

**THE NIDA INSTITUTE FOR BIBLICAL
SCHOLARSHIP**

OF THE AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY

ASSESSING CHURCH WEBSITES

**STUDYING BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE
MINISTRY**

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INTRODUCTION

Project Overview:

The Best Practices in Online Ministry Initiative set out to evaluate the websites of churches that make use of the Internet as an extension of their ministry, in an effort to identify the “best practices” available online.

Background

The Initiative was informed and motivated by a study produced by the Pew Internet and American Life Project titled, “Wired churches, wired temples: Taking congregations and missions into cyberspace”. The study surveyed over 1,300 congregations to inquire “how they built and use their websites, how congregations and leaders use email, and whether their use of Internet tools has helped the spiritual and everyday life of their members.” According to the authors of the report,

“ . . . the survey reveals that the Internet is being used by congregations to strengthen the faith and spiritual growth of their members, evangelize and perform missions in their communities and around the world, and perform a wide variety of pious and practical activities for their congregations. Many believe the Internet has helped these faith communities become better places.”

The Pew study reported that the majority of congregations are eager to use the Internet to increase their presence and visibility in their local communities and to explain their beliefs. Therefore, one-way communication features (e.g., posting sermons and basic information) are preferred to two-way or interactive communication features such as spiritual discussions, online prayer, etc..

The study found that many of the activities on the websites of those congregations that participated were exactly what one would expect (sermons, pictures and histories, maps and directions, meeting schedules and locations, basic activities of the church, etc.). Beyond these sorts of activities, however, the study found a broad range of other activities (use of email and online cards for recruitment, services and ministries for the deaf, gays, the homeless, diaspora Gypsies, communicating with members abroad, activities for teens, Bible trivia, games, graphics, college-level theology courses, and much more). Activities and services of a more personal nature were also represented (prayer request submissions, links for crisis counseling, etc.).

A number of questions and concerns framed and provided the impetus for the project:

1. What are appropriate units of analysis for developer, design, and user assessments?
2. What are appropriate methods of assessment?
 - a. Self-report
 - b. Observation
 - c. Interview
 - d. Other
3. What indicators may yield functional utility and exchange value for future online ministry practices?
 - a. Clarity
 - b. Consistence
 - c. Coherence
 - d. Functional value
 - e. Generative insights
 - f. Other
4. What can new or additional information contribute to online ministry practices?
5. What taxonomies have salience in the field today?

Members of the American Bible Society's ForMinistry.Com team approached the staff of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship asking us to identify and evaluate the websites of churches and denominations across the United States. Such an evaluation would involve

speaking with the pastors and those responsible for creating and maintaining the sites, and then developing a method for evaluating various aspects of each site.

Goal:

The goal of the project was to develop heuristics that would provide online ministry practitioners with tools and measures for assessing the functional, transactional, and intrinsic value of their work, while identifying best practices pertaining to online ministry.

Objectives:

1. Develop, test, and evaluate measures that capture developers' purposes and performance;
2. Identify and/or develop, test, and evaluate measures that capture users' performance, their ability to retain and transfer knowledge, the social consequences of use, and their satisfaction;
3. Provide relevant information to developers and users that identifies discrepancies and gaps between producers' purposes, computer-mediated-communication (CMC) design and functions, and users' performance;
4. Provide relevant information to researchers, educators, and CMC practitioners regarding cognitive and social consequences of use;
5. Build and/or enhance capacity for planning, executing, and evaluating CMC for religious use; and
6. Help developers and users identify, clarify, and revise purposes for using CMC related to their mission and prerequisite tasks.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

What are the internal dynamics and processes that are at work in online ministry operations? How can we document standards of excellence pertaining to the ways by which Christian religious organizations implement online ministry? Six hypotheses were stated during the initial stages of the study. They were:

1. There are some exemplary online ministry practices that can be used to increase the overall quality and effectiveness of online ministry.
2. Important distinctions exist among online ministry participants—specifically, pastors, website designers and technicians, and content providers.

3. Distinctions may emerge from issues such as how computer-mediated-communication redistributes the locus of authority among participants as they use and apply words, symbols, and meanings.
4. Online ministry practices, at present, are more informed by advances in technology than they are guided by theological understandings.
5. Currently, there is a low degree of integration among the ministry objectives of pastors, website designers and technicians, and content editors/providers.
6. There is significant variation among online ministry practitioners related to human, material, and financial resources allocated to online ministry.

Limitations imposed by scope and focus of survey

The general thrust of the present study was exploratory. It attempted to gather and analyze data in ways that would contribute to or advance ways of understanding the practice of online religious ministry. Before conducting an observational investigation of best practices, we recognized the need to first map the terrain, even with the apparent limitations of self-reports. Three previous studies were conducted that served as a knowledge base for our work. They were studies conducted by Pew, mentioned above, Hartford Institute of Religion Research, and the Barna Group. The American Bible Society (ABS) study was distinguished from the studies previously mentioned, in that our research used a qualitative rather than a quantitative method of investigation. Our interest was to add depth, insight, and meaning to the previous research, specifically as it related to the possibility of capturing either a new or emerging ministry paradigm.

PART ONE: DEVELOPING SURVEYS, COLLECTING DATA, AND CHOOSING SAMPLES

DATA COLLECTION (THE SURVEY)

The Survey (Type)

A variety of survey sources and multiple methods were used to gather and collect data about exemplary Internet practices used by religious and faith-based institutions. Analysis of church, denomination, or faith-based websites, self-report questionnaires, and face-to-face interviews were three assessment strategies used for exploring best practices in online ministry.

Description of Content

Triangulation of data sources was used to collect and understand the ministry goals, objectives, strategies, and procedural operations of online ministries. This involved interviewing people of different ranks who were associated with or responsible for the online ministry. Regarding the self-report assessment strategy, three questionnaires were designed—one for the Technical Leader, one for the Pastor or Church Leader, and one for the Content Leader/Editor.

Sample Questionnaire (Technical Leader)

1. General
 - a. What top two or three concerns and issues led your church to develop the site?
 - b. What top two or three goals do you, as the technical expert, have for this site?
2. Technical: Software
 - a. List the software applications you used to develop the site.
 - b. What reasons led you to choose these applications?
3. Technical: Hardware
 - a. List the hardware you use for your site.
 - b. What led you to choose these solutions?
4. Visual Design
 - a. List three factors that were important to the visual design of the site.
 - b. How often do you change or refresh the design (never; every 6 months; every year; other)?
5. Information Architecture

- a. List three key features about the information architecture or recommended paths to your site features.
6. Costs
 - a. What do you estimate the cost to have been for launching this site, considering both volunteer time and skills, as well as outside, paid vendor help (under \$1,000; \$1,000-\$5,000; \$5,000-\$10,000; over \$10,000)?
 - b. What do you estimate the annual cost to be for maintaining and hosting the site (under \$1,000; \$1,000-\$5,000; \$5,000-\$10,000; over \$10,000)?
7. Return on Ministry and Investment
 - a. List three returns on ministry your church hopes to receive from this site.
 - b. List three returns on investment your church hopes to receive from this site.
8. Benchmarks and Success Measurements
 - a. List three benchmarks that guided your development of this website.
 - b. List three ways your church plans to measure the success of this site.
9. Tools and Services
 - a. What are the three most popular tools and services on your site?
 - b. List three new tools and services you plan to add in the next year.

The questionnaires for the Church Leader and Content Editor followed a similar format and asked many of the same questions. However, certain modifications and additions were made. For example, Pastors were asked to comment on the following:

- What they would have done differently now that they are online and have a history;
- What online achievements they were most satisfied with up to this point;
- The audiences they hoped to reach;
- The messages they hoped to communicate;
- What methods they used for evaluation and feedback; and
- What they identified as constraints to the success of their site and how they hoped to overcome them.

Content leader-editors were asked to comment on the following:

- The top concerns they bring to the site;
- The top functions and roles that the Bible and Bible resources play on the site;
- The steps they go through to provide Bible content;
- The ways that ministry and ministry resources play a role on the site; and

- The ways in which they assess the effectiveness of Bible and ministry content on the site.

DESIGN & SAMPLING

Description, justification, limitations, and threats to internal and external validity

Two research strategies were employed to gather and secure data. First staff identified, scanned, and then analyzed a variety of websites. This work drew from existing research strategies that had been used by other research groups. Second, staff designed questionnaires and conducted field interviews with key church and/or denominational leaders and website staff. When available, and if different, content providers were interviewed as well.

The website research strategy used a “typical case sample” rationale and procedure. The aim was to collect data from existing sites that would constitute a common profile on online features, design elements, and content strategies. We envisioned this data would be helpful to persons entering this emerging field of ministry.

The field interview strategy employed a “maximum variation sampling” approach and rationale. Maximum variation samples provide information across a diverse set of online ministry participants and programs. Heterogeneity of sites would yield a broad picture of the state of online ministry. Furthermore, if patterns were discovered over distinct and varied online ministry sites, it would add to the significance of the findings.

Sampling Methods: Description, Explanation, and Justification

We began by identifying over 150 websites representing churches, denominations, and faith-based organizations. Documentation of online practices took place through an initial analysis of websites. Website features and elements that were examined included: Bible Content, Community Content, Services Content, Links, Audience, Ministerial/Personal Content, Doctrinal or Belief Statements, Member Content/Church Life Information, Navigation, Tools, Design Parameters, Designer Issues, Site Integrity, and Software Issues.

From the websites reviewed, cases were identified and selected to participate in the second phase of the study. During this phase, online ministry leaders and practitioners were asked to

complete questionnaires and participate in face-to-face interviews. A research team of the American Bible Society issued letters of invitation to pastors and leaders that introduced the study and solicited their participation. The invitation identified the primary goal of the project as an effort to document and evaluate best practices on the web. Contacts were made via phone and email as well. Participating churches were promised a copy of the final report and a \$200 gift certificate good for use on Scripture resources from the ABS product catalog.

Churches who agreed to participate were asked to complete preliminary questionnaires—one each for the pastor, website content editor, and the technical expert. Leaders were encouraged to invite members of the congregation who were instrumental in the planning, building, implementation, and maintenance of the website to join in the interview. Finally, churches were asked to sign a participation agreement, which included an outline of the contours of the study, what they could expect to take place during the interview process, how information would and would not be used, and a statement that all participation was voluntary.

Sample Size: Explanation and Justification

Person-to-person interviews were conducted with approximately 40 churches.

Potential Biases Resulting from Sampling Methods

In order to minimize coder bias, all identifying characteristics were removed from the interview transcripts and each was assigned a number. Moreover, when it was time to compare the evaluations of the websites against our analyses of the interviews, it was decided that separate groups would be responsible for coding each component so that coders would not be likely to analyze the website based on what they had already read in the interview transcript.

PART TWO: ANALYZING INTERVIEWS, DEVELOPING A WEBSITE CODING MANUAL, AND EVALUATING WEBSITES

External subject-matter-experts in the field of computer-mediated-communications (CMC), in addition to ABS research staff, were used to develop and critique the conceptual

heuristic tools to be used to analyze interview data. This group included a research professor in the field of CMC, a doctoral student with specialization in CMC, and a doctoral student with expertise in literary analysis. A manual for coding, analyzing, and interpreting data was developed from the efforts of this group. ABS staff used this coding instrument in work toward the establishment of rater reliability and as a means to train coders for data coding and analysis. The coding manual was organized around the following issues:

- Organizational Analyses
 - influence
 - communication
 - goal orientation
 - socialization (education)
 - routinization
 - desired institutional image
 - ethics and morals
 - community
 - organization

- Discourse Analyses
 - authority
 - genre and style
 - subject matter expert
 - validation
 - fact/fiction
 - truth/myth/poetry
 - degree of shared reality
 - codes of participation

- Technology Analyses
 - controls
 - networks and relations
 - metaphors and labels
 - commitment
 - relativity continuum
 - obsolescence
 - reality views
 - gender
 - socialization (education)
 - communication
 - rituals
 - community
 - self-measures
 - wiredness
 - rhetoric

- genre/style

In turn, staff used the coding manual to re-analyze church websites. Three church/faith-based websites were used to refine the coding for initial application. The initial version of this manual analyzed four areas: navigation, site necessities, purpose and audience, and content. inter-coder reliability was very high. Over 75% of the answers were identical between coders.

RESULTS, CONCLUSION, AND NEXT STEPS

The combination of our research from the initial website review, the interviews, and the second wave of website analysis has yielded several observations. First, there were wide-ranging differences among church and faith-based online ministry websites. There were both laudable successes and lamentable disappointments. Determination of both successes and disappointments is based on the four areas of analysis, navigation, site necessities, purpose and audience, and content.

Exemplary websites, based on our findings, did not occur by chance. Recruitment of personnel with technical expertise, high expectations of pastoral leaders, and high commitment of web designers and content providers were basic features of best practices for effective delivery of CMC. Effective sites used many other best practices, too. These sites were easy for beginners and first-time visitors to navigate. First-time visitors needed less than two minutes to learn the functional layout and logic of the design, and the sites generally offered a consistent navigation plan which was repeated on each page.

Second, variation was observed regarding the timeliness of data and the degree to which sites encouraged or discouraged two-way interaction with end-users. Although we allowed for evaluating the routine refreshment of sites on a scale from daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly to never, the weekly update was the common best practice pertaining to site refresh of new content. Some sites were observed that had no explicit information regarding the update of information and no evidence that a refresh of content had occurred since the information was initially posted.

Third, several sites provided some form of user feedback or dialogue, but one-way transmission of information—from source to audience—was more typical than sites which offered two or more ways of interaction. Within our coding schema, best practice possibilities may have included (a) mechanisms for reporting errors, offering questions and providing technical comments; (b) users responding to sponsor’s polls; (c) users discussing polls with sponsor or with other site visitors, or (d) sites providing vehicles for discussion, including use of live chat rooms. While a small number of sites facilitated user interaction with sponsors, no sites observed facilitated users interaction with other users.

Finally, initial observations presented in this report discuss one emergent, but unanticipated content pattern, the limited use of biblical material. Because we were assessing church and faith-based online ministry best practices, we assumed that the importance of Scripture in churches would result in a prominent display and use of Scripture through computer-mediated-communication. Across the course of our research—initial website reviews, questionnaires and interviews, and second assessment of websites—we observed minimum, superficial presentation of the Bible and/or biblical materials. Common practices included use of Scripture references interspersed on the landing page and/or front page of “new sections.” For example, sites displayed a Bible verse with or without an attending biblical reference. During interviews with web designers or content editors, they perceived the use of Scripture to be sufficient since it was embedded in sermons or through other writings of church leaders.

While the use of technology to advance the mission and ministry of the churches and faith-based organizations is not new, use of computer-mediated-communication technology is a relatively new means for communicating religious concerns. Recent research by Pew, Hartford Institute of Religion Research, and Barna offered an overview of the beginning stages of this development. Our current research attempted to recognize and build upon those past efforts while contributing information-rich data that was informed by the day-to-day practices of online ministry teams. Our view was that although questions were being asked regarding online ministry activities, there was little evidence of any coherent, conceptual, or theoretical framework for broadly understanding these activities as they pertain to

communicating the mission, messages, and meanings of ministry. This research was conducted with this understanding in mind.

From the first century of the Common Era to the present moment, a central duty of the church is communication of the *good news* that comes to it through Jesus Christ. Transmission of the church's mission and ministry always involves acts of translating its message(s), that is, carrying meaning across cultures. If the technology that generates computer-mediated-communication makes any contribution, it clearly and forcibly accentuates the opportunities and challenges associated with carrying religious words, signs, and symbols forth to all nations and nationalities of the world.