

Web Pages for Churches and Other Nonprofits

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A Free eBook

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What This eBook is and What it is Not

I designed this eBook for people with little or no Web experience, or for those who know coding, but have never had to put together a site from scratch.

It will help you think through the process, from why you want a page, through what should be on it, and when to update it.

The booklet is written for nonprofit groups who cannot afford to hire a professional designer, or who don't know the kinds of questions to ask a professional. Specifically it for you if you want a Web page but don't know how to get started, if you have gotten a page up, but don't like how it looks and don't know why, or if someone has created a Web page for you and you don't know how to tell them what you really need.

This is not a handbook of HTML. You will not find out how to do tables or use CSS. There are plenty of places to look for the nuts and bolts of coding. This handbook will not help you decide which HTML editor to use. It will not teach you to do graphics or deliver interactive information. It will not teach you to set up a blog. It will not help you set up a Facebook or Twitter account.

Again, this is to get you started in thinking about what you want on your pages and why. You might call it conceptual, or a big picture book. I hope you find it useful!

The next few sections are for new users of the Internet. If you are comfortable using IE or another browser, feel free to skip down to the section called *Welcome to the Web Revolution*. If you don't know what that last sentence means, read on!



Choosing an Internet Service Provider (ISP)

Most likely you already have access to the Internet. If not, you will need to choose an Internet Service Provider, or ISP. Your cable or satellite TV provider will most likely offer Internet service. The same with your phone company. If you don't know who to go with, ask for recommendations from your constituency.

Search Engines, or Do You Google?

At the time I originally wrote this booklet, there were multiple search engines on the Web, each with its strengths and weaknesses. However, in the seven years since, Google (<http://www.google.com>) has come to the fore and it really the only one you need.

If you have surfed the Web, you have likely used Google. In case you are not familiar with it, here's a short tour. For most browsers (by which I mean Internet Explorer, Firefox, Opera, Google Chrome or similar), you simply need to type your question in the search box at the top and be automatically taken to Google. If not, use the link above. When you get there, you will find a small menu across the top which reads

Web – Images – Videos – Maps - News - Shopping – Gmail – more.

I find the images link particularly useful when I am searching for a picture of something. You look them up by subject just as you do a Web page.

Suppose you need to learn HTML to create a page. Simply type in "how to write html" without the quotes, and you get back 142,000,000 pages that match your search. If you have formatted your question well – or if it is capable of being formatted specifically – you will usually find what you want on the first page or two. Try googling yourself. Simply type in your name – this time use the quotation marks around it – and you might be surprised what you find.



Hosting Your Site

Before anyone can see your site on the Web, you will need to load it onto a server somewhere. I will write more about this later, but you might want to be looking now. Your Internet Service Provider (ISP) may offer this service as part of their package. If not, ask for recommendations from your constituency. You should be able to find a good service starting at \$5 a month. There are free sites, but they will run ads on your pages to help pay for their service. Or, you may find a site which is truly free with no ads, but it will require you to have someone on staff who knows about programming from scratch, as they will not give you helpful templates or anything else. One thing you will likely want is a site that will also register your domain name for you. If you don't know what that means, hang in there. I'll talk more about that later. For now just know that it will cost you somewhere in the neighborhood of \$10.00 a year or less, and may even be free for the first year.

Okay, now into the meat of this eBook!



Welcome to the Web Revolution

Does it seem like you are the only one without a Web address? Does a lack of a URL (Uniform Resource Locator, or the address of a Web page) make you feel hopelessly behind the times? Does a hastily thrown up or three year old Web page for your church or organization make you cringe?

All is not lost! You don't have to be a Webmaster extraordinaire to have an attractive Web site. Nor do you have to know programming to put together a helpful site.

What you do need is to provide useful information in a logical and aesthetically pleasing format. The mantra of the Internet is "Content, content, content," and that is more important than flash.

Using a few commonsense rules, you too can join the Internet revolution.

The Process Starts with a Few Defining Questions

Why do you want a Web page? There are as many answers as there are people considering creating one. Do any of the following match your reasons?

- You feel that everyone is on the Web but you
- You want to show you are relevant
- Someone in your congregation offered
- You're feeling pressured into it by your parent organization

None of the above are good enough.

You need a good positive reason for getting online, because you are making an ongoing investment in time and money.

That bears repeating: *Web sites are an ongoing commitment.* Pages which get put up and ignored ever after are useless at best, embarrassing at worst. Don't begin unless you intend to give your pages the time they deserve. This will amount to an hour or two a week as a general rule, once the work of getting the pages up is done.



So Why Do You Want a Web page?

- To let other people know what you have to offer?
- To keep your own people updated?
- To serve more clients or extend the reach of the gospel?
- To attract more young people? The under thirty crowd will

likely judge your church or organization by your Web page. This may not be what you want to hear, but it is a fact.

Your primary reason for creating a Web site should serve as a focus. Each page on the site should reflect your underlying thrust and theme.

Notes:



Web Site Creation Starts at the Table, not the Computer

Appoint a committee which represents everyone who needs to have a say. Once you decide the various pages (discussion on how to do that starts in the next section), make sure there is someone representing each main area: director, pastor, Sunday school, youth group, services, activities, day care, etc., etc.

Why a committee instead of just a Webmaster?

- ♦ It is difficult for a single person to represent the entire congregation/organization and its mission and public image
- ♦ One person can't have all the good ideas a committee can, and a committee brings greater buy-in from the organization
- ♦ The Webmaster can become possessive about the site or leave.
- ♦ The Web site will seldom be a vital force if it is only one person's vision.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. My current church's Website (<http://www.kffriends.org>) is the vision of a single person, and is very well done. The Webmaster is a long-time member of the congregation who totally understands the church, what we stand for, where we are going, and what is important to us. Even so, she solicits information from all the rest of us for writings and pictures to put up on the site.

Once you have the site set up, one person will be able to maintain it – though even then you will probably want to have a back-up in case of sickness, accident, job transfer, or whatever.

One warning: You will likely have someone on your committee – especially if this site has been mandated by your parent organization – who knows a lot about Web pages. Don't let their technical expertise hijack the project at this point. You don't want to be talking about the "how" at this early stage, but rather the "why." Once you know your reason for getting things online, then you can decide how to do it and what is technically feasible.

If you are Web guru in your group, please don't bully anyone at this early stage. The why is the important thing at this point. It's too easy for us geeks to start coding or to push our own favorite method of creating Web pages before we make the important decisions.



Decide what you want your Site to convey

Two things will keep people coming back to your page: good, relevant, up-to-date information, and an attractive site.

Pull ideas from your mission/service statement to guide you as you think about how to present yourself online. If you do not have one, get it written before you start your Web site!

How do you want people to see your organization/church? This will determine what kind of information you provide, what pages you create, and the image you project. Some examples are:

- ♦ Caring
- ♦ Community resource
- ♦ The place to turn when you need to know about _____
(Whatever your specialty is).
- ♦ Evangelical in outlook
- ♦ Modern in outlook and “with it.”
- ♦ A safe and welcoming place
- ♦ Family friendly

Pick a single, or two at the most for your main focuses. Spending enough time on this step now will save arguments, confusion, and time further down the road.

How “Professional” Do You Want Your Page?

This will influence the people it attracts. Flashy will bring in young people, solid and full of information will attract Boomers, etc.



Decide on the “Look and Feel” of the Site

You want the pages to look like they are all from the same organization. This includes such things as color, bullets, headings, font types, graphics, (use all the same type of graphics. Cartoon, line drawing, photos, etc.), person (third, first) in the writing of the body, light or serious tone, among other things.

Visit any commercial site on the Web to see this. Amazon.com is a good example. Not only is the whole site built with an overall look and feel, but the Canadian, British, French, German, and Japanese sites all have the Amazon feel. Or take a look at my site, Faith-Writer.com (<http://www.faith-writer.com>). You will find all the title graphics are done the same way, using the same font; that the navigation bar at the side is the same on all the main pages; that I have the same font in the body of the pages all through the site; and that the colors remain consistent. These are the same colors, fonts, and graphic I use on my business cards and stationary.

Just as you recognize a McDonalds before you are close enough to read the words, just as you can identify an ad in the paper before you see the name of the company just by how it looks – take a look at a Rite-Aid ad, or a Walmart ad to see what I mean –so all the pages of your site should have the same feel about them. Whoever does the actual coding of your site will likely create templates (or patterns) that can be followed by your Webmaster later. This will help to keep your pages all feeling the same.



Think About Color

Part of the look and feel of your site is the colors you choose. You will likely want to use the colors of your church/organization, such as those you use for your stationary, bills, posters, or whatever you produce.

If your organization doesn't have a particular color scheme, you can decide what tone you want to convey. There are various sites on the Web that cover color psychology. One of them is [Color Matters](http://www.colormatters.com/entercolormatters.html) (<http://www.colormatters.com/entercolormatters.html>), but again, you can simply go to Google and enter "psychology of color" without the quotes, and find plenty of pages to choose from.

Web Safe Colors

Web safe colors are those which will look the same on PCs and Macs, and as well on poor monitors, as they do good ones. This isn't as important as it used to be. My older site, [QuoteLady.com](http://www.quotelady.com) (<http://www.quotelady.com>) uses Web safe colors, as it was created in the late 90s, but my newer site [Faith-Writer.com](http://www.faith-writer.com) (<http://www.faith-writer.com>) uses instead a color which complements the main graphic. Most people now have monitors which can handle more colors, but if your clientele is poorer, or in a country which has older technology, you will want to keep this in mind.

Another reason for using a Web safe color would be if your clientele is divided between PC and Mac users. Some colors do not display very attractively between the two, but the Web safe colors will do quite well on either platform.

You can find a link to a chart of Web safe colors online at the [\(6x6x6\) Color Palette Map](http://the-light.com/colclick.html) at <http://the-light.com/colclick.html>, but again, just typing in "color palette map" in Google will direct you to any number of pages.



Graphic Talk

Graphics should:

- ♦ Have action and people. You want to present your organization or church as being active and involved with people. Happy, smiling pictures give a good impression. This is true whether they are photographs or line drawings.
- ♦ Fit into the overall feel of your page (see above). Line drawings give one kind of feel, photographs another. Remember your clientele, and what you are trying to get across.
- ♦ As a general rule, be used sparingly - remember those with slow modems. A few, well-chosen graphics are better than too many. This may be different if your main users will be young people with up-to-date technology, in which case they may expect lots of graphics and be able to handle them.
- ♦ Be as “small” as possible so they load easily.

For a graphic “small” does not mean tiny pictures, but rather pictures which load quickly. If you don’t have a graphics savvy person in your organization, consider paying someone to do this, and/or visit the **Bandwidth Conservation Society** (http://www.blackpearlcomputing.com/bpc/Bandwidth_stuff/default.html) for suggestions to help graphics load faster. Your page must load in a reasonable time or no one will wait to see what is there. An old estimate said that people would wait eight seconds for a page to load before moving on. It is less than that now. You probably have five seconds at most to capture your audience, unless they really want to see what you in particular have to say.

Don’t use fancy animations unless they will really help attract the kind of people you want to visit your page. In most cases, animation causes either irritation or takes the reader’s attention away from the message you hope to convey.

A rule of thumb is to use gifs for pictures with few colors, and jpegs for photographs. You may not know what that means, but your Webmaster will.



Decide what to include on your pages

Here are some suggestions to get you started

- Meeting times
- Office hours
- Address and phone number. *Whatever you do, get contact information prominently on all your pages, but especially on the home page. Let people know how to contact your organization and your Webmaster*

- Services offered to community
- Mission statement
- Meetings open to the public
- About the pastor/president
- Sermon/meeting notes
- Sermon title for next week
- Organization newsletter
- Youth information
- About your denomination/organization
- Committee purposes, meeting times etc.
- Exciting projects you are currently doing
- Grants you have received or applied for
- Any awards your organization has received
- Articles in the newspaper or other media
- Whatever else is important to you – or rather whatever will be important to the person visiting your site

Don't judge what you are listing now. Just get all the ideas out on the table.

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Importance

Now that you have written down everything you can think of to go on the page, rank the information in importance: Most important, Important, Not as important.

Next delete everything in the last group. You don't want the pages to be wordy!

You will also want to make sure the items designated as "most important" go on the front page. You want visitors to the site to understand right away what you are about.

Don't, however, try to say everything about any of the items. Keep it simple on this first page. People can be led into some depth, but you can't start that way.

And remember that you are ranking the importance according to the reasons you are creating the Web page as you decided previously. However, now that you are thinking about actual information, you may want to tweak your reasons and/or, your site's mission statement. Also remember the mantra of the Internet is "content, content, content." People may come to look at a flashy page, but they will come back again and again if you provide content that they need.

Creating the Page

Your Webmaster will do the actual coding of the page, but what the committee needs to decide is how your home page will look for those who first find your site. I talked above about how to decide what goes on there. Now you need to place the information in a logical and aesthetically pleasing manner. You decide what graphics to use, including the logo of your page. You decide where each item will be placed. You decide where the different kinds of fonts you have chosen will be used, if you haven't done that already. What you are creating here is basically a mock-up of the page so you can see how it will look. Your Webmaster will then take that mock-up and create the actual page as close to your vision as the software will allow. Repeat for each of the lower pages.

Again, if you need help with coding a page, visit Google (see above)



Optimizing Your Page for Search Engines

Many people will find your site because you tell them about it, either face-to-face or through your literature, but others will find it by searching on Google. There are various ways to make it more likely that people will find you.

First, make sure the name of your church/organization is mentioned on your page, preferably more than once. You will also want to mention your street address, city and state, or other information that will let local people find you, and as I emphasized above, contact information.

Second, when you use links to other parts of your site, don't say "click here." with "here" having the clickable link. You need to write out the link, so that it is something like, see Pastor Tim's Sermon for last Sunday here, with everything from Pastor on to the end of the sentence as the link. In fact, even though you may call your minister Pastor Tim, you may want to write out his whole name to help people searching for him. The idea is to be as specific as possible so that when Google or other search engines go out looking at your site, they find lots of specific information that people might search by.

Third, the description and keyword meta tags. These go in the <HEAD> area of your pages. Again, if you don't know what that means, your Webmaster will.

The description tag obviously describes your page.

Include such things as:

<META name="Description" CONTENT="church, churches, Podunk Junction, Methodist, Rainbow Child Care"> and anything you might want to use to lead people to your site. The more specific the better, but don't neglect the general terms as well, such as Church, or Social Service Organization. Notice that these are separated by commas.

The keyword tag offers some search terms. These will look something like this:

<META name="Keywords" CONTENT="Podunk Junction Community Church, the place where you belong"> (con't)



To see what others have done, view the source code of main pages. If you are using Internet Explorer, you click on the menu item “View” at the top of the page, and then choose “Source.” You should see these meta tags near the top. For an example, look at my site [QuoteLady.com](http://www.quotelady.com) (<http://www.quotelady.com>).

But most of all, just mention your site all the time, especially when it is new!



Other Considerations

- ♦ If your clientele uses different browsers (for instance, if you have a variety of PC and Mac users, or Web savvy folk who use Opera, Firefox, or another browser) then make sure your pages look good in these various places. Ask those with the different browsers to take a look.
- ♦ Think about vision-impaired people when you create your site. This includes using the ALT tag in images, so there are words associated with the picture. This looks like this: ``. It also means setting your font sizes as relative to each other, and not to a specific size. That is, use `SIZE="+1"` type sizing rather than calling for specific font sizes. This will look like: ``
- ♦ Have copyright clearance for any graphics you use.
- ♦ Make sure the page is reasonably scalable, that is, that it looks good in browser windows of various sizes. You can do this yourself by simply resizing your browser from small to full screen.
- ♦ If you have sound, videos, or anything that requires more than a plain browser to view, have links to where you get the plug-in. Your Webmaster will understand this.
- ♦ Add a counter if you want to track the number of visitors to a page. You can find these by searching “website counter” without the quotes in Google to find several choices of free ones. However, most web hosting services do offer statistics for your site which tell you much more than just a counter will. A counter will be most useful on a page other than the home page, one where you need to know how popular it is.
- ♦ Date the pages now, and update this date whenever you make changes.
- ♦ Make your navigation easy and logical. Make it easy to find the main/home page again. Have people of varying skill levels test this.
- ♦ Make people in various areas responsible for content. They don't need to create the pages themselves, but they will know the facts and updated information that need to go on those pages. Some of these areas might be committees, the director, the pastor, Sunday school, different branches of your organization, etc.



Hosting the Page

Put it on a service where you can have your name as a link. People will search <http://www.yourorganizationname.org>. You don't want them having to type in something like: <http://www.hostingservice.com/users/nonprofits/12345/index.html>.

Your Internet service provider may allow you space to mount a page. (See above about getting an ISP). As I've already mentioned, you can expect to pay from \$5.00 a month, up for this service, or more if you need more elaborate things like a full service shopping cart, or an SQL server. If your committee doesn't have any suggestions, try searching "full service virtual website hosting" in Google. The site I use costs me \$70.00 a year, which includes domain name registration.

If you need or want to get a Webpage up and there is no one in your organization with the expertise to do so, consider hosting one with [Yahoo](http://smallbusiness.yahoo.com/webhosting/) at <http://smallbusiness.yahoo.com/webhosting/>. This will cost you around \$10 a month, paid yearly, but they will give you a wide range of tools to enable you to create a site with little or no experience in coding. You can also register your domain with them for an additional \$9.95 a year.

I've mentioned registering your domain several times. What that means is that you register the URL of your page so you own it. For instance, I own the domains quotelady.com and faith-writer.com. That means no one else is using those names, and that as long as I continue to pay the yearly fee, no one else can. You can't mount a Web page without doing this as well, for it registers you on the Internet so that your page is searchable.

A newer option for organizations is to create a blog instead of a Web page. This might be a feasible way to go for your organization if your information consists mainly of announcements or activities you are involved in. You may also want to do a blog as an addition to your Web site. There are several places to create a blog, particularly Blogspot.com and Wordpress.com. A blog is easy, but people will expect it to be updated regularly, so don't start one unless you are able to do that.



Getting the Word Out

If your denomination or parent organization has a general Web page, make sure your church or organization is listed there.

If your city has a listing of nonprofit Web pages, get your organization there.

Put the URL in all your literature, including the bulletin, newsletters, and any ads you do. Put it in brochures for special services, camps, day care, etc., and on business cards. Put it on your signboard in letters large enough to be read driving by. You may even want to announce it in your local paper, if you regularly advertise there.

Generally, just mention it every place you can and encourage your clients or members to use the page and tell others about it.

Rethinking your pages

And above all, keep the information on your pages current! You need to give people reasons for coming back. If all they find is three month old items, they won't visit again.

But even if you are doing that, don't think you can just sit back and enjoy your site forever. Periodically your committee should give some thought to an overhaul of the site, at least once a year.

- ♦ Talk again about focus and audience
- ♦ Update the design completely, or
- ♦ Make some small changes such as color or type of graphics

Keep it interesting, and people will visit regularly!

If you have questions, you can find contact information for me on either of my sites, QuoteLady.com or Faith-Writer.com. Or just email me at koberst@faith-writer.com.

**I hope this eBook was useful
to you and your organization.**

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