

**Reflections on
Web Wisdom**

**Technology in Ministry
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2/25/06

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One concept Alexander and Tate examine in their book Web Wisdom are the "keys to information quality in advocacy web pages" (Tate, 58). These keys seemed to best fit the criteria of a church website. Church websites meet several of the criteria the authors list as pertaining to these types of websites including, "1. Seek to influence people's opinion on something?" This opinion would be where they go to church or perhaps how they feel or think of this church.

Next "5. Promote a cause?" This cause could be to bring visitors to a greater understanding of who Jesus Christ is or the position of the local church as it pertains to this process. Examples of this would be worship services, special concerts, Bible study and prayer group opportunities. This cause could also be to encourage greater involvement in church events which impact the life of the community. Examples of this would include feeding the homeless, attending a rally to support a Christian cause or even gathering articles for those in need.

Our church became a drop-off point for a local Katrina relief effort a few months ago. During this time our website contained valuable information that advocated the relief effort. There were lists of what could be brought, needed priorities, drop off times listed and even pictures of volunteers loading the truck.

This brings to mind another way that church websites can be utilized as advocacy pages. "3. Encourage contributions or money?" While my church does not do this, I am aware of several churches that do. A user can simply log onto their website and click on a button that takes them to a secure transaction page. A church member or web visitor can then enter the appropriate information and the electronic plate is passed. I am also aware of churches that provide parishioners with the ability to setup an automated withdrawal each month from their bank accounts so even if they miss a Sunday, they do not miss an opportunity to participate in

the offering. A church website could contain information on this and other electronic opportunities to give, thus encouraging greater participation in financial gifts. There are some church websites that even allow congregants to check their yearly giving records online.

The next way in which I believe church websites could be identified as advocacy pages is "6. Attempt to increase membership in an organization?" While there will always be debate regarding how large a church should be or in some cases if church membership should exist at all; I believe the Great Commission requires the church to take on this task. Not only to grow in size, but also to allow those within the congregation to find ways to get better involved in the many ongoing opportunities that become a part of the life of the church.

Finally, "7. Provide a point of contact for like minded people?" This, in my opinion, is a possibility for church websites but because churches often do not see themselves as advocacy sites this area goes largely untapped. Church websites will usually have a small page that lists the names and email addresses of their pastors, but as I read through this chapter the words "Is there a listing of the names and qualifications of any individuals who are responsible for overseeing the organization" (Tate, 62)? This struck me as defining more than just the pastor, but also many of the ministry leaders in our church. I found myself wondering if a church website could really become a place for like minded people to connect and what that might look like.

Perhaps being a point of contact would mean adding moderated discussion boards for people to connect on and discuss the work of the church in. I can only imagine how many senior pastors would groan as they consider the can of worms this might open. Who would moderate these forums? And what boundaries would be set for their use? But on the other hand, I wonder what people might find each other in agreement and decide to get together for coffee or pray for one another. As a Pastor to Singles I spend much time trying to encourage healthy friendships


that bring like-minded people together. When I see two single moms with teenage sons that have each recently faced a bitter divorce, it becomes my prayer that they will be able to comfort each other. In some cases I have had the opportunity to introduce an older and younger single mom to each other and found that the older woman was able to pray and offer support and advice to the younger mother and cared for her in ways that ministered much more deeply than I ever could have. These types of interactions cause me to wonder how a church website could foster communication between like-minded people. Perhaps it is a risky proposition for the church to consider but I believe these interactions could have a large impact in the ministry context in which I serve.

One final observation from this chapter was the phrase "Is it clear what issue is being promoted" (Tate, 62)? As I examined the "Objectivity Checklist," I found this to be a key concept that church websites rarely review. What is the key thing that churches are trying to convey? In many cases I believe churches may be trying to communicate too many things on their websites. Come visit us, get more involved, do you know Christ, be involved in caring for others, go to summer camp, meet our staff and tithe online are only a few that come to mind.

I wonder if the church website viewed as an advocacy site and narrowed slightly to follow the guidelines found in this chapter would be more effective. The alternative seems to be to consider the church website a "Business Web Page" and simply "promote a product or service," "provide customer support," "provide a company's catalog available online" and "provide documentation about a product" (Tate, 63). However, I do not think the Apostles would think very much of this second option. I recall a quote that Dr. Walther enjoys regarding the writing of the Gospels.

"An objective dispassionate reception is the last thing the Gospel writers would have wanted their books to receive. We are free to

accept, reject, belittle, or embrace, but whatever our response, we ought to understand what those books intend to do: they intend to convert us."

Should the work of the church be very different in its intentions from the writers of the Gospels? Are church websites simply business sites or should they really serve a greater mission? Alexander and Tate say "An advocacy web page is one with the primary purpose of influencing public opinion" (Tate, 59)  believe this should be the case with the church web page and the utilization of the checklist these author's provide is a good first step in making some practical changes to the church web page in practical ways.

