Ministry in a Digital World: Establishing a Multidimensional Web Presence
By Mark Simpson


Abstract
A multidimensional web presence is essential for a church or ministry organization in a digital world. A web site alone is no longer sufficient. In addition to maintaining an online ministry identity, developing an information network and providing places for community through social networking are also essential dimensions of a web presence. A multidimensional approach expands the opportunities for a ministry to create a dialogue with those both within and outside the faith community. Strategies are offered to help simplify the development and maintenance of a multidimensional web presence.

The Presence of Ministry in a Digital World
In his message for the 44th World Communications Day, Pope Benedict XVI challenged the clergy to see digital media and the World Wide Web as opportunities to broaden the presence and ministry of the Church to the world:

> The spread of multimedia communications and its rich “menu of options” might make us think it sufficient simply to be present on the Web, or to see it only as a space to be filled. Yet priests can rightly be expected to be present in the world of digital communications as faithful witnesses to the Gospel, exercising their proper role as leaders of communities which increasingly express themselves with the different “voices” provided by the digital marketplace. Priests are thus challenged to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, websites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis. (Benedictus XVI 2010)

Advancements with digital communications present the church with opportunities for ministry that were not feasible with traditional print media and its associated costs and limited circulation. Establishing a digital footprint on the World Wide Web today can be done virtually for free and make the church accessible to a global audience.

Simply having a ministry web site is no longer enough to establish a web presence. Today it is important to have a multidimensional approach that includes not only an information network, but a social network as well:
Once upon a time, a business would put up a website with its contact information, and that was the beginning and end of its web presence.

Those days are long gone. Savvy marketers today are very aware that a multidimensional approach is essential if one hopes to build a strong and responsive web presence. (Brauner 2009)

But taking advantage of these online opportunities can be daunting to the technically challenged or those not experienced with managing a web presence. At first glance, creating a church web site, posting messages on a ministry weblog, or utilizing social networking sites can seem too complicated to the pastor or church leader. But creating a digital footprint on the Web can be broken down into manageable activities that most any user of the Internet can follow. The following strategies are offered as one way to help simplify the development and maintenance of a multidimensional web presence for a church or ministry organization.

**Register a Domain Name to Establish an Online Identity**

The first step in creating a multidimensional web presence is to select a domain name that identifies the church or ministry organization on the Web. Visitors access a web site through a web browser by entering the domain name as a URL such as: http://www.commongroundjournal.org. Choosing a domain name is thus essential to differentiating a ministry from all other ministries on the Web (McFarlan 2009). A great deal of thought and research should go into the selection of a domain name, as it can serve as the core identifier used in creating all of the other account names involved with establishing a multidimensional web presence (see Table 1).

A domain name includes a *name label* to associate with the domain—often an organization’s name or variation thereof—followed by a dot and an *extension label* that classifies the content associated with the name (such as .com in the United States for commercial endeavors and .org for churches and organizations). International domain names add a *country code* following the extension label to identify the country of origin;

---

1 Beginners in developing online technologies may wish to explore the *In Easy Steps* series of books to help them get started (www.ineasysteps.com). Intermediate developers may find the Peachpit Press *Visual QuickStart Guides* especially helpful, as they are built around step-by-step instructions and illustrations (www.peachpit.com). Experienced developers may enjoy any of the New Riders (www.peachpit.com), O’Reilly (www.oreilly.com), or QUE (www.informit.com) books for their advanced techniques.
the U.S. does not use the country code. Thus for the CanDoSpirit Network in the United States, the name label “candospirit” with the .org extension label results in the domain name www.candospirit.org.

For ministry organizations in the United States it is wise to register a name label as both .com and .org domain names, as Web users often search for web sites using the .com extension first. Registering both domain names also prevents others from capitalizing on an organization’s name or posting inappropriate content under that name. It thus eliminates potential confusion or embarrassment for the web user who enters the correct name label but with the wrong extension. Different extension labels may be more common in other countries. Therefore the domain names registered should be for the extensions most commonly used in the ministry’s country.

**Table 1. Domain Name Propagation in a Coordinated Multidimensional Web Presence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry Name</th>
<th>Ministry Basics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Domain Name   | www.ministrybasics.com  
|               | www.ministrybasics.org |
| Google Site   | https://sites.google.com/site/ministrybasics/ |
| Blogger Name  | http://ministrybasicsblog.blogspot.com* |
| Twitter Account Name | @MinistryBasics |
| Facebook Name | Ministry Basics |
| YouTube Name  | MinistryBasics |

*MinistryBasics.blogspot.com was already in use and not available—adding “blog” to the name “ministrybasics” was the simplest alternative for the unavailable name

The name label in a domain name should be as short as possible, making it easier to remember. Longer names are easy to misspell, and may be cumbersome to use in e-mail addresses or posting messages on social networks. If a desired domain name has already been registered by others (e.g., firstbaptist.org), a variation on the ministry name and its location or affiliation may be an alternative choice (e.g., fbcnewburgh.org or

---

2 Although the domain name and related accounts are registered with the services indicated, they were not yet in operation at the time this article was written.
firstchurchabc.org). It is not unusual to have to explore several variations of a ministry name label before finding one that is still available for registration as both a .com and .org domain name.

Registering a domain name is simple and relatively inexpensive. The availability of a domain name can be researched using the WHOIS database of registered domain names, which can be accessed through many domain registrars such as Network Solutions (www.networksolutions.com). Once registered, it is very important to be sure to renew the domain name annually before it expires. Otherwise—even if a ministry is actively using it—the domain name becomes available for anyone else to purchase. The importance of on-time renewal of domain names cannot be stressed enough!

A church or ministry organization should register a domain name even if it will not be used for establishing a web site. For example, many churches use free web space such as provided by Google Sites, where the ministry’s name label is part of Google’s domain name (as in https://sites.google.com/site/ministrybasics/ for the organization Ministry Basics). Even though Ministry Basics used Google Sites to host their web pages, they still registered the ministrybasics.com and .org domain names for future use. Remember, establishing a multidimensional web presence involves creating other account names that are easier to remember if they are similar to the domain name. A church or ministry organization should reserve and preserve their ministry identity through its name label now, as a domain name or other related account names may not be available later when web presence needs change in the future.

Create a Web Site that Promotes Ministry Opportunities

A critical dimension of a multidimensional web presence is the ministry web site. The appearance and content of a web site, and particularly the home page, gives visitors a first impression of the quality of the ministry. A quality web site should seek to provide users with essential resources and information that can enhance the ministry experience and increase the awareness of ministry opportunities.

Having registered a domain name, a church or ministry should determine whether or not to pay for a web hosting company to host the ministry web site, or utilize free web site space such as that available from Google Sites (http://sites.google.com). Using a web hosting company requires a monthly fee, but allows an organization to use their
registered domain name, setup numerous ministry and staff e-mail accounts under that name, and make available a broad variety of web-based resources. Having a web site at a registered domain name looks more formal and professional, and clearly establishes the identity of the organization online. Using a free web hosting company such as that provided by Google Sites offers attractive and easy to use web page design tools, but is more limited in functionality than a hosted web site. Free web hosting also does not provide a ministry with dedicated e-mail addresses using the registered domain name. For example, the free Google site would have a single e-mail address such as ministrybasicsweb@gmail.com rather than multiple e-mail accounts such as pastor@ministrybasics.org, churchoffice@ministrybasics.org, and so on as needed by ministry leadership.

Whether using a paid or free web site, a clean, current, and consistent appearance for each web page is essential (Tindal 2009). The appearance and structure of a ministry web site creates a lasting first impression that draws or drives away visitors to the ministry, and encourages or discourages use of the online resources made available. Thus the content on a ministry web site should be kept up-to-date, especially the information on the home page. Announcements about ministries long since past do not leave a positive impression on visitors to the web site and do not keep users informed about current opportunities.

No matter the layout chosen for the web site, key information about the ministry should be easily accessible from the home page through a single-click (very important!) of a navigation button or hyperlink to another page on the site. The essential information that should be accessible through links on the home page appears in Table 2.

In designing the home page it is often helpful to think of the first screen of information—what is visible before scrolling down the page—as being equivalent to what appears “above-the-fold” in a printed newspaper. The first full screen of a home page is perhaps the most important “real estate” of the whole web site. It functions as the current headline that seeks to draw people to the church or ministry, just as the top of the front page of a newspaper entices people to read it. Thus it is important to keep the information above-the-fold: A–Attractive, B–Brief, C–Current, and D–Descriptive.
Table 2. Essential Home Page Links on a Ministry Web Site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Link</th>
<th>Information Retrieved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| About Us     | WHO you are—a brief history of the ministry and denominational affiliation, if any  
              | WHAT you believe—a brief doctrinal statement or core beliefs and practices  
              | WHEN you meet—a list of regularly scheduled services; also a link to a calendar of events (e.g., create a free Google Calendar of ministry opportunities)  
              | WHERE you are located—a link to text directions and map to the organization (e.g., MapQuest); the address and phone number should also appear prominently on the home page  
              | WHY be involved in your ministry—a drop-down list of links to web pages describing your ministry opportunities  
              | HOW to reach you by phone, postal mail, and e-mail—provide staff member specific e-mail addresses, and provide an all purpose e-mail contact e.g., info@ministrybasics.org |

In the footer at the bottom of the home page, indeed at the bottom of each web page on the ministry web site, a copyright line should appear. The copyright identifies the organization as the originator of the material on the web page. It also serves as an indicator of how current the information on the page is. Thus articles or sermons may appropriately display a copyright date of a past year when the information was posted, whereas the home page should always display the current year. The general rule for copyright information is to use the copyright symbol and the word Copyright followed by the year and the organization name, ending with a period, as in: © Copyright 2010 CanDoSpirit Network. If copyright permissions need to be described, the word “Copyright” should be linked to a separate web page that describes those permissions. The organization’s name, if made into a hyperlink, should take you to the organization’s home page, not the copyright page.

**Utilize Blogging to Expand Ministry Outreach**

In addition to a web site, another important dimension of a multidimensional web presence is the development of a ministry weblog (more commonly referred to as simply
a blog). Although a blog site can contain many of the same pieces of information contained on a ministry web site, its purpose is different. A blog is a form of personal instant publishing of ideas, opinions, or commentary on topics of interest to the author. Blog postings are usually messages that are time and date stamped (Farkas 2006, 14), and presented in chronological order with the most current message appearing at the top of the blog web page (Stone 2003, 9). Links to other resources or archived messages usually appear in a side column (Stone 2003, 9).

Blogging has changed the way in which information, and particularly news, is disseminated (Hewitt 2005). Broadcasting news is no longer limited to official media outlets—now anyone with access to the World Wide Web can create professional looking content to express their views and opinions. For ministry purposes, a blog site can serve as a way to reach individuals whom might not visit the ministry web site or organization’s physical facilities.

Blogging allows ministry leadership to quickly communicate information, perspectives, and positions about a topic with the potential for others to comment on it. What makes a blog so attractive is the immediacy of the communication. Unlike a web page where news and commentary may need to be passed along to a web master to format and upload on a revised web page, a blog message can be posted immediately by any user with the appropriate access rights to the blog site. The beauty of blogging is that a ministry leader can comment on news and events that are occurring now, rather than having to wait until a scheduled ministry service. A blog thus becomes a great outreach tool for addressing current issues and events while pointing visitors to corresponding ministries and resources. Blogging makes it literally possible to expand the proclamation, education, and edification ministries of the church world-wide.

Individual messages or blogs are similar to an editorial in a newspaper. The author of the blog is the editor who posts his or her perspective as a message upon which others may then make comments. Comments may be anonymous or require a person to login as a subscriber to the blog site. Either way the comments usually can be moderated for appropriateness by the editor (i.e., edited, hidden, or deleted). Comments on a specific blog posting are often accessed through a link below the message so as to not detract from the message itself. A blog is thus structurally organized and displayed slightly different from the threaded hierarchy of messages used in an online discussion forum.
Blogger by Google (www.blogger.com) and WordPress (www.wordpress.com) are two commonly used free blog site providers. Both blog sites provide web page templates to use in formatting the layout of a blog attractively. This feature makes the development and management of a blog easier without having to have knowledge of web design principles or web page authoring skills.

For the more adventurous, podcasting (short for combining the words “iPod” and “broadcasting”) has become popular for those wishing to publish ideas, opinions, or commentary in video or audio format rather than a text-oriented blog (Farkas 2006, 2-3). Originally intended for use on portable media devices like the iPod, podcasts have become a way of delivering audio and video commentary to virtually any electronic device having access to the World Wide Web.

A podcast may be an audio or video presentation as lengthy as a sermon or as short as the reading of a devotion. Unlike a regular text-based blog, podcasting involves the use of a microphone and/or web camera to create the media file that will be accessed online.

Podcasts are typically delivered from the Web online via data streaming of the media to an appropriate media-capable device, which requires continuous access to the Internet throughout the podcast, or downloading of the whole podcast file to be uploaded later on such a device. Because the bandwidth involved in accessing or downloading large files can be problematic for some users, shorter commentary in smaller file sizes is a good principle to remember when creating a podcast.

**Utilize Social Networking to Establish a Ministry Community**

An increasingly popular dimension of a multidimensional web presence is the use of online social networking. Where blogging has the potential to expand ministry outreach through information and instruction, social networking has the potential to demonstrate ministry care and community through conversation and interaction. Social networking allows a ministry to show love and support for the needs of others through the posting of words of encouragement, and sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences from daily living.
Twitter

Social networking encompasses an increasingly broad range of online service providers. Twitter, for example, provides a way to send short text messages called “tweets” of up to 140 characters to a Twitter account. Account settings determine whether these tweets are restricted in access to subscribers to the account only or are made available to any Twitter visitor. Tweeting allows for the virtually instantaneous sharing of ideas or needs with those following developments within the organization. It is also a handy way to alert others quickly to changes in ministry opportunities or announce new ministries as they become available. Just as businesses use Twitter to gather information from customers or quickly broadcast important news, a church can use Twitter to keep the ministry community informed of special events, or invite feedback on ministry experiences.

Great care should be taken if using Twitter to share prayer requests. It is essential to remember that matters of privacy must be taken into account in posting information on the Internet—therefore it is always wisest to assume that even messages on sites with restricted access may be able to be read by anyone on the Web. While good intentioned, sharing prayer requests online about health, financial, legal, or personal matters along with the person’s name or under an inferred relationship may be a breach of confidentiality and even pose a security problem for the individual.

Facebook

Facebook is another popular way of building community through social networking. Using Facebook, a ministry organization can promote the connection and interaction of friends and family within the community through informal conversations and online activities. Other individuals can also be invited to join the community as a way to reach out to them and build supportive relationships (Internet Evangelism Day, n.d.).

Like Twitter, information can be shared in Facebook about life within the ministry organization. The character limit on the length of messages posted is higher than

---

3 Text messaging on a mobile phone (texting for short) is also a form of social networking. For purposes of ministry, texting can provide an additional way for people to be part of a community even when physically apart from one another. Texting should always be done under safe conditions.
Twitter and has gradually been increasing, though there are limits on the number of messages than can be sent to avoid spamming other users. Users of Facebook can form smaller social networks of family and friends for sharing and communicating common interests. Facebook is a great tool to help the ministry community stay connected between meetings and services, and even reconnect with those who may now be at a distance.

**Be Alert to Ministry Opportunities Through Other Online Technologies**

Web sites, blogs, and social networks are just some of the dimensions available in a multidimensional web presence. Other online applications such as YouTube and Moodle, for example, also provide a way for networking the local and larger ministry community.

**YouTube**

YouTube is a web site designed for the sharing of videos (www.youtube.com). While many videos uploaded to YouTube reflect personal interests and experiences, training and informational videos created by academic and business professionals are also quite common.

Ministry organizations may find it useful to create short YouTube videos that can be used in teacher training or leadership development endeavors. For example, short videos could be posted that teach theological principles, or demonstrate ministry skills and faith practices. Since the uploaded videos become available for others to use as well, the outreach potential for the ministry organization is expanded.

**Moodle**

Offering online courses is a way for a ministry to provide opportunities for structured and self-directed teaching and training. Moodle is one of several courseware management systems available for delivering and managing online courses (www.moodle.org).

Moodle classrooms can contain web links, downloadable documents, media files, discussion forums, chat rooms, wikis, surveys, quizzes, workshops, etc. The interface is fairly simple to use, and the software is available for free. Ministries seeking to expand
teaching and training events beyond traditional face-to-face settings may find Moodle the solution to creating an attractive and interactive online learning environment.

Most ministries will find it necessary to seek a service provider to host the free Moodle software. Moodle therefore provides a list of Moodle Partners who are recognized and approved service providers (www.moodle.com).

Conclusion

Online technologies grow more numerous and powerful every day as enhancements and services are added to the resources available on the World Wide Web. With each new service comes a potential new dimension for expanding the web presence of a ministry organization.

Everyone eventually develops preferences in the selection of service providers and online applications used in creating a multidimensional web presence. Only the current core and common dimensions are presented here; others are available and will invariably become available in the years ahead. Even so, the core concepts of maintaining an online ministry identity, developing an information network, and providing places for community through social networking are likely to remain essential dimensions. The opportunities for expanding ministry via the Web are virtually unlimited.

Reference List


### Suggested Reading


### About the Author

Mark Simpson is Dean of Innovative Learning at Trinity College of the Bible and Theological Seminary. He also owns and operates EDCOT, a small web-based company that explores the opportunities and challenges of Education with Digital Courseware and Online Technologies.