

**Essay Title: Our New Front Door**

**Audio Essay: Disc 2 track 2**

When InterConnections wrote a lengthy article about church websites in 1998 an estimated 40 to 60 percent of our congregations had them. Now the figure is over 90 percent.

Increasingly, it's the way that visitors find us. Many congregations report that most of their visitors, even if they've learned about the church or fellowship in another way, have checked it out on the Internet before making that first visit. Websites are our new front door. They not only tell visitors about our theology, they tell them what kind of service to expect and even what to wear.

And just like a front door, it's important that a website be welcoming. That means it must be attractive and up to date. But not so attractive that it's hard to read, says Deborah Weiner, director of the UUA Office of Electronic Communication. Says Weiner: "The key to good website design is ease of navigation and clear information, which is attractively, but not elaborately, presented."

She offers some tips for websites: Focus on the elements that a seeker from outside your congregation will be looking for. These include the name of the congregation, its location, time of service, a brief history, programs offered, and something that shows what the "inner soul" of the congregation is about.

Weiner notes: "I particularly love what some congregations have done to create a sense of welcome and show their character through their websites. Web pages should be welcoming and inviting, with materials that are kept up to date and are focused on basic information rather than exhaustive detail, which newcomers don't want or need."

One congregational Webmaster notes that some sites are too cluttered. He says, "You can look at some websites and make the assumption the designer thought that artistic design was more important than the information on the page."

It's important to have written procedures that cover who may add information to the site. Also, write down the site's objectives and its rules and procedures, including when its Domain Name needs to be renewed and whom to call for technical support. Keep any passwords needed to operate and change the site in a separate confidential memo in the church office.

Be careful on websites to safeguard the privacy and safety of members. A website, unlike a printed newsletter, is open to the whole world. Here are some general website rules that most congregations follow: don't use any personal e-mail addresses without permission. Instead, use institutional aliases like *minister@firstchurch.org*. Also, websites should include no home addresses or phone numbers; no personal items about people in the hospital or on vacation. Likewise, the website is not the place for the newsletter item reminding folks that "the back door is frequently found unlocked . . ."

Secondly, keep information current. If you're not able to keep the website updated, keep it simple. Focus the website on your congregation's mission and goals, and take care not to use it for advertising personal services or expressing personal opinions. In short, use the UU Principles and the congregation's vision statements as a guide for everything that appears on the website.

Finally, make sure that the congregation itself owns the domain name or web address for its website. One Midwestern congregation got itself in difficulty when its Webmaster, who had registered the church's domain name in his own name, was asked to leave the church because of a personal issue. In retaliation, he hijacked the website, blocking church access to it, and he put negative material on the site. It took the church six months to regain control of its domain name and website. Also, make sure you don't let the domain name expire: there are people who look for these situations and then offer to sell the name back to you for an exorbitant amount.

For more information and resources, go to: *uua.org* and click on *Leaders*.

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