

# Chapter 7: Community, social media & interactivity

---

## 7. Introduction

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have described the results in terms of the websites' technical details, the leaders' personal use of the internet, choice of content or audience and the effect of the congregations' profiles on the way the websites are viewed by leadership. This chapter investigates whether churches are focusing deliberately and implicitly on non-members via welcome pages, their local community, and how hyperlinks might define the churches' place in the virtual community. It also outlines the results of the attempt to use a platform-neutral assessment of interactivity. Finally, the use of social media as a tool for communication, and how this affects the authority of the leaders is considered.

### 7.1 Welcome pages

Objective 6 is partly concerned with the extent to which churches present different information for different audiences. One key audience encompasses visitors and newcomers – has a sense of welcome and specific information been presented distinctly within the website? The unit of analysis was thus separate visitors' pages. Of the 147 sites coded, only nine (6%) had such a page: two Catholic, four Baptist and three Anglican churches. There may have been sites with visitors' text as part of the main introduction, but by keeping the unit of analysis as an obvious place for newcomers to go, it was felt that this would identify the churches for whom clarity of welcome was most important. The small number found means that conclusions may not be robust compared to the whole population of church sites. In addition,

the two Catholic sites contained extremely similar text and phrasing, although neither linked to a common source for the text. Nonetheless there are interesting points of note. The full information gathered is given below at Table 7-1.

To recap, when the coding framework was originated, targets were divided into words and phrases that reflect what the individual should do, and those which reflect the role the church expects or performs. The derivation of these categories is explained in section 3.14 in the methodology.

Eight sites contained phrases that included the word 'welcome' – 14 incidences overall. Eight also included internal directions. Seven referred to traditions or what usually happens at their services. The presence of jargon, without explanation, was the category with the highest number of incidences – 51 words or phrases on 7 sites.

Four sites offered advice on where to find a seat, and when to stand, kneel or sit during the service. Five offered guidance on when other movement around the church is expected. Linked to this were four churches whose pages contained phrases that implied welcome, for example, 'feel free to remain seated' or other qualifications to the internal direction statements.

These nine sites have attempted to present information for newcomers in a friendly and welcoming way. The use of jargon is to a certain extent inescapable in an organisation where there are technical terms in use for people, events or things but general familiarity with these terms cannot be assumed. Despite this, the nine sites covered a range of items that a casual church visitor may want to know, potentially putting strangers at ease. Visitors may be attending a wedding, or baptism or funeral and be unfamiliar with the way things are conducted. This is not only to do

with any unwritten codes of conduct, but also about dispelling assumptions that may be held about churches.

	Number of sites	Number of incidences	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Sum
What the individual does						
Dress code	1	1	0	1	1	1
Where to sit	4	6	1	1	2	6
When to sit/stand	4	8	2	1	3	8
Singing	3	3	0	1	1	3
Money	1	2	0	2	2	2
Children	2	3	1	1	2	3
Directions external	3	3	0	1	1	3
Directions internal	8	28	7	1	8	28
What the church does or publishes						
Welcome people	8	14	2	1	3	14
Words that convey welcome	4	13	8	1	9	13
Music style	4	7	2	1	3	7
Service style/format	6	14	6	1	7	14
Disabled access	1	1	0	1	1	1
Directions external	4	4	0	1	1	4
Directions internal	5	6	1	1	2	6
Offers contact details	2	2	0	1	1	2
Traditions – usually/tend to	7	26	7	1	8	26
Times	4	9	3	1	4	9
Jargon without explanation	7	51	11	4	15	51
Jargon with explanation	4	9	3	1	4	9

Table 7-1 Welcome page results (n=9)

The welcome pages that were found covered a range of possible experiences and situations. That there were so few, only nine from 147, suggests that there is far more scope for churches to consider their visitors. It appears that very rarely is church attendance considered thoroughly from the point of view of a stranger.

The discussion relating to photographs and the use of images and video suggests some are more mindful of the need to welcome their visitors (see section 5.6.3 above) Mark, James and Wendy all considered that the website should be welcoming – whether their churches had managed to achieve this or not.

## 7.2 Websites located in community and wider web

### 7.2.1 Community groups sharing facilities

All %	Links to non-religious groups that use church buildings	Links to pages for internal use only
Anglican	8	6
Catholic	20	20
Methodist	6	6
Baptist	33	13
All churches	13	9

*Table 7-2 Percentage of websites with links to outside users or internal administration (n=147)*

One category coded that was intended to measure the extent to which the church was located within its physical community was whether mention was made of non-church groups who can or do use the church buildings. It is relatively common, in the researcher's experience, for church facilities to be made available to the local community. Few churches made reference to this, as shown in Table 7-2 above. However, it is not possible to tell whether this omission is a deliberate choice of information content or is because no outside groups do in fact use the church

buildings. Lee (Shelley Baptist) commented that although it was a positive thing to have a thriving external community using his church’s facilities, sometimes it was difficult to schedule actual church commitments around these activities.

### 7.2.2 Administrative or internal-use sections

Counting the pages or links denoted as internal or administrative use was intended to provide a measure of the focus of the website – is the site carrying much that is designed for those involved in running the church, or is it predominantly outwardly-focused? Is the site a hub of information for the church’s internal purposes?

Websites could be repositories of a great deal of detail that would be of use to the congregation. Low percentages of sites carried such a flag, suggesting that the websites are not being used as a communication medium within the church. Or it could be that nothing is protected. The Catholic sites did have a higher proportion of sites with internal/ administration links (20%) but given the smaller sample of Catholic church sites this represents only four of the overall sample.

Thus neither of these two measures provided a conclusive answer as to the extent to which the churches were deliberately placing themselves in their local community.

### 7.2.3 Third-party content

All %	Third party downloadable content
Anglican	17
Catholic	15
Baptist	24
Methodist	4
All churches	16

*Table 7-3 Availability of third-party content (n=147)*

This was coded for as it was felt it would give an indication of the ways the church located itself within the wider sphere of Christian resources, in addition to the hyperlinks studied to meet objective 8. Using third-party content would suggest an awareness of the range of online resources available, enrich individual church sites and save webmasters' time. There are a number of mostly US sites which provide Bible readings, commentary, music and spoken word that can be freely downloaded for leaders and for the general congregation. For example, Lifechurch.tv and Mars Hill<sup>19</sup> both provide free resources. These sites were not specifically coded for in this study, and the scarcity of links to other sites is worth noting. It may be that there are not UK resources judged to be of sufficient quality. Perhaps each church wishes to be self-sufficient in its teaching and resourcing without resorting to US imports. Or more simply, the people choosing the links are unaware of what is available. Few sites offered any third-party religious content for download (although more linked to other Christian websites – see section 7.6 below). Many presented information produced in-house (sermons and newsletters). Of the sites offering any third-party content, a download of Adobe Acrobat was the most-observed link.

### **7.3 Social media in local and national church**

Interviews with two interested parties (Michael and Murray) afforded the opportunity to examine one local Diocesan-equivalent and one national view about the church and social media. For reasons of anonymity it is not possible to fully expand on the principles and problems experienced because it would reveal the identity of the interviewee.

---

<sup>19</sup> <http://resources.lifechurch.tv/> and <http://marshill.com/> (5 February 2012).

The national organisation had been running training on blogging for two years at the point of interview (October 2010). The aim was to inspire people but also to allow realistic contemplation of the commitment involved. Michael highlighted some of the issues he aims to tackle on these courses for would-be bloggers – that it is not the best medium for just posting a weekly sermon, for example.

Murray said that at the local level, encouragement, advice and listing was available for individual churches. His organisation uses a Facebook account for its social responsibility work, and Twitter for their news and vacancies. However, he was aware that these media were not being exploited to their full potential as media that allow ‘immediacy, intimacy, interactivity and campaigning.’ As a communications professional, however, Murray was clear that what was needed from individual churches was the setting of clear objectives and consideration of whether these are served through social media. This is perhaps the first stumbling block for the churches within this sample; in that clear objectives come from clear leadership of the communications process and the interviews in section 6.5.1 above suggest that this is not the case in this study. Murray also raises the legal issues of ‘being on the record, defamation, privacy, intellectual property and personal security.’ Interestingly, whilst Helen’s experience with Facebook touched on personal privacy issues, there was no mention of these other topics from any of the interviewees. Finally, Murray also cautions against the use of social media as a method of exchanging messages with children in the church – suggesting it is not appropriate under any circumstances. Lee and others would disagree with this statement, as they have clearly thought carefully about their use of online tools. If the local church does not encourage any interaction online with its younger people, it could be missing a potentially fruitful communications channel. The implications of this approach are explored in the discussion in section 8.6.2 .

### 7.3.1 Social media: content analysis

All %	Link to blog	Links to social media services	Email list	Sermons/ talks available for download	Third party downloadable content
Anglican	6	15	5	17	17
Catholic	0	10	0	10	15
Baptist	15	24	3	39	24
Methodist	13	13	4	4	4
All churches	8	16	3	19	16

*Table 7-4 Church websites using social media & interactivity (n=147)*

The items listed in Table 7-4 above are indicators of the level of engagement with online interactivity or Web 2.0 tools, marking the extent to which churches are embracing user generated content or the ability of a website to be more than a static broadcast medium. These items relate to objective 7.

The majority of sites do not include or link to any of this kind of content. Social media services include blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Yammer and MySpace. No Catholic sites make mention of or link to a blog, only 6% of Anglican sites link to a blog. The highest proportion is the 24% of Baptist sites which include links to social media websites such as Twitter or Facebook.

It is possible that social media tools are being employed to a much greater degree by individual churches or church members but are not linked to by the main church website. One explanation could be that what is seen as trivial information is on social media but the serious information is on the church site. Or that by keeping the social media at arm's length, the church authorities do not feel obliged to monitor or endorse the information and interactions happening elsewhere on the internet sites. Thirdly, it could be that the social media is set up from the grass roots, within the congregation in an entirely unofficial way and the leaders have no

knowledge of its existence. The online networks may be more friend-based than linked to church structures. This scarcity of joined-up online networks was addressed during the interview process and results are given in section 7.3 .

The presence of an email list or a discussion forum does not necessarily indicate a deliberate decision to promote this kind of online collaboration. At least one of the companies providing website platforms specifically for churches provides these tools as standard on a basic site. So the congregation may have the facility to log in to the site as a member, or join in discussion with other members – but if these are not promoted, they will not be used, or they will be redundant rivals to more immediate and accessible platforms for collaboration, such as Facebook.

### **7.3.2 Social media: interviews**

Despite the lack of interactivity found on websites via content analysis, there is evidence that churches are beginning to embrace social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. There is a range of opinion and experience expressed in the interviews, reflecting the different levels of engagement and understanding of the tools as discussed in section 4.7 .

### **7.3.3 Facebook**

Michael (national communications) noted that since Facebook had such a huge user base, it made sense for the church to be there – the church would not ignore a country of 500 million people. This is not yet the prevailing attitude amongst the leaders interviewed. Of those that do have Facebook pages for their church or groups within it, a number said that these had been created independently by church members and had only then been assimilated into the church's official online presence. This encompassed groups such as the Scouts (Mark), the youth

group (Lee) and one smaller church within a Methodist circuit (Benjamin). Benjamin was of the opinion that no-one outside that small church would have access to or find new information via the Facebook site since it would not be their first source of news. If this is a common occurrence – a Facebook group being established independently – this would explain why so few official websites mention or link to the groups. Wendy and Lee both suggested that Facebook would be inappropriate as a tool for their congregation because of the age of the church members, but could be implemented if there was need – this being the same opinion as held by Colette and Thomas. Other age-based factors are recorded at section 6.6 and 4.4 above. Colette's children were Facebook users and would use their personal pages to advertise church events to their peer group which suggests there might already be a need within her church. Gayle had an interesting situation in that the church meeting had vetoed the creation of a Facebook page for the church itself, but the youth group was allowed to have an officially endorsed page. Aaron had considered a Facebook presence for the church, but had decided against it on the grounds of insufficient time. He also felt that Facebook was better at providing a platform for purely social communication, and was not well used by corporate bodies. This echoes the use of Facebook as a method of maintenance of weak ties (Lomborg, Ess 2012).

In terms of the leaders' personal use of Facebook there are again differences. Lee and Kester are the most clear about their use of the site – Kester has an account, but only for his chaplaincy work, responds to messages rather than initiating and rejects requests to connect from people who are not part of that team. Lee explained his policy about friending younger members of the church and how he also has a policy of responding to, but not initiating, contact via Facebook. His Facebook friends though are from all parts of his life, including people from his

church. Mark, by contrast, did not have any of the younger members of his church as friends.

Mark, Gayle and Aaron all used Facebook personally to keep in touch with friends and family overseas but Gayle felt that she did not have sufficient time, however, to devote to keeping up with the site. Helen used Facebook and had a mix of church and personal friends on the site. She noted, though, that her intention had been to use it to keep up with her friends, but had not wanted to refuse friend requests from churchgoers. That had led to a change in her use of Facebook, in that she had moderated some of the status updates she had posted and that there was no room for banter or 'silliness' which might offend some of the older members of her church.

#### **7.3.4 Blogs and Twitter**

Twitter is a micro-blogging service where users post 140-character updates, distinct from traditional blogging sites which generally have more measured and longer articles posted. It is not universally welcomed:

*it seems to me a supreme waste of the seventy years we have in life to  
Twitter (Kester, St Bride)*

This quote from Kester represents one extreme of the views expressed about Twitter. Lee and Mark were far more enthusiastic about it as a tool for creating and maintaining connections – finding inspiration for teaching and for their own learning and growth, taking relationships begun via the service further by meeting in person. Twitter was also a service that Aaron had considered for his church but, like Facebook, decided it was too time-consuming.

Lee had created a blog for his church in addition to the website – possibly as a way of circumventing the webmaster’s delays in updating the main site. He was the only leader to be actively blogging during the time the interviews were carried out, and said that such was his interest that:

*... the internet is littered with blogs that I have started and rejected... I have all kinds of blogs that are half-started or were there for a particular purpose but the purpose has passed (Lee, Shelley Baptist)*

Mark had begun a blog but had not had sufficient time to regularly post, but welcomed the feedback he received when he did. His time was spent either on Twitter or on a third-party site belonging to a particular radio programme, and Mark had on one occasion spent the best part of a day contributing to various conversations on that site. Alan and Benjamin both reported issues with the amount of time commitment a blog needs to be interesting. Alan had dissuaded his leader from beginning a blog, because he felt the leader would have insufficient time to make regular contributions.

Robert is reluctant to engage with any social media service, saying that:

*it doesn't excite me, I don't understand why people find it exciting, whereas stopping someone and talking to them in the street seems to me really important and very interesting and that's what I should be doing (Robert, St James)*

Kester was more positive in his approach to blogging. Whilst he did not have his own personal blog, he had contributed to a Diocesan vocations project. It is interesting to note his comment that his Bishop asks for priests to inform him if they have a blog:

*I think there can be much good to a good blog, the bishop asks us to tell him if we do blog, because they are part of the public face of the church and I know some priests who blog and I think it's an invaluable tool that they do, I think it's very good that they do it. (Kester, St Bride)*

In terms of consumption of blogs, a number of people did read postings although no-one had subscribed to any specific site for regular reading. Kester and Benjamin both use news services provided by organisations in their denomination that include the content of blogs. Kester and Colette named blogs from relevant national organisations that they would read, and Benjamin and Colette had both followed the most recent Methodist Conference via blog posts. Wendy said that she quite often found herself being bored by the content of blogs, even those from relatively well established media-friendly clergy. Helen admits that she does not particularly enjoy reading, so would not turn to the written word in any form for pleasure, but would read a blog post if it was the equivalent of reading an article:

*if I was actually genuinely researching but people's random thoughts about things – well I'm not really interested in those, they don't interest me (Helen, Central Baptist)*

Other services such as Flickr were mentioned in interviews. Helen in particular with her dislike of reading was a fan of podcasts and the ability to listen to others' opinions whilst out walking the dog, for example, was for her a huge advantage. It would appear then that blogs and informal online publications are accepted as a source of information, and for some, contributed to, but are still viewed with scepticism by others.

## 7.4 Representation of self online

Respondents noted that emailed messages needed to be written with care to preserve their intended meaning. In talking about wider social media, Helen, Lee and Mark made reference to the need to understand who could be reading information that is posted online and the need for care in its selection. These three were the only interviewees to talk in any detail about their use of social media. As mentioned already, Helen noted that having members of the congregation as Facebook friends meant that she moderated some of the things that she might post as a status. Lee, who is a keen user of Twitter and blogs, discussed at length the potential difficulties of keeping private life and public life separate when personal information is posted online. He had decided that there should be no distinction between his role as a minister and his private life, since both aspects were fundamental to his whole self. Mark suggested that deciding how to portray oneself online was not so far removed from the ways in which he as a minister has to adapt his style to work with the many varied people he comes into contact with. He admitted though that he did feel he had an online persona, and that he might say 'wackier' things on the internet.

The local communications officer stated in his response discussing the use of social media that leaders needed to be aware that it is "impossible to separate their personal identity from their vocational identity." (Murray, regional communications officer). Helen's outlook suggests that she does try to maintain more of a personal and vocational separation than Mark or Lee. The porosity of the boundaries between online and offline communication with social media do not yet appear to have been considered in any depth by the other leaders, because they are not particularly engaged in social media or providing information online.

From a slightly different perspective, William (publisher and webmaster) discussed the need for accuracy of information, and how he would sometimes respond to a Tweet to the corporate account from his personal account to permit a more personal interaction. He suggest that

*the thing about Twitter...the way [accounts] interact is all about who's behind them...some people are quite conversational and quite good...there are some organisations who just use them really badly and just use them for a feed from their website or something, which is fairly unhelpful, and I am hoping that's the thing we don't do. (William, publisher and webmaster)*

## **7.5 Hierarchy and authority**

One of the consequences of allowing more interaction and feedback, and more conversation unmediated by the church leader could be reduction in their status as the authorised preacher. Research literature (e.g. Cheong, Huang & Poon 2011, Campbell 2007, Campbell 2010a) has suggested that because online church allows for a bottom-up approach to organisation, traditional hierarchical notions of authority would come under fire. The interview questions were designed to uncover any experience of this, or opinions about its possibility, as set out in objective 9.

Aaron raised a question about the nature of congregations in England. He wondered whether churchgoers, who tended to be older, were raised in a tradition of acceptance and would never challenge the preacher. He noted that actually more feedback and more challenge would sometimes be welcome, as did Wendy and Lee, who both said that in principle they would welcome good debate. Benjamin also pointed out that as a leader, it was part of his job to teach people and that invited interaction, and with a clear purpose this is not a threat:

*we have a defined role of what a minister's duties and responsibilities are, but how can you encourage discipleship if you are not prepared to enter into conversations with people?* (Benjamin, Valley Methodist)

There is one aspect to church websites that does hint at a change in the relationship between the leader and their congregation. This is in the ability of people to check up on or challenge the truthfulness or factual correctness of their talk, if the talk should be available online. Mark said that there had, in the past, been very healthy exchanges on his blog and that he was aware of the need to be accurate as information could very easily be checked. Helen, discussing the recording of her talks and the congregation of her church:

*we've got enough people that are quite academic theologians in the church anyway that could challenge stuff, that could say on much higher level ...which would freak me out more than somebody that's discovered it on Wikipedia or something like that, so, if people are interested and they want to go and research more about it that's fantastic that they can.* (Helen, Central Baptist)

In this instance Helen is widely appreciative of the fact that congregants do have a number of ways of researching the topic she has spoken on, but is more concerned about academic and perhaps intellectual challenge to her sermon than one who had perhaps merely Googled for an opposing point of view. James at St Saviour recounted an experience whereby his teaching on a subject had been challenged by a churchgoer whom he felt had been misled by information on the internet. Speaking more generally about the issues of Christian teaching online, and disagreement with his opinion, James cautioned:

*... you can get some very conservative right wing views being promoted as if it's church dogma which in actual fact, it is a very sort of exaggerated version of church dogma and very specific and very honed whereas the actual teaching is wider and more fluid. (James, St Saviour)*

In one respect, then, challenges to the leader's opinions in the pulpit can help reinforce that teaching if the leader has an opportunity to debunk extreme or exaggerated versions of the church's teaching online. The authority is not diluted in situations where the leader is still part of the conversation. The leaders in the interview sample were all welcoming of debate and the opportunity for people to think their views out for themselves.

## 7.6 Hyperlink analysis

Denomination	Number in sample	Number with links	% with links	Total number of links	Mean (sites with links)	Mean (all sample)	Min	Max
Anglican	66	36	55%	330	9.2	5.0	1	25
Baptist	35	25	71%	243	9.7	6.9	1	47
Catholic	20	17	85%	348	20.5	17.4	2	127
Methodist	26	10	38%	153	15.3	5.9	4	37

*Table 7-5 Overview of hyperlinks found on church websites*

Where present on a website, hyperlinks were noted. Links were selected as a component of the analysis following work published by Scheitle (2005) in order to address objective 8.

A total of 1064 links were collected from 88 individual churches. The number of sites with links varied from 38% of Methodist sites to 85% of Catholic sites. Of those sites with links, the mean number per Anglican site was 9.2, the lowest number, and 20.5 links per Catholic site. These results are given in Table 7-5 above.

However, these figures contain an outlier. One Catholic site contained 127 links, 82 more than the next highest number of Catholic links and far higher than the maximum of the other denominations. The site was a commercially-produced site, and the links it contained pointed to range of local and national Catholic and secular organisations. Once this was removed, the mean number of links per Catholic site reduced to 13.8, more in line with the results from the Anglican, Baptist or Methodist churches. These results are presented in Table 7-6 below. It is possible that the outlier contained many links that were included because they were identified with the Catholic church as a global organisation rather than necessarily being relevant to the local church members. That would perhaps point to inefficient use of the website as a medium, or possibly a lack of evaluation of the sites included in the link list. Even removing the one site from the analysis, Catholic churches still had the greater proportion of sites with hyperlinks (80%).

Denomination	Number in sample	Number with links	% with links	Total number of links	Mean (sites with links)	Mean (all sample)	Min	Max
Anglican	66	36	55%	330	9.2	5.0	1	25
Baptist	35	25	71%	243	9.7	6.9	1	47
Catholic	20	16	80%	221	13.8	11.1	2	45
Methodist	26	10	38%	153	15.3	5.9	4	37

*Table 7-6 Overview of hyperlinks found on church websites- outlier removed*

Scheitle (2005) claimed that the level of external hyperlinks was linked with the conservatism of the church; those with more links were more interested in controlling the whole internet experience for their congregation. This is a plausible explanation for the different mean rates of links on the four denominations' sites. However, it is possible that the differences arise from more structural reasons; that there may be something inherent in the churches' governance structures that makes it more likely an Anglican church will not provide external links. More collaborative

denominations or more outward looking churches may naturally choose to include more outward links on their churches' site. The decision to include external links and the mechanism by which they are chosen was discussed during the interviews and the outcome can be seen at section 7.6.4 below.

## 7.6.1 Link targets

Target	Number of times linked
Local church	86
Anglican Diocese of Chelmsford	33
Local school	32
Church of England	25
Local information	22
Local Methodist circuit	22
Baptist Union of Great Britain	21
Baptist Missionary Society	15
Catholic Diocese of Brentwood	14
Alpha Course	13
Rejesus	13
Christian Aid	13
Churches Together	12
Methodist Church of Great Britain	12
Eastern Baptist Association	11
CAFOD	10
RC.net	9
Find a Church	9
Tearfund	9
Vatican	9
Evangelical Alliance	9
Bible Gateway	7
Individual missionary church	6
Brentwood Cathedral	6
Christian Aid	6
Catholic Church in England and Wales	6
Bible Society	6
Traidcraft	6
Church Times	6
Premier Christian Radio	5
Clipart	5
BBC	5
Bedford Essex & Herts District	5
Brentwood Cathedral Music	5

*Table 7-7 Destinations of hyperlinks*

Examining the links gives a league table of both the actual resources being linked to and the categories of resources (based on the definitions of Scheitle). Table 7–7 above lists the targets linked to five or more times across all denominations. This represents 45% of the total number of links identified. The local links for churches, schools and information have been counted as one category rather than as individual targets. It was felt this gave a better sense of the kind of link being used than recording each individual local school or church. It is more useful to know that churches choose to link to a local school than to know necessarily which school that is.

These local church, school, circuit or other information sources are the most widely used links. Local and national hierarchical organisations also figure highly. The most popular religious organisations – those which are not tied to denominations, or concerned with broader level objectives – are the Alpha Course, Rejesus and Christian Aid. Christian Aid<sup>20</sup> is a development charity, supported by Methodist, Baptist, Anglican and other churches (the Catholic church has its own development agency in CAFOD, the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development). Rejesus<sup>21</sup> is an agency of Churches Together in England<sup>22</sup>, providing information on the Christian faith aimed at people who are looking for independent opinions and facts. The Alpha Course<sup>23</sup> is a widely–advertised and supported introduction to Christianity

---

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.christianaid.org.uk>, accessed March 17 2012

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.rejesus.co.uk/site/about\\_us](http://www.rejesus.co.uk/site/about_us), accessed March 17 2012

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.cte.org.uk>, accessed March 17 2012

<sup>23</sup> <http://uk.alpha.org/facts-and-figures>, accessed March 17 2012

franchised across churches globally, with strong brand recognition and high advertising spend.

It appears, therefore, that churches' priorities when choosing links are to align themselves with their denominational hierarchy, and also to provide information on national charities and faith information sources as well as promoting local links.

### **7.6.2 Link categories**

Again following Scheitle (2005), the links were classified into categories reflecting the nature of the organisation being targeted. Every link discovered was assigned to a denomination-specific category (unlike Table 7-7 above, which deals only with those organisations linked to five or more times by any church). Using these broader categories also allows for more meaningful numbers since some areas would otherwise have fewer links once the denominations were separated.

Table 7-8 below lists the categories by popularity. The figures are counts of links in each category, so it is expected that there would be more Anglican categories represented as there were more Anglican churches analysed. The list bears out the claim made in section 7.6.1 that churches do choose to identify themselves in their local area, and their national hierarchy. However, Community, Social Justice and Resources are more popular categories than Evangelism. In the analysis in section 7.6.1 two of the most popular non-denominational sites would be classed as Evangelical - Alpha Course and Rejesus. This suggests that as a whole, the churches under consideration do not place evangelism via the internet high on their priorities when choosing hyperlinks or associations with which to align themselves, but that in fact the campaigning or charity work has more of an influence on the statements the churches are making about themselves via the website.

Category	Grand Total
Anglican Hierarchy	66
Catholic Resources	51
Catholic Other Congregation	50
Baptist Hierarchy	41
Baptist Social Justice	39
Anglican Other Congregation	37
Catholic Hierarchy	35
Anglican Social Justice	34
Catholic Social Justice	28
Anglican Community	25
Methodist Hierarchy	25
Anglican Resources	20
Methodist Social Justice	20
Baptist Evangelism	17
Catholic Media	16
Methodist Other Congregation	16
Anglican Personal Faith	15
Methodist Community	15
Baptist Community	13
Baptist Other Congregation	13
Anglican Media	12
Catholic Affiliated education	11
Catholic Link broken	11
Baptist Other	10
Catholic Personal Faith	10
Catholic Parachurch group	10
Methodist Evangelism	10
Anglican Evangelism	7
Baptist Resources	7
Baptist Link broken	7
Baptist Parachurch group	6
Methodist Resources	6
Anglican Commercial Sites	5
Methodist Parachurch group	5

*Table 7-8 Hyperlinks classed by category*

### 7.6.3 Congregation size

	Congregation size – mean n of links			Grand Total
	Large	Medium	Small	
Anglican	13.38	9.27	3.60	9.17
Baptist	8.33	9.33	12.50	9.72
Catholic	22.36	11.67	–	20.47
Methodist	11.50	19.83	5.50	15.30
Grand Total	17.33	10.73	7.18	12.20

*Table 7–9 Mean number of links and congregation size*

A further exploration based on hyperlinks related to the links and the size of the church in question. It could be assumed that a larger church will be more effectively resourced, and that that resourcing will include those with the time and expertise to maintain a church website. Furthermore, a larger church may have more organisations that it is associated with or interested in, and consequently would have a higher number of outgoing links on its website. To explore this assumption, churches were assigned to a size category of small (<50), medium (51–200) or large (>200). Those for which a congregation size was not available were assigned to the medium category. Discussion of the derivation of these size bands is in the methodology at 3.13.1.1 above. Table 7–9 above gives the mean number of links per denomination according to size of church.

There are two caveats to these data. The Catholic figures include the church with a large number of links. Secondly, statistics for the Catholic churches were at parish level, not individual church; so the number of church members is likely to be artificially inflated. Several churches may be served from one church rather than having their own individual identity, and the headcount is at this higher parish level. Thirdly, no statistical tests have been attempted given the very uneven numbers of churches within each group so the claims made for the differences are based only on the means presented.

It appears that the assumption that larger churches will list more links is not borne out for all denominations. Within the Anglican and Catholic churches, larger churches do have more hyperlinks. But for the Baptists, this is reversed, with smaller churches presenting more links on their website. For the Methodists, the medium-sized churches provide more links than do the smaller or larger churches. Therefore the number of links does not appear to relate to the size of the church. The assumption that a larger congregation will have a more sophisticated site (if more links is a proxy measure for sophistication) does not appear to be true. There are other factors that should be taken into account. For example, a larger church with a more elderly congregation may be wealthier, but a smaller church with a younger and more IT-literate membership may have the skills and motivation to investigate and recommend websites or resources worth linking to.

#### **7.6.4 Hyperlinks: interview findings**

Of the churches under consideration, all had links to other websites. The content analysis demonstrated that the most popular linked-to places were the denomination, local churches and national Christian organisations or charities such as Christian Aid or the Alpha course (see section 7.6 above). The interviews afforded an opportunity to discover who within the church chose the organisations and what level of input the leader and congregation had to this decision.

For some, the choice of links was entirely down to the webmaster. Colette, Helen and Gayle all said that the main responsibility for choosing the outbound links lay with their webmaster. From the webmasters, Alan said links were chosen by him, and Howard that the church meeting had suggested many. Aaron could list the links that were on the church's site, but he had not picked them himself. Benjamin noted that there were too few links on his circuit's site to other websites that discussed contemporary issues, citing Ship of Fools as an example.

Kester and James both claimed to have chosen the majority of links on their churches' sites. This pairing is an interesting contrast – Kester appears to more enthusiastic and informed about the internet than James. James seems more suspicious of online communication, although he does use websites for personal purposes. Kester said he had chosen 90% of the links, with the webmaster contributing the rest. James' approach seemed to be more serendipitous, suggesting links when he came across sites that were of interest to him. So two leaders with differing experiences online have both elected to lead on one aspect of their churches' site. Of the churches in the study, Kester's Catholic church seems to be the only one with a systematic approach to choosing its external links. The links help define the church in terms of its place in the wider online landscape – do they reflect the church as a local organisation, or one concerned with evangelism, fundraising or charity? A process of choosing links based on what the church finds interesting would create an identity that mirrors the community; a set of links based on what the leader happens to come across might not produce the same quality of identity. In addition, the choices are possibly being made by the person in the church with the least experience of, and time to spend, locating relevant external sites.

## **7.7 Expertise of leaders**

The foregoing interview results suggest evidence for a certain incongruity between the level of expertise or interest and the level of control over the site that leaders want.

The majority of leaders interviewed said they used the internet only for general reference, for email or for shopping sites like Amazon. Lee and Mike were exceptions to this with their interest in blogging, and Benjamin has a wider experience of online tools than many others. However, several expressed little

interest in understanding more about the benefits of online communication. The dangers and drawbacks were expressed in very broad terms – ‘chat rooms and so on’, even though the leaders had not explored the benefits of the internet to any great extent. In terms of the updating of the content, the sentiment seemed to be that it was best to leave it to the volunteer, even if that volunteer was not particularly skilled in current web technologies.

In contrast, leaders had written most of the web content, and most exercised a final authority on what was published. Regular updates were made without recourse necessarily to the leader because the content had originated elsewhere – the most common method was to update either by taking the content from the printed newsletter or adding this as a PDF. However, the bulk of the content had been written by people with relatively limited engagement with website creation. Hence, people with no experience or interest in online communication are keeping control of the content and making decisions about the way their church is presented.

This could have two effects. First, misunderstanding the media means it will not be exploited fully. A website has far more potential than to merely be a means of circulating a PDF of a weekly newsletter. If the site is seen just as a digital noticeboard there will be no impetus for improvement. Second, it could be disempowering volunteers – the relationship with the volunteer webmaster may be strained in some churches, but if the volunteer is only allowed limited freedom it may be that these restrictions contribute to the poor relationship. If the leader feels the site is good enough then they may not pass on training opportunities.

### 7.7.1 Social media

The sense that the danger of social media is emphasised at the cost of potential benefits, or actual knowledge comes out in this remark from James, St Saviour which is worth quoting at length, with added emphasis:

*Safeguarding is something that I am involved in professionally so although I don't understand social networking and so on I am beginning to understand some of the dangers involved...I occasionally get an email from someone saying they want you to join such and such some sort of social networking thing and I always just delete the email because...I just worry a little bit about it you know is this going to be something bad. (James, St Saviour)*

One interviewee who was a keen Facebook user described the precautions he would take when communicating with younger parishioners via the site, again, phrased in terms of the dangers being more prominent than the benefits:

*...I recognise that is the difficulties that sometimes Facebook causes and that kind of social interaction on the internet so I am very careful about how I deal with what we might perceive as more vulnerable folk in the church on the internet (Lee, Shelley Baptist)*

However, for many, the churches' online presence seems to be in the hands of either a leader with little enthusiasm for the media, dictating content, or an untrained amateur working with no corporate guidance. There is also a risk that by allowing the volunteer to be the gatekeeper for information on the website, the church may find itself tacitly endorsing viewpoints or organisations that reflect the webmaster's interest rather than those of the church as a whole. This is most possible via the links sections, with choice of links in a number of churches left to

the webmaster. Sites could be selected to be linked to without a full understanding of their content, including their political or doctrinal basis.

## **7.8 Interactivity: content analysis**

The last section of the findings considers interactivity on a more abstract level. The current research aimed to replicate McMillan et al.'s (2008) platform-neutral study of interactivity, using the categories developed in that research to assess the extent to which church websites had engaged with these activities. As well as the peer-to-peer interactions possible, the framework also allows for analysis of the ways in which the sites themselves are customisable or permit interaction.

As a reminder of the approach explained in section 3.3.2.1 in the methodology, McMillan *et al*/use a three-dimensional construct: human-to-computer, human-to-human and human-to-content. These had further subdivisions so the list of thirteen aspects being coded for is based upon these following, plus a miscellaneous 'other'. Within the current research project, these variables were operationalised and coded for in the following way. Table 11-3 in the appendices gives the full list of the component items coded for and results for each denomination.

This section of the current research aimed to replicate McMillan's findings, so Table 7-10 below recasts these findings in the same way that McMillan's are presented in the original paper.

	Anglican	Baptist	Methodist	Catholic
Navigation standard (mean)	1.56	1.3	1.17	1.45
Max	7	4	5	4
Min	0	0	0	1
Navigation personalised (mean)	0.2	0.18	0.13	0.25
Max	2	2	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Action standard (mean)	0.12	0.24	0.17	0.15
Max	3	2	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Action personalised (mean)	0.18	0.12	0.08	0.3
Max	2	2	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Transaction standard (mean)	0.94	0.75	0.21	0.53
Max	5	2	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Transaction personalised (mean)	0.12	0.03	0.04	0.15
Max	2	1	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Organisational/ individual synchronous	0	0	0	0
Organisational/ individual asynchronous (mean)	0.98	1.06	0.92	1.2
Max	2	2	2	2
Min	0	0	0	1
Individual/ individual synchronous (mean)	0	0.03	0	0.5
Max		1		1
Min		0		0
Individual/ individual asynchronous (mean)	0.1	0.12	0.25	0.5
Max	2	1	3	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Add content (mean)	0.05	0.03	0.21	0.5
Max	1	1	2	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Customise content (mean)	0.12	0.24	0.25	0.1
Max	2	4	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Other (mean)	0.09	0	0	0
Max	2			
Min	0			

*Table 7-10 Incidences of interactivity, following McMillan (2008)*

### 7.8.1 Interactivity categories

Results show that few of the websites analysed included any kind of interactive feature as defined by McMillan et al (2008). The two categories where the mean is or approaches one item per site are *navigation standard* and *organisational/individual asynchronous*. The former are accounted for by the presence of menu bars; the latter by availability of email contact. Anglican and Baptist sites have means of 0.88 and 0.75 for *transaction standard*, which includes downloading a newsletter. For no other element is the mean higher than 0.53 items per site.

Even if an interactive element is part of a site, and several commercial sites have various elements such as chat rooms available, there is no guarantee of the quality or depth of the interactions that may be in progress. Churches may not have the resources to implement fully the 'bells and whistles' that come with a pre-packaged church website. It could be more beneficial to have a smaller, less functional site, than a more complicated but under-used web presence.

This part of the research project aimed to replicate work that would measure interactivity independently of any specific platform or method of interaction. Despite the low numbers of incidences and therefore the limited conclusions that can be drawn, the work permits a slightly different focus to the main body of content analysis. This helps build a more detailed picture of the characteristics of the websites under consideration.

### 7.9 Interactivity: interviews

Questions addressing the apparent reluctance to invite interaction formed part of the interview research. The explanation appears to be a combination of supply and demand. The congregations were assumed to be too old to be engaged online, and the volunteers did not have sufficient time to dedicate to the kind of administration

and monitoring that a web-based forum would need. That said, there was a general agreement that feedback on preaching or church activities was welcome, but by different communication methods. Aaron and Kester felt the most appropriate channel for feedback would be a private email, and that the church should not necessarily have a role in online conversations:

*If a group of people want to have an ongoing social conversation they don't need the church website for that ...I mean, how fruitful is the comments section to any whether it's the BBC or the Observer or the Daily Mail? (Kester, St Bride)*

Helen felt that the church should not offer what could not be done well, that a bad forum was worse than no forum at all. Alan alluded to this being a circular situation – websites were not frequently updated, so people did not visit them and want to contribute; but if they were more frequently updated people might change their habit and the content would be generated and be interesting, encouraging more visits.

Murray was clear in his advice that social media and open forums would only be useful for certain kinds of conversation and specifically not any kind of pastoral care from a church leader. These cautious limits on what online interactivity might offer perhaps help explain why there is very little evidence of church leaders finding it a useful tool. Wendy reinforced this argument when she suggested that one of the reasons that there is little interactivity is that the church is lagging behind the rest of society in its approach to being online; Michael also made a similar point that the conversations the church is having now were those that other organisations had been holding five or more years previously. Considering the national church as a whole, he suggested that for a long time there had been a very risk-averse environment, where the tradition was for top-down conversations. The change to

more peer-to-peer conversations that online tools afford was something to which the church is still adjusting. As Wendy pointed out:

*...the Church of England is usually about twenty years behind the rest of the world.* (Wendy, St Timothy).

## **7.10 Findings summary**

Content analysis results point to websites which can be out of date (5.8.1 ), limited in content (6.1.1 ) and unwelcoming to outsiders (7.1 ). Few have been created by a professional company (5.7 ) and a minority are still using web technology that was abandoned by the mainstream over five years ago (5.5 ). The evidence suggests that churches rely on volunteers (5.7.1 ) and that even where the volunteers are willing, they may be lacking in expertise or awareness of new possibilities (5.5 ). As volunteers, their time is restricted and relationships with the leader may not be running smoothly (5.8.3 ). Content comes from newsletters or pre-existing publications, and has mostly been written by the church leader (6.5.4 ). Interview evidence suggests that there is little ongoing governance or evaluation of websites – they may be discussed at their establishment but not often considered by the leadership on an ongoing basis (5.9 ). The creation of a site is influenced by the leadership, its maintenance by the level of official governance and evaluation (5.9.1 ), the expertise of those involved and to a certain extent by the age of the congregation (6.6 ). There is an assumption that older people are not interested in visiting the church's website or engaging with social media and so churches are not investigating the potential of these avenues of communication.

## **7.11 Church as information provider**

Evidence from the content analysis shows that whilst almost all websites provide a basic level of detail (6.1.1 ), many are not publishing further information. The

prevailing sense is that the website is an extension of the weekly pew sheet (6.5.2 ). Interviews suggest that for many, the content is restricted because there is no-one in the church with the time or expertise to be more involved (5.7 ), and the apparent cost of a more sophisticated site is a barrier (5.7.1 ). In addition, interviews also point to a lack of considered strategy and governance over the information the church could or should be providing (5.9 ).

### **7.12 Clergy engagement and information skills**

Interviews suggest that the level of engagement personally from the leader could have an influence on the church's website (7.7 ). Many feel email is sufficient in terms of online communication, if not a cause of information overload in itself. (4.8.2 ). There are issues for the leaders relating to their use of social media as a leader and in their personal lives (7.4 ). All leaders use the internet in one form or another, but in this study, the level of expertise and experience varied (4.8.1 ).

### **7.13 Church in wider community**

Content analysis did not find evidence of Facebook or other social media being widely used (7.3.1 ), but interview evidence suggests this is misleading, with many churches having official or unofficial Facebook pages (7.3.3 ). Churches had links to external organisations (7.6.1 ), but are not necessarily including their physical neighbours in their online links. Social media appears to be viewed as something for the young, (7.3.2 ) so again age influences the perspective. Interview evidence also suggests that leaders have not felt their authority challenged by changes in communication (7.5 ). The leaders' expertise in online content, which is related to their personal habits, will also affect the level to which a church corporately engages with social media (7.3 ).

The discussion in the following chapter shows how these findings relate to the existing body of research knowledge and explores the reasons behind attitudes and opinions of leaders. It also includes recommendations for future research topics and practical guidance for churches – or any other small, volunteer-dependent organisation – on the setting up and maintenance of an online presence.