



# Associated Baptist Press

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## Church Internet sites often lack vision, strategy, specialists say

By David Winfrey

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- As more churches launch Web sites, too few are reaching their potential because church leaders don't define why they want a site or they fail to develop a strategy for what they hope to accomplish.

That's the collective opinion of several Web specialists throughout the country. They say too many church leaders are enamored by the gee-whiz technology of the Internet but aren't considering how to link their Web sites to their overall communications strategy.

"A lot of people just put up something because, 'Oh, I have to have a Web site.' But it doesn't meet any needs," said Lisa McMahan, senior Web administrator at the Southern Baptist International Mission Board and a consultant for Web design for the past five years.

Robert Reeves, agreed. "Some churches have not thought through their strategy."

As communications director for the Kentucky Baptist Convention, Reeves gets calls every month from church leaders seeking advice on launching an Internet site.

Often, church Web sites are developed, launched and maintained by just one person, he said.

"It tends to be their vision instead of a really thought-out vision that involves multiple people at the church and involves leadership," he said. "Once the fun wears out, that's the point to where a Web site begins to get stale."

Steve Hewitt, editor of Christian Computing Magazine, said many churches are hosting essentially a "billboard" site, advertising their location or church service times but "they're totally missing the potential of what can be done."

"We say that there are like 50,000 churches on the Web and 49,995 are doing it wrong," he said.

A church's vision for its Web site can be incredibly complex, including recordings of church services, chat rooms for Bible studies or multimedia presentations explaining the Christian faith to nonbelievers. Or it can be as simple as a page that lists a church's worship schedule and phone number.

The key, consultants insist, is planning.

Rather than being distracted by all the possibilities posed by the Internet, Dave Stahl recommends that churches design their Web site to match their mission statement.

"I always encourage churches to forget about tools," said Stahl, communications director for Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Ill. "Do your strategy, because tools are going to change, and you don't want your strategy to change over time."

Ryan Bradley, Web manager for Beuchel Park Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., agreed. Another common pitfall, he said, is trying to do too much too soon.

"Instead, start small then slowly build," said Bradley, who has led workshops on how to build a church Web site.

McMahon suggests most church Web sites should be classified according to one of two goals: helping keep members informed or advertising to people outside the church.

Web sites targeting church members will require more constant updates for such services as membership directories or online newsletters, she said.

McMahon also recommends that Web designers for such sites make sure they are offering information and services that church members truly want.

"What's the user expecting to find?" she asked. Web managers should monitor the traffic to their sites to see if their work is being valued, she added. "If you put up the church newsletter and no one ever goes there, you're wasting your time."

On the other hand, churches that use their Web sites for outreach are going to want to avoid "churchy" language that might confuse non-Christians, according to McMahon and others.

"People are used to being entertained," she added. "You might have to have more of the cutting-edge technology."

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## **Designer offers questions to ask of church Web site**

By David Winfrey

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Lisa McMahon is convinced she can improve most church Web sites with two questions: who is your target audience and what is your goal for the site?

"If they don't know who their primary audience is, they really don't know what their purpose is," said McMahon, who has been designing Web sites for five years.

That might sound basic, but McMahon said surprisingly few churches have thought through those simple questions.

After addressing audience and goals, McMahon has a few more issues to consider:

- Who is your secondary audience?
- How will your site serve your primary audience?
- What type of information will your primary audience expect to find on your Web site?
- What information do you have readily available to provide to your audience?
- What types of information do you expect to put on your Web site? Calendar? Newsletters? Staff profiles?
- Who will serve as the Web manager for the site? The Web manager is the primary contact person for a site, McMahon said. That person also monitors access privileges to the Web site account for page editing purposes.

-- Who will be the maintainers for the site? Page maintainers can be the Web manager or someone else completely. Page maintainers perform many of the technical duties, such as actually building the Web pages within the site, converting content to Web format and making updates to the pages.

-- How often do you expect to update the content on your site?

-- How much time per week or per month will you dedicate to updating your site?

-- Who will be responsible for answering e-mail that comes via a link on each page of the Web site?

-- What words do you hope will describe your site when it is built? Professional? Friendly? Cutting edge?

-- What materials do you have on hand that you would like to adapt and publish on the Web?

-- Is your preferred domain name available? What will your Web address be if your preferred address is taken?

-- Have you chosen a Web-hosting provider?

-- What look and feel do you want your Web site to have? For those who are starting out, McMahon recommends they have a list of at least five of their favorite sites they can tell a designer what they liked about each one.

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: McMahon, who is Web manager for the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, has built a site full of Web design tips for churches: [www.imb.org/medianow](http://www.imb.org/medianow).

## **'zchurch' paving the way to the information highway**

By David Winfrey

EVANSVILLE, Ind. (ABP) -- Welcome to [www.zchurch.com](http://www.zchurch.com), one congregation's attempt to put practically everything it does on the Internet.

Log on to the Web site and you'll find a cartoon Mayberry, where every building represents a different ministry for Bethel Temple, an interdenominational church in Evansville, Ind.

Click onto the video building and you can watch a Sunday worship service, complete with an online Bible, a form for submitting prayer requests and an online donation process.

Pastor Steve Schwambach says everything was designed with non-Christians in mind.

"This gives them a way to kick the tires without having a salesman hang on them," says Schwambach, pastor at Bethel Temple since 1980.

"Unchurched people take incremental steps toward God," he adds. "If you can give them a smaller step, they're more likely to take it than if you ask them to make a huge leap."

zchurch was designed with the help of unchurched people. In fact, he adds, on the Sunday he outlined his vision for a Web site to the congregation, a third-time visitor who had been away from church 15 years asked if he could help.

That visitor recruited a non-Christian from work who had the technological skills to get zchurch off the ground, Schwambach says. The helper prayed to accept Jesus as her Savior after reading from the Web pages how to become a Christian, he says.

"This is just another hook in the water, it's trot-line fishing," Schwambach says. "Use every means you have."

With 4,000 visits each week, Schwambach predicts zchurch membership could someday dwarf Bethel Temple, which has a regular attendance of about 1,300.

Another growing project is zgroups. More than 400 people from every state and a dozen countries participate in e-mail Bible studies.

Jonathan Sieg, who attends college in Lanham, Md., says he is involved in a local church but enjoys the weekly encouragement he gets from zgroup members.

"It offers one thing different: the opportunity to interact with people all over the country, believers and unbelievers, with a great diversity of denominations, views and experiences," he adds. "It's eye-opening sometimes."

Schwambach says building a Web presence has taught him about the creativity of God. zchurch opened up a whole new ministry opportunity for church members who previously thought they had nothing to offer, he adds.

"We had all these techies who were just sitting there thinking to themselves, 'I can't preach a sermon, I can't teach a Sunday-school class, I can't sing a solo,' he says. "They just were sitting there thinking, 'Well, there's nothing I can do.' And all of a sudden there's this whole pocket of people in our church, who are shaking the world for Christ just because we gave them one more way to do so."

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## **California Southern Baptists keep name, affirm faith statement**

By ABP staff

RIVERSIDE, Calif. (ABP) -- California Baptists will remain "Southern" in both name and practice following votes of the California Southern Baptist Convention Nov. 14-15 in Riverside.

The largest evangelical group in the nation's most populous state rejected for the second straight year a proposal to remove "Southern" from its name. The convention also went on record as affirming recent changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message," the Southern Baptist Convention's doctrinal statement.

For the fifth time in 15 years, the state's Baptists considered shortening the convention name. Proponents argue that the regional connotation hinders evangelism outside the Bible Belt.

"It is a stumbling block to reaching people who have a negative impression of the word 'southern,'" declared Mark Milwee, pastor of First Baptist Church in Gilroy.

Opponents argued changing the name would send an unwanted signal to the Southern Baptist Convention and others.

"I think it's the wrong time," said Bret Capranica, pastor of First Baptist Church in Granada Hills. "With the upheaval of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, we need to send a clear signal that we willingly and fully support" the SBC, Capranica said. "If any geographical change needs to be made, it belongs with our national convention."

California Baptists also overwhelmingly passed a motion by Roger Spradlin, who served on a committee that proposed a rewrite of the "Baptist Faith and Message" adopted by the SBC last summer, to affirm the new faith statement.

"It's an important time for us as a convention to express our solidarity with the Southern Baptist Convention," said Spradlin, pastor of Valley Baptist Church in Bakersfield.

Dan Nelson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Camarillo, spoke in favor of the motion. "We are a cooperating entity with the SBC," Nelson said. "Our [national] convention has spoken. For us not to affirm would indicate we are not in cooperation and not appreciative of the funding we receive."

In other business, the convention defeated a motion to establish a separate board of directors for the California Southern Baptist newspaper. With the vote, the newspaper remains under direction of the state convention's executive board.

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-- Adapted from longer reports by Mark Wyatt and Cynthia Wright.

### **Smyth and Helwys announces plans at 10th-anniversary celebration**

By John Pierce

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- Smyth and Helwys Publishing marked its 10th anniversary Dec. 1 with announcements of two new initiatives. The company in Macon, Ga., will open an office in the Dallas area to cater to customers in the West and develop a new line of children's curriculum for Sunday school, publisher Cecil Staton announced at an anniversary banquet attended by employees, authors and friends.

"We are only standing at the beginning of what Smyth and Helwys can be," said Staton, noting that these new plans come on the heels of a 30-volume Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary to be produced over the next several years. The first volume, First and Second Kings, written by Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, was released last month.

Though Smyth and Helwys has previously produced children's teaching materials, Staton said the new project would be a full-scale, dated line "with good theology." The curriculum will be developed by a broad group of preschool and children's educators and should be available to churches in 2002, he said.

The celebration included a presentation on the growth of the company that began in December 1990 and published its first book, Studies in Acts by T.C. Smith, in 1991. Since that year, Smyth and Helwys has grown from serving 400 churches with Bible-study materials and other resources to more than 4,000 churches in all 50 states and overseas.

Guest speaker Rob Nash, religion professor at Shorter College in Rome, Ga., commended Smyth and Helwys for becoming "a major player" in Baptist life. He added that while bearing the name of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, early Baptists known for their sacrifices for freedom, the 10-year-old publishing company has "been faithful to their heritage."

Details about location and staffing of the Texas office are still being worked out and will be confirmed early next year, Staton said.

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