for most average computer users. You shouldn't attempt this without a fairly technical volunteer to run things. In fact, it would be preferable to have multiple people as you never want your website to be at the mercy of one person who may leave, get busy, get disinterested or otherwise neglect this important ministry tool.

Once these sites have been setup they function in a similar fashion to the previously mentioned hosted CMSs, although there is a steeper learning curve. The first step if you decide to take this approach is to find a hosting provider. There are many many choices here. The one that seems to be the most flexible and the cheapest is <http://www.dreamhost.com>. In fact, for non-profits the price is free (<http://www.dreamhost.com/hosting-nonprofit.html>). Dreamhost will allow you to install almost any open source software, including CMSs.

The three major CMS software solutions to consider are Drupal, Joomla and Wordpress. There is that Wordpress again. See our previous comments. Yes, you can install your own copy. The other two are very popular as well. A good comparison of all these is at <http://www.goodwebpractices.com/other/wordpress-vs-joomla-vs-drupal.html>. While all of these have many templates to choose from, you may need to engage a designer/developer to truly personalize the solution. This of course would add to the total cost, but could give you exactly what you want. An example of this approach is at <http://www.georgiafaith.com>.

For advice and a list of potential designers and developers please contact the WELS Technology Office. There are a number of WELS members and WELS owned businesses ready to assist.

## Totally custom

If none of the above solutions meet the needs of your mission church, the last option is a totally custom developed website. While some web companies may use a CMS, many specialize in their own solutions. One of the drawbacks is that specialized solutions tend to force your mission to rely on the provider to update content. This will ultimately be a major negative and potentially costly. In general, I would advise against this approach.

Whether you use a template, create a semi-custom design based on a template or go totally custom, it's always wise to keep your eyes open to see what other churches are doing. Perhaps you will pick up design ideas, ideas for content, or features that might work in your situation. The following websites are worth a review once in a while:

- ◆ [www.ministrycss.com/category/church](http://www.ministrycss.com/category/church)
- ◆ [www.greatchurchwebsites.org](http://www.greatchurchwebsites.org) (dormant)
- ◆ [www.mychurchwebsite.com/church-website-design-portfolio](http://www.mychurchwebsite.com/church-website-design-portfolio)

The chart on the next page is a feature comparison between the three custom CMS solutions mentioned earlier. You can compare your own by using the tools at: <http://www>.

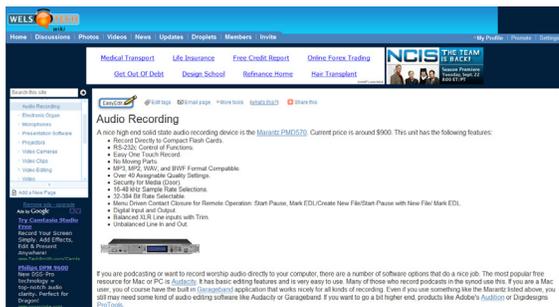
cmsmatrix.org/matrix/cms-matrix. Again however I would strongly suggest reviewing the more user friendly templated programs like FinalWeb before deciding to do something semi-custom or totally custom.

	<u>Drupal 6.10</u> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<u>Joomla! 1.5.10</u> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<u>WordPress 2.2.1</u> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<i>Last Updated</i>	2/26/2009	1/11/2009	7/25/2007
<b>System Requirements</b>	Drupal 6.10	Joomla! 1.5.10	WordPress 2.2.1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Approximate Cost</i>	Free	Free	Free
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Database</i>	MySQL	MySQL	MySQL
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Programming Language</i>	PHP	PHP	PHP
<b>Security</b>	Drupal 6.10	Joomla! 1.5.10	WordPress 2.2.1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Content Approval</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Email Verification</i>	Yes	Yes	Free Add On
<b>Support</b>	Drupal 6.10	Joomla! 1.5.10	WordPress 2.2.1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Commercial Manuals</i>	Yes	Yes	No
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Online Help</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Public Forum</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Ease of Use</b>	Drupal 6.10	Joomla! 1.5.10	WordPress 2.2.1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Drag-N-Drop Content</i>	Free Add On	No	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Friendly URLs</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Image Resizing</i>	Free Add On	Yes	Limited
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>WYSIWYG Editor</i>	Free Add On	Yes	Yes
<b>Built-in Applications</b>	Drupal 6.10	Joomla! 1.5.10	WordPress 2.2.1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Blog</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Chat</i>	Free Add On	Free Add On	Free Add On
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Discussion / Forum</i>	Yes	Free Add On	Free Add On
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Document Management</i>	Limited	Free Add On	No
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Events Calendar</i>	Free Add On	Free Add On	Free Add On
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Guest Book</i>	Free Add On	Free Add On	Free Add On
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Mail Form</i>	Free Add On	Yes	Free Add On
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Newsletter</i>	Free Add On	Free Add On	Free Add On
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Photo Gallery</i>	Free Add On	Free Add On	Free Add On
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Polls</i>	Yes	Yes	Free Add On
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Surveys</i>	Free Add On	Free Add On	Free Add On
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Wiki</i>	Free Add On	Free Add On	Free Add On
<b>Commerce</b>	Drupal 6.10	Joomla! 1.5.10	WordPress 2.2.1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Shopping Cart</i>	Free Add On	Free Add On	No
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <i>Subscriptions</i>	Free Add On	Free Add On	No

## Hardware

The good news is that to get a perfectly acceptable website up and running, you really don't need to buy any physical hardware other than a computer to access the internet. It gets a little more complicated if you want to add that "immersive" experience for your web visitor we talked about in a previous chapter. In most cases that means adding audio and/or video to your site.

Audio Podcasting is one of the most basic tools of sharing God's Word in a digital world. Most congregations have recorded the pastor's sermon for some time either to VHS or audio cassette tape. These were then used for a ministry to shut ins. With the internet and the relative ease at which digital recordings can now be made and posted on the internet, the use of the recordings can be expanded to outreach. To listen to examples of other WELS churches that are making use of audio podcasting, install and open iTunes on your computer and search for WELS. There are many examples there. To learn more of the technical details of audio podcasting visit the WELSTech Wiki site at: <http://welstechwiki.wels.net/page/Church+Media>.



Video Streaming is a recent development that has dramatically changed the church's ability to communicate. At very low cost, churches can now "broadcast" events just like a TV station. In the world of online video, there are a couple of choices to make. Much of the video online is "on demand." This means that it has been pre-recorded and then uploaded to sites like YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) or Vimeo ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com)) for later viewing. The other option

is to offer a "live stream" of the event you are recording.

Through sites like UStream ([www.ustream.tv](http://www.ustream.tv)) or Mogulus ([www.mogulus.com](http://www.mogulus.com)) viewers can tune in to what is going on in real time. Determining which route you take will depend on how important it is that people watch real time events or if they can watch on their own schedule. To stream live events, you will need to have a broadband connection to the location of the filming. For on demand, all you will need is good audio and video fed into some kind of recording device, usually a computer. For instructions and further suggestions on how to do either, visit [welstechwiki.wels.net](http://welstechwiki.wels.net). You can also find a listing of churches that provide both on that site at [welstechwiki.wels.net/page/Online+Worship](http://welstechwiki.wels.net/page/Online+Worship). If you'd like to see a rather aggressive approach to this concept of "church online," visit [www.lifechurch.tv](http://www.lifechurch.tv). This is not a WELS site, but shows what the technology is capable of.

Just to give you an idea of a middle-of-the-road audio and video setup, here is a list to consider with approximate pricing:

- ◆ Allen & Heath PA 12 Mixer - \$700
- ◆ Telex FMR-500E Wireless Mic (with additional handheld mic for house and choir sound) - \$850
- ◆ Computer (most any newer computer will do with an Intel Core 2 duo processor or equivalent) - \$550
- ◆ Ospray 100 Video Capture Card (2) - \$300
- ◆ VidBlaster Home Software - \$200
- ◆ Sony EVI-D70 Cameras (2) - \$1800

In short, an initial investment of about \$5000 will provide a mid-range audio and video setup for recording audio and video content. Getting it on your website is fairly easy with services like Mevio or Vimeo. Lower tech solutions could be crafted for half the cost but may not be as convenient or produce results that would give that "immersive" experience you are after.

*(Note: None of the prices listed above include installation, cables, mounting hardware or support contracts. This setup does*

*not include speakers or other necessary items to amplify sound inside your facility. It only assumes you want a quality audio or video recording.)*

As was suggested earlier, the best approach would be to review the materials on <http://welstechwiki.wels.net> and then seek help from an experienced professional. The Synod's Technology Office can point you in the right direction.



# 5 Marketing and Measuring



Now that you have your site set up you have two things left to do: 1) Make sure people visit it, and 2) Determine if your website is doing what you hoped it would do. This final chapter of *Websites and Missions* will provide some tips to help.

## Marketing

The hard work and sometimes expense of setting up and maintaining a website will be wasted if nobody visits the site. This is the fear of every site on the internet. We are all competing for “eye balls.” Yet the stakes are higher for churches. If we can’t reach our target audience – the lost – there are eternal consequences. So how are people going to find your little corner of the digital world? Most people these days start with a search.

## Search Engines

If you already have a website, start up a web browser and go to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com). Now enter search criteria that includes the name of your town or city followed by the state and then the word “Lutheran.” Then see if your website appears on the first page of results. If not, you have some work to do. The goal is to have your website near the top of the first page. The search we tried is a typical search for church shoppers.

It is extremely important for churches to have websites that are easily located. This begins with a memorable domain name or URL (i.e. [www.faithlutheran.org](http://www.faithlutheran.org)). However, that alone will not bring traffic to your site or allow people searching on popular search engines to find it. Here are 5

tips to help insure visitors who search for a church via a search engine will find your website:

1. Add new content to your site on a regular basis. The more words on your site that a search engine can find, the better your chances of your site coming up in response to a variety of search terms. Blogs are very good things to have on websites as they tend to keep a steady flow of content on the site. Remember that “more” does not mean content for content’s sake. Your content should include meaningful topics that might be of interest to prospects. A good example of a blog that attracts visitors based on focused content is Pastor Mark Cares and his ministry to Mormons. Visit it at: <http://markcares.wordpress.com>. By the way he is using Wordpress.
2. Make sure your site is “coded” correctly. Websites are built using a programming language called HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language). Search engines look for certain words within the text. Whoever is in charge of the code of the site should get educated on how to do this. The two HTML tags to keep in mind are the meta tags called “keywords” and “description.” Keywords are a comma separated list of words that tell the search engine what your site is about. You should include words like church, Lutheran, your city name, Jesus, faith, etc. The description is a brief sentence that tells people what you do or why you exist.
3. One of the most important criteria used by Google to rank your website is the number of external links (i.e. links to your site found on other sites) that come from other popular sites. This can be tricky, but it’s worth trying to insure that links to your website are included in every web directory you can find. Also video sites like YouTube

and photo sites like Flickr are great places to include your content with descriptive text linking to your site. Make sure all your members who have blogs or websites include a link to the church website as well. Don't forget about social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace either. Finally, be sure to explore local options like the Chamber of Commerce. Most have websites today and place member organizations on them.

4. Use the many resources online that will help webmasters optimize their sites, better understand search engines and stay current on the latest tools and trends. A great place to start is Google's Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide at: <http://www.google.com/webmasters/docs/search-engine-optimization-starter-guide.pdf>.

5. Make sure whoever is managing your site stays up-to-date on the current Search Engine trends and webmaster techniques. A great site to do that is at: <http://www.google.com/support/forum/p/Webmasters>.

## Social Networks

Your primary online marketing tool is going to be your website. However there are other internet locations your mission church should have a presence if for no other reason than to advertise your main website. It is very easy to get a Facebook site setup or add a Twitter account. Just remember that these tools are useless without adding content on a regular basis.

Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)) holds much promise for ministry purposes. Twitter is a micro-blogging site that allows individuals to "subscribe" to the service and receive the "tweets" the micro-blogger posts as text messages on their phone. These tweets are short, typically less than 140 characters, and could contain text, links to pictures or any other content. Presidential candidate Barack Obama made effective use of Twitter in his presidential campaign. Even today he has some 150,000 followers who receive his tweets.

A pastor or mission church could create a Twitter account and advertise for people to "follow" it. In the feed, you could put daily inspirational thoughts, Bible verses, and

reminders about events. Keep in mind that the tweets need to be of high quality and written with a target audience in mind or nobody will see a need to subscribe. A Twitter account just for members could also work, sharing tips, thoughts, etc. that might serve as an encouragement to share their faith or strengthen their own. Needless to say, this is a communication mechanism that will resonate with teens, but not exclusively. If you did a survey of your congregation and ask how many of those with cell phones have text messaging, you might be surprised.

An amazing (and scary) trend is currently taking place online. People are willing to share almost anything about themselves with the entire world via the internet. Social networks like MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn have millions of users posting things ranging from their inner most and deepest thoughts to what they are eating for breakfast. They tell the world, or at least hundreds of their digital friends how they are feeling or what their weekend plans are. It's scary because posting information before truly thinking through all the ramifications of sharing it have led to some unfortunate consequences. The amazing side of the phenomenon, however, is that Christians have never had such a public or semi-public forum to tell anybody what, or who, is at the center of their life — Jesus Christ! Curiously, however, most Christians do not, thus the need to be reminded that their faith should not be checked at the proverbial digital doorway. Our lights need to shine online and offline.

Here are some things every digital citizen who uses social networks can do to begin sharing their faith.

1. Most social networks allow you to post a permanent profile about yourself. Include in the "interests" section those items that directly relate to your spiritual life (i.e. Bible reading, church activities, sharing Christ, etc.).
2. In the "favorite links" section, include a link to the church and other solid devotional or religious materials that your visitors might read and help them better understand why Jesus is so important to you.
3. In the "what I'm reading" section, include the Bible.

4. In the photos and video section, include items related to your church or life of faith.

5. When posting comments on other people's pages/sites, be sure to season your post with salt. "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (Colossians 4:6)

All of the above can also apply to social media sites as well. YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) and Flickr ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)) are both examples of social media sites where the primary content is media (audio, video or picture) and people share their thoughts on that content.

## Measuring

So how do you know if your website is worth the effort? For starters you'll want to know as much as you can about the visitors to your site.

## Tracking Tools

Know who is visiting your site and how they are getting there. There are free tools that will allow you to monitor how your site is doing. Google provides a free tool called Google Analytics. This will provide revealing reports about popular pages on your site, where your traffic is coming from, how long they are staying, and what search term they used which produced your site as a search result. Go to <http://www.google.com/analytics> to find out more.

It's very easy to setup and will be an invaluable tool to help you determine if your site is being visited, and what content seems to be attracting attention. The important part about the results however is making some decisions based on it. If you find that there are pages on your site that don't get much traffic, determine why. Is the content not relevant, or perhaps your site navigation doesn't help the visitor find it? There are many other things you can determine based on these statistics.

## Just Ask

Sometimes the best way to determine if your website is getting the job done is to just ask. Make sure you have a way to find out from your church service visitors how they found you? Did they visit the website? What did they think? Ask your members the same question.

You could also put surveys or polls on your site asking for feedback. A couple of good and fairly inexpensive survey tools are Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) and Zoomerang (<http://www.zoomerang.com>). They are easy to set up and give a nice professional presentation. They also allow the survey taker to see a summary of other results, which is always a nice touch.

Finally, if you haven't launched your website yet, be sure to test the design and sample content on anybody you can get to review the site. Be sure to include people who you would consider prospects in this review. Take their feedback seriously and make appropriate changes before you launch the site. It's also a good idea to do this kind of a review on a regular basis.

Some ask how often should you freshen up the design of the site. That depends. If it looks dated, change it. If it's still effective and attracting visitors, leave it alone. It is there for a purpose. If it meets your objectives, then you should be happy.

## Examples

While each situation is very unique there are a few sample or reference sites that may be worth considering as you begin your site design or redesign. These two sites were expressly developed using the principles in this document. While they may change over time the basics all remain.

The first website is <http://www.ctkpalmcoast.com> from Christ The King in Palm Coast, FL. This church was selected for the project since it represented the typical Home Mission new start. A detailed project website was also created that should provide some “behind-the-scenes” information about what goes into a site design and rollout. Those resources can be found at: <https://sites.google.com/site/ctkmodel>. Look especially at the Project Updates and 20 Guidelines - Applied to CTK pages.

The second website is <http://www.goodshepherds.net> from Good Shepherd’s Lutheran in West Allis, WI. This church was selected as it represents a typical medium sized WELS church situated in the midwest.

Both of these sites make use of the synod’s webhosting platform called FinalWeb and use a similar style template to achieve their objectives. Please feel free to contract these churches to gain deeper insights into their respective projects.

## Summary

Hopefully over the course of the last five chapters you have information to get started on a website or attempt to “up-grade” your current site. As you are probably aware however technology changes at a rapid rate. What was sound advice today may not be as smart tomorrow. Try to stay on top of trends in technology, especially as they relate to outreach. A good way to do that is subscribe to a few blogs. I’d suggest the following:

- ◆ [www.churchmarketingsucks.com](http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com)
- ◆ [www.internetevangelismday.com/blog](http://www.internetevangelismday.com/blog)
- ◆ [www.outsidetheboxministry.com](http://www.outsidetheboxministry.com)
- ◆ [www.effectivechurch.com](http://www.effectivechurch.com)

While the theology is not always square, they do inspire creative thought and keep you abreast of internet trends.

Remember your website is still just a tool. Perhaps your primary promotional tool, but still a tool. Plan it. Commit to making it as good as it can be. Put great content on it. Give it a purpose. Maintain it. Market it. Evaluate it. Pray that the Lord would use it to His glory.

May God bless your digital outreach!

---

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2929 North Mayfair Road ✕ Milwaukee, WI 53222 ✕ 414 256•3888 ✕ [www.wels.net](http://www.wels.net)

