

Chapter 9: Conclusions

9. Research questions and aims

9.1 Research questions

The research set out to answer three research questions. This chapter will provide those answers, and outline how the individual objectives have been met.

Question 1: To what extent have English Christian churches established a distinct individual web presence?

The longitudinal study reveals that around two thirds of English Christian Churches from four different denominations have an individual web presence. From a random sample of 400 churches in England, tracked over three years, by December 2011 66% had a website that could be found by an online directory or simple Google search. This was an increase from 41% in January 2009. The trend had been upwards from 2009, but the December 2011 figure represents a 1% drop in the overall total.

This project has shown that not all churches have created a website and has been the first survey investigation of English churches of all sizes.

Question 2: To what extent do churches and church leaders use email, websites and social media tools to find and publish information?

To a large extent, churches are using online tools. Interviews suggest that email is a frequently used method of communication by church leaders, but that it is not always problem-free. Many reported feeling overwhelmed by the email traffic received. Social media is used by some leaders, with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Content analysis of websites shows that although a majority of churches may have a website, few use any kind of interactive tool to engage visitors. Whilst very basic information is present on the majority of sites, most do not publish more detail. Only a small number (nine) had a separate page for newcomers. Hyperlinks are used by a majority of sites to external sources of useful information.

Question 3: Is there evidence that traditional notions of hierarchy and authority been affected by online sources of information and communication?

The interview evidence shows that no English church leader questioned had seen negative effects of online information on their authority. In fact, when their teaching had been questioned the leaders had welcomed the opportunity to enter into conversation and thus had seen a positive effect. Literature had suggested that authority might be undermined by the ability of churchgoers to find answers from sources other than the pulpit, but no effect was seen in this project. It is perhaps that the authority effects are at a macro level, affecting society, rather than individual church leaders.

9.2 Meeting aims and objectives

In order to avoid repetition of large parts of the results text, the summary of the objectives is given below with references to the results sections providing evidence for the achievement, or otherwise, of the individual objective.

Objective	Met?	Evidence
Establish a baseline measure of the number of parishes or churches in England with a purpose-built website.	Yes	5.1 Percentage of churches with websites increased from 2009, but had levelled off by 2011.
<i>From a smaller sample, investigate key aspects of website production, publication and content choice to establish whether:</i>		
Websites are part of a planned information and communications strategy	Partially	6.5.1 There is insufficient interview evidence to conclusively answer this point. There is a lack of ongoing governance, and many sites are out of date, suggesting a lack of due attention to the websites.
How content is presented and created	Yes	6.2 Practical and reference information Content analysis shows that there is little shared content other than hyperlinks.
There are variations in the choice of different information topics across denominations	Yes	6.2 shows variations in the number of churches with information on specific topics
Content includes information which explains or highlights the congregation's faith, worship or community	Yes	6.2 6.3 detail the information on these topics located via content analysis
Any differentiation is made between church members and the wider community as audiences for local church websites	Yes	6.2.2 , 6.5.2, 7.1.7 Few had a specific newcomers' page. Many provided architecture/ family records information for specific visitors
Churches use interactive tools including allowing user-generated content (CA, interview)	Yes	7.8 7.9 Interactivity was not found on the majority of sites
Churches use hyperlinks to locate themselves in local, national or global online communities(CA, interview)	Yes	7.6 Content analysis shows the popularity of various organisations linked to
Leaders have experience of challenges to authority led or encouraged by online media	Yes	7.5 No leader felt they had seen this kind of challenge
Explore the ways in which church leaders use the internet for vocational and personal tasks	Yes	4.7 4.8 Leaders use the internet regularly for a variety of vocational and personal tasks
Explore the use of social media by churches and their leaders as a tool for sharing information (interview)	Yes	7.3 Leaders and some churches do use social media, to varying extents

Table 9-1 Evidence for meeting aims & objectives

All objectives, except for one, have been met. Objective 2 has not been met fully due to insufficient evidence from the interviews as to the existence of planned communication strategies. An answer could be inferred from the number of sites that are not maintained or the number of churches that do not discuss their websites on a regular basis, but this is not as satisfactory as direct interview evidence.

In summary, the research has described the ways in which websites are produced, how social media is used and identified the pitfalls and barriers encountered. With so much of church life reliant on volunteers and restricted funding, the available expertise will be limited. Leaders and volunteers do not have time and resources available to invest as much in websites as they perhaps require. A sense that younger people are at risk from online dangers, and that older people are not interested, may also limit the desire to engage with websites or social media. Email use is widespread, to the point of becoming a problematic source of work overload for church leaders.

9.3 Contributions to knowledge

This research intended to explore one aspect of how English life has been affected by the increasing adoption of online methods of communication. Little previous work had studied the information content of church websites in England or examined how and why these smaller organisations are publishing information.

It has contributed to knowledge of the barriers such organisations face using the internet as a primary means of communication. There are issues with the perceptions of the needs of an ageing population, concerns about the safety of the younger generation, and whether volunteers possess sufficient skill to perform an effective role. This project helps further the understanding of how barriers can be

anticipated and avoided, in order to fully exploit the potential of digital communication.

It is likely that these issues will be familiar to many voluntary groups working on a semi-autonomous basis. Do volunteers have sufficient time and skill to investigate and implement new or simpler ways of working online, or the willingness or ability to challenge their current methods? Organisations may feel that they have effective top-down policies and training in place, but evidence from this project is that these messages are not always filtering down to the grass-roots. The overall message from the top-level organisation might be that it is important for units to have a website but who is suggesting ways of ensuring that these websites have useful, current and quality information?

The research also serves as a reminder that not all organisations have the money to implement sophisticated online solutions and in a small way helps identify instances of the digital divide. As more and more public services move online, the ability of older people to use the internet securely and efficiently becomes important. The understanding gained from this project that many still see it as an irrelevance, or even as a threat, even for something as familiar as going to church, may be able to contribute to the debate about internet access. In particular, the prevailing opinion arising from this research that older people are not interested in digital communication is yet to be tested.

Different clergy have different perceptions of the usefulness of the internet. Some have a limited range of trusted sites and others are prepared to search for information. Email is still a widely-used method of communication. With the rise of alternative methods of sharing information and headlines suggesting email has been surpassed, it is important to reinforce the idea that outside of business and IT, email is still a key method of communication. The research findings have potential

use as a basis for understanding how church leaders, and other professionals, might approach the use of email as a tool in order to minimise its potential as a cause of workplace stress.

9.3.1 Relationship to other literature

The research relates to how churches use the internet as a tool to promote religion and religious practice, one of Campbell's four discourses (2005), which are:

- Spiritual medium facilitating spiritual experiences
- Sacramental space suitable for religious use
- Tool to promote religion and religious practice
- Technology for affirming religious life

The findings suggest that the emphasis is on churches promoting church, not necessarily Christianity as a religious practice and there is some evidence from the social media users that the English experience also shows technology is affirming religious life (fourth discourse).

Cho (2011) also classified the approaches within the research community and the current research project contributes to understanding further the English experience of the first:

- The internet as an information transmission
- Online religion's relationship to offline religion
- Online influence on the offline
- Online-religion and religion-online
- Basic observations on the Internet as a medium

The relevance to the work of Scheitle on hyperlinks, Sturgill on information types and McMillan on interactivity have been discussed in detail above. Finally, the

research project shows how the church as part of English society is contributing to what Wellman calls the 'everyday internet.'

9.3.2 Authority

Cheong (2011) found evidence that Singaporean pastors were changing their behaviour – becoming more engaged online – because of perceived threats to epistemic authority. The project found no evidence that there has been any challenge to authority structures within local churches in the UK arising from social media or the internet generally. However, the exploration of authority was limited and did not fully explore the different ways in which authority can be manifested.

9.3.3 Three phases of research into church and internet

Various authors characterised the history of research into the internet into three phases (for example Wellman 2004, Hojsgaard, Warburg 2005, see 2.4.6 on page 19). The research project can be characterised as a third-phase project. It has been concerned with what Wellman (2004) calls the domesticated internet. The project has extended the understanding of how small scale projects (church websites) are transmitting local information and expecting there to be a demand for it, reflecting further domestication. It has also integrated work from religious studies with information science, furthering the 'bricolage of scholarship' (Hojsgaard and Morten 2005, p9).

9.3.4 Content analysis and hyperlinks

The project focused on small, mostly volunteer-led church websites. There was little equivalent work to be built on in the UK – previous studies are dated (Carr, 2004) or are from the US, investigating larger, international sites. Other work is either out of date or focuses on large international sites. The project is a new example of how content analysis can be used to evaluate websites. It replicated

previous interactivity (McMillan 2008) and hyperlink research (Scheitle 2005) showing how little interactivity is available, and how links are used within English church sites.

The preceding sections have explained how the project has contributed to the body of relevant research knowledge. The final sections in the discussion will focus on applying that knowledge – providing practical recommendations for national and local bodies, and a set of questions to enable churches to plan effectively their online presence.

9.4 Recommendations

The following section lists recommendations and discussion points for local churches, or in fact any smaller voluntary group seriously considering its online presence, as well as suggestions for actions that national organisations might take.

9.4.1 Expertise

This research shows that there is a possible lack of expertise in creation and maintenance of websites. Keeping skills, and therefore sites, current is important to ensure the information is accessible and appropriate.

To address this, local churches could exploit peer-to-peer learning. There are skilled webmasters and other interested parties in existence. Local areas could create opportunities for collaboration and learning between churches, setting up informal networks. Two recent Christian conferences have hosted ‘Social Media Surgeries’ where keen users have shared their experiences and shown people how to make the most of blogs, Facebook or Twitter. This kind of learning experience is not dependent on top-down hierarchy, is relatively cheap and can tackle one or two

issues at a time, instead of attempting to be a comprehensive formal course in web authoring.

The Dioceses or equivalent may also need to reconsider how their available guidance is provided and marketed. If there is guidance available, but it is not widely publicised, resources are under-used and each individual church will continue to work independently, and possibly make the same mistakes independently.

9.4.2 Use available platforms

Many of the websites in the sample had been created from first principles. This limits the number of people who can easily learn to update information to the site. Using a free or open source platform like Wordpress or Drupal removes much of the need to learn complicated code. Sites can be added to if a need arises. The Dioceses could provide ready-built templates for parishes to adapt.

9.4.3 Simplicity

Websites which carry limited information do not have to be overly complicated. If the church determines the most important information to convey, and concentrates on this, the website will serve a useful purpose. The research found little interactivity on church websites but it is arguable whether this is needed – with Facebook and other sites so popular, there are other places which provide better platforms for this kind of interaction. A church website may therefore benefit more from focusing on simplicity.

Focusing on simplicity brings two additional benefits. Firstly, a simpler site is easier to maintain, so more people can assist. Secondly, mobile internet use is a growth area. Keeping a desktop site simple makes it easier to view on a mobile device if a mobile version is not feasible.

9.4.4 Email guidance

Interviews showed that one recurring problem for the leaders was the volume of email received. Whilst it is a useful tool, if it adds to a sense of stress, it can have a detrimental effect on the leaders' wellbeing. If this proved to be a widespread problem, Dioceses and their equivalents could consider how they could provide support in sharing best practice techniques for dealing with email in the context of the job role of church leader.

9.5 Discussion questions for local churches

These discussion points could form the basis for a project plan to create and publish a new site or undertake a serious review of an existing website. They do not cover the technical aspects such as deciding which platform or hosting site to include, as this was not part of the research project's capability. Instead they aim to create a framework for thinking carefully about how a website can be used effectively as part of a church's communication strategy.

9.5.1 Why create a website?

Why do you want to publish a website? What are all the possible reasons you can think of? (The list might include information, evangelism, organisation, membership, fundraising, mission). How do you translate those reasons onto the web? How can you prioritise those purposes and balance exclusive and competing reasons?

What kind of information is regularly requested by church members, visitors, potential visitors, researchers, or strangers?

Which group(s) of people constitute your key audiences?

9.5.1.1 Content & architecture

What platform will you use? Is there a benefit to having a commercial provider?

Do you need separate pages for established church visitors, for newcomers and for church groups? How will you signpost people between them? Who will have access to decide the content?

How can you prioritise the information for different groups of readers?

What do you *not* need to include?

What guidance can you give your contributors regarding appropriate images, length of sentence & paragraph, to make the content clear?

9.5.1.2 Best practice: graphics, design and maintenance

Are your photographs clear, not distorted or pixellated? What is the ratio of pictures of the building and pictures of people? Can you include video content? What about audio?

Who will update your site? On what frequency? Who will have responsibility for originating the content? Will you have a gatekeeper?

How will you ensure you stay current with web trends? Where can you access training from?

9.5.1.3 Contact

What is your preferred method of contact? Do you tell people this? Who monitors emails received from the website? Is there a policy for responding?

9.5.1.4 Legal and access

Is your site accessible? Does it work with a screen reader or magnifier? Is the navigation clear and standard? Can your site be navigated by keyboard only? What are current industry standards?

What about cookies, privacy?

Will you create a specific mobile-friendly site? If not what can be done to make your site accessible on the move?

9.5.1.5 Evaluation

How will you evaluate effectiveness? What would count as success? When will you review the site and its content?

Google Analytics – free, better than a hit count

Is it appropriate to have a website at all?

9.6 Limitations

A number of areas where a different approach could have been taken have been identified and are given below.

9.6.1 Choice of sample populations

Focusing on the top four denominations, making up 75% of English churches, allowed for the most popular kinds of church to be included. Smith, Scheitle & Bader (2012) suggest that independent congregations may have more homogeneity than a disparity. It may have been beneficial to include smaller denominations as a fifth, ‘miscellaneous’ category to paint a broader picture, and to allow for comparisons between churches with strong denominational links and those with either none, or with looser affiliations.

9.6.2 Longitudinal analysis

During the development of this aspect of research, much consideration was given to the numbers of churches and the denominations of churches that should be included in the sample. The benefit of a proportional sample which would allow for a more accurate representation of the number of churches was outweighed by the disadvantage of the unequal distribution of the denominations.

9.6.3 Content analysis

Content analysis did not include any way of coding for the church's ecclesial identity. In other words, how liberal or conservative or not it may have been, or whether it would identify as 'evangelical.' Certainly within the Church of England there is a wide variety of different identities and kinds of churchmanship (the way things are done). In the existing, predominantly US, literature, the identification of a church as 'evangelical' has played a part in understanding its philosophy and thus its attitude towards communication and media. This project did not take this kind of distinction into account, so there is a possibility that interesting differences have been missed.

Content analysis as a quantitative technique does not allow for fine distinctions when coding a website. Either an element is present or absent, and the scheme employed in this research project did not permit other measurement. Therefore, subtleties of presentation differences may be lost in the coding process.

With so few sites presenting the information being searched for, if time had permitted, an alternative approach could have been to focus on fewer sites and adopt a more case-study led investigation; allowing for in-depth study of a smaller number of sites. This would have addressed the difficulty of the absence of information and the inability to detect the subtle differences. However, part of the

value of this research project is in its quantitative and objective approach. There have been many other case studies of one or two sites or blogs; by taking a broader range of sites in a quantitative content analysis the project was able to include more, smaller sites.

On balance, a more in-depth and nuanced analysis of fewer sites may have been a suitable alternative, and content analysis remains a very appropriate tool for researching the information published.

9.6.4 Hyperlink analysis

One change would be to use software to gather links and not attempt to categorise by hand. This was time consuming and produced a possibly less sophisticated analysis than would have been possible. The link study was not a key part of the study but was disproportionately time consuming. The later paper by (Smith, Scheitle & Bader 2012) suggests that with a more in-depth analysis, more 'leaky' information about networks and resources could be uncovered. However, this approach would perhaps form the basis of an entire research project by itself rather than being a component of a wider investigation.

9.6.5 Interviews

Recording interviews via iPhone with backup dictaphone, or via Skype was a cheap and effective method, but not completely foolproof. Twice the dictaphone backup was needed, once after an iPhone user error and once after Pandora, the application used to record Skype, crashed. One interview with a webmaster was lost after recording so only limited comments that had been transcribed to that point were available. There were no complete failures to capture any interview content.

The major drawback with the interviews in this project came from the relative inexperience of the interviewer. The intention was to conduct semi-structured

interviews, following a pattern but allowing for diversions and near-natural conversations to arise. On reflection, some interviews were too unstructured when interesting stories or anecdotes were told, taking a disproportionate amount of time and meaning that not all interviewees were asked questions on all topics. In addition, the interviewer was not experienced at drawing out introvert and possibly reluctant participants so one in particular that was recorded at the start of the data collection phases (Wendy) was much shorter than others.

The question 'Many people think the internet has changed life for the better. Would you agree?' was the final form of a question intended to be an opening into a discussion about the benefits, or drawbacks, to using the web. It was noted, however, that this is a leading form of question after it had been posed several times, and so the interviewer attempted to compensate for this in later interviews. Whether the church leaders interviewed were more used to disagreeing or having a point of view, not many agreed without qualification.

The research did not address the accessibility of sites for older users or viewers with visual or cognitive impairment. This could provide a useful avenue for future research, particularly taking into consideration the remarks made in interviews about the ageing nature of the congregations.

Interviews only took place with church leaders who had a website, as planned, to attempt to maintain a clear link between the content analysis and the interview stage. The project topic means that it may have been difficult to recruit leaders from churches without websites, without strong persuasion skills as the subject may have seemed irrelevant. It is possible that a broader perspective could have been gained by including those whose churches do not have websites. In light of the interview findings, it would be particularly interesting to find out how leaders cope with email traffic if they are not particularly keen on online communication.

9.6.6 Other data sources

It was acknowledged at the outset that this project was not concerned with the design of websites because 'good' design could be seen as a subjective quality. However, design and layout are factors which assist in the navigation and understanding of content of websites so with hindsight, these factors might have provided a useful data source. The inclusion of some basic layout features in the content analysis did not allow for a judgement on their quality. A number of sites were quite poorly laid out, or had outdated design features that hindered comprehension but this could not be taken account of in the content analysis.

The project also did not have a remit to look for usage information. Whether or not the churches in the sample would have been willing, or able, to supply page view or Google Analytics or similar information is debatable but those who could would have provided another reference point for the study.

9.6.7 Other omissions

During the life of the project, mobile access to websites increased as smartphones proliferated and became more affordable. The research did not look at whether church sites have mobile-friendly websites, but this would be a useful future research topic.

The denominational differences that were looked for, but not apparent in the content analysis, were not focused on in any further way. Lomborg & Stein (2012) claim that US churches can be clearly defined along denominational lines (p172). The differences between denominations in England are perhaps less clear, and there is certainly a wide variation within the Church of England traditions. There is less likelihood that a church would have a particular political outlook because of its ecclesial identity in England, than in the US.

9.7 Opportunities for further research

There are a number of lines of enquiry emanating from this project that could form the basis for further research projects. The list would include:

Email overload and work/life balance: How can church leaders be trained effectively and supported in responding to email and dealing with the sense of overload?

Church as support for older people online: As government, business and society move more functions online, could the church have a role to play in supporting the information literacy of its older congregations?

Social media at institutional and individual level: How do national and local churches understand and use social media? What are the successful and poor examples? Has this enhanced communication or ministry?

Typologies of authority and the affect of online information: What kind of authority might be under consideration, and how does that relate to the theological positions of leaders? Is there any sense of a shifting in authority, and if so why?

Church leaders training and information seeking habits: How are trainee leaders developing online search and information literacy skills? Why do they choose the resources they rely on? Do older or younger trainee leaders view these differently?

Denominational/ ecclesial identity differences: How do non-denominational/ independent churches use websites? Is there a difference in England between evangelical congregations and those of other traditions? What affect does the identity have on the way a church might use the internet?

Voluntary organisations: Do the findings translate to other volunteer-dominated organisations? How do other hierarchical organisations arrange their internet/

safeguarding guidance and training? How can this inform development of policy as more services become volunteer- or charity-led?

9.8 Concluding remarks

Despite limitations, and possibly asking more questions that have been answered, a clearer picture of the state of individual churches' use of the internet is now possible. The research has contributed to the limited body of work investigating how English religious organisations are working with online tools. The project has practical applications for the English Christian church, and provides a fresh insight into the challenges one part of society faces in working online.