

Connected congregations: Church Web Sites

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

Churches with Web sites and pastors using e-mail are praising how the electronic media keeps them in touch and enriches congregational life, a recent foundation-funded study discovered. But in a good news-bad news scenario, the authors of a separate survey warn that having a Web site designed chiefly to attract newcomers to the brick-and-mortar site is worse than having no Internet presence at all.

People using computers to scout out a church to attend have distinct expectations for what a web site should be. They “will hold a poor site against a congregation,” says the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. “Having a quality Web site presence is even more crucial for congregations attempting to reach persons under 30 years old.”

First, the good news. The response to a survey of 1,309 congregations taken last year by the Pew Internet & American Life Project suggests that churches and synagogues have found new energy and purpose through use of the Internet. For instance, 81 percent said that e-mail use by clergy, church staffs and members has helped the spiritual life of the congregation to some extent; 35 percent said it helped a great deal. About 17 percent said e-mail helped the congregation “a lot” to connect with the surrounding community, and 51 percent said it helped “a great deal” to keep in touch with fellow members and church staff.

About 470 ministers and rabbis responded to the survey. “A striking number of the clergy . . . have turned to the Internet to get material for sermons, worship services, church-education programs, and their own personal devotions,” said Elena Larsen, author of the Internet project report released in December by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Altogether, 83 percent of the congregations with a Web site encourage visitors to attend their place of worship, but most of the activity is “one-way communication” such as posting information, schedules and sermons, she said. Few congregation

sites had interactive features such as opportunities for discussions and feedback, the Pew study indicated. Three-fourths of the sites provided links to denominational and faith-related sites.

Neither the Pew study nor the smaller survey by the Hartford Institute claimed to have a representative national sample of the expected tens of thousands of congregations using the Internet. The latter survey, conducted last fall by a class at Hartford Seminary, focused solely on Web sites operated by congregations. The 63 usable responses from 125 sites surveyed, according to the institute, roughly matched the ratios of major faith groups in the country. More than 25 percent were Catholic parish sites, for example.

“One of the most startling findings is that none of the webmasters surveyed reported that their congregations contracted with professional Web design firms outside their membership to create their sites,” said Scott Thumma of the Hartford Institute. That was encouraging news, in that motivated members—a skilled member of the congregation in 75 percent of the cases—created the site. But it was also disappointing, Thumma said, because “many of the sites surveyed could have benefited from professional design assistance.”

The Hartford Institute has started regular reviews of “excellent” church Web sites on its own site, <http://hirr.hartsem.edu>. Among those cited are Overland Church of Christ in Kansas (“warm, soft look . . . clean, uncluttered . . . subtle coloring . . . very clear and organized”), Colonial Baptist Church in Cary, North Carolina (“Clearly someone had thought long and hard about what they wanted the Web site to imply about their congregation”) and Central Presbyterian Church in Baltimore (“treasure trove of information . . . links to their sister church in São Paulo, Brazil, and to parachurch organizations they support”).

Criteria used in the reviews include whether the site provides full information on contacting the church, a service schedule that is easy to understand, belief statements and links to a denomination if affiliated. “Does the site have a way to report errors, ask questions and provide feedback?” The Hartford Institute also looks for interesting descriptions that are concise and jargon free, with headings and surrounding white space. If there are blinking or animated items, Hartford analysts ask whether they “enhance or detract from the page’s content.” They also ask whether the content is up to date and if there is a tool for searching the site by keywords.

A Web site intended to serve two audiences should have features for members (newsletters, events calendar, prayer request section and contact information) and features for visitors (area map and directions, photo of the church, “frequently asked questions” and nursery contacts), according to the Hartford Institute. “Increasingly, your Web page may be the only glimpse people ever have of your congregation,” Thumma predicted. “At least spend as much time and money on your site as you would on your congregation’s landscaping.”

As a pastor I use the Internet for several areas of ministry--communication, teaching and preaching. E-mail is a quick way to communicate with parishioners, colleagues both local and national, and the synod. I use the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Web site a great deal for facts that I can use in preaching and in teaching both adults and children. I frequently “hit” easum.com (Bill Easum’s Web site), changingchurch.org, and micahempowers.org. For news I check jsonline.com (the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*) and cnn.com. The Internet is one of the first places I turn when I’m looking for information regarding any topic.

*Jennifer Thomas
Lake Park Lutheran Church,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

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I don’t use the Internet for theological resources. On occasion I will check out the Web sites of churches, and I get information about conferences and upcoming events related to ministry.

I use e-mail on a more regular basis to send notes of encouragement and appreciation. Calling people at work is sometimes inconvenient, but almost everyone has e-mail at the workplace. Our church body regularly uses e-mail to circulate prayer requests.

*Prince Raney Rivers
Cary First United Church of Christ,
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Probably my most frequently visited Web site is the one being developed here at the Hartford Institute for Religious Research--hirr.hartsem.edu. It is a gateway to an enormous (and growing) array of resources for people who want to find out what researchers know about various aspects of American religion. It's presented in a format and language that make it accessible and useful to people who are leaders in religious communities.

*Nancy Ammerman
Hartford Seminary,
Hartford, Connecticut*

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I tap into a myriad of other church Web sites. It's meaningful to see what other churches are doing.

E-mail is a big piece of my pastoral life--hundreds arrive every week. I find people communicating ideas on which they've taken time to reflect. The medium of e-mail helps some people to raise awkward subjects or sentiments in careful ways. Not everything on the screen deserves equal consideration. And e-mail is no substitute for the beauty of human give-and-take. But what a great way to connect broadly and quickly.

*Peter W. Marty
St. Paul Lutheran Church,
Davenport, Iowa*

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E-mail is my primary way to stay in contact with other priests as well as key leaders in the congregation. Although I rely on e-mail and voice mail for setting appointments with parishioners, I do not use it for pastoral care or any communication I would not want to be overheard.

My favorite Internet sites include cnn.com for general information, altavista.com for searching, and AnglicansOnline.org for general denominational information.

My information and technology arsenal includes CD-ROMs for liturgical resources, graphics, zip disks for managing large files and backing up files, a laptop computer, a cellular telephone (for emergency paging as well as calls) and a palm pilot, which

has replaced several notebooks.

I serve a growing mission and I have to stay mobile. I download e-mail, directions and news services to a laptop, where I synchronize them along with my schedule, expense report, task list and contact manager of my palm pilot. Being under 35, I have grown up with microcomputers and expect information to be available and accessible at all times.

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