

# Chapter 6: Church as information provider

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## 6. Introduction

Publishing a website puts the church in the role of information provider. Objectives 4,5 and 6 are concerned with the kind of information published and the purpose behind the site. This chapter will examine the content analysis and interview findings intended to explain what churches are publishing, and why.

### 6.1 Church as information provider: content analysis

#### 6.1.1 Basic information

The content analysis examined categories intended to create a baseline for the standard of the information on the websites. These relate to the absolute minimum details to be published on any organisation's website which acts as a gateway for further exploration – where they are, and how to contact them. They have equivalence with the sorts of information that are regularly published in print notice sheets distributed at church [an example of which is presented in appendix 11.10 ] These elements are concerned with objectives 3, 4 and 5 related to content choice.

#### 6.1.2 Directions and contact details

All % of denomination total	Percentage of sites with a dedicated contacts page	Percentage of sites with a 'Contact Us' link	Contact email given	Contact telephone number given
Anglican	77	68	91	88
Catholic	55	85	95	90
Baptist	85	73	94	88
Methodist	67	67	71	75
All churches	74	74	89	86

*Table 6-1 Contact details (n=147)*

Table 6-1 above shows the number of sites that provided contact details. It is possible that some sites had both a contacts page and a 'contact us' link as these were not mutually exclusive categories. It also shows that almost all websites provided an email address, which would either have been on the contacts page or listed as part of the main body of information. Fewer churches provided a telephone number, except for the Methodists, who slightly preferred to publish a telephone number ahead of an email contact. Overall, 11% do not allow direct email contact from the website and 14% do not publish a contact telephone number. Table 6-2 shows a further breakdown, by number, of whether the sites with no email or phone have neither or just one. Nine have neither telephone nor email; five publish only a telephone number and nine only an email address.

Number	No email or phone	Phone only	Email only
Anglican	3	1	3
Catholic	0	1	2
Baptist	2	0	2
Methodist	4	3	2
All	9	5	9

*Table 6-2 Contact details – further breakdown*

### 6.1.3 Maps

All %	Percentage with map from commercial service	Percentage with map produced in-house	Percentage with no map
Anglican	53	24	23
Catholic	60	20	20
Baptist	82	15	3
Methodist	42	8	50
All churches	59	19	22

*Table 6-3 Churches using commercial or in-house maps (n=147)*

The provision of a map was also considered to be a marker for whether very basic information was available on a site. The majority of churches did provide or link to a map, as shown above in Table 6–3. However, half of Methodist churches do not provide any kind of map and overall 22% had no map at all.

Most made use of one of the free sites such as Googlemap or Streetmap to link to their location details, rather than drawing a map themselves, although nearly a quarter of Anglican websites did use an in-house map. This is an interesting finding which could be down to one of several reasons:

- Webmasters do not trust external sources of mapping information
- Webmasters are unaware of the sources of external and scalable maps
- The websites were created before these services were widely available and have not been updated since.

In addition, the lack of maps for all denominations, but specifically the Methodists, could be because this kind of information has not been deemed necessary. Perhaps the church building is a sufficiently well-known local landmark – although that is of little assistance to visitors from outside of the immediate parish. All reasons for lack of map would point to a lack of expertise or awareness of resource availability which would have possible implications for the website construction as a whole. This further reinforces the findings in 5.8.3 that sites appear to be entrusted to untrained volunteers.

In this sample, a majority of websites provide some basic contact information including a map of their location. Email addresses are widely available, as are telephone numbers. Providing such information shows that churches expect there to

be further interaction from the initial point of contact via the website. Provision for more sophisticated information via the internet is discussed in section 6.3 .

#### 6.1.4 Times of events

All %	Times of services	Details of services
Anglican	95	29
Catholic	95	10
Baptist	100	18
Methodist	79	17
All churches	94	22

*Table 6-4 Service times and details (n=147)*

Publishing the times of church services is another piece of vital and basic information. Further explanation of what those services involve and in what format they take place may be less crucial, but do give a visitor an indication of the kind of organisation that particular church might be.

A high proportion of churches give the times of their services, as shown in Table 6-4. There are 6% who do not. Omitting this key piece of information may suggest the website is not a high priority for the church.

#### 6.1.5 Service style

Far fewer give details of their services. This refers to information on what is meant by the title given to the particular event, for example, 'Eucharist,' 'Mass,' or 'Evensong,' or whether a service is family-friendly. It might also explain what happens during a service; if there is singing, a collection, a procession, a time of silence. This is distinct from the detailed liturgy or content described in section 6.3 below. The lack of such information suggests that the website may be being written without taking into account new or non-churchgoers as an audience. It is possible these numbers are an underestimate as some churches would have this information

on a third-level page, or on a specific newcomers' page which was coded separately (see below at 7.3 ). There is the possibility that the information is not presented because the audience for, or purpose of, the website have not been clearly articulated, and so the information has not been considered necessary.

### 6.1.6 Major festivals

All %	Christmas	Easter
Anglican	3	35
Catholic	0	0
Baptist	0	0
Methodist	0	0
All churches	1	16

*Table 6-5 Information on major festivals (n=147)*

In addition, specific festivals' details (Easter and Christmas) were coded. The coding of the majority of Anglican churches happened around Easter 2010, however, the time delay between completing those and the other denominations meant that the measure would not be a reliable indicator of currency. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that only 35% of Anglican churches made reference to Easter on their websites. No other denominations mentioned the major festivals on their sites.

## 6.2 Practical and reference information

These categories are concerned with information that is practical in nature, rather than being concerned with spiritual or pastoral development, sermon content or the kind of notices that would be relevant for an established church congregation.

### 6.2.1 Rites of passage

All %	Baptism	Marriage	Funeral
Anglican	30	35	14
Catholic	35	35	10
Baptist	3	3	0
Methodist	4	4	4
All churches	20	22	8

*Table 6-6 Information available on rites of passage (n=147)*

Despite falling regular attendances, people do still use churches for weddings, christenings and funerals. One set of statistics suggests the number of weddings rose in 2010 in the Church of England (Beckford 2012). Baptism and christening are, for the purposes of this project, interchangeable terms. It is likely that churches will receive enquiries from non-members about these special services for ‘rites of passage’ or ‘occasional offices’ as the Church of England refers to them. Therefore, it would follow that this would be one of the key pieces of information that a website would carry.

More websites for Anglican and Catholic churches provide information on this kind of event than do Baptist and Methodists, but still only a third have published such detail, and only a fifth overall. The marked difference is possibly because it reflects the Anglican and Catholic position as parish churches – these are the institutions to which non-churchgoers might automatically turn to in order to arrange one of these ritual events. It reflects the Church of England’s place as the established church of state. It may also have a relationship to the kind of buildings these churches own – a medieval parish church is picturesque, whereas inner city Baptists’ buildings may not be the wedding background that people wish for.

## 6.2.2 Architecture and Genealogy

All %	Architecture/ Genealogy
Anglican	53
Catholic	40
Baptist	39
Methodist	54
All churches	48

Table 6-7 Architectural or genealogical information (n=147)

The coding rubric for this category was as follows:

*Does the site contain any information about the history of the church or its community? This covers surveys of historically interesting buildings as well as stories of the establishment of younger churches. It also includes any sections on how to trace parish records for genealogical research. It is not concerned with the current community or congregation.*

Almost half (48%) of all churches provide information on their architecture or their available parish records for researchers. Several sites present onward contact information for records centres, so it may be that this is one of the key requests for information from church visitors. It is also information that does not necessarily demand or invite further interaction or conversation with the church, in the way an enquiry about a wedding might. Hence, it would be made public in order to assist the researchers without needing input from the church leadership.

Benjamin and Alan from the interview sample also mentioned projects to provide parish records, as detailed in 6.5.3 .

## 6.2.3 Local information

All %	Local information
Anglican	29
Catholic	70
Baptist	9
Methodist	8
All churches	27

*Table 6-8 Local information (n=147)*

Local information was coded as follows. This was intended to contribute to a measure of the extent to which churches locate themselves in their local community or act as a possible hub for information:

*Does the site contain any links to local secular or religious institutions? This includes associated church schools but also NHS facilities, local charities or community groups. Code NO if there is just a coded list of these organisations in the main body of the site.*

Of all churches, 27% publish this kind of information. However, it is notable that a higher number of Catholic churches publish local information. This could be explained because many have related church schools, and details of local schooling was counted within this category. Less than a third of Anglican churches provide any information on the local area and even fewer Baptist or Methodist churches do. Possible reasons may be that churches may not want to link to third party information over which they have no control, or they may not have the resources to check external sources and update their pages accordingly. Or they may perceive the church site as being strictly for church information, reflecting the assumption the website is the online equivalent of the notice sheet. Results of the extent to which local information is imparted via hyperlink is contained in section 7.6 below.

### **6.3 Spiritual & faith information**

All %	Denomination		Statement of faith		Service content		Liturgy		Bible verses	
	Coded	Linked	Coded	Linked	Coded	Linked	Coded	Linked	Coded	Linked
Anglican	4	44	26	0	11	11	5	0	9	21
Catholic	0	80	0	0	30	25	10	0	0	15
Baptist	27	61	67	15	33	9	3	6	39	15
Methodist	5	50	50	4	25	21	0	4	17	17
All churches	9	54	36	4	21	14	4	2	16	18

*Table 6-9 Churches showing faith-based information (n=147)*

These items given in Table 6-9 aimed to address whether churches have provided information about their denomination, their statement of faith, prayer or service content, or any explanation of the liturgies in use. Information could be coded within the site, or provided by way of links to third party sites. The categories for coded or linked information are not mutually exclusive so some sites may have information that is in both and is recorded in both. It was felt to be useful to differentiate between the two because there is more thought involved in adding text to a site about these areas than just adding a link, so coded information implies there has been more consideration of the usefulness to site visitors. It also attempts to measure the extent to which information provided centrally rather than that written locally might be used, reflecting objective 3.

### **6.3.1 Denomination**

In this category, sites were coded for any information on their affiliation over and above a statement along the lines of ‘this church is a member of denomination Y.’ Denomination information is mostly provided by links to the individual denomination headquarters’ site, rather than each site coding its own interpretation or copying an official statement. This is potentially an effective way of exploiting the linked nature of the information on the internet, and saving the individual churches from keeping a separate page up to date. The four major denominations are

organised differently, with different hierarchies and responsibilities, so there are key variations in the life of these ‘English Christian’ churches. Please refer to Appendix 11.9 for a discussion of the key differences in the four church organisations.

### 6.3.2 Statement of faith

All %	Statement of faith	
	Coded	Linked
Anglican	26	0
Catholic	0	0
Baptist	67	15
Methodist	50	4
All churches	36	4

*Table 6-10 Churches publishing a statement of faith (n=147)*

For this category, the coding instructions were as follows. Firstly, for a site with embedded/ coded content:

*Coded: Does the site include a statement of faith ('This is what we believe') or a wider mission statement? – either can be just a sentence or a full page or pages.*

For linked content:

*Linked: Does the site link to any third party sites that give a statement of faith ('Baptists believe that...') or a wider mission statement? This would not include a link that was labelled just as a link to the parent denomination site.*

Results show that Baptists and Methodists are more likely to include a statement of faith. No Catholic sites do, and also only 26% of Anglican sites. A statement of faith defines the outlook of the church, including, to some extent, its politics as well as its stance on areas of potential doctrinal disagreement within the wider Christian community. As well as being of use to those who are considering joining a specific

church, a clear statement of faith could also suggest a strong church leadership, aligning the congregation with a wider movement or outlook. The category also included any mission statements, which would explain the way the church defined its purpose, not necessarily in doctrinal terms. The statement of faith or mission is not necessarily something that can be inferred from knowing the church's denomination. Churches may define themselves as 'evangelical' regardless of their affiliation, for example, so this category can cross over these formal boundaries. Within the Catholic church this kind of statement may be seen as unnecessary because there may be less variation within the Catholic tradition.

### 6.3.3 Liturgy

All %	Liturgy	
	Coded	Linked
Anglican	5	0
Catholic	10	0
Baptist	3	6
Methodist	0	4
All churches	4	2

*Table 6-11 Explanation of liturgy (n=147)*

This was defined in the coding instructions as looking for:

*Content or links to any third party site that explain the content of a service, or the form of words used. This would include more than the name of a prayer book being used but would attempt to explain why a service is conducted in a specific manner.*

Within the Anglican tradition the words used and the overall structure in which an act of worship is delivered can have wide variation between, and within, churches. A service may run using the Book of Common Prayer in a version finalised in 1662 or it might be a relatively unstructured gathering based on a type of 'Fresh

Expression<sup>18</sup>.’ A church therefore might want to explain its most popular liturgies in use. However, results demonstrate that few sites provide any information on the liturgy in the first or second layer of pages explaining the form of the content of a service, or the form of words used and their origins or meanings. 10% of Catholic sites do, but no Methodist sites carry this information. Figures in Table 6–11 above show this, and also that a small percentage – 3% of Baptist churches offer this kind of information as part of their site, but 6% do link externally.

#### 6.3.4 Service content

All %	Service content	
	Coded	Linked
Anglican	11	11
Catholic	30	25
Baptist	33	9
Methodist	25	21
All churches	21	14

*Table 6–12 Service content (n=147)*

This category is concerned with whether actual extracts from services or prayers are given, again either written as part of the site or via an external link. This covers the content of the actual act of worship, whether or not there is an accompanying explanation:

*Does the site include any prayers from any source or any extracts of services?*

*This could include things like set responses used as part of a baptism, or a*

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<sup>18</sup><http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/>, accessed 19 March 2012, also see glossary of terms in Appendix [•]

*creed or confession. It does not include any explanations of the worship style or what might happen in a service e.g. 'children leave after the first hymn.'*

*Does the site include links to third party sources of prayer or service e.g. the Church of England Daily Offices?*

Service content as a whole is given on more churches' sites, with a third of Baptist and almost a third of Catholic sites providing this detail. Sites also use linked information, such as that provided by the Church of England, with a quarter of Catholic churches giving a link to an external source.

Whereas section 6.3.3 focused on explaining the form of service to a visitor, this information category is concerned with presenting the actual content, a difference that is perhaps more subtle in explanation than originally intended at the coding stage. The Church of England publishes a feed for daily prayer and their daily services which churches can use on their own sites. Using this would be a simple way to link the church to a wider body and the wider tradition of prayer, but the results show that this is not happening on the websites under consideration. It is possible that the Anglican webmasters are just unaware of this source of information, and the same holds for the other denominations' webmasters. Or, it could be that the churches choose not to rely on external content or do not feel this is relevant for their organisation.

### 6.3.5 Bible verses

All %	Bible verses	
	Coded	Linked
Anglican	9	21
Catholic	0	15
Baptist	39	15
Methodist	17	17
All churches	16	18

*Table 6-13 Bible verses presented on websites (n=147)*

Relatively few churches include any Bible verses on their sites, which is noteworthy since the Bible is the central text for the Christian faith. There are many sources on the internet from which the linked Bible verses can be taken. Biblegateway.com is one of the most well-known but as is demonstrated in section 7.6.1 below this was only linked to from seven out of the 147 websites.

More Anglican and Catholic sites use links as a method of sharing the Bible than present it as part of the text on their site, and fewer Baptist churches use links to Bible sites than include the quotes on their sites. An equal proportion of Methodist churches use both links and code on their sites. This last piece of information considered in this section further suggests that website creators are not thinking outside their immediate realm for information that could be of use to their sites' visitors. The implications of this, combined with the attitudes towards content selection uncovered during this interviews, are assessed in section 6.5.4 .

### 6.3.6 Sermon available for download

All %	Sermon/ talk available for download
Anglican	17
Catholic	10
Baptist	39
Methodist	4

*Table 6-14 Percentage of sites with downloadable sermons (n=147)*

Few Methodist churches had a facility for publishing a sermon or talk on their website, but nearly 40% of Baptist churches did. The majority of churches still do not offer the facility to download a weekly sermon. Whilst this is a possibly useful function for the site, it does demand a certain level of commitment and technical ability to maintain this service. It could be that the churches just do not have the resources to create this facility. Leaders' attitudes regarding publishing sermon content as discussed in the interview process varied.

Not every leader mentioned a sermon or talk's recording as being useful content for a website, but where they were suggested as possible content the leaders had clear reasons why they were or were not suitable. Where mentioned, the response was mixed in terms of whether the church website was an appropriate place for a sermon to be uploaded. Aaron, (East Methodist), felt it was not:

*A couple of people have asked me to post or e-mail my sermons on something and I said "No". I don't see that as the nature of preaching, it's for the moment and it's in that moment. (Aaron, East Methodist)*

Gayle talked at first in terms of not having sermon notes available to post, because she would speak off the cuff, then said they did not have the technology to record the talks. The idea that publishing sermons would detract from their context was

also mentioned by other leaders. Mark suggested this was something that was being considered, as he was aware the site was not doing as much as it could. Helen said that sermons were posted as MP3 audio files. She also shared her initial trepidation at the idea of the talks being freely available, agreeing with Aaron that the sermon was ‘of the moment,’ and expressing concern that one day’s talk would be taken as her final opinion on a topic.

#### 6.4 Purpose of websites

Sturgill’s 2004 paper compared four kinds of information presented on church websites – information designed to convert the reader, to provide information about the church as an organisation, to present the church as part of its community and to allow interaction with the church. The current research followed a number of Sturgill’s original categories in the content analysis so it was possible to answer objective 4 by using the same four broad categories. The allocation to each category is noted in the content analysis schedule in section 3.8 .

Table 6–15 English churches' categories, following Sturgill (2004) shows the mean number of items per category per denomination, and also the overall mean for all churches regardless of denomination.

Mean number of items per category	Organisational	Evangelise	Interact	Community
Anglican	18.7	2.5	1.1	0.9
Catholic	13.8	2.8	1.1	1.5
Baptist	15.5	4.3	1.2	1.0
Methodist	19.1	2.8	0.9	0.8
All churches	17.3	3.0	1.1	1.0

*Table 6–15 English churches' categories, following Sturgill (2004)*

The sample of English churches in this study reflects the findings from Sturgill, in that organisational information is presented more often than any of the other three

categories. English Baptist churches have a slightly higher mean number of items classed as information designed to evangelise the reader. This element of the results helps summarise the answer to objective 4 investigating differences in information topics across denominations.

## **6.5 Church as information provider: interviews**

Turning now to the interview findings, the next sections explore how leaders expressed their church's intentions behind the website, how the content is created and by whom, and to what purpose. In addition, the differences in strategy because of the congregation's age are considered in this section. These interview findings complement the content analysis described above as the intention was to understand how the choices around information to publish were made.

### **6.5.1 What is the purpose of the site?**

Questions were posed which were intended to probe for a sense of whether the site had been set up with definite aims and a defined purpose, and if the site was a part of an articulated communications strategy. The interviews did not suggest that the latter aspect was true although this is partly unclear because follow-up questions were not widely used where, with hindsight, they could have been. Regarding a purpose for the site, however, a number of answers were given. That from Thomas, (St Margaret, Anglican) is one example:

*we want to put everything there that would be of interest to anybody who would be surfing the net or got a particular concern or a particular interest they want to pursue* (Thomas, St Margaret)

Although this sounds at first like a clear purpose, on reflection it is not a defined purpose – publishing everything of interest to anyone would make for a cluttered site. It was acknowledged with further questioning that the site was intended to be more useful for those who did not attend the church than for its membership, so there had been some narrowing of focus.

### 6.5.2 Defining an audience

Many suggested their sites could have a dual purpose, serving the church community and those who were visitors. However, only nine of the churches in the content analysis sample had pages with newcomers' information in a signposted page so there may be more defining needed in terms of arranging the content on a site for these disparate groups.

Mike noted that a lot of the early argument about the establishment of St Michael's (Anglican) website hinged on this point – whether the site was for the church or the outsiders. Kester was very clear on this point when he said:

*[the website] is about making, putting our presence out there, making people aware of us, so if they Google "catholic church [•]" they'll find a website where they can easily access information (Kester, St Bride, Catholic)*

Kester and Benjamin both described their church website in terms of being an extension of the noticeboard. This is rather outdated thinking about the way that websites work. It is a good starting point, but may be much less than the general public would expect of an organisation's website. Robert had a fundraising option – the only site to do so – in an attempt to bolster interest in the restoration of his Victorian church.

### **6.5.3 Architecture and Genealogy**

Two churches (Valley Methodist and Bridge Baptist) published historical records on their websites. Whilst this is no doubt a time saver and taps into a very popular amateur genealogical research trend, it could be argued that this is not a core part of the church's work, and certainly does not reflect the church as a living community, something that leaders were keen to reflect on the websites. However, it clearly indicates that the external audience is one for which information is being provided. Content analysis results at section 6.2.2 show that many churches publish similar information. The next section considers where all published content comes from.

### **6.5.4 Content origination**

Benjamin (Valley Methodist) was the only leader to have created the site himself. Leaders had generally contributed the bulk of the text to a site which is created and managed by someone else. This is not unreasonable since website creation is a technical skill that would have to be purposely acquired.

Webmasters used either pre-existing text from leaflets, or requested specific information from the leader during the creation of the site. Subsequent content came from a variety of places. Wendy (St Timothy) had not, at the time of interview, supplied any new content for the website. Helen (Central Baptist) said that now their site was up and running, different groups supplied content. In the extreme case mentioned, James (St Saviour) works via his secretary, and does not directly supply any content on a regular basis direct to the web team.

One question that was not asked in the interviews was the extent to which the text supplied would be edited and adapted for the website. Helen mentioned that the

words from leaflets would be used as a basis, but there was no exploration with other leaders of the extent to which their content was open to be sub-edited by the webmaster. It would have been a useful line of enquiry as it could have shed further light on the methods of content generation.

None of the sites under consideration had facilities to allow church members to directly upload their own content. Although most agreed that anyone had a right to ask for content to be included, the webmaster would act as gatekeeper:

*anybody can say they would like something on the website, providing it fits into the categories that are already there. (Thomas, St Margaret)*

This is another example from St Margaret of a statement that on further consideration does not necessarily prove to be wholly positive. By restricting content to established categories, the site may be missing out on ways to expand or include new or broader content. The statement implies a subtle level of control over the content based on pre-existing topics. Further discussion of the ways sites are controlled is at section 8.2 below.

#### **6.5.5 Ideal content**

Content analysis has revealed what the churches are actually publishing on their websites. The interviews allowed clergy to describe what their ideal site would contain. Six of the participants suggested the kind of content they would like to see. The key theme that emerged here was that the sites needed to be inviting and welcoming. Pictures and graphics, as already discussed in 5.6.3 formed part of the respondents' wish-list for content.

## 6.6 Congregations' age and information provision

Chapter 5 includes detail on how church congregations tend to be predominantly comprised of older people. This is remarked upon by a number of the leaders, noting that even those congregations with growing youth or family membership still have a preponderance of older people in the congregation. Robert (St James, Anglican) suggests that his church does deviate from the trend in that his congregation is mostly single, and mostly between 30–45 as well as being international in composition because of their inner-city situation. The breakdown of congregations' age profiles is given in 4.4 above.

The influence of age on the churches' use of the internet seems clear. A number of leaders commented that their congregation would not turn to online sources of information, for example:

*the vast majority of my church members wouldn't necessarily have a computer that they'd go on the internet every day, they wouldn't look automatically on the internet for church news* (Lee, Shelley Baptist)

However, being older does not always mean a lack of familiarity with IT, as this point from Gayle makes clear:

*we've got one man who's eighty three and he's a nib on the computer, he'll put graphics and things up you know, for projecting, but he would be very anti Facebook page* (Gayle, Christ Methodist)

It is, however, noteworthy that competence with a computer does not necessarily translate to understanding of the potential that a site like Facebook could offer. Gayle described a situation within the church when the suggestion of a Facebook

page had been voted down by the governing meeting, because the mainly older members expressed fears about its use.

Helen (Central Baptist) raised a related point that online communication can be at times informal, perhaps more informal than older church members are comfortable with. It was suggested that this was a definite generational difference. This could lead to conflict and misunderstanding if the younger and older members used the same media to exchange information. There is no great expectation that older congregation members would be interested in new methods of communication:

*...at a recent meeting we asked how many people were on Facebook and of a meeting of about 40 people there were 3. And I think that was because they're mainly elderly (Aaron, East Methodist)*

Indeed many of the churches felt that Facebook would have to wait until there was a more youthful focus:

*It may be something we could look at because we are bringing on more young people into the leadership team (Colette, High Road Methodist)*

One implication of this approach is that by focusing only on the internal congregation, there may be missed opportunities to engage with a possible younger audience outside the church. It lends weight to the suggestion that leaders and their church governance structures do not systematically consider for whom their website is intended. It is clear from the interviews that use of the internet is limited by the age differentials in church, with websites assumed to be mostly used by younger people, thereby affecting how the church sees itself as an information provider.