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Reaching out worldwide

Not all parishes have websites, and those which do may present only basic information about services and a newsletter. Yet if a site reflects parish life and offers a genuine welcome, it will speak of a faith worth sharing

I don't tweet, I'm not on Facebook and I don't use a mobile phone. But I have become an avid fan of the parish website. I remain a Luddite at heart, and I am pretty convinced that my curates over the years have spent more time surfing the web than visiting parishioners. But I also believe that ignoring the web as a tool for both communicating parish information and – much more significant – for evangelisation is folly.

A few months ago, my son persuaded me to have a look at who was actually visiting our parish website. I assumed that maybe 10 people a week accessed it and that they were simply interested in how to get married here, or hiring the parish centre for a birthday party.

It was a huge shock to discover that on average each month we had more than 800 visits from some 500 separate visitors in 23 countries. And they were looking for our core offering – service orders, audio of sermons, downloads of notes for *lectio divina* groups and so on. It was extraordinarily moving last month to receive two visits from countries where Christianity is illegal and actively persecuted. Most moving of all, perhaps, was an email I received from a missionary priest in Kenya who wrote to say that he was using material from our website to train seminarians in homiletics in Nairobi.

I have learnt in the last six months, at the feet of my teenage son, not to despise our parish website as a tool for communication and evangelisation.

So how do we go about it? I speak absolutely as a novice – these are hints and guesses from the coalface of pastoral practice, rather than the nostrums of a communications expert. But from our experience, if a parish website is going to be an effective tool for communication and evangelisation, then the core content has to be developed close to the heart of the leadership team.

By all means, it's a good idea to use eager teenagers, technicians and others to design,

develop and maintain the site. But the leadership must exercise a real ministry of oversight here. Parish websites genuinely communicate something about the core values of the Christian community. A local PR firm may be able to do something much more flashy – but they may also have to ring you up to ask what Palm Sunday is. Rather like church doors, which communicate whether they are closed or open, if this is worth doing at all, it needs to get the right message across.

It is crucial to locate the content close to the parish leadership. This does not necessarily have to be the parish priest or minister, but it does have to be someone pretty close to that. After all, they are the vision leaders; otherwise, you could easily be communicating someone else's vision of what it means to belong to Christ Church or Sacred Heart or St Aelred's. And, when people actually come seeking Christ among us, the mismatch will simply tell them that we misled them.

One large church's website offers me a virtual guided tour, tells me it is looking for a new organist and advertises the menu for the coffee shop. It completely fails to tell me that it is a lovely space of prayer, and the home of a warm, welcoming Christian community. The websites of two of the busiest churches in the country are themselves so over-busy that they put me off at the first attempt.

What I am saying is that the content needs to be about our core life – and our visitors here confirm this again and

again. Of course, to be effective, it needs to be up to date and accurate. The website of one of my old churches was still advertising the run-up to Holy Week three weeks after Easter. Carelessness, certainly, but it sends a message – just like churches with out-of-date noticeboards (or no noticeboards at all). Presumably, they never expect anyone new to join them. If you have a website that you know will not be updated regularly, then – like the noticeboard – make sure that what visitors see does still make sense.

The website needs to be accurate: this is really difficult as we genuinely want to give the best impression of our churches and facilities to those who are exploring what we do. If we claim we have fantastic children's work or youth work, and we don't, then folk who come seeking in our midst will spot this immediately (even if it is not great children's or youth work they are looking for). The mismatch stretches credibility.

What you will find on our website is up-to-date information about services, downloads of services and sermons, material to help you grow in faith and an invitation to join in. You can also find out about how to hire the parish centre and what it costs to get married here. But that is absolutely not our priority, nor, as we have discovered, the priority of visitors to our site.

I recently visited a website in southern Europe of a church I used to attend as a student. The only information it gave me beyond the basics was for foreign nationals wanting to get married. In the marketplace of faith on the internet, that is simply not good enough. Visitors to our parish websites – whatever their initial reasons for visiting – need to be beguiled across the threshold to explore more and maybe discover the stirrings of a faith long forgotten or the kindling of something new.

A parish website may well start life as a simple, local attempt to share information – and it is good for that. It is one of many platforms through which as leaders we seek to make sure the vision is communicated and that people are challenged to respond. But there is much more here. The web these days is where people in their millions are actively seeking.

If our website speaks of a community that is open and of a faith worth sharing, we have invited our visitors to take the first step. Of course, if they are bold enough to try us out, the promises we offer need to be true.

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TO DO

Try to visit your church as a stranger and see what it tells you

Explore websites that you like and loathe to learn what you want to do and what you don't want to do on your website

If you have a website, make sure you are tracking who visits it and why