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Informing, inviting or ignoring? Understanding how English Christian churches use the internet.

by

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Glossary

Baptism/ christening

The ceremony in which a person is initiated into the Christian church, as a child or an adult. Can be either full immersion, or more commonly, water is poured on the head three times (in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit).

The Church – (upper case ‘C’)

This is shorthand for 'the established church.' It refers to the whole population of individuals, leaders, physical buildings and other assets that make up the organisation, for example the Church of England or the Methodist Connexion.

church (lower case ‘c’)

For the greater part of this study, 'a church' refers to a community of people under the leadership of a cleric, based in and around a physical building.

Clergy

Used to refer to all those who have been ordained. In this project, it is used to refer to leaders of all denominations.

Congregation

Those who attend services regularly at a specific physical church. For the purpose of the research, it is assumed that members of a congregation are people with an identified Christian faith.

Diocese, deanery, parish

A diocese is a geographical area representing a regional worshipping community in the Church of England and Catholic church. A diocese is then split further into archdeaconries, and then deaneries, or smaller regions. The equivalent in the Methodist church is a Circuit. Each deanery is split into parishes. Each parish has an

incumbent, although some parishes are joined with others under one priest and these are called *united benefices*.

Denominations

Denominations are different groups within the overall British Christian tradition. They vary on elements such as the importance of sacraments, the status of women priests, or whether infant baptism is acceptable. The four main denominations referred to are Catholic, Church of England or Anglican, Methodist and Baptist. These make up around 75% of the existing churches in Britain.

Ecclesial Identity

The political, spiritual and liturgical traditions of a church make up its identity.

Ecumenical

Describes activities intended to promote unity between different denominations.

Eucharist / Holy Communion

Eucharist is from the Greek for 'thanksgiving' and is one term used to refer to the sacrament of Holy Communion. This is the sharing of bread and wine in remembrance of the Last Supper. Also called *Mass* in Catholic traditions.

Evangelical

The technical definition is of a Protestant Christian church that emphasises the authority of the Bible and salvation through the personal acceptance of Jesus Christ. In practice this means evangelical churches tend to stress outreach, and will never assume they are preaching to the converted.

Evensong

A daily evening service in the Anglican Church. Also called Evening Prayer.

Fresh Expressions

“The creation of new congregations or churches which vary in ethos and style from the church which starts them. This is because they are designed to reach a different group of people than those already attending the original church.” Taken from <http://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/mission/missionevangalism/fresh-expressions.aspx>, accessed 25 March 2012.

Liturgy

A particular order or form of public service laid down by a Church. Baptist and Methodist churches have no set liturgy and each church defines its own approach.

Matins

A name for Morning Prayer.

Megachurch

The average US megachurch has a weekly attendance of at least 3,800 people (see <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html> accessed 2 September 2012).

Offices

Another term for the daily services at which canon law prescribes certain prayers to be said. Commonly, Morning and Evening prayer which are compulsory for ordained ministers in the Anglican Church.

Ordination

The process by which individuals are invested with authority as a member of the clergy – the positions which are ordained and the process by which ordination happens varies between denominations.

Parachurch

Concerned with faith or church business but outside of the formal structures.

PCC (Parochial Church Council)

A PCC has statutory responsibilities for the mission, finances and building of a church. It is made up of a mix of the church leader, who chairs the meeting, and elected lay representatives. The Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure 1956 and Synodical Government Measure 1969 (No. 2) set out the rules governing PCCs.

Pentecostal /Charismatic

Pentecostals believe in "manifestations of the Holy Spirit" which include signs and wonders such as gifts of healing, miraculous powers, discerning of spirits, tongues and interpretation of tongues. Pentecostal worship is characterised by emotional, lively expressions of worship.

Priest/ Vicar/ Rector/ incumbent/leader/ minister/ Priest-in-charge

The (usually) full-time, salaried, ordained leader of a particular church or small group of churches. For a full technical discussion of the differences between the different kinds of clergy, see <http://www.churchofenglandglossary.co.uk/> accessed 25 March 2012).

Rites of passage

Used to refer to baptisms, marriages, funerals – those points which mark transitions or significant events.

Sacrament

“An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” The two main sacraments in the Anglican Church are baptism and Holy Communion.

Seasons

The church year is divided into Seasons – principal examples are Lent and Advent but all weeks of the year have their own designation. The extent to which the seasons are observed varies between churches within the C of E and across denominations.

Superintendent

Methodist – leader of a group of churches.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how English Christian leaders and churches use the internet for personal and corporate communication, and looks for evidence of challenges to traditional understandings of authority arising from online communication. Early studies in this area suggested that online religion would cause enormous change but more recent studies reflect less polarised opinions. Religious people tend to use the internet to augment rather than replace practice of their faith, holding true for different religions globally. Leaders use the internet for a wide variety of religious information tasks.

The project uses a longitudinal website census, quantitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews. 400 churches in four English denominations (Baptist, Methodist, Anglican and Catholic) were surveyed over a three year period to establish if they published a website. 147 churches from the same four denominations, located in an area equivalent to Chelmsford Diocese, were assessed on 75 categories of information and their hyperlinks analysed.

Interviews with church leaders and interested parties helped foster understanding of why and how sites were created, and explored the leaders' personal use of the internet. The percentage of churches with a website increased over the survey period for all denominations. Content analysis showed that currency, extent and accessibility of information on websites varied, with some being out of date, others showing no contact details and few having specific information for newcomers to church.

Interview findings revealed perceptions of email overload, varying degrees of governance and control of websites by church leaders, and leaders' own use of the internet and social media. Interactivity was rare on church websites. Different levels

of expertise are mooted as reasons why control and governance varies between leaders. Perceptions of the internet may be influenced by moral panic. The influence of the age of congregations on adoption of social media, and the impact of volunteer webmasters are examined. Recommendations for churches planning to revisit or review their sites are included, limitations are noted and suggestions for further research made.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Introduction

This research is concerned with two influences on English society: the internet and religion. The internet is increasing its reach into daily lives. Traditional religious participation is declining. How the former affects the latter, and how the Christian church is responding, is the interaction under investigation.

Access to the internet is increasingly an indispensable part of daily life. Websites, blogs and email are now mainstream communication tools. The 2010 General Election in the UK demonstrated how journalists used social media as a legitimate source of news, and where political parties had social media strategies for voter engagement and participation (Newman 2011). The London 2012 Olympics were branded the 'digital Olympics' (O'Riordan 2012) and marked a point where new forms of media blended with established broadcasts. The BBC's television coverage reached 51.9 million people overall. In the same period the broadcaster recorded over 12 million requests for mobile video coverage, strongly suggesting that for the duration of the Games many people stayed connected to the coverage wherever they were (O'Riordan 2012).

2.18 billion people – a third of the population worldwide – are Christian (Hackett and Grim 2011, p9). In the United Kingdom, Christianity is still the religion that the majority identify with, even if regular Sunday attendances are in decline (National Centre for Social Research 2008, np). Recent statistics from the Church of England show that each year 70% of the population of England and Wales attend a church wedding, funeral or baptism, and 19% of primary school children are educated in church schools. As Church House points out in the report:

In a pluralistic society, Christian denominations continue to play a significant role in the life of the nation. (Archbishops' Council 2012, p1)

There are 15,919 Anglican churches in 12,500 parishes in England (Archbishops' Council 2012, p11). There are other Christian denominations, too, reflecting both the effect of earlier schisms and disagreements and also continued tolerance of dissent within a broader faith framework. Baptist, Methodist and Catholic churches together with the Church of England, make up 75% of English churches (Evangelical Alliance 2005).

That society has changed radically in the past generation is not in doubt. As far as the church is concerned, changes have included the decline in regular churchgoing, from 11.7% of the population in 1979 to 6.3% in 2005 (Brierly 2006, p12). The relatively recent ordination of women affected the composition of full-time leaders; and ongoing debates about the acceptability of women Bishops illustrates how the church is still regularly dealing with change and internal disagreement.

In the context of changes in the church and the popularity of online activities, this research sets out to investigate how more quotidian aspects of English churchgoing have been affected by expectations of organisations and individuals used to using the internet for reference information and interaction. In 2001, churches needed good advice on website design, publishing and communication (e.g. Blackmore, 2001). Parish churches may have a dominant physical presence in a community but it does not necessarily follow that their internet presence is, a decade later, of an equivalent standing. How have English Christian Churches risen to the challenges posed by a society moving online? (Lomborg and Ess 2012) indicate that since 2005, social media allowing consumption and contribution of content has become the most popular use of the internet, marking a change from static websites and

heralding the rise of the ‘produser’ – producer and user of content. Church communication may need to address this change and meet the needs of people who expect to be able to interact with, not just refer to, websites. Understanding how – or if – churches see themselves as information providers or communication facilitators – needs to be established. Do their websites give information that visitors need? Are the sites inviting contact from visitors? Or are churches ignoring the possibilities and challenges? In addition, it has been suggested that flatter, non-hierarchical communication methods could threaten the authority of institutions and faith leaders (Campbell 2007) as leaders no longer act as gatekeepers of content. So is there a balance to be found for church leaders? The role of vicar is one that comes with a number of stereotypes – male, elderly, tea-drinking and with comic potential (Saunders 2010) and a contrast is often drawn between technology and the institution of the church as incompatible (Dembosky 2012). Have church leaders ignored or embraced new technology as part of their role as priest?

There are other, wider questions that research into the church and websites can address. The current Government’s Big Society initiatives encourage provision via voluntary organisations of community services previously provided by the State – which is not universally seen as a positive change. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was quoted describing the Big Society as ‘aspirational waffle’ (Helm and Coman 2012). What challenges does reliance on volunteers present for an organisation hoping to get online? How do small organisations create and maintain their websites? The church has been involved in charitable support for education, health, homelessness and families for decades. Do they have a volunteer base that is able to grasp new technology and its challenges as well as these social provisions? This research will provide support for answers to these questions. The research is concerned therefore with how one part of English society is adapting to

change. Given that the church is not normally portrayed as progressive, or involved in cutting-edge technology, understanding the extent to which the internet has affected this institution will allow for the development of guidance and policy for individual churches and leaders, which will be relevant for national organisations both religious and secular.

The project will use parts of three studies reported in the literature review to help inform the study. The replication is of the interactivity (McMillen 2008) and hyperlink research (Scheitle 2005), and Sturgill's (2004) classification of purpose of websites will also be used within the UK sample. Testing these previous findings with an English sample will help extend the academic research into religious use of the internet.

1.1 Scope

The research project is concerned with the information content of English church websites, nationally and specifically in the area described by the Diocese of Chelmsford. Although broadly relevant to the whole UK, it focuses on the Church of England and its organisation. It is also concerned with the opinions and practices of church leaders and webmasters, and will take input from other related interested parties where appropriate. The study focuses on information and decision making, not the theology of communication.

It is outside of the scope of the project to consider the usability or accessibility of websites. It is also not concerned with in-depth technical aspects of production (such as who uses which platform to build sites or which commercial companies are employed). Data such as Google Analytics which show website visit rates, duration, and geographical location of visitors will also not be considered.

The research questions, aims and objectives have thus been formulated as follows.

1.2 Research questions

To what extent have English Christian churches established a distinct individual web presence?

To what extent do churches and church leaders use email, websites and social media tools to find and publish information?

Is there evidence that traditional notions of hierarchy and authority been affected by online sources of information and communication?

1.3 Aims and objectives

Aim 1: This study aims to establish the extent to which English churches are using websites and collaborative (Web 2.0) online tools, and to what purposes.

Related objectives are to:

1. Establish a baseline measure of the number of parishes or churches in England with a purpose-built website

From a smaller sample, investigate key aspects of website production, publication and content choice to establish:

2. Whether websites are part of a planned information and communication strategy
3. How content is presented and created
4. Whether there are variations in the choice of different information topics across denominations

5. Whether content includes information which explains or highlights the congregation's faith, traditions or community
6. If any differentiation is made between church members and the wider community as audiences for local church websites.

From the same sample, investigate the extent to which churches place themselves in the wider community via their websites, including whether:

7. Churches use interactive tools including allowing user-generated content or place restrictions on content creation
8. Churches use hyperlinks to locate themselves in local, national or global online communities.

Aim 2: To explore church leaders' adoption and perceptions of online tools as information and communication media in relation to their ministry duties and everyday life.

Objectives are to:

9. Explore whether leaders have experiences of challenges to authority led or encouraged by online media
10. Explore the ways in which church leaders use the internet for vocational and personal tasks
11. Explore the use of social media by churches and their leaders as a tool for sharing information.

1.4 Outline of thesis

This thesis consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 explains the background to the project and why it has been undertaken, giving an outline of the context of the

research. Chapter 2 presents a survey of the related academic literature, providing more in-depth background and serving to locate the current project in the landscape of existing research. Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach that has been taken to the research, aligning the project with existing methods and explaining how they were implemented for three lines of enquiry. Research findings are presented in chapters 4 to 7, integrating the results from the different lines of enquiry. In chapter 8 the implications of these findings for research into internet use in both religious and secular fields are discussed. Chapter 9 presents final conclusions, recommendations and identifies possible limitations to the research. The bibliography and appendices are contained in the final two sections.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

2. Introduction

2.1 Scope and structure

Tools and uses of online communication change quickly, so research from the late 1990s is already, in many cases, redundant. Few papers from before 2000 were included in the review. This is the point in time at which 40% of the UK population had accessed the internet, meaning web browsing was no longer restricted to a small minority¹. Papers written before this are concerned with much older technologies, and are therefore mostly outdated and becoming irrelevant.

Perspectives from other mainstream religions (Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and Hinduism) have been included where the content of the research sheds light on the way in which websites have been used. This also means more research from outside the US has been included, although the US remains the largest source of output on religious use of the internet. The terms United Kingdom, British and English are used as appropriate dependent on the geographical area being discussed.

Initially, the main focus of scholarship relating to religion and online tools was the impact of the internet on creating new religions, rituals or ways of doing ‘church’ online. This work is important, because it forms part of the research landscape although much is not directly relevant to the research questions under

¹ <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access---households-and-individuals/historical-internet-access/index.html> (accessed 13 November 2012)

consideration. Therefore, the research is acknowledged, outlined where appropriate and discussed in detail only where theory or practice are of direct interest.

Academic research on all aspects of the internet and religion has remained relatively theory-free, so there are no articles included which attempt to embed practice in a model or framework. Research into related non-religious use has been included where it helps illustrate a concept or specific point.

The nature and reality of online community has been a topic considered by some authors in relation to religious use of the internet, (for example Blank 2011, Kendall 2011, Campbell 2005) but this is not included in depth as part of this review because it is not core to the research undertaken. Likewise, although there is a large literature on website design, usability and analytics, this is not relevant to the research questions posed, and so not included.

2.1.1 Structure

The first sections outline the current connectivity and use of the internet in the UK, and how public life has been affected by increased online communication. Following this, the level of religious identification and the status of the church in England is discussed.

The next sections summarise relevant research into religion and the internet, including consideration of the changing attitudes towards research and the prevailing paradigms. Beginning at section 2.5 , the major strands of research into US, Asian and African religious use of the internet are investigated in-depth, and the ways in which online church has been researched are briefly noted. Finally, in sections 2.9 onwards, work that is specifically related to the research questions is

reviewed: augmentation of practice, information seeking in religious contexts, content of websites, hyperlinks, authority and social media.

2.2 Internet connectivity

Figures from the Office for National Statistics show the use and availability of the internet in the UK over several years (Office for National Statistics 2012a, 2011, 2010, 2009). Figures from the annual updates published in August 2012 and 2011² show that internet use is well established within the UK as an integrated part of everyday life:

- 80% of UK households had internet access in 2012 compared to 77% in 2011
- In 2011, 4.9 million people used wi-fi, compared to 0.7 million in 2009
- Of all adults, in 2011 30.1 million (60%) are online daily or almost daily
- In 2011, 91% of 16–24 year olds and 18% of internet users aged 65 or over participated in social networking
- Of those who did use the internet, 59% of the over 65s were online almost every day in 2011
- 90% of all adults used the internet for emailing in 2011, the most popular activity (Office for National Statistics, 2012a, 2011).

Computing applications have developed in the last decade not only in the sophistication of web-based services but also the hardware used to access them, with smartphones and tablet computers becoming popular. Faster and cheaper

² The ONS has delayed delivery of the 2012 estimates for online activity until February 2013. It can reasonably be anticipated that they will show a further increase in the number of people and the frequency of their use, given the trends from previous years.

home computers and broadband connections mean that video-on-demand is growing, via YouTube, the BBC's or other broadcasters' catch-up facilities. Social networking now accounts for a major proportion of time spent on the internet (Nuttall and Gelles 2010). Blogging, virtually unheard of in 2000, has expanded rapidly from relatively few online diaries to an information space of over 133 million blog posts (as measured by Technorati), since 2002 (Mandansky and Arenberg 2011). Between 2003 and 2006 the size of this information space, the 'blogosphere' doubled every six months (Kluth 2006). Smartphones and tablet computers mean services are accessed on the move, as shown by the BBC's Olympic coverage figures. The internet experience in 2012 is fast, complex, multimedia and, as the figures for wireless hotspot use above show, increasingly mobile.

2.3 Religious identification in the UK

The Church of England has a state role in times of celebration such as the 2011 Royal Wedding or the 2012 Diamond Jubilee³. However, this does not translate into wider religious practice. One constant change in society – alongside technological and demographic changes – has been a decline in regular churchgoing.

In 2001, the UK National Census included questions on religion for the first time. 8% of people chose not to answer this voluntary question but of those who did, 72% identified themselves as Christian (Office for National Statistics 2004). One major secular organisation highlights how this level of cultural identification does not translate into knowledge of the faith⁴, or into actual attendance figures. That claim,

³ <http://www.thediamondjubilee.org/order-service>, accessed 2 June 2012

⁴ <http://richarddawkinsfoundation.org/> Survey results published on 14 February 2012

however, is not news to the church. A 2005 survey from the Evangelical Alliance shows that only 6.3% of people in the UK regularly attend a Sunday service (Evangelical Alliance 2005). These figures were confirmed by research from the Church of England from 2007, painting a picture of declining church attendance in the UK (Opinion Research Business 2007). However, figures from 2010 suggest that the decline in attendance has now levelled off with media reports in 2012 hinting at a slight rise, and certainly more church weddings taking place (Hewitt 2010, Osborne 2012, Beckford 2012).

In the last thirty years, the age profile of congregations has changed, becoming predominantly older. The churchgoing population has also become urbanised, as a result of immigration into major cities and a related rise in churches characterised as Black churches. The largest loss to congregations has been young people aged 15 to 29 (Brierley 2006). Yet, worldwide, a third of the world's 6 billion people are Christian, (Tomkins 2005) and the global church's 'centre of gravity' is shifting. Anglicanism may be in decline in England but it is growing elsewhere (Tomkins 2005). In 1960:

14 per cent of Christians were in Africa and Asia, now it is 32 per cent. There are six times as many Anglican churchgoers in Nigeria as in England...half of all Christians are still Catholic...there are 34,000 Christian denominations worldwide. (Tomkins 2005, p245)

The next section considers research which has combined the internet with religious studies.

2.4 Internet studies and religion

2.4.1 Internet studies: framing of research

This survey of the literature over the last 12 years shows a shift in both understanding and expectation of how the internet might affect religious practice. Religion and internet research has now become a discipline in its own right (Ess and Consalvo 2011). The bulk of the research has been published in the United States rather than Britain, reflecting not only relative sizes of the research communities but also possibly different attitudes towards religion. In Britain, although there is an established church, religion tends to be seen as a private matter. In the US, where separation of church and state leads to more religious voices appearing in public spheres, religion is more of an open matter. This US/Britain balance is reflected in the literature under review. There are also a number of significant studies on religion and new media from Asia, reflecting the relatively early connectedness of countries such as South Korea or Singapore.

The next sections outline how previous studies have characterised the effects of the internet on religious life and practice.

2.4.2 Utopia versus dystopia

Authors have suggested that the first academic research on internet use was published in 1996, with most citing O'Leary (1996), for example, in Cho (2011). The dominant paradigm for the early research characterised the anticipated changes in society as either wildly dystopian or optimistically utopian. There were expectations that the internet, and the electronic linking of individuals for work and pleasure, would have a profound effect on society. This 'technological determinism' had at its heart the notion that:

structural features of new media induce social change by enabling new forms of communication and cultivating distinctive skills and sensibilities (Di Maggio, Hargittai & Russell Neuman 2001, p309)

Thus, the internet would lead inexorably to a changed society; with relationships and ways of working inescapably affected by the implementation of new tools. These effects would be revolutionary and hyperbole was commonplace. Castells (1996) suggested that the ability to combine print, oral and audiovisual media lent the internet a significance on a par with the development of the alphabet. Forecasts predicted the wholesale abandonment of commuting, shifts to fully networked communities and changes to the ways in which relationships would be formed as discussed in, for example, Helland (2004). The view could be summed up thus:

The internet was seen as a bright light, shining above everyday concerns. It was a technological marvel, thought to be bringing a new Enlightenment to transform the world. (Wellman 2004, p124)

Christians (2002) argues that religious perspectives are needed when studying communications technology because the underlying assumption that technology is value-neutral is flawed suggesting that when 'moral purpose is sacrificed to technical excellence' the 'religious perspectives help free the field from a narrow, technicistic view of neutral technology.' He goes so far as to say that technology could be a cause of 'inauthentic humanness.' (p40).

There were other challenges to the deterministic view, for example, Dutton (2003) suggested it is wrong to assume change takes a linear path. Other factors would affect how new technologies are adopted and implemented. These could be political, geographical or economic, but one key point is that the technologies are

often inherently social. Others such as Borgman (2003) and Wellman (2004) also called for less extreme utopian or dystopian analyses and for more understanding of the internet as a part of continuum of technology, with roots in the telegraph and telephone which have had roles in shaping people's lives, reminding us that:

...people do not discard all their old habits and practices with the advent of each new technology (Borgman 2003, p3)

Wellman's current view of the place of the internet in society is that:

It has become embedded in everyday life...become part of everyday things...an important thing but not a special thing. It has become the utility of the masses rather than the plaything of computer scientists. (Wellman 2011, pp20–21)

Commentary that assumes far-reaching change as a result of new technology tends to concentrate only on the developed world. Castells (1996) said that changing technologies will 'embrace the...core segments of the population in the whole planet' (Castells 1996, p328), yet a 'core segment' is not defined. In addition, technology is largely seen as value-neutral, particularly when the environment is being considered (Christians 2002 provides one exception). The removal of the need to travel to communicate is seen as a major virtue, whilst the increase in power consumption by servers, or the waste generated by built-in obsolescence is not considered. In 2010 there were a number of suicides by workers making Apple products. This brought the workers' conditions to the attention of the consumers' media, possibly for the first time (Johnson 2010), followed up by Rushe (2012).

2.4.3 Online-religion versus religion-online

As internet studies as a discipline and the dystopian/ utopian point of view developed, those studying religion and the internet were also finding their own ways to frame research. Hadden and Cowan (2000) published a significant first collection of articles considering religion and the internet. Within this volume, Christopher Helland discussed the interaction between religion and the internet (Helland 2000). He argued for a distinction between religion–online and online–religion. Religion–online refers to the use of the internet as a broadcast medium. It is the transposition of offline aspects to an online setting without much alteration in attitude, and with maintenance of traditional hierarchies. Church websites that act as ‘shop fronts’ for particular place–based organisations would fall into this category. In contrast, online–religion refers to new ways of framing religious practice via the internet – online community, participative worship, virtual church and peer–to–peer contact. Exploration of these two dimensions formed the greater part of research for some time. Much of the literature exploring Helland’s dimensions has focused on the US experience of mediated religion or the theoretical and theological implications of a virtual religious experience. Virtual religion is not an integral part of the scope of this project and so the US literature will not be discussed in great detail – a British project is discussed below. One point worth noting about religious rituals held online in environments such as Second Life is that they often closely mirror their offline counterparts (Hutchings 2010a).

More recently, discussion of the framing of research has taken different directions. The next sections illustrate some of the different approaches.

2.4.4 Author–focused or network–focused

Hutchings (2010b) has suggested that Helland’s description is now more useful as a way to frame questions rather than describing activities, because of the blurring of

boundaries caused by the rise of new media channels over the last decade.

Hutchings suggests that other descriptors such as the extent to which a medium is 'author-focused' or 'network-focused' may now form the basis of an additional and useful set of questions. An author-focused medium is one in which the 'creator maintains strict control over content, and therefore over message and presentation.' (Hutchings 2010b, p14). In contrast, a network-focused medium is one whose purpose is to foster interaction between its users. Websites and blogs fall under Hutchings's author-focused classification, whereas social networking sites and virtual worlds are network-focused. The extent to which a site falls into one of these categories helps assess its purpose.

2.4.5 Four discourses and five heuristics

Heidi Campbell has written extensively on the process characterised as the social shaping of technology – the ways in which communities negotiate acceptable use of an innovation. For example, the Kosher mobile phone used in ultra-Orthodox communities, with SMS and other capabilities removed to render its use acceptable under rabbinical law (Campbell 2010b, p163). Campbell (2005) identified four discourses and the accompanying narratives which have characterised research into religious use of the internet in particular. These are:

- **Spiritual medium facilitating spiritual experiences:** whereby going online in itself can lead to a spiritual experience
- **Sacramental space suitable for religious use:** internet can become a space for activity by design, such as online church or space for prayer meeting
- **Tool to promote religion and religious practice:** the internet is a neutral tool which can be used for religious purposes as well as secular work

- **Technology for affirming religious life:** internet facilitates connections between like-minded groups.

The discourse that is most relevant to the research questions here is the third, by which:

The internet can be used to seek religious information and spiritual relationships or it can be used to reconfigure traditional religious activities so they can be pursued online (Campbell 2005, p 12)

These four discourses allow for characterisations of work on religion and the internet which are broader than Helland's religion-online/online-religion distinction, although the approach quoted above is still rooted in that distinction. These characterisations also demonstrate the breadth of opinion and approach to research on religion and the internet.

Cho (2011) further defines five heuristic perspectives to 'offer insight into the interpretive lenses that are used to understand the intersection of religion and new media.' (p8). These perspectives, and examples of the research that has employed them, are given below (taken from Cho 2011 pp8-15).

- **The internet as an information transmission medium** (e.g. Bedell 2000, Horsfall 2000, Sturgill 2004) – using websites only as a method of imparting information
- **Online religion's relationship to offline religion** (e.g. Kluver and Chen 2008, Jenkins 2008) – whether online religion supplements or supplants traditional church attendance; how ritual translates to an online environment
- **Online influence on the offline** (e.g. Kim 2007) – how does the internet effect change on the way offline practices are perceived?

- **Online–religion and religion–online, the prime heuristic** – (Helland 2000) – ways in which this distinction have been applied or changed
- **Basic observations on the Internet as a medium:** the beginning and end of medium theory – research does not tackle medium theory directly, but some have used its concepts (e.g. Campbell 2005).

The first heuristic from Cho (2011), looking at websites only as a means of information transmission is that which most closely reflects the current project. This framing of the research landscape by interpretive rules gives an interesting recent insight into the ways in which scholarship has developed.

2.4.6 Three phases of research

Several authors have separately identified three waves or phases in internet studies in general and in research specifically about religious appropriation.

Wellman (2011) describes the shift as follows. For him, the first age of internet studies was dominated by ‘punditry,’ with hyperbole about the potential of a completely connected, always–on society. The second age involved attempts to document internet use, driven partly by the need for regulation and by commercial interests. The third, and current age, is led by a need to analyse the use that individuals are really making of the connectivity afforded.

Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005) also describe research as having proceeded in three stages. Campbell (2011) and Cho (2011) both use the 2005 characterisation of three waves as the basis for their later discussion of research into religion and the internet. These are summarised in Table 2–1 below, with quotations taken from each research paper describing the different phases in the authors’ own words.

Research stage	Authors' definitions
First Wave	New and extraordinary aspects of cyberspace (Høsjgaard and Warburg 2005, p8) Building religious solidarity or potentially destroying religiosity (Campbell 2011, p234) Polarised regarding the beneficial or harmful potentials of new media (Cho 2011, p7)
Second wave	More realistic perspective (Høsjgaard and Warburg 2005, p9) Not simply technology, but rather people who were generating these new forms of religious expression online (Campbell 2011, p 234) Nuanced understanding of new media's potential for benefit or harm (Cho 2011, p7)
Third wave	Bricolage of scholarship from different backgrounds...may very well indicate that the topic is maturing academically (Høsjgaard and Warburg 2005, p9) Contributions from different methodologies and approaches from different disciplines (Cho 2011, p7) Demonstrate how studies of religion online add unique insights and help contribute to the overall understanding of life in a global information society (Campbell 2011, p235)

Table 2-1 Summaries of characteristics of three phases of research

This summary shows that the early research described in section 2.4.2 above can be characterised as first wave studies. The second wave of research includes the work building on Helland's (2000) online-religion versus religion-online dichotomy, as given in 2.4.3 above. The current project, bringing information science-based qualitative and quantitative research methods and aiming to understand how the websites are located in wider networks, can be characterised as a third wave project.

The theoretical surveys of the ways in which religion and the internet have been studied are important for locating the current work in the wider research landscape. The next sections focus on the practical research that has been carried out on related areas, showing where the current gaps in knowledge are located.

2.5 Research findings: Major world religions online

2.5.1 Pew Internet and American Life

Three studies from the Pew Internet and American Life project (Hoover, Schofield Clark and Rainie 2004, Larsen 2001, Larsen 2000) have measured the extent to which US adults have used the internet for religious purposes. Although they are US-specific, the research projects provide useful insights into how some religious activity online has been adopted. In addition, the statistics from Pew studies are reported widely in the literature.

In 2000, more people in the US had looked for religious information online than had used online banking or dating services (21% compared with 18% and 9%). The proportion had risen to 25% in later research (Larsen 2001, Larsen 2000). Hoover, Clark and Rainie (2004) suggest that 64% have engaged in activities online that are related to religion. However, this high figure could be due to the inclusion of activities such as sending religious greetings cards and is therefore likely to be artificially inflated. In contrast, a non-Pew study by Armfield and Holbert (2003) reports that religiosity has a weak but negative influence on internet use with people reporting higher levels of religiosity tending to use the internet less frequently.

Those deemed the 'online faithful' by Hoover, Schofield Clark and Rainie (2004) are more active online than other internet users, more likely to have a broadband internet connection and to have been online for longer than non-religious surfers. The level of activity suggests a large and engaged audience for the content published by religious organisations. The 2004 study also concludes that the kind of activity conducted online is distinct from traditional church attendance. That is,

'personal spiritual activities' (p5) take precedence over replicating churchgoing online:

...This challenges the assumption that the Internet would make it more likely for people to leave churches in favour of more flexible online options...the online faithful seem more interested in augmenting their offline preferences.

(Hoover et al 2004, p5).

Therefore, although the focus of much research has been on online religious activity, this does not reflect practice of those in the US who use the internet for religious purposes. This suggests that understanding the form and content of the kind of website that provides this complementary information and spirituality could be key for engaging people in online activities designed to expand their experience of, and commitment to, a particular church. It is also suggested by the study that online 'seeking' – searching out spiritual information – is not as widespread as has been assumed. This would have implications for website creators attempting to publish evangelistic material:

These findings do little to confirm previous speculations that the internet holds special appeal for those spiritual seekers looking for alternatives to conventional religious practice. (Hoover, Schofield Clark and Rainie 2004, p11).

These Pew research projects only consider the US population, and with a high proportion of Internet users claiming to attend church once a week (41%, compared to around 6% of the British population as a whole) it may be that the audiences for church websites in the US and Britain are very different. It could be that, comparatively, the complementary use of the internet arises because there is

already a strong baseline church attendance and connectivity. Pew research suggests that religious activity is more related to augmenting offline practice than seeking online alternatives.

2.6 Megachurches

Megachurches are one part of US churchgoing worthy of note for their use of internet-based communications. A number of highly commercial, branded megachurches operate on a campus format, whereby people worshipping in multiple physical locations are joined by online activities. This is now a 'vastly successful genre of digital ministry' (Hutchings 2011, p1121). Hutchings describes Lifechurch.tv which broadcasts from one location to many by video. Online viewers see a 'mash-up' of video, chat and social media that changes the viewer's interaction with preacher and audience' (p1126). This is an example of the way that very wealthy churches use online communication to increase their influence from a single location. There is currently no home-grown UK equivalent, but Lifechurch.tv has broadcast to London locations.

2.7 English online religion

The blending of offline and online church has been on a much smaller scale in the UK. This section will explore one online church project, highlighting the English experience, as a contrast to the Lifechurch.tv virtual campus approach and the Asian megachurches discussed below.

In 2004 Church of Fools in the UK ran a short-term pilot. Its current incarnation is as St Pixels⁵. An offshoot from the successful website Ship of Fools⁶, and backed by the Methodist Church of Great Britain, the experiment in online church attracted wide publicity. The project has been considered by a number of authors (Jenkins 2008, Kluver and Chen 2008, Hutchings 2007). Church of Fools ran for five months between May and September 2004. Commentary on the Church of Fools focuses on spiritual and practical elements. The legitimacy of a wholly online church within the accepted boundaries of the UK church has been considered. This has included virtual sacraments and how online interactions affect a sense of belonging and spirituality. The practical aspects of the experiment include ways that disruption could have been prevented or managed more effectively. Kluver and Chen (2008) analyse the Church of Fools based on news reports and blogs. In the same journal issue, although without collaboration⁷, Simon Jenkins (2008) wrote, as creator of Church of Fools, his critique of the project's aims and objectives. His aim was as follows:

Just as the Methodist church leader John Wesley took his preaching out of churches and into the fields and streets in the 18th century, we wanted to take church to where people are in the 21st century – on the Net. (Jenkins 2008, p101)

⁵ http://www.stpixels.com/wp/?page_id=34 – accessed 25 April 2012

⁶ <http://shipoffools.com/>, accessed 25 April 2012

⁷ It was confirmed that Jenkins did not work with Kluver & Chen via personal conversation, December 2010.

In this personal account of the Church of Fools, Jenkins reported reactions to the experiment.

Some said that a virtual church could never replace the real thing, and that it was scandalous that we were even attempting it. Others thought that the Internet was too important for churches to ignore, and that the different denominations should try planting churches in cyberspace. (Jenkins 2008, p113)

The intention was to replicate offline church as closely as possible online. The project members had to deal with disruptive visitors who were interested in subverting the sacred space; including organised hacker and troll attacks. Virtual churchwardens had the ability to remove disruptive visitors, but were overwhelmed. In his discussion, Howe (2007) says that

An unfortunate and unforeseen clash of cultures meant that what for the Church's creators was a sacred space looked to many newcomers like a computer game. (Howe 2007, p19)

The Church of Fools project demonstrated that online church based in the UK worked, to a certain degree, to bring people together in a virtual space. A guiding aim of Church of Fools was to reach those who would never approach a 'real' church. The spin-off, St Pixels, is a thriving British online community.

The idea of a virtual sacrament was discussed in the English religious media again in 2010 as a planned Twitter communion service was withdrawn after the minister involved was contacted by the Methodist Church of Great Britain (Jenkins 2010). The debate over the appropriateness and authenticity of online tools for English Christianity is still ongoing.

2.8 Major world religions

Research into religion and the internet has not been solely the preserve of North American or English academics. This section discusses research into online communication from other religious and cultural traditions. Kim (2007), Kawabata, Tamura (2007), Fukamizu (2007), Ho, Lee and Hameed (2008), Cheong et al. (2009) discuss internet use for religious purposes in Asia. Kim (2007) investigates Korean Christianity whilst Kawabata & Tamura (2007) and Fukamizu (2007) have Japanese Buddhism as their focus. Ho *et al* (2008) examined Muslim surfers and factors which influence their online activities. Cheong *et al* (2009) investigated Singaporean Protestant churches from a geographical information systems perspective. This latter study is considered in more depth in the section on content analysis of websites.

2.8.1 Christianity in Asia and Africa

In 2002 the most internet-connected country was South Korea Kim (2007). Examples of megachurch websites are discussed by Kim (2007) in this context, with a descriptive analysis of two churches. The use of pictures on websites and adaptation of European imagery is noted. For example, sheep are used on one page, despite the fact they are only seen in Korean zoos. Christian leaders are frequently referred to as shepherds or pastors. The research is an attempt to represent the churches' characteristics and explain the context, in which they are set, namely Korean Christianity. The sample of two is limited, and by focusing on the megachurches there is no discussion of how smaller, but potentially still hyper-connected, Korean churches are exploiting the internet. The discussion focuses partly on the content of the websites but mostly considers the way that the internet may be shaping religious practice and spirituality. What is not discussed is how

resources are selected, nor is the relationship between the web design and church leadership explored. Kim (2007) suggests that Korean churches are presenting themselves as a 'lifestyle option' (p219), with vast resources available over and above those related to traditional Sunday services. The churches provide an online way to understand Christianity. One key point noted is that the websites 'offer possibilities for interactive participation of believers but at the same time seek to control and limit their choices' (p220). This observation is echoed by Scheitle (2005), discussed in section 2.12 .

Hackett (2009) presents a case study of three African Pentecostal⁸ ministries' websites, with particular emphasis on leadership and authority. Hackett notes that the sites include a range of resources and their presentation varies – characterising one as an information hub. Created with its Nigerian audience rather than the US backers' connectivity in mind, it is not reliant on slow-loading graphic elements. The organisations studied are large churches, similar to a US megachurch. One has an attendance of 200,000 and global branches. Commenting on sites which portray the church leaders in favourable ways and on the commodification of leaders' messages, Hackett notes that:

Pentecostal megachurch leaders exploit the ambiguities of the website medium to bolster their image in ways that they might not do so overtly in a sermon or crusade format. (Hackett 2009, p500)

This is one way in which leaders' authority is legitimised through websites. Their appearance is more as a business leader, running a religious empire, than of a

⁸ Please refer to Glossary for explanation of terms

traditional pastor. There are similarities between the Korean and African megachurches' websites as both attempt to provide an entire religious faith resource within their boundaries and both show the influence of consumerism in their content. These Christian site studies, although far removed from small, English churches, help expand understanding of the wider landscape of mediated religion. There are also new perspectives and examples to be drawn from other religions, and the next two sections examine research on Islam and Buddhist practices online.

2.8.2 Buddhism in Japan and Singapore

Kawabata and Tamura (2007) discuss why levels of use of the internet, for religious purposes, are lower in Japan in comparison with the figures reported from the US (using the Pew Internet & American Life report from 2001 as reported at 2.5.1 above). One key reason given for this is that Japanese religious followers and priests tend to be older so overall usage within their age group could be expected to be lower. A second explanation offered is that religious activity is under-reported because of negative connotations to the term 'religious.' However, the level of anonymity afforded by the internet does mean it is a place where minorities or those concerned about persecution can go for information. Kawabata and Tamura (2007) point to the internet's facilitation of reciprocity and the apparent lack of acknowledgement or adoption of this ability by traditional Shinto sites. They also suggest that the physical shrine space is key to the experience, and that:

the superficial act of virtual shrine visits threatens to erode the dignity of this traditional shrine oriented faith (Kawabata and Tamura 2007, p1005)

One Shinto shrine has become a focal point for online message exchange, rather than as an online pilgrimage, blending offline and online without compromising the

dignity of the shrine. It is concluded that for Japanese religious websites, Helland's (2000) online-religion label does not fit; that there are few opportunities presented for interaction with the websites, and no motivation to increase this. In contrast, their study of email counselling suggests that this fits more into the model of online-religion as it enables two- or multi-way communication not tied to a physical location. Notions of power and hierarchy are touched upon but there is no discussion as to how these affect published website content. Overall, their work suggests a fairly limited use of the web by Japanese religious followers, a situation that is echoed by Fukamizu (2007). Fukamizu suggests that 60% of the Young Buddhist Association had used the internet, and 50% of temple priests had done so too. However, only 30% of the Young Buddhist Association had used the internet for religious purposes, a figure that dropped to just 3.4% for ordinary followers.

Fukamizu (2007) also carried out a survey of priests and festival goers and the analysis of their attitudes towards religion and the internet. Results showed significant differences in the use of the internet between priests and followers and in the level of internet use and the acceptance of the mystery of religion. The first finding, it is claimed, can be partially explained by the age differences between the priests and the followers. However, the general conclusion reached is that the younger generation exhibit more critical attitudes towards their religion. It is not possible to determine whether it is the youth that is causing the critical attitude, or the exposure to the internet, but fear of this undermining of doctrinal truth or uncritical acceptance of the religious teaching and attitudes could be behind reluctance to embrace the internet.

Cheong, Huang and Poon (2011) discussed Buddhist priests' use of email and online tools to communicate with their students. The interactions are framed as priests as

strategic arbiters of interaction, choosing when to use face-to-face conversations and when to employ email. This research suggests that the acceptance of online tools has increased since Fukamizu and Kawabata and Tamura published their research in 2007, reflecting global shifts in acceptability. Indeed, by 2011 a Buddhist web forum was well established and has been reported upon (Busch 2011). The research focuses on the control aspects of the forum, questioning whether the moderators have legitimate authority to frame the discussions and content of the site. Busch (2011) concludes that although the site is framed as a sacred space, there are concerns over the transparency of that moderation process which allows moderators to enforce their own strict orthodoxy.

2.8.3 Islam in Singapore

Ho, Lee and Hameed (2008) discuss the online religious activities of Muslims in Singapore. They report that Muslims were more likely to engage in personal religious activities online, not those related to institutionalised religion. One hypothesis was that the 'interactions online may be a new avenue to strengthen internet users' own religious belief.' (p95). Of all Muslims in Singapore who used the internet, 80% had used it for something faith-related. Almost 31% had searched for a mosque near their house, and 62% had read accounts about Islam online. Ho *et al* (2008) conclude that:

...instead of totally substituting offline religious activities...Muslim surfers seem to be more interested in augmenting their traditional religious experiences. (Ho et al 2008, p107).

This conclusion reflects that from the research of Hoover *et al* (2004). It is worth noting that both this investigation of Islam, investigation into counselling in Japan

(Kawabata and Tamura 2007) and megachurches in Korea (Kim 2007) suggest that internationally, and across different religions, one constant use of the internet for religious purposes is to augment offline experiences with online interaction or information, or to help integrate users into the life of a large offline church. This kind of use appears to be constant across cultural boundaries.

The next section will look in more detail at work which investigates the kind of activities that help users with this augmentation – how and why Christian churches and church leaders are using online resources.

2.9 Research findings: Specific religious uses of the internet

This section reviews work that has investigated religious use of the internet in the UK and in the US. These include studies of social media, information seeking and hyperlinks, and the effects of digital interactions on traditional authority structures. The final section considers the research documenting publication and use of church websites.

2.9.1 Motivators and search terms

Laney (2005) employed a ‘uses and gratifications’ paradigm (p167) to research motives for Christian web use. The study draws on previous work on motivations for watching religious television programming (Abelman 1987) and finds a number of similarities. Laney concludes that motives for going online are:

...the value of the power of information coupled with the anonymity that the Internet provides, as well as the community of faith that cyberspace potentially embraces (Laney 2005, p178).

This work locates websites in a continuum of new media development, but does not assume websites are a substitute for other forms of media. Drawing comparisons with the non-interactive television broadcasting, it found some effect of website use as being motivated by a desire for companionship, but the information seeking elements of use were deemed to be more important. This is possibly another example where augmentation of religious practice is a motivator.

Jansen, Tapia and Spink (2010) present an analysis of the terms used in online searches by US users, with two major limitations. Firstly, the transaction logs are from Altavista, Dogpile and Excite, but not Google. Secondly, the logs are from 1997, 1999 and 2001. Since internet use in 1997 is very different from that in 2012, it is possible that the findings cannot be reliably extrapolated to the present day. For instance, were those using the internet in 1997 early adopters and thus are they different from the general population in profession or income? However, these limitations aside, the results are of interest for the insight afforded into religious web search. Religious-related searches represented approximately 1% of search queries and these queries were longer than non-religious searches. Of the searches conducted, the top ten in all data sets were related to traditional religions. The three most frequently used terms in all time periods were 'Christian', 'Bible' and 'Church'.

Most religious seekers sought information associated with established, traditional, mainstream and offline religions supporting the religious status quo, rather than challenging it. (Jansen et al 2009, p11).

These two studies provide further support for the idea that religious use of the internet is predominantly to augment the offline experience, and not to replace it. They are 'third wave' studies – examining how people are getting on with using the internet in an integrated, everyday manner.

2.9.2 Email and ministry opportunities

Mills (2011, 2006) studied the role of email and pastoral care. The first paper investigated distance counselling in rural settings when an outbreak of foot and mouth disease restricted travel. In this, it was concluded that telephone was the best method of delivering crisis counselling as it permitted synchronous exchanges. As an asynchronous method, email had a number of flaws which made it unsuitable for anything more complicated than prayer or greetings card exchange. Mills' (2011) work, outside of a crisis situation, concluded that despite its limitations email can be used for counselling. Whilst there were restrictions on the data collection for the later work, whereby anonymisation led to a reduction in data quality, the work is helpful for highlighting an area where Christian ministers are involved in duties involving websites and email outside of the setting of a parish church. In addition, Mills studies English ministers, which in itself is of interest when the majority of similar research is concerned with US participants.

2.9.3 Authority and online religion

At least two authors have examined the possible threats to the authority of church leaders that may arise because of the connectedness of their congregations, and subsequent changed nature of the hierarchies. The study first mentioned in 2.8.2 above (Cheong, Huang and Poon 2011) examined the epistemic authority of Singaporean Protestant leaders via in-depth interviews and found a number of effects in a study of 29 leaders. The participants were Protestant, from mixed denominations, and from larger, younger churches including a megachurch. It was assumed that these younger and larger churches will be more likely to be made up of people used to using online communication.

Cheong *et al* (2011) characterise epistemic authority as follows:

Religious epistemic authority depends on a system of communication relations that confers on clergy a special role and status in knowledge acquisition of the divine which in turn authorizes them to issue judgements, persuasions and commands. (Cheong et al 2011, p940)

Their hypothesis is that widespread accessibility of information via new media channels will undermine the authority of leaders and ‘diminish the perceived stock of knowledge held by the elites’ (Cheong, Huang and Poon 2011, p941). The pastors in the study who feel challenged by this have taken on new information roles and are becoming more inclusive in their relationships. In other words, they are increasingly marking their authority by participating online, being part of the same online space that their congregations are inhabiting. And with better knowledge of the competing religious voices in these online spaces, the pastors are able to act as interpreters for their church members, explaining more about what is heretical and why. The leaders are characterised as having moved ‘from commanders to arbiters of knowledge encounters’ (also p941).

The interviews were conducted in 2007–8. Although Singapore is advanced in terms of its level of online connectivity, the data were gathered prior to social networking becoming very popular and so the discussions are still couched in terms of blogs and email. It is not addressed whether the pressures the pastors reported have been exacerbated by the multiplicity of new media channels or whether the issues have become less important because of changes in technology and expectation.

Campbell (2007) also discusses religious authority and the internet. Arguing that authority is manifested via different mechanisms – ideological authority, for

example, versus hierarchical authority – Campbell discusses the ways in which different religions construct and interact with authority figures offline and online, and the ways in which online communication may affect these constructions. So far as Christianity is concerned, respondents in Campbell's study felt that their use of online tools helped them be part of a global faith movement, and that this was both a challenge and a benefit to ideological authority:

The internet was characterised as providing support for traditional structures, while also creating a space for critique of offline churches. (Campbell 2007, p1050)

The interviews that formed the basis of this work were recorded in 1999. As noted in section 2.2 above, the experience of being online thirteen years later is far different: local, social networks, more multi-media resources and a wider reach. So it is possible that the contemporary experience sees a different impact on religious authority.

Turning to blogs, Campbell (2010a) also examined blogging as a process which relates to the framing of authority. Most (69%) of the Christian blogs identified were written by male, US Christians. The study investigated three research questions – what kinds of authority are referenced; are the sources of authority affirmed or challenged; what are the notable practices of bloggers?

In answer to the first research question, Campbell identified four types of authority: roles, texts, theological ideas and religious structures. By far the most commonly referred to were religious roles, but as this category included references to God and characters from the Bible this is not perhaps a striking finding (2,134 references). Only a small number of references to religious roles were challenging the authority

of a role-holder. Of the challenges to pastors, 46 of the 54 negative references were to nationally-known pastors or figures rather than bloggers' local church leaders. The research reports overwhelmingly that bloggers are affirming the current sources of religious authority with challenges being made only by a minority of bloggers. The presentation of the results does not allow for investigation of whether the criticisms are arising from a few persistent bloggers or are more widely scattered across the sample, which would have perhaps suggested a wider context for the sources of challenge to authority.

These studies of religious authority online suggest that the earlier expectations were incorrect in believing that allowing online practices as part of everyday religion would have an impact on the hierarchy and structure of the church. If the majority of bloggers are using their blog to affirm their leaders and to discuss their own Christian life, as Campbell (2010) suggests, then these dystopian views could be dismissed. Church leaders reported few incidences of authority challenges in interviews analysed by Michels (2009) which is discussed in section 2.11 below.

2.9.4 Websites

Pew Internet and American Life research examined the content and management of successful websites, identifying concerns of webmasters and providing insight into the ways by which churches maintain their sites (Larsen 2000). Of particular interest is the list of functions that church websites had implementing or were considering implementing in the future. For example, 13% hoped to implement discussion space for groups within their congregation. The research, undertaken in 2000, has been overtaken by advances in online communication and the rise of purpose-build discussion spaces like Facebook, but these are useful indicators because they show the direction websites could have taken.

Noomen, Aupers and Houtman (2011) interviewed Dutch Catholic and Protestant web masters, volunteers and paid staff, ordained and lay. The webmasters are characterised as mediators, dealing with:

...competing ideas, demands and conflicts regarding the purposes, contents, functionalities and visual outlooks of the websites they are working on

(Noomen 2011, p 1103)

One key point made by the Protestant web staff is that the church has so many different strands that a church site intended for everyone can only be strictly informative, explaining different viewpoints. Any attempt to provide more in-depth theological content would be divisive. In addition, the text-based nature of the Protestant tradition is felt to have influenced the design elements – there has been less emphasis on how websites are presented. There is also a suggestion that individual churches may not have difficulty translating religion ‘in their own image’ onto the web, (p1112), but that for wider faith-based sites:

religious appropriations of the Internet are not processes in which coherent offline traditions are smoothly translated into a new online context (Noomen 2011, p1112)

So from this sample of web producers, the difficulties lying behind development of interesting and visual websites has been highlighted, at both the umbrella organisational level and also the challenges any institution would face.

Cantoni and Zyga (2007) studied Catholic monasteries and convents worldwide. A multi-lingual email survey asked communities to identify the degree of internet adoption, the kind of use and the management of their use. Using possession of email as a baseline measure, Cantoni and Zyga (2007) found variation in adoption

levels between different kinds of communities. 87.2% of monastic institutes (male) had an email address; 73.3% of independently-run convents (female) did not, in 2004, use email for communication. 90% of religious institutions managed centrally also had websites, or are thinking of them, compared to 58% of the independent institutes. It is noted that, in 2004, the internet had been in use for as long as 5.5 years in some of the communities, so was not a recent innovation (p298). This research is interesting for its global focus since so much other work looks only at US congregations. In addition, the research found no correlations between the size, age or geographic distribution of the institutes and their adoption of internet communication. One particular finding is that websites acted as shop windows to organisations in many cases (43%), without further connection, suggesting that:

it is rare that a Web site has a form of an Internet portal, which allows entry into virtual space on the subject of Christianity (Cantoni and Zyga 2007, p303)

A final note of interest from this study relates to the management of communication – concluding that:

...technology alone, without the human factor, without promotion, without the right training and culture of use, cannot guarantee that communication exchanges take place (Cantoni and Zyga 2007, p304)

Cantoni and Zyga (2007) located email addresses for 2,285 of 5,813 Catholic institutes and make a point that if they could not find by either Google, or official registration directories, it was reasonable to conclude that the remaining convents or monasteries did not use email. By using email as the tool to collect information they are necessarily only focusing on the institutes that are prepared to answer, and

have a working email address. There was no attempt to contact those in the majority without an email address. The reported study is the first to attempt to answer questions on the extent to which internet communication is used within monastic communities. It highlights the use of websites as 'shop windows' for these distinct institutions.

Hutchings (2010b) also refers to web sites as shop windows, suggesting their purpose is that:

Websites operate as a shop window and a library, offering information to visitors who want to learn more about an organisation. (Hutchings, 2010, p14)

Hutchings (2010) notes that a successful website is an example of an author-focused medium, allowing the creator to retain overall control (p14). Smith (2007) investigated the websites of seven non-profit religious organisations in the US, such as The Methodist Federation for Social Action – organisations affiliated to mainstream denominations, but not the churches themselves. Smith's (2007) small-scale survey describes the updating frequencies, strategies and evaluation of the organisations' websites. She found that the rate of updating varied – between daily and every couple of months, and that the schedules were more likely to be determined by the events the organisation had planned. Few had formal evaluation mechanisms to monitor the use of their sites. Smith reports the majority as spending less time maintaining their site than on other communication channels, and being reliant still on printed newsletters. Finally, of the seven organisations studied, only two had a web specialist working on their online presence. The random selection of the organisations meant there is a large disparity between the smallest and largest – one has 350 members, another 1.7 million. It would have

been useful to have understood whether size was related to wealth and staffing levels and therefore the commitment towards the online communication. A wider-focused study on non-profit organisations and their sites published in 2012 suggests that this kind of organisation have always struggled with effective online communication (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012).

2.9.5 Volunteers and the law

Hoy and Phelps (2003) studied 102 US church websites and found that there were breaches of privacy security on a number of them, both in the collection of personal data and in the publication of personal information such as via detailed prayer requests. Legislation in the US is different from that in the EU, and new regulations in the EU further limit the use of cookies by websites⁹. The work highlights the need for amateur webmasters to be aware of the rules in place but suggests that in their study, people posting information on a church website were not so concerned as if it were a commercial site. The privacy loss is the same, but this is an interesting question for those operating church sites. In the years since this work has been published, perhaps people are more aware of the risk to their personal data because of more media coverage, phishing, and the rise of social networking sites. But if the attitude still prevails, it could have implications for English websites' content.

⁹ Implemented in the UK by SI 2003/2426.

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2003/2426/contents/made> Accessed 18 August 2012

2.9.6 Church websites

Hoy and Phelps (2003), Carr (2004), Sturgill (2004), Swanson (2004), Baab (2008a), Farrell (2011) have analysed the content and purpose of church, or closely related, websites, with only Carr (2004) concerned with British Christianity.

Swanson (2004) reports findings on ten websites for apostate organisations (those for people who have rejected orthodox faith). Information dissemination is the key purpose for most of the sites studied, in preference to evangelism or proselytisation. It appears from the methodology that the content analysis was conducted as part of a class project. Swanson adjudicated the results from multiple codings of websites by students, so it is possible that the findings are not strictly unbiased. However weak, the evidence suggesting that information content is the most important element of religious websites is of interest.

Sturgill (2004) focused on Southern Baptist churches, analysing websites' organisational characteristics. The underlying assumption is that 'religious institutions engage in marketing and branding like other businesses' (Sturgill 2004, p 168). There is also an examination of the concept that churches, as mediated organisations, may actually reinforce their existence as an organisation by having a website. The study looked for evangelistic information, the church as an institution, its denomination, interactive elements and links to the wider community. The presence of ideological or organisational information was also investigated. For the sample of 251 websites, organisational information was more prevalent than ideological information. This suggests churches are not exploiting the internet to its full potential as a medium for more complicated messages. 92% of churches had information on services, with 56% offering a 'plan of salvation' – an explicit message about the Christian faith.

The work is limited to one US denomination. The study is a content analysis only, and apart from one chi-square test (presence of organisational information versus ideological information) does not offer more rigorous analysis of the results than a simple descriptive list of percentages. Also, there is no follow up with the church webmasters, so it is impossible to fully understand the decision making and motivation behind the sites that have been analysed. Nonetheless, Sturgill's work provides useful detail on the kinds of information churches are publishing or omitting from their sites.

Baab (2008a, 2008b) reports on study from the US, concluding that the ideology of the church influences the messages and strategy of different websites. Baab identifies megachurches, emerging churches and liberal churches as using different website strategies and content. For instance, megachurches rarely mention 'inclusivity' on their sites, but are more likely to have a specific link for information for newcomers. The study also contains interviews with church website producers and analysis of their use of mainstream secular marketing techniques. This work extends that of Sturgill (2004), in that it examines websites from different traditions, not just the Southern Baptists. The insight given into the attitudes of the website producers also provides evidence that these websites are created with different audiences in mind. The focus is solely on US sites, and there is an assumption that US Protestantism has a different character to that of the rest of the world. However, these findings could be extrapolated to the UK if the ideology of a church was an identifiable factor.

Cheong et al. (2009) investigate the online presence of Singaporean Christian churches. Using Helland's (2000) concept of 'religion online' in a multidisciplinary setting, the study investigates virtual geographies constructed by church websites.

The application of GIS to churches is not directly relevant to the study being undertaken, but their initial investigation and discussion of the ‘websphere’ of the organisations under study is. It is suggested that websites are:

... a dynamic extension of religious news and emergent church-related information. (Cheong et al 2009, p296)

The study reports interviews with a number of religious leaders about their attitudes towards and use of the internet. It is concluded that:

Religious leaders generally perceive the Internet as a medium for “giving [members] information” and this is consistent with the broad informational content of many websites (Cheong 2009, p299)

Cheong performed content analysis of 177 Protestant church sites. Table 2–2 below lists the categories of information that were coded for in this research. This is of particular interest because the list is directly useful for development of categories for the current project.

Religion on-line	Total (%)
Background of organisation	80.2
History of organisation	58.2
Faith beliefs/ vision	77.3
Religious services	88.7
Religious programs	81.4
Community programs	41.7
Photo gallery	37.1
Map of church	67.8
Webcast	8.5
Audiocast	47.5
Discussion forum	14.1

Table 2–2 Representation of religious organisations online (Cheong et al 2009, p296)

Cheong *et al* (2009) use the term 'websphere' in the research because it also includes the outgoing hyperlinks, mapping the virtual relationships between churches via these links. In this way they emphasise the community location of a church offline and online. The non-US focus and the interdisciplinary nature of the research help further understanding of how churches globally use websites. The term also includes the Web 2.0 elements such as blogs that are dynamic and interactive, further demonstrating the acceptance of these tools with some religious communities.

Farrell (2011) frames his content analysis of US churches in terms of online-religion/religion-online. The data collection was carried out in 2008, by which time other authors had tended to eschew this simple dichotomy. Farrell (2011) works with three hypotheses relating to the organisational use of websites, asking if different denominations use websites for different purposes. Does the level of community and political involvement vary with denomination? Do evangelical congregations reject public denominational affiliation? Do younger congregations (broadly evangelical) have more interactive websites? These questions are posed and the attempt to answer them is made by a content analysis of 600 church websites looking for three factors corresponding to the hypothesis – mobilisation, affiliation and functionality. Farrell coded the websites on an interval scale from 0 to 4, and reports the mean score on each factor for the variant denominations studied. Without more sophisticated statistical analysis of the means reported, it is difficult to judge the claim that 'even the slightest numerical difference is significant because the measurement range is so low' (p82) and thus a difference of 0.095 between two denominations may not be of note. Overall, Farrell claims support for the hypothesis that the level of content designed to mobilise political or social action varied across denominations.

Farrell's (2011) results regarding the age of congregations show the denominations on a continuum with higher functionality (interactivity) in the non-denominational, non-traditional churches and fewer opportunities for interactivity on websites of more traditional churches. The assumption here is that the age of the congregation influences the purposes to which the website is put.

Denomination is more explicitly linked to the politics and theology of a church in the US than in England. Under the umbrella of the Church of England, for example, sits a broad range of philosophies and the same is true for the other English denominations under consideration in this study. Nonetheless, Farrell's work provides further evidence for the ways in which churches use websites to communicate and interact with their congregations in the US.

In Europe, Fischer-Nelson (2012) asked Danish pastors what information they would want to see on an official church website. They wanted to see practical information, on baptisms, funerals and weddings, alongside articles on Christian faith and theology. Their concept of websites was as a way to communicate clearly Christian faith as a response to increasing secularisation.

The only existing content analysis study of English church sites is from Carr (2004), who investigated London church sites and the extent to which parishes have a role to play as information providers. As well as now being dated, the research leaves several questions unanswered. In his analysis of the Southwark Diocese website Carr states 'The diocesan website is a very good one, as far as it goes.' (p56).

Unfortunately, this statement is not evaluated against any particular criteria for either design or content, only Carr's opinion: 'Navigating the site is quite easy, and it has an attractive look' (p56). Discussion of parish websites looks only at the kind of basic information that could be found on a site, and is analysed by presence/

absence. This means there is no further insight into why particular elements have been incorporated, and the sites do not appear to be objectively assessed. However, this research is relevant as it appears to be the only prior study of English, Christian websites.

Use of email figures quite highly in the research as a key element of internet use. 95% of parishes have an email address. Carr (2004) states that with a sample size of 116 (response rate 34%) 'the results are likely to be significant' (p61) but offers no actual proof for this statement. Overall his conclusion is that email does not play a part in parish church mission. Indeed, although 48% of respondents said they were online at least once a week, Carr found a 'generally negative attitude towards the use of the Internet as a way of advancing the churches' mission.' (p67). Carr found that only 3% of parishes regularly discussed the internet at crucial meetings.

Carr (2004) does not give an analysis of the role of the Diocese as information provider, nor are the reasons behind the decision to publish or withhold information on websites explored. He also suggests that reluctance to use the internet could be down to the age profile of the clergy, but makes no reference to the 'silver surfer' phenomenon where retired people are becoming an active group online. In the US example, Hoover, Clark and Rainie (2004) found that in the US, the group most likely to use the internet for religious purposes were those aged 50–64. In the UK, internet use amongst retired people is increasing, with the over 65s as likely to look online for health information as younger people (Dutton and Blank 2011).

However, as the only existing British study, this is a helpful marker in the research landscape and foundation for the current research project. The next section examines the use of social media by religious organisations, again, from global perspectives.

2.10 Social Media

2.10.1 Facebook

Social media is an umbrella term for websites and tools that are primarily concerned with connecting individual users via a shared platform, such as a blog, or a particular service such as Facebook. Social media allows for dissemination and easy sharing of information, reaching beyond the personal contacts of church leaders (Hutchings 2010b, p16). Whilst noting that not all users become producers of content, Lomborg and Ess (2012) characterise social media as:

...communicative spaces in which the ordinary media user has greater potential to take control and responsibility on the communication process.

(Lomborg and Ess 2012, p170)

As social networking via services like MySpace, Facebook, Yammer, LinkedIn and Twitter has become mainstream, so research has investigated its relationship to religious communication. The changed nature of communication that is implied has a potential impact on the way that religious teaching and practice is perceived and done. The abandoned Twitter communion noted in section 2.7 above is one example of how traditional structures have been challenged via social media. One journalist has claimed that:

Religious groups were the original social networkers...so it should hardly be surprising that [they] have embraced Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social networking tools in order to promote their message and reach out to their followers. (Murray-West 2010, np)

Murray West's assertion that social media (network-focused tools) have been embraced by religious groups is reflected both in the research literature and general religious writing. In an example of the latter, (Rice 2009) highlights the ways in which social media, specifically the rise of Facebook, influences users' sense of community and purpose. It is noted that one effect is that the boundaries previously in place between leaders and the led have become 'fuzzy.' (p.128), a more populist approach than the academic research into these boundaries as considered here in section 2.9.3 above. Rice does not propose abandonment of Facebook, but suggests methods by which its influence can be controlled. What is also of interest is the inherent assumption that Facebook is not going to decline noticeably in popularity in the future. Rice is writing less from an academic, neutral point of view but as one advising church leaders in the US on how to use, control and understand Facebook. In several places the language – even reflected in the book's subheading 'How the Hyperconnected are Redefining Community' – is more reminiscent of the first wave of internet studies where hyperbole outstripped reflection and ultimately reality. This is also true of another US work, (Hipps 2009) which argues that technology is having a detrimental effect on faith communities. For example, in an opinion that echoes that of Christians (2002), Hipps says:

The Internet is a lot of things, but it is emphatically not a neutral aid. Digital social networking inoculates people against the desire to be physically present with others in real social network...Being together becomes nice but nonessential. (Hipps 2009, p115)

These two books are included in the review as examples of contemporary commentary showing how some church leaders see the potential effects of social

media. Later empirical evidence suggests that Hipps' and Rice's assertions are not being realised in current experiences.

Johns (2012) and Lomborg, Ess (2012) researched religious Facebook use. Johns observed the interactions on a range of global Facebook groups for different religions. He noted very little ongoing interaction on the group pages, with one posting a month typically being the level of participation in 2010. His conclusion is that users are signing up to Facebook groups not to engage in conversations online, but as a way of signalling their religious identity as part of their Facebook profile – a less far-reaching and revolutionary use of the technology than Rice or Hipps would suggest.

Lomborg and Stine (2012), in the same volume, describe a case study of a Danish church's use of Facebook. In particular, they focus on the online friending behaviour of one of the pastors, his view on this and his congregation's views. The viewpoints from the Danish church, which is described as more mainstream, and the attitudes towards media and religion are opposite of the patterns in the US. They conclude that the Facebook interactions amongst church members are best suited to maintaining weak-tie relationships, not usurping but augmenting regular contact via other communication means. The pastor who befriends congregation members is aware of his self-presentation on Facebook: on the one hand, being able to present himself as a 'normal' person is a benefit, and being aware of the congregation's daily concerns via their interactions on the site provides him with far more detail than could be gleaned from brief Sunday morning conversations. On the other hand, some congregants prefer a greater distance between themselves and the pastor in order to maintain professional authority (p184). This small case study

presents one of the first attempts to describe the social media relationships between church leaders and their church members in a European context.

2.10.2 MySpace

A recently published (2011) article investigates data from an older, and now less popular than Facebook, networking site, MySpace. Researchers compared MySpace profiles, and the information given there on religious affiliation, with data from an unconnected survey on their faith activities (Bobkowski and Pearce 2011). It was concluded that the religious outlook of young people did not necessarily translate online, in that those identifying as evangelical were no more likely to post religious information on MySpace. Also, users may identify as religious in their profile, but there was no evidence that people spontaneously talk about religion in wider online conversations on the site. This finding reflects the pastor quoted in Michel (2009) who asked, following a well-used Christian sermon question, whether if people were arrested for being Christian, would there be enough evidence for a conviction from their online presence.

2.10.3 Blogs

Publishers of blogs invite users to comment on their posts or to link or share from their own blogs. In this way a network of related blogs can be built up with users exchanging comments. Cheong, Halavais and Kwon (2008) claim that blogging can be viewed as a new religious practice. This is distinct from the online-religion interactions documented in the late 1990s. Cheong *et al* (2008), further discussed below, say that for church leadership:

Blogging develops proximal spaces by annihilating relational distance between the pastor and readers while maintaining the pastor's moral authority as a gatekeeper of religious knowledge (Cheong et al 2008, p296)

It is worth noting here that Cheong *et al* do not envisage that blogging as a practice would undermine the pastor's authority. Whilst a minority of blogs are well-read, the blogs in Cheong, Halavais and Kwon's sample receive little traffic and make up part of the 'long tail'¹⁰. The research comprised a content analysis of 200 blogs with religious content. The content found in the blogs is given below.

Type of content	Number of blogs
Personal religiosity	44.5%
Didactic content	39.0%
Criticism and social issues	15.5%
Co-ordination of practices	7.0%

Table 2-3 Cheong et al 2008: Types of religious content appearing in blogs

The study also analysed the links posted by religious and non-religious bloggers, finding that there is a 'Christian A-List' of sites and other bloggers that are linked to which parallels the secular 'A-list.' Cheong *et al* provide two relevant points:

Religious bloggers are operating outside the realm of the traditional nuclear church as they connect and link to the mainstream... [and] major parts of the religious blogosphere ...still reflect the influence of traditional religious experience. (Cheong et al 2008, p125)

¹⁰ http://www.longtail.com/the_long_tail/2005/09/long_tail_101.html (accessed 11 January 2010)

Individuals blog about their traditional church attendance. This further reinforces the idea that online religion is not subsuming place-based church but rather, religious people are integrating the online communication into their everyday practice and augmenting their offline churchgoing experience. The ubiquity of blogging as a practice is reflected in the publication of 'how-to' books for church leadership; citing examples of good and bad practice. Bailey and Storch (2007) claim, with echoes of the hyperbole that surrounded early studies of internet and religion:

Blogging has radically and permanently changed ministry... (Bailey and Storch 2007, p64)

If blogging has changed ministry, it has also affected congregations. Stewart (2011) presents a case study analysing the contributions made by British female writers on parachurch sites. One evangelical church in Stewart's study expressed concerns that the internet was a disruptive medium. Concern about access to 'aberrant or damaging' content (p1212) meant:

Many of the women...restrict[ed] the sources that they go to for Christian teaching to those that are directly recommended by senior members of the church. (Stewart 2011, p1212)

These senior members would naturally be male leaders. Stewart's participant, Katie, from this church used her personal blog as a forum to develop her teaching, in a way that was not permitted in the physical church because of strict gender division. All the women were using blogging as a way to find a voice that was otherwise marginalised in their home church. This shows how online participation allows individuals to augment their religious experience. Stewart's (2011) research echoes

the claim from Cheong (2008) that bloggers are operating outside of the mainstream church.

In addition, Campbell (2010) (as discussed in section 2.9.3 above) found that for a number of bloggers the motivations lay in one of four categories, the most popular being a desire to share information about Christian living. This too is a way of augmenting the daily religious experience of both the blogger and their readers. So one theme emerging is that online work has a secondary role to play in religious life.

2.10.4 Twitter

Lovejoy, Saxton (2012) include religious organisations in their study of how non-profit organisations use the microblogging site. They claim that sites like Twitter and Facebook allow organisations to easily interact with their stakeholders in ways that were difficult with only static websites. Hutchings (2010a) shows how Twitter is used by people involved in Lifechurch.tv to communicate and enhance the experience during the rest of the week.

Cheong (2012) presents a commentary on Twitter use for Christian religious purposes. Creation and spreading of memes around statements of faith, and faith branding, are the two uses of Twitter which are explored. There is less focus on the possible relational side of Twitter-based interactions. Although the ability to convert a weak tie into a strong relationship exists, for the church leaders under consideration Cheong (2012) suggests that the ties develop into 'attachments' p199, not necessarily relationships - and that the leaders use Twitter to push for more consumption of their media output as well as physical participation in their church. In terms of faith branding, Cheong suggests that Twitter can help

'commodify' religious experience. Her discussion focuses on the corporate use of Twitter in the US, but concludes with calls for wider research into the ways that this kind of online contact is integrated into religious participation.

2.11 Information seeking

The previous sections examined literature concerned with religious use of services designated as social media, which is generally accepted to be driven by user-generated content. This next section looks at literature examining the information-seeking, rather than content-generating, habits of church leaders – another area in which no UK studies have been published.

Lambert (2010) outlines a case study on the information seeking habits of US Baptist ministers. He identifies several roles that ministers adopt which influence their information needs: administrator, preacher and counsellor. As 'preacher', the ministers are themselves information providers and turn to a number of sources, offline and online, with the internet a popular source of information. Defining the internet as a single source, however, fails to acknowledge the vast range of online resources. There is a difference between a site such as Biblegateway.com, offering authoritative versions of the Bible, and a blog written by a lay person such as those analysed by Cheong, Halavais and Kwon (2008) or wider, more informal social media sources such as Twitter. This work is evidence that in the US, at least, pastors have no hesitation in turning to websites for information. It was also noted that the leaders in the case study agreed that it can be hard to assess what is useful online.

van der Laan (2009) offers a cautionary and critical view of the use of websites providing resources for sermons and in some cases off-the-peg sermons for

download. Whilst acknowledging that many will rely on websites for sources of information, he suggests that:

Religious life changes not for the better but for the worse when the Internet becomes not only the default but the first source to turn to for something so important to Christian religious life as the worship service and the sermon.

(van der Laan 2009, p275)

The implication here is that the internet is a detrimental force, weakening the role of church leader, rather than a force for good. In a direct response to van der Laan, (Michels 2009) presents an ethnographic analysis of involvement with the internet for preaching purposes. This work highlights how the internet makes unorthodox points of view far more accessible than would have been in earlier years, quoting a pastor as saying:

...materials from variant viewpoints are now accessible... 'ten years ago you wouldn't have stumbled upon that—it wouldn't have been in your local bookstore.' (Michels 2009, p172)

For the specific church leader in this study:

His role as the 'centre of Biblical truth' for the congregation has changed, and theological positions are more frequently challenged based on information found online (Michels 2009, p172)

These themes of authority and challenge to orthodox views relate to those in section 2.9.3 above.

Michels' (2009) initial response is interesting despite being a limited case study of one leader. That leader uses the internet but not uncritically. Although aware that

not all information on the internet is reliable, his judgement is based on his understanding of what follows his orthodox point of view. So despite there being a vast range of different viewpoints easily accessible, only information which confirms the minister's current thinking is used. Michels (2012) investigated the information seeking behaviour of five leaders of a Canadian Baptist church. In this study, leaders used a variety of information sources for both church- and everyday life-related problems: Google, social media, people, books and television as well as prayer and the Bible. In principle these leaders took the same view on selection of sources as the earlier, lone participant in that they cited orthodoxy as a key criteria. In fact, the 2012 paper repeats the same point exactly about 'stumbling across books' as the 2009 work, so it is reasonable to assume both papers report on the same congregation. Michels (2012) reports that the 'respondents also seemed comfortable selecting resources from outside their theological tradition' (p21) including some that are not generally regarded as orthodox. These two studies have taken an ethnographic approach to understanding how Canadian church leaders solve information needs.

An email survey asked Danish pastors how they used the internet (Fischer-Nelson 2012). As an email survey this would only reach those who are actively using the internet. The results show that there is a great deal of online searching. 81% of the sample used the internet almost every day for work purposes. Table 2-4 lists the top activities performed online. Blogging and Facebook are minority pastimes whereas information search, Bible lookup and sermon inspiration are well-established tasks for which Danish pastors seek solutions online. Fischer-Nelson (2012) reports that 88% of pastors say the internet has had a positive influence on their work (p122).

Online activity related to work, in past 3 months	Percent
Sent/ received emails	99
Searched for information	96
Found inspiration for a sermon	86
Looked up passages in the Bible	66
Found prayers for use in the church	35
Been on Facebook	17
Written on a blog	4

Table 2-4 Danish Pastors' online activities (Fischer-Nielson 2012, 121)

For Park and Taylor (2007), ministers deemed 'elite' made up the research population in this study of the resources ministry professionals used. The respondents are termed elite as they are recipients of study grants, therefore it is claimed the ministers are highly-educated. It is noted that the ministers all used the internet as a source of knowledge - human capital, as it is described. Gender and racial differences in use of resources were also found, but the key finding is that for this research group, the internet was used more than in the general population.

The PICTURE project from Università della Svizzera italiana (USI - Lugano, Switzerland) in collaboration with the School of Institutional Social Communications of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross has, since 2009, collected data on the use of the internet by Catholic priests. Participants are only those who are users of the internet, so the research does not allow for investigation of reasons of non-use. Of the sample of 4,992 priests, 94.7% were online daily. Only 8.7% had never searched online for homily (sermon) materials; 41.6% said they thought digital technology has improved their 'priestly mission'. These figures suggest that within the global Catholic Church, if leaders have adopted online communication, a significant minority are finding the tools of benefit (Cantoni et al. 2012).

Although none of these studies reflect the experience of English leaders, and the majority of participants covered are male, they help to contextualise the experience

of all church leaders balancing widely-available information, that which is orthodox, and their roles as preachers and information providers.

2.12 Hyperlinks

The final section of this review specifically looks at the ways in which hyperlinks have been studied in the context of religious websites. Hyperlinks leading from one website to another are deliberately chosen, and can help establish the ethos of a website.

Haas and Grams (2000, 1998) have raised a number of issues relating to hyperlink analysis in wider research, not just that which is concerned with religious websites. Their original aim was to develop classifications for hyperlinks following relatively traditional methods. However, their concern with facilitating understanding of the context of a hyperlink makes the work useful background to that which currently considers the 'semantic web.'¹¹ The work describes possible categories for links, but also suggests that all links can be collapsed into either being a recommended resource or a navigational aid. (p100). It is also suggested links help contextualise a page for the reader. In Haas and Grams (2000) the authors state that:

For nonfiction pages whose general purpose is to be informative, it is reasonable to assume that the author wishes to make the organisation and information on the Web page or site clear and easy to understand. (Haas and Grams 2000, p182).

¹¹ <http://www.w3.org/RDF/FAQ> (accessed 8 January 2010)

This assertion is behind their expectation that tools that would increase the information that a hyperlink can offer would enhance the users' experience of a site. Their 1998 work contains a call for more research into the producers' viewpoints as decisions are made regarding content and positioning of hyperlinks.

Scheitle (2005) attempts to define boundaries around online church presence. Scheitle's hypotheses relate to the theological position of the church – whether liberal or conservative – and the number and type of hyperlinks used on each church site. He argues that a more conservative church website will include more links to more types of content, as the conservatives believe that there are few external unapproved sources that adequately meet the informational needs of the congregation. Conservatives see ecumenism as a threat. A liberal church will, on the other hand, include fewer links because they deem more external sources to be acceptable. Scheitle finds that the theological position does influence the number and categories of website links. The educational attainment and income of the congregation also influence the number of links a website will include. This work is of interest for two reasons. Firstly, by enumerating the categories of links that were found in the sample of churches, the current research project is provided with a framework for analysing English church links. Secondly, although the analysis is of the hyperlinks rather than website content analysis it provides more context for the study of church websites and their location in the online community. The list of categories is given in the table below.

Links to official denominational sites
Links to other congregations or religious groups
Religious resources
Religious media
Parachurch groups e.g. Promise Keepers
Politically motivated religious sites
Religiously affiliated educational institutions
Commercial sites selling religious goods
'Other' religious sites

Table 2-5 Link categories from Scheitle (2005)

This element of website construction, the use of hyperlinks, is one which webmasters use consciously or unconsciously to help identify the character of their site. Along with the level of interactivity, other written content, design and layout, links are part of the way a site is conceived and published. All these elements have been considered in the research literature to a greater or lesser extent and form part of the research landscape in which this project is located.

In a later work, Smith, Scheitle & Bader (2012) note that there has been little further investigation of outbound links from church sites, and perform an analysis on non-denominational US churches. The pattern of links suggests that apparently independent churches are actually connected via a hidden network of third-party sites.

2.13 Conclusion

Current literature concerning use of religious information online shows the development of research from the first wave of highly theoretical work assuming that technology would inevitably reshape religion. The second wave, which focused more on people than the technology, is also being passed as more analysis and more collaborative work is being produced. More notice has been taken on the ways in which online activities have influenced non-Western religions. The rise of social

networking has in some cases led to publication of statements that have more in common with the hyperbole from the late 1990s ‘first wave,’ but there has also been serious scholarship investigating corporate and individual use of social media. Information seeking and information publishing have also been investigated, although there are few studies which explore the English experience. A common theme is of religious use of the internet to augment rather than replace traditional, in-person religious experience.

The literature review has established the importance of a need to investigate the specifically British or English use of the internet for religious purposes. This project will fill this gap in the research landscape, exploring how online tools are being adopted at local, parish level.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3. Part 1: Introduction to Methodology

Research is undertaken principally to answer questions about the world. Blaikie (2009) characterises research as having one of several key purposes: to describe, to explain and understand, to effect change, to predict, to evaluate or to assess impacts. These purposes drive the formulation of the research questions – ‘what?’, ‘why?’ or ‘how?’ questions. Whether the aim is to find a definitive answer to a question, or to arrive at a better definition of the question itself, the methods employed and what constitutes an adequate answer will be determined in part by the nature of the phenomena under examination and in part by assumptions that underpin the investigation. What is regarded as sufficient evidence for conclusion from one epistemological standpoint may be dismissed as unconvincing from another:

Epistemological assumptions are concerned with what kinds of knowledge are possible – how we can know things – and with criteria for deciding when knowledge is both adequate and legitimate. (Blaikie 2010, p92)

Consideration of these assumptions and standpoints is crucial, as summed up thus:

The purpose of methodology is to enable researchers to plan and examine critically the logic, composition and protocols of research methods; to evaluate the performance of individual techniques; and to estimate the likelihood of particular research designs to contribute to knowledge (Krippendorff 2004a, p.xxi)

This chapter will examine the philosophies which underpin research strategies and in doing so will contextualise the methods considered for this project and offer justification for the specific tools selected.

To recap, the research questions under consideration are:

- To what extent have English Christian churches established a distinct individual web presence?
- To what extent do churches and church leaders use email, websites and social media tools to find and publish information?
- Is there evidence that traditional notions of hierarchy and authority been affected by online sources of information and communication?

3.1.1 Research methodology

3.1.1.1 Scientific Method

‘Scientific method’ as it developed within the natural sciences has at its core the ability to reason from general scientific claims to particular conclusions which can be checked experimentally (Gower 1997). This is the positivist model (Blaikie 2010). Denscombe (2008) offers an explanation of this model in terms of seeking ‘causes and consequences’ of observed phenomena. Observed phenomena were deemed important because this understanding of what constitutes knowledge arose as a reaction to metaphysical mysticism, swapping faith in acts of God for the formulation and testing of observable laws of nature. Positivism, often used synonymously with empiricism as an approach, aims to investigate phenomena in isolation; in a value-free environment.

Empiricism is the epistemological standpoint that observations (and sensory) experiences should be regarded as the most important or only method to gain knowledge ... (Hjorland 2005, p134)

and:

...the traditional accounts of scientific method, then, offer a logic of science which is biased more or less heavily in favour of an empirical epistemology and ontology (Gower 1997), p259

Hence, all knowledge comes from experience. Okasha (2002) reports that the philosopher Hume arrived at the logical extreme of this position and rejected any possibility that true causality could ever be established – causality is a figment of imagination (p51). But this is the extreme, and Hjørland supplies a measured approach:

In practice empiricist epistemologies are searching for simple observations which any observer can agree on. (Hjorland 2005, p134)

Denscombe (2008) asserts that this approach is typified by the experimental method, seeking to test hypotheses in circumstances that are detached, objective and can be independently verified. The subject matter in the natural sciences, particularly physics, offers itself to this kind of investigation; the ability to study individual events that can be separated without consequence from a wider whole. Manipulations can be performed which lend themselves to statistical analysis, hence, the logic of this scientific approach is operationalised by quantitative methods, and as Gorman and Clayton (2005) explain:

In quantitative research one usually starts with certain assumptions, questions or hypotheses and looks for data that will support or deny them.
(Gorman and Clayton 2005, p7)

This approach has been recognised as being the default approach within library & information science during its early development until the 1980s (Budd 1995). Also according to Budd (1995), positivism has lingered although:

...to some extent the positivist influence has waxed and waned, it has seldom disappeared utterly, perhaps because of the attractiveness of its claims, specifically the phantasm of certainty. (Budd 1995, p298)

This has had implications for the way in which research in information science has been formulated. Budd claims this is because 'operational positivism' defines research: 'questions asked...are limited to certain methodologies' (p300). That is, researchers prioritise questions with quantifiable answers and discount those areas of enquiry that go beyond the immediately observable. Counts of books borrowed or websites visited can be statistically analysed but give no explanations for the motivations of the borrower or browser. As Budd goes on to point out, 'intention sets the social apart from the physical' (p301). There is no way to reduce or understand people's intentions (which prompt their actions) within the experimental method that insists only that which is observable is valid. Wilson (1999) suggests that too much attention to rigorous method divorces research from reality and makes it of little use to practitioners. In addition, Gower (1997) notes that claims to objectivity from research under a positivist paradigm are flawed:

...the cultural, political and ideological convictions are brought to bear on the decisions scientists make; to this extent the scientific beliefs incorporated in a paradigm are socially constructed. (Gower 1997, p244)

3.1.1.2 Other approaches

There has therefore been a move within information science research towards a more phenomenological approach, a change from the strict rigid stance that follows the scientific method to one that encompasses and permits inferences to be made. Phenomenology is an approach that seeks to uncover latent meaning from the manifest meaning, thus is related closely to hermeneutics. This approach uses more inductive reasoning, which begins with observation and aims to build theory from the data. It is more closely linked with methods classed as qualitative methods. Again, as Gorman and Clayton (2005) explain:

The ultimate goal of qualitative research is to understand those being studied from their perspective, from their point of view (Gorman and Clayton 2005, p3).

Both qualitative and quantitative methods of enquiry are evidence-based. It is in their approach to gathering and testing evidence that they differ. The former favours a 'bottom-up' approach and this is the basis of grounded theory. Grounded theory attempts to place explanations within context, to build explanations around observed events, and is reflexive in that theory can be developed in an iterative way by consulting with those involved in the situation under observation. This holistic, integrative approach is typical of many qualitative methods where:

...the qualitative researcher collects evidence and uses this to develop an explanation of events, to establish a theory based on observed phenomena (Gorman and Clayton 2005, p7)

3.1.1.3 Mixed approaches

Wilson (2003) contends that:

we are all interested in 'information', but that is not a single phenomenon

(Wilson 2003, p446)

Hence, a range of methods of enquiry and research topics have been employed throughout the discipline. There is no single aspect that can act as a cohesive force. Gower (1997), in his discussion of the changing acceptability, or otherwise, of scientific methods over time suggests that there is no reason why one could not be an 'epistemological opportunist' or a 'methodological anarchist' (p236) since many methods that were seen as doctrinal at a particular point in history have gone on to be ridiculed for their inadequacy.

3.1.1.4 Four research strategies

Blaikie (2010) contends that such opportunism can be effective only when proper consideration has been given to the reasons why a change in approach is necessary. He outlines four research strategies– Inductive, Abductive, Deductive and Retroductive – and suggests that each one is linked with specific research questions, designs and paradigms. This clearly sets out the links between the epistemological assumptions being made and the kind of research design that can be adopted. Throughout his discussion is the argument that selection of design and method is governed by these links as well as preferences and pragmatism. Furthermore, he states that since hypothesis testing is only relevant to deductive, quantitative research, social science investigations proceed by the formulation and answering of research questions. These questions generally take the form of 'what,' 'why' or 'how?'

The purpose for research questions can vary in complexity, and can be cumulative within the same research project. Answering a 'what' question is simpler than deciding why or how a situation arises.

The Inductive strategy is suited to answering 'what' questions:

The aim of the Inductive research strategy is to establish limited generalisations about the distribution of, and patterns of association amongst, observed or measured characteristics of individuals and social phenomenon (Blaikie 2010, p83)

This strategy also implies that researchers decide in advance which characteristics to look for, and how they are defined. This differs from the retroductive approach, which seeks to describe phenomena and then test models which provide explanations – answering 'why?' questions. The deductive strategy is based on hypothesis testing and is that which is aligned with the classical scientific method, explaining 'what' questions. Abductive research strategies are more complex and can answer both 'what' and 'why' questions by:

...producing understanding rather than an explanation, by providing reasons rather than causes. (Blaikie 2010, p89)

Denscombe (2008) takes a very pragmatic view and suggests that the actual choice of research methods is 'horses for courses.' By this he means that one should use the method of investigation that is most suited to the question in hand, rather than being fettered by a purely philosophically-led choice. This pragmatism encourages the mixed-methods approach whereby methodologies are combined, rather than forcing all aspects of research into a single framework. Again, Blaikie would agree saying that:

Methods can be used in the service of a number of research strategies, however, they will need to be used with different ontological assumptions.

(Blaikie 2010, p106)

Triangulation is a term borrowed from disciplines such as surveying or geology and refers to an approach that takes data from three points, all focused on the target question. In this way researchers are able to gain different but related perspectives on the problem. Denscombe (2008) offers two outcomes for using triangulation – a more accurate measurement of a phenomenon or a more complete picture. In this project, the use of multiple lines of enquiry is intended to enhance the understanding of the problem. Blaikie (2010) suggests that triangulation is just one possible approach within a ‘mixed methods’ design, referring to “studies that combine qualitative and quantitative methods in parallel or in sequence” (p.219). Others combine methods to explore, embed or explain phenomena.

3.1.1.5 Characterisation of current research project

This project is aiming to describe and explain the current situation of church-based online communication. As an exploratory study, there is no intention to change or evaluate the way things are. The research purpose, combined with the knowledge gained from the literature, has led to a set of research questions predominantly focused on the ‘what’ and ‘why’ – bearing in mind that ‘detailed description can provide the beginnings of an explanation’ (Blaikie 2010, p71). The research strategy employed is Inductive.

In the current research, quantitative and qualitative methods will be combined to give a fuller picture of the problem under discussion. Content analysis and surveys, which have their roots in empiricist epistemology will be combined with interviews, more usually associated with a qualitative, phenomenological approach.

3.2 Part 2: Implementation

3.2.1 Ethical considerations

Desk research based on websites that are publicly available and unchanged by examination does not entail particular ethical considerations. Conducting interviews and interaction with interview participants does, however. Loughborough University guidelines were followed¹² and ethical approval obtained.

3.2.1.1 Consent

The key issue is that interviewees participate from a point of informed consent, that is, they understand the nature and purpose of the interview, how their responses may be used, and their right to withdraw partially or completely from the session. In addition, the interviews were recorded and explicit consent was required for this, particularly for telephone interviews where participants could not see the recording equipment. The email invitation to participants included information on the nature of the research. This is included in appendix 11.5 with the preamble used to gain consent at the beginning of each interview.

This chapter will go on to offer further justification for the choice of research methods used in this project, and outline their implementation. This justification will include brief reasons why alternative models and research methods were not adopted. The diagram below outlines the three phases of the research project:

¹² Summary is available at

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/admin/committees/ethical/gn/Process%20for%20approval%20master.pdf> (Accessed 23 October 2012)

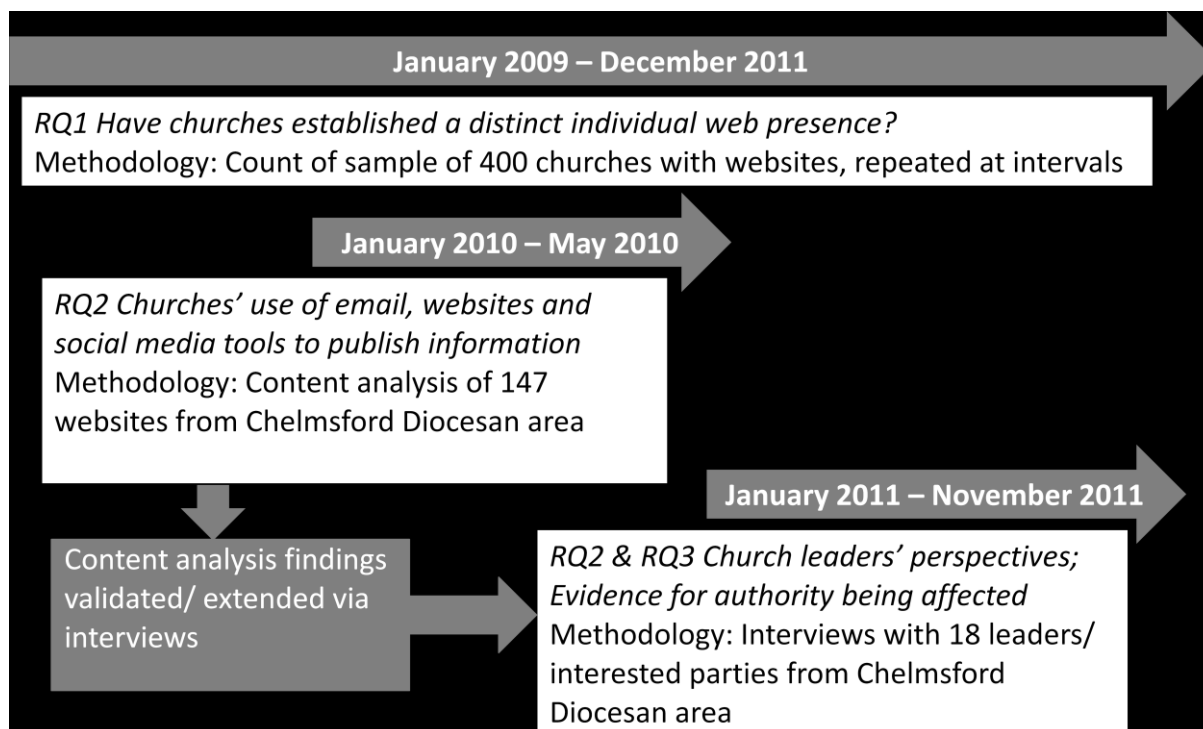


Figure 3-1 The three components of the research project

3.2.2 Quantitative methods (i) – Survey research

The longitudinal strand to the project is based upon counting the existence of church websites, a form of survey research. This simple census provides a baseline for the numbers of church sites in existence and helps contextualise the more detailed content analysis.

As a piece of desk research this approach has a number of advantages. First, it can be relatively free from bias. Taking a simple random sample removes influence by area, church size or income. There is a known population of churches in England.

Research in this way allows the phenomenon under investigation to be observed in an objective manner. There is no researcher influence over the churches chosen by the random sample. The observation of the presence or absence of a website does not influence the likelihood of a site being found.

The survey was designed to take repeated measures of the same variable over a three-year period.

One disadvantage of this simple census is that although it provides a baseline for the project, it is not possible to attempt to draw wider explanations from the data collected as to why the numbers of website vary.

However, as the project is constrained by time and other resources, further investigation into this particular issue would not necessarily contribute further to the answering of the research questions in hand.

3.2.3 Quantitative methods (ii): content analysis

Content analysis has been used to describe the information published on church websites. Content analysis can be used in either a qualitative or quantitative context. In this project, the quantitative method is employed. The section below outlines the characteristics and suitability of this, and its implementation, drawing on other research projects as well as methodology texts for guidance and examples of successful approaches.

Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use. (Krippendorff 2004, p18)

Krippendorff (1980, 2004) is one of the most widely cited content analysis experts. His guidance forms the foundation for the approach taken in this project.

Krippendorff (2004) traces the roots of content analysis back to the Church and its concern about the spread of secular matter sparked by the invention of the printing press. Content analysis is used to understand communication, and one of the most

distinctive features of communications is that they inform their recipients, invoke feelings or cause behavioural changes.

Krippendorff (2004) rejects the notion that content analysis must by definition be quantitative. He also objects to the idea that the meaning is manifest and maintains that texts have no objective qualities. In other words, there is nothing inherent in a text; someone brings the meanings of a text to it. There is no assumption that the message itself is a container for the meaning.

Ordinary readers and content analysts merely read differently. (Krippendorff 2004, p23)

Content analysis of texts has two advantages as a research method. Firstly, it can be unobtrusive. Analysis of a text does not change what is being measured by the act of measuring it. This is in contrast to interviews, for example, which can introduce bias via the researcher, or experiments that can change the outcome by influencing the expectations of the participants. Secondly, pragmatically, it is a tool suited to desk research within a limited budget.

Websites and other online tools are a key source of data:

The exponentially growing Internet is an unimaginably large but for the most part unmined source of content analysis data. (Krippendorff 2004, p43)

If the goal is to understand messages from websites then it is the most appropriate tool to use. Websites can clearly be defined as a text. Categories can be formulated from theory or from induction from observed websites. If some features are assessed by a purely binary presence or absence marker, results are quantifiable and can be statistically analysed.

3.3 Content analysis methodology

The section below considers methodological concerns when using content analysis.

White and Marsh (2006) provide an overview of recent content analyses that considered a variety of texts. Their paper provides a concise overview of the technique, its origins, current applications and considerations, emphasising that content analysis can be approached from either a qualitative or quantitative standpoint. With the latter, the emphasis is on the objective counting of elements within the text. Its objective is to 'test hypotheses, not develop them.' (p30). The former has a more inferential approach with target texts being examined prior to the development of the analytical constructs with which they will be ultimately analysed. A number of the examples cited by White and Marsh combine both approaches within one research study. In their characterisation of the differences between qualitative and quantitative content analysis, White and Marsh summarise the key variations in research approach, research tradition, categorisation, coding and the argument basis for proof amongst others.

White & Marsh also point out that varied definitions of content analysis have existed during its development as a research technique. For the purposes of their article they employ the definition from Krippendorff (2004) as quoted above. This definition includes images as well as text. Researchers cited in White and Marsh have analysed the content of images on web sites (Bell 2001 and Collier 2001), as well as the relationship between images and the surrounding text. White & Marsh (2003) form the overall conclusion that content analysis is a 'highly flexible research method' and a 'systematic, rigorous approach to analysing documents' (p41).

3.3.1 Development of categories and classifications

Within the information science literature specifically, Allen and Reser (1990) survey how content analysis as a tool was used in library research in the late 1980s. The work focuses on written sources and only considers electronic content (email) in passing, but does include discussion of the pitfalls of content analysis which have been noted for the current research. The research suggests that within the body of library and information science literature studied, there are two types of content analysis – classification or elemental analysis. Elemental analysis involves recording and researching at the level of individual words within a text. The majority of work discussed in this review fits into the former classification category – that texts are examined for the presence or absence of specific categories of information. This is the prevailing nature of the research being undertaken in this project and so Allen and Reser’s review is of direct relevance.

The development of the categories used for analysis is key to the success of the project. Allen and Reser (1990) noted that only 24% of the studies under consideration used existing categories for analysis, although this is their recommended starting point. They suggest that:

When researchers find it is necessary to develop their own classifications, the categories chosen should be exhaustive, mutually exclusive, clearly defined and conceptually valid in relation to the research question. (Allen and Reser 1990, p257).

Validity is the extent to which the tool is measuring the aspects of texts that it is intended to measure. Reliability is the extent to which repeated use of the tool will give the same results. In content analysis reliability is also calculated as an inter-

rater score, that is, to ensure that multiple researchers are recording the data in the same way. To ensure that the framework for the current research maintains validity, categories were linked directly to the objectives of the study.

Wherever possible they were also developed with reference to the existing literature. If a particular aspect had been tested with a particular indicator these were automatically included. For example, Carr (2004) included a count of whether church websites included a contact email address. Therefore the presence or absence of an email address is an element in the list for this study, linked to discovery of the extent to which churches make their contact details easily available. A further source and verification of the indicators came from the practical literature written for church website designers. David (2007) lists a number of elements of poor design and construction, from which good design and construction can be inferred. Although design, assessment of which can be subjective, is not a specific criteria, elements have been included. These concrete elements – such as use of frames, or placement of menu bars – allow an objective assessment of whether a website is following current best practice in its construction and layout. A detailed discussion of the categories is given in 3.8.

The content analysis framework given in appendix 11.1 lists the categories and the objectives that provide justification for the inclusion of each particular element. The majority of the indicators are a simple presence/ absence measure, either of text, graphics or links. This allows for a relatively fast analysis of individual web pages and for a quantitative analysis of the results. Three items also code for the difference between a link and coded text for specific expected content elements. Allen & Reser (1990) also caution against revising the categories except within a pilot study that is intended to allow for the adaptation of the categories. The

framework for this was tested on a proportion of websites before full implementation.

3.3.2 Content analysis of the world wide web

Weare and Lin (2000) focused on the challenges presented by the world wide web. Their article predates the review from White and Marsh (2003), so it is possible that some of the concerns Weare and Lin raise have been sufficiently addressed in subsequent research. However, given the pace of change of online communication in the last two decades, their statement that ‘the sheer size and chaotic structure of the Internet...complicates efforts to select representative samples of messages for analysis’ (p273) is unlikely to have been proven false.

Weare and Lin (2000) note that the low cost of online and digital information allows a greater range of resources to be considered as part of the population – they cite the wide availability of news archives as one example. This increase in the availability of resources also permits a more rigorous approach to sampling with fewer studies of online information relying on convenience samples. However, they do note that the unregulated proliferation of websites poses an issue in itself:

... sorting through the wealth of information is a formidable task, and this task is further complicated by the dynamism of the WWW in which pages appear and disappear rapidly. (Weare and Lin 2000, p 276)

The nature of the message is also considered by Weare and Lin (2000), specifically, the nature of ‘push’ versus ‘pull’ information on the world wide web. Online communication presents a range of methods of accessing the messages that website producers are publishing. In the early days of the internet these were static messages, very much akin to a newspaper or a book. With later developments in RSS

feeds and collaborative tools, the delivery and appearance of the messages has changed. Collation of relevant messages is routinely automated by intelligent systems. These changes could all have an impact on the traditional assumptions about the placement and context of a particular message that is the subject of an analysis. Weare and Lin do not suggest concrete answers but rather draw attention to these issues as bearing on future research. They claim that 'few studies have delved into what messages are specifically trying to convey and how they convey it' (Weare and Lin 2000, p285).

3.3.2.1 Coding interactivity on websites

Weare and Lin (2000) also suggest that there are methodological issues in coding for interactivity in websites. They cite examples of other research that has examined email and chat rooms and the direction of political conversations within communities (e.g. Musso *et al* 2000) and go on to state that:

...a common limitation of this approach is that it only measures the potential for interactivity rather than the actual level of interactivity supported by a Web site. (Weare and Lin 2000, p285)

McMillan et al. (2008) addressed exactly this point by developing a platform-independent tool to code web-based interactivity. They note that given that traditional content analysis tools have been transplanted to the internet, it is a necessary 'evolution' to develop new tools that allow for a 'rigorous yet flexible tool for the tough job of analysing web-based interactivity' (p795). In particular their tool is designed to be relatively future proof, that is, rather than relying on enumerating the current tools which allow for interactivity on websites it categorises the interactions and codes for these categories. This is important given the rapid pace of change of the adoption – and abandonment – of online tools. This in turn is

based on the assumption that content analysis measures could be developed based on 'theoretical foundations.'

Building on existing theories of interaction, McMillan et al (2008) use a three-dimensional construct: human-to-computer, human-to-human and human-to-content. 'Human-to-computer' is characterised by three types of interaction: navigation, action and transaction. There is also a layer of possible personalisation, a concept that is more recent in its origins given the expansion of technological innovation. The complexity of websites also now demands the presence of features such as personalised search. Human-to-human is defined as that which is concerned with the website as a mediator between two people. This is characterised by the 'email us' type of link, or the ability to tell a friend about the website. There is also a concern for whether the communication is synchronous or asynchronous. Already there is blurring of boundaries between human-to-human and human-to-content. Human-to-content interaction allows users to post comments or upload photographs or other items. This is the kind of interaction that is widespread on social media sites such as Facebook. If a website is constructed around the same principles as a blog and actively encourages comments from its readers, conversations between a number of participants including the site owner can take place. This is a form of human-to-human asynchronous communication and interaction, yet by adding visible comments to the blog, it is also a form of human-to-content interaction.

Whilst the 'tell a friend' link is classified as human-to-human, the use of 'share this' tools is quite widespread, allowing users to post websites' links to one of a suite of recommendation sites, including Facebook, Digg or Twitter. These sharing services

do not have a specific end audience in the same way that an individual email would do, and the posting of the recommended link is creating content elsewhere.

This tool is of interest to the research under consideration because it is independent of the technologies used to promote interactivity. This has two benefits. Firstly if technologies change significantly during the life of the project, or at least the data collection phase, the work is not necessarily redundant for being superseded. Secondly, it could reduce any effects that are due to the financial input into the websites under consideration; richer sites may have more complex tools for interactivity than those with more meagre resources at their disposal, but this would not affect a coding scheme that was effectively concept-based. A further consideration is that it updates the relatively limited range of interaction tools that have been considered by the directly relevant literature to date.

3.3.3 Unit of analysis

White and Marsh (2006) provide guidance and examples on the unitisation of the data into sampling units and data collection units. Sampling units serve to identify the population and establish the basis for sampling. Data collection units are the units for measuring variables. Units of analysis are the basis for reporting analyses. These units may be, but are not necessarily, the same. Examples of sampling units given by White and Marsh include abstracts in the LISA database (Green 1991) and chat reference interviews (White, Abels & Agresta 2004). Data collection units are words and conversation turns respectively. White and Marsh suggest that:

Pragmatism determines the sampling and data collection unit; the research question or hypothesis determines the unit of analysis. (White and Marsh 2006, p30)

Salinas (2006) undertook a content analysis of websites with Latina content. Whilst the websites in the study are not directly relevant to the church websites in this project, the methodology employed can illuminate the methods to be used. Within Salinas' study:

The unit of analysis was the Web site's homepage, defined as the main point of entry to the Web site, and secondary pages, defined as pages that are linked from the homepage. (Salinas 2006, p307)

Haas and Grams (2000) also defined their unit of analysis in the same way as 'source pages and the first generation target pages that were linked to them' (Haas & Grams 2000, p183). This is the definition that will be employed for the current research project. Weare and Lin (2000) also discuss the establishment of a sampling unit. Their stance is that the use of a single web page as defined by its URL, which could be either the home page or a page that is landed on by a random process, is a limited approach best used in studies that are concerned with elements of web pages. However, it may be too simplistic for studies that attempt to investigate communication theory rather than structure.

3.3.4 Sampling

Research studies are criticised by Allen and Reser (1990) for either unreliable sampling or for not stating the assumptions under which a sample was taken. Salinas (2006) also notes the difficulty of selecting a truly random sample of the websites available and used a relevance sampling technique that employed the major search engines Google, Clusty and Yahoo!

Weare & Lin say:

The scope of information on the Internet, its rapid rates of growth and change, and its chaotic organisation obfuscate the population of messages under study and what constitutes a representative sample of those messages, thereby threatening the external validity of Web-based research. (Weare and Lin 2000, p289)

An explicit statement of the sampling strategy is necessary to judge the reliability of the statistical analyses undertaken, if indeed any analysis is attempted. Two separate samples of churches are being used within this project. The first, drawn from all English churches, is intended to approximate a random sample. This is for the longitudinal work, recording the change over time of the proportions of churches with websites. The exact method employed is described below in section 3.6.1 . The second, to be used for the content analysis, is drawn from the Chelmsford Diocesan area only, which is local to the researcher. One aim for the project involves conducting face-to-face interviews with clergy and support staff responsible for the analysed websites. The likelihood of this being completed increased with a smaller geographic range. The method for establishing this sample is given in 3.7.1 below.

3.3.5 Qualitative Methods: Interviews

The desk research described above is suited to the ‘what’ questions (RQ1, and part of RQ2). To understand the ‘why’ questions, interviews will be used to gather opinions and experience, with the aim of identifying trends which will provide possible answers to the research questions:

To what extent do churches and church leaders use email, websites and social media tools to find and publish information?

Is there evidence that traditional notions of hierarchy and authority been affected by online sources of information and communication?

Interviews “lend themselves to the collection of data based on...opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences” (Denscombe 2007, p175).

This approach is intended to complement the quantitative content analysis. The content analysis does not allow for explorations of motives or attitudes towards, or personal use of, online communication.

Interviews are conducted as either structured or unstructured, one-to-one or group exercises. A guided group exercise is more commonly referred to as a focus group. It is not intended that focus groups will be used within this research for a number of reasons. First, this kind of activity is useful when seeking a group consensus on a topic, which is not part of the current project’s plan. Individuals’ opinions are more informative in this context. Second, focus groups require planning around several participants’ diaries, and given constraints on the researcher’s time, this would be impractical. Third, focus groups require a level of competence to be effective and the researcher does not have a reliable track record with this method. If an individual interview is incorrectly recorded or conducted, this is a problem, but only one person’s data is at risk. Losing all or part of a focus group’s outcomes would be far more of a setback.

Structured interviews are very similar to questionnaires, in that there is no room for enlargement or discussion of the questions or answers. (Blaikie 2010, p205). They are used to collect more quantitative data, and would require a set of pre-tested questions and associated assumptions. A completely unstructured interview, where no planned questions are posed, would not guarantee to cover sufficiently the

relevant points for this study. As with focus groups, this kind of interviewing also requires a high skill level to conduct effectively.

The purpose of the interview phase of the research is to further explore church leaders' experiences. Questions will be informed by the longitudinal and content analysis work, but not limited to this. Although simpler to administer and easier to analyse, a highly structured interview would not be the most appropriate tool in this situation. Instead, a semi-structured approach will be adopted. That is, a number of key points and questions will be identified in advance of the interview, but the interview will not be restricted to these and more free-flowing comments and conversation will be encouraged (Denscombe 2007).

It is recognised that it is difficult to not influence the interview outcome in any way, as age, gender or hierarchical differences may have a bearing on the rapport between the researcher and the interviewee (Blaikie 2010). Semi-structured interviews are not therefore necessarily an objective method, but the advantage of allowing individuals free rein to discuss their motivations, bias and approach is seen as outweighing this lack of objectivity in this case.

Other advantages of interviews for this project include flexibility, validity and costs. Interviews allow for a great deal of flexibility in investigation. The less structured interviews certainly permit digressions and diversions which if handled correctly can uncover new avenues for research, test assumptions, clarify questions or provide more background on a particular situation that may not be previously known to the interviewer (Denscombe 2007). If time allows then these divergent avenues can be pursued within an interview. However, that flexibility can lead to difficulty in analysing data and can affect the reliability of the information as it can be so varied between participants.

Information gained by interview can be validated as it is recorded. Interviewees can be asked for clarification and the interviewer too, can have their assumptions questioned by the participants (Blaikie 2010). Interviews are also relatively low-cost and simple to execute, which is helpful for a project with resource constraints.

Interviews are not without their drawbacks. A key downside is that they are time-consuming to conduct and transcribe. By meeting participants face-to-face there is also a consequent loss of anonymity which could influence willingness to discuss opinions that are counter to the received wisdom; there can be other interviewer or artefact effects such as difficulty in turn-taking with a telephone interview (Bell 2005).

If an interview is too structured there is a possible loss of opportunity to discover information of value outside that tackled by the predetermined categories. If too unstructured, there may be a loss of reliability as well as making data analysis too complex. Finally, it is unlikely that an unbiased and truly representative sample of participants can be used.

Nonetheless, actually asking those involved in the production of church communication is a well-suited method by which an explanation of the process can be uncovered, making interviewing a key component of the research project.

3.4 Alternative research methods

The preceding sections have outlined the justification for the research methods selected for use in the study, considering their epistemological foundations, theoretical advantages and practical limitations. Content analysis, interviews and surveys are only some of the methods of enquiry that could have been employed for

this research. The following sections acknowledge these alternatives, and explain why the tools were not employed within the research.

3.4.1 Case study

A case study approach would have analysed a small number of websites in great detail. This is the method used by Kim (2007) in the study of Korean megachurches.

In the context of the current research questions the case study would lead to a predominantly descriptive exercise for a small proportion of extant sites. Even within the denominations under discussion there are many variations in approaches to website building – an artefact of the huge variations in size, location, wealth and approach of English churches. A small *n* case study could possibly miss or over-exaggerate these differences. Case studies cannot be easily generalised. An investigation of a particular church's site would be noteworthy, but the conclusions drawn could not be reliably extrapolated to the rest of the church population. Given the lack of information on the approaches taken by English churches, the work being undertaken would be more useful if it can be generalised – if not to all church websites, and all churches' approaches to communicating online, then certainly within each particular denomination.

3.4.2 Experimental methods

Research falling under the experimental paradigm is more consistently viewed as internally reliable and valid. However, other than experimentally-driven usability testing, such methods could not legitimately be used in the context of this work. Usability testing can involve objective measures of internet task performance – the number of clicks different groups of people take to find a target piece of information, for example (Cappel and Huang 2007). More sophisticated experiments

use gaze monitoring to investigate where participants are looking at the web page in question to understand how the layout of the page is followed.

These elements of research could be employed to compare website design and layout. However, this would move the focus of the study away from the information content that is of primary interest. Consideration of the design elements is a secondary issue.

3.4.3 Focus groups and user interviews

One way in which a more qualitative approach could have been employed would have been to ask for page evaluations by different groups of people. The obvious groups would be those who are members of a church and those who are not; questions on the expected and published content of a sample of church websites would have elicited potentially valuable information about the perceptions of church sites and the audiences for whom they are designed. A participant-based qualitative approach using focus groups could have been employed, again to assess perceptions of various church sites. One-to-one interview could also have been considered. The disadvantage with these options is that they would detract from the content, focusing more on the opinions of the users than the intentions of the publishers. One of the intentions of the research is to examine the websites from the producers' point of view, putting the church in the role of information provider. Focus groups would also necessitate using a smaller range of sites than is possible with the content analysis approach, and thus be susceptible to the same kinds of sample size limitations as the case study method. In addition, recruiting participants and arranging sessions is resource-intensive and possibly outside the scope of the project in hand.

3.4.4 Questionnaires

A questionnaire could have been used to investigate the roles and attitudes of the church leaders commissioning websites or of the staff that are building the sites.

Questionnaires have the advantage of being potentially anonymous, and so may be a method of uncovering views that are not in keeping with current orthodoxy. There is a risk that a prescriptive questionnaire with no scope for unstructured answers does not allow for these views to be heard; and there is the equivalent risk that unstructured answers with no opportunity for follow-up can be misinterpreted and ambiguous. Structured questionnaires would be relatively simple to analyse. Using web-based software such as SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang would also minimise the need for data entry time or postage costs.

A disadvantage of an online survey is that the format would exclude those who are not regular internet users. The opinions of those in this group of church staff are of great interest to the project. Using a questionnaire would also mean that only quantitative methods are employed within the research project and it was felt that semi-structured interviews would permit a greater depth of understanding of the answers to the research questions.

3.4.5 Observation and Documentary Analysis

A further method of uncovering how content was chosen, and the decision making processes around production of websites or adoption of social media, would have been to observe the individual churches' discussions and meetings or to make an analysis of the records of the meetings. This could have been accomplished by detached or participant observation. It would have allowed for a number of voices to

be heard, not just the church leaders' and the content would not have been guided by the researchers' questioning.

This kind of access may have been more suitable for an in-depth case study rather than a wider survey of a large number of churches. In addition, the practicalities of this kind of research would have been problematic for the project in hand as its resources are limited.

Documentary analysis – extending the content analysis of websites into content analysis of church meeting minutes – would possibly have contributed more background to the understanding of which information is published. However, it is also likely that the minutes record only a decision and action rather than any in-depth discussion so the information therein could be sketchy and incomplete. It would not necessarily highlight dissenting voices.

There are many methods which different versions of the project could have employed, and the choice was governed by epistemological considerations and the resources available to the researcher.

3.5 Summary

This project draws from an established literature in its planning and implementation. Three methods will be used to provide complementary information on the research problem. Quantitative survey research and content analysis will be used to explore websites, identify what is being published and where. The sampling technique, category definitions and the units of analysis have all been selected and developed in line with the recommendations and common practice of information science and communication researchers' work to date.

These findings will be extended by qualitative interviews, providing answers to the 'how' and 'why' questions – how are sites published, and why are they produced?

The next sections detail actual implementation of the research strategy.

3.6 Longitudinal study – all English churches

RQ 1: To what extent have English Christian churches established a distinct individual web presence?

This section outlines how this survey was designed and implemented over three years, 2009–11. In summary, a random sample was taken of English churches, and it was recorded whether or not these institutions had a website. The detail of how the sample was arrived at is given below.

3.6.1 Determination of sample

Objective 1 is to establish a baseline understanding of the proportion of English churches with websites, and to investigate whether this proportion varies over time. For this investigation a number of parameters were established. Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and Baptist churches are included in the sample. These four denominations represent 75% of the churches in England, according to the 2005 English Church census (Evangelical Alliance 2005).

It was determined that a sample of 100 churches from each denomination would be used. Equal sample sizes would allow for statistical analyses to be carried out if deemed appropriate. Using the figures from the 2005 English church census, a proportionate sample would have been made up of seven times more Anglican than Baptist churches (see table 6.1–1 below). To obtain a proportional sample, then, would have involved either very small numbers of the Baptist, Catholic or Methodist

churches, or very large numbers of Anglican churches. Although the purpose of the study is to establish a baseline for the extent to which churches have websites, it is not the main focus of the research so to test large numbers of churches for presence of websites would have been disproportionately time consuming. Testing too few churches from different denominations would have made the results unreliable. Thus, over-representation of the non-established church denominations was felt to be preferable to under-representation.

Denomination	Number of churches	% of all churches in England & Wales	% of all churches represented by sample of 100
Anglican	16,247	58%	1%
Methodist	5,999	21%	2%
Catholic	3,565	13%	3%
Baptist	2,386	8%	4%
Total	28,197	(Does not sum to 100%: not all denominations included)	

Table 3-1 Denomination size and relative proportions

A 'church website' means a site with a discrete home page. This is defined as at least an index page. Church of England parishes have merged and Methodists and Baptist churches often work together within a local area, so there may be sites that cover a number of individual congregations under the same root URL. A site with two or more churches under the same administration would be counted as a church website if the particular church selected has the equivalent of a discrete home page within the grouping. This therefore excludes church or business listing sites that only list contact details for any of the four denominations in question. Also excluded were sites concerned with architecturally or historically interesting churches. These refer only to the fabric of the building or the genealogical information available and not the current use of the church. Many are produced independently of the parish church in question; for example, there is quite a large

collection of Norfolk churches at <http://www.norfolkchurches.co.uk/mainpage.htm> (accessed 13 November 2010) compiled by one individual. The results for individual churches in this collection show in Google results although the sites are not concerned with the church community life, rather its fabric and location.

The names for the majority of Baptist and Methodist and some Catholic churches include the denominational designation, making the allocation of the church to the relevant classification simple. Catholic and Anglican churches, frequently named after saints, do not offer such a simple demarcation. Thus the church website or Google search results were used to identify the correct denomination. In some cases third party listing sites gave the relevant information, for example, if the search results included a reference from <http://weekdaymasses.org.uk> (Catholic, accessed 22 April 2011) or <http://www.achurchnearyou.com/> (Anglican, accessed 22 April 2011).

3.6.2 Data collection

The initial sample of 400 sites was established using the listing site <http://www.findachurch.co.uk>. This independent site hosts details of the majority of churches in the UK and Ireland. With the owner's permission, the database was sampled. Each entry has a unique numerical key within the range 10000–50000. An online random number generator (<http://www.randomizer.org>, last accessed 2 September 2012) was used to create a list of a thousand five-digit numbers. When a five-digit number is entered in the search box on Findachurch.co.uk, it returns the relevant entry. This is not a publicly available search tool on the site. This method allowed for a more random selection of churches to be identified than using one of the denomination-specific listing sites. It also ensured the inclusion of churches with no web presence because the site includes basic details on all churches

whether or not they have signed up to Findachurch.co.uk or have their own website. Finally the method was geographically independent: other sites, and indeed the public search on Findachurch.co.uk use postcode or town as the main search key. Using the random index numbers meant that the location was not a required parameter in the search process.

Each random number was entered into the search box on the site. The result page was examined, and rejected at this stage if it was either not English, or not from one of the four denominations under consideration. If the church found met the criteria the denomination and name were recorded. For some, Findachurch.co.uk gave details of websites – the link was followed, and the URL noted. A snapshot of the home page was saved using a Firefox extension (Zotero).

If no further details were given in the listing, a simple Google search was carried out on the name and location. The first two pages of Google results (20 results) were examined for links to the church's website. This is accepted as being the limit to most users' ordinary search behaviour e.g. (Jansen, Tapia & Spink 2010). Third-party sites were followed to check for links, as were tourism sites. The URL of a site found was recorded and the homepage saved.

This process was repeated over a period of time from January to April 2009 until 100 Anglican and Methodist churches had been identified. A second batch of 1,000 numbers was generated. As these were independently generated, each successful hit had then to be checked against the original list in order to avoid inadvertent duplication. After the target for the Catholic sites was met, it became clear that the relative scarcity of Baptist churches would prove a difficulty if the sample was to be completed in a reasonable time frame. The decision was therefore taken to combine the random number method with searching the Baptist Union directory site. The

random numbers were still used sequentially to search Findachurch.co.uk until an English postcode was listed as part of the results. This postcode was then used with the Baptist Union site to search for churches in that location. Once a church was located, it was added to the sample. This process of search based on a randomly generated postcode was used until 100 Baptist churches had been identified. Approximately 20% of the sample of Baptist churches was generated using this method. The initial sampling was completed in early April 2009.

The second stage in the process, revisiting the churches to establish the change in church site presence was completed at the end of December 2009. Further collection periods were completed in July and December 2010. The final phase was completed in December 2011 and the results are given in section 5.1 below.

3.7 Content analysis – East Anglian churches

RQ2: To what extent do churches and church leaders use email, websites and social media tools to find and publish information?

The general survey sample described in section 3.6 above is drawn from the whole of England. For in-depth content analysis and subsequent interview research, a more localised area was used. The area is that roughly equivalent to the Diocese of Chelmsford, local to the researcher. It was considered that this would more easily permit face to face interviews with the church staff tasked with the upkeep of the websites being considered via the desk research stage.

Chelmsford Diocese includes a diverse range of areas and communities in its 474 parishes. It is the second largest English Diocese after London. It includes East London boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Newham, Redbridge and Waltham Forest. Newham includes the site of the 2012 Olympic Park, and has thus

experienced targeted regeneration and construction in the last seven years. Rural communities in North Essex are covered, as is the port of Harwich and the airport at Stansted Airport. By considering all churches from one Diocese, any effects caused by better training or funding for web development in a different autonomous area would be mitigated.

3.7.1 Sample size calculation

3.7.1.1 Estimating sample size

The population of churches with websites in the Chelmsford Diocese is a known and finite population. The calculations for sample size for a proportion are listed in appendix 11.3 .

3.7.2 Establishing the Anglican church sample

In January 2009 the Chelmsford Diocesan web directory listed 196 churches with their own websites, of a total of 618 individual churches from 474 parishes. A random number list was used to pick possible sites from this subset of 196. Where a URL selected by this method led to a broken link, the next in the list was identified and so on until 76 extant sites had been logged. No note was made of those with websites not functioning. Ten of these sites (5% of population) were used for piloting. These were then discarded from the sample and not re-visited for the content analysis proper. Some of the churches identified belonged to united benefices (groups of parish churches). Where there was a discrete home page for the parish identified by the list, the site was included. If the site identified led to a wider community website with a subset of pages dedicated to the church, this was also included because they were still being listed by the Diocese as the parish church website.

Once 66 churches, and therefore 66 discrete places had been identified, the next step was to match the Anglican (A) churches with nearby Baptist, Methodist and Catholic churches. Given the diverse nature of the possible locations within the Chelmsford Diocese it was felt that matching churches geographically would help minimise location effects in any differences found in the content of sites. It would mitigate a situation in which the majority of Baptist churches examined, for example, were from inner London or where all Anglican churches were rural.

Initially the search for the corresponding church sites was carried out using postcodes or root postcodes of the Anglican churches. The Baptist and Methodist denominational sites provide a church finder based on postcode on their websites¹³

The Catholic Church website was at the time of use (April 2010) organised slightly differently, listing parishes by name, town and mass centre (i.e. church name).

Therefore it was necessary to identify the Anglican, Methodist and Baptist church(es) location(s) before looking for a neighbouring Catholic church.

Given the proportions of churches in England it was clear that this would lead to an uneven sample size. Three issues were encountered with the approach outlined above.

¹³ at http://www.baptist.org.uk/baptist_life/baptist_family/local/churchfinder.html, accessed 25 April 2010

<http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=opentogod.content&cmid=1097>, accessed 25 April 2010

There was not a direct one-to-one correlation between the Anglican churches in one area and the other denominations. In many cases, different postcodes representing individual Anglican churches retrieved the same Baptist, Methodist or Catholic church. One Baptist church may have had several Anglican neighbours, for example.

The Catholic Church website did not easily allow finding of churches via postcode. It was difficult to match the areas as described by the site with the places in which Anglican churches had been identified. A supplementary approach was taken – a Google search on “catholic church” plus either place name or postcode. Finally, the full list of churches in the area as given on the Catholic Church website was checked. This ensured that all possible churches were considered. The Methodist church site only searched on the first part of the postcode. If multiple results were returned then the first result was used. If that postcode stem occurred again, then the next result in the list was used and so on.

There are not directly equivalent lists of the number of churches in the Diocesan area for each denomination but the relative proportions from available statistics for roughly equivalent areas are given in the table below. It can be seen that although fewer non-Anglican churches were to be considered, there were relatively more in each category than represented in England as a whole.

	Approximate number of churches in equivalent area	Number of websites identified	Percentage of equivalent area represented by sample	Percentage of churches in England as at January 2009
Catholic	96	25	26%	10%
Baptist	177	36	20%	6%
Methodist	81	26	32%	16%
Anglican	618	66	11%	43%

Table 3–2 Distribution of denominations in Chelmsford Diocesan area

3.8 Content analysis categories

This section will explain how the objectives were operationalised as categories of information to be investigated via content analysis. As a reminder, the objectives were:

To investigate key aspects of website production, publication and content choice to establish:

3. How content is presented and created

4. Whether there are variations in the choice of different information topics across denominations

5. Whether content includes information which explains or highlights the congregation's faith, traditions or community

6. Any differentiation is made between church members and the wider community as audiences for local church websites.

From the same sample, investigate the extent to which churches place themselves in the wider community via their websites, including whether:

7. Churches use interactive tools including allowing user-generated content or place restrictions on content creation

8. Churches use hyperlinks to locate themselves in local, national or global online communities.

Author Category	Carr (2004)	Sturgill (2004)	Kim (2007)	Baab (2008)	Hoover <i>et al</i> , (2004)	Cheong <i>et al</i> (2009)
Statement of faith	Beliefs	Convert/ evangelise the reader	Prominent imagery		Links to denominational/ faith / scripture sources	Faith beliefs/ vision
Information for visitors	Service times Style of worship	Present church as an organisation	Church news	Ways of welcoming	Encourage visitors to attend	Map; Organisation background
Contact details	E mail address	Interact with church or others	SMS		Invites prayer requests	Discussion forum
Located within community		Church as allied with a larger community		Use of 'community' 'connect' 'relationship'	Community information / soliciting volunteers	Community programs
Philosophy		Organisational vs ideological emphasis		Use of 'justice'		
Liturgy	Occasional offices					Religious services
Downloads			Sermon text/broadcast		Sermon texts/ webcasts	Webcast; Audiocast
Internal audience					Internal administration	
Use of graphics/ pictures		Pictures of senior pastor	Choice of photographs	Photographs of events Slideshows/graphics		Photo gallery
Interactivity			Chat rooms			Discussion forum

Table 3-3 Previous research findings and content analysis categories

Table 3–3 shows which elements previous studies have considered, bringing them together under wider categories. By synthesising the research findings from the literature review as a basis for content analysis categories, pre-determined categories can be established. This ensures that the categories to be used have been empirically tested, and those that are newly developed have a clear justification and meaning attached to them, as recommended by Allen and Reser (1990) to ensure reliability and validity, and discussed in 3.3.1 above.

Guidance from publications such as David (2007), Blackmore (2001) was used to assist in identifying information which would be expected to be included on an organisational website.

Objective 3 covers a broad range of possible indicators as well as the basic design elements of a website.

Objective 4 is concerned with variations in the choice of information topic. The topics coded for included both the basic details and more in-depth theological or practical detail, as covered by objective 5. Hence items coded for under objective 5 and 6 would also be considered under objective 4.

Objective 6 also covers a range of information categories – from the very basic details for visitors which would legitimately be expected to appear (such as a map, or contact details) as well as information that was looked for speculatively – would a church consider information on community facilities part of its remit? In addition, information for newcomers was considered as part of this objective. This was operationalised as a separate category of distinct welcome pages, which were coded and analysed separately.

The final coding decision rules and the objectives for each item are given in Appendix 11.1.

3.8.1 Hyperlinks

One aspect of the content analysis involves categorisation of hyperlinks. Scheitle (2005) undertook a hyperlink analysis of church websites and assigned the links to one of ten categories. These categories, given below, formed the basis of those used in the current study to meet objective 8. The original ten as listed in Table 2–5 above were extended by a further six categories.

Used by Scheitle (2005)	Originated for current research
Secular sites	Broken links
Links to official denominational sites	Evangelistic sites
Links to other congregations or religious groups	Social action/ social justice
Religious resources	Web 2.0 links
Religious media	Sites to encourage personal faith
Parachurch groups e.g. Alpha course, Tearfund	Community sites
Politically motivated religious sites	
Religiously affiliated educational institutions	
Commercial sites selling religious goods	
'Other' religious sites	

Table 3–4 Hyperlink categories

3.9 Content Analysis: piloting

Ten Anglican sites were used to pilot the categories in February 2010. This allowed a check that the categories developed were clear when real websites were under consideration and that discrete elements could be reliably identified. A number of changes were made to the coding form as originally developed in November 2009:

- The number of site design elements was reduced. As the project is primarily concerned with content rather than design, it was felt that coding for the use

of Flash, or the colour/ pattern choices was not necessary. Coding for the use of basic design tenets (menu in standard place, use of frames) would give sufficient information as to the sophistication or otherwise of the website's design

- The order of categories listed was amended for ease of coding; elements that appeared regularly on landing pages were grouped together
- The category 'Architectural information' was expanded to include genealogical and historical detail as well as information on the building itself. This category codes for information for visitors or residents that is related to the building or its past, rather than the current community or congregation
- Decision rules were clarified to make the distinction between liturgy, service content and service style more obvious.

3.10 Content Analysis: data collection

Content analysis commenced on 6 March 2010. The first phase was concluded on 31 May 2010. Hyperlinks and welcome pages were considered during August 2010. Websites were viewed on one of two laptops. The first, running Firefox under Windows Vista, was replaced in mid-April with a newer machine running Firefox under Windows 7. Both computers also had Internet Explorer version 8.

Each church identified at the sampling stage was given a code number. The Anglican churches were coded Ax using the number the church was allocated in the original list of 196 churches. Baptist, Methodist and Catholic churches were coded as Bx, Mx or Cx with the same number as the Anglican church with which they were geographically associated.

Anglican churches were analysed first, followed by the Catholic, Baptist and Methodist churches in that order.

Once the site had been successfully opened, a PDF of the home page was created using the freeware DoPDF utility¹⁴. If a site was not functioning, the URL was checked for typographical errors. The church name was also searched using Google, and the URL was checked under Internet Explorer before the website was rejected. The PDF was saved with the code number for the church in question. Any additional PDFs were labelled in the same way with a short explanation in the filename of the content they represented. It was acknowledged that the PDFs were not necessarily accurate representations of the site design and layout. As website design is not a key consideration, PDF was felt to be a robust and relatively flexible file format to capture the content at the point the landing page was coded.

Each available site was explored by following all the level 1 links from the landing page. Level 2 links were followed where necessary to give context, but the subsequent pages were not coded. The pilot phase had suggested a useful order for the coding categories to be considered; this held true for a majority of sites.

Detailed coding instructions, developed from McMillan (2008), are in appendix 11.1 along with the decision rules developed by the researcher for the coding items. The data were entered on an Excel spreadsheet with a separate tab for each denomination. 1 and 0 were used to represent Yes and No for the binary coded cells and text was entered for those categories that required further notes or descriptions. External links discovered in the website were copied into a separate

¹⁴ <http://www.dopdf.com/> (accessed 11 July 2010)

tab in the spreadsheet for later analysis (see 3.13) and discrete welcome pages were also considered separately (see 3.14).

The final numbers of sites coded are as follows:

	Approximate number of churches in Diocesan area	Number of websites analysed	Percentage of Diocesan area represented by those analysed	Percentage of churches in England as at January 2009	Percentage of churches identified with dead links
Catholic	96	20	21	10	25
Baptist	177	35	20	6	3
Methodist	81	26	32	16	0
Anglican	618	66	11	43	n/a*

Table 3-5 Number of churches in final sample

*n/a : There were non-functioning sites within the list of Anglican churches examined, but in building the core sample of 66 sites, these were not counted.

3.11 Coding reliability

Literature that considers reliability judgements within the field of content analysis does so from the premise that a team of coders will be employed on a project. Therefore the reliability analysis is a tool to ensure that varied individuals are making similar decisions on the appropriate coding categories in use. They thus consider inter-rater reliability and there are many coefficients that can be calculated for the establishment of reliability. There is a robust literature around the reliability of these measures themselves (Krippendorff 2004b, Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken 2004, Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken 2003).

There is also an assumption inherent in these larger studies that the coders will not have been involved in the development of the coding categories and will therefore require sometimes extensive training so that they consistently code in line with a

standard interpretation. Since this study was developed and coded by the same person, there was no need for this level of training, and the decisions taken on how to code are in line with the thinking behind the development of the coding scheme.

It is acknowledged that one individual can subtly change their interpretation over time, so it was deemed a worthwhile exercise to calculate a percentage agreement over time. Use of percentage agreement has been criticised as a measure of inter-rater reliability for a number of reasons. Primarily, it does not give an indication of how the assignment of coded values is related to chance (Krippendorff 2004a). It has also been criticised as not giving consideration for coders whose decisions were close, but not in complete agreement (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken 2002). However, it was felt percentage agreement was the most appropriate for the study in hand since by the nature of single-researcher coding, none of the assumptions about inter-coder reliability were met.

3.11.1 Reliability scores

Six weeks after the original coding, eight websites were re-coded by the researcher. Reliability was calculated by noting the agreement for each item in a 2x2 grid. The tables can be seen in appendix 11.4. For the individual websites the agreement varied between 82 and 98% agreement.

These individual site results were then aggregated and an overall agreement % calculated. Across all eight sites, the researcher agreed with the coding decisions 89.9% of the time. This was deemed sufficient to proceed. Subsequent published research (Bobkowski, Pearce 2011) suggests that a minimum agreement of 80% should be reached.

3.12 Coding decision rules

The items that were, in this phase, being coded for and the measurement and interpretations/ questions that were being employed for each category are given in Appendix 11. These are the categories that were originated for this study. For the majority of categories, coding was on a binary presence or absence measure. The table also lists the corresponding objective and how the information was classified according to Sturgill's (2004) four characteristics (organisational, community, evangelise, interaction). The rules for interpretation are given in Appendix 11.2.

3.13 Hyperlink analysis

3.13.1 Controlling for size of congregation

Scheitle (2005) controlled for the size of congregation in the hyperlink analysis. It is possible that the larger a church, the more prosperous it is and the more people with IT skills are available to contribute to a website project. It is therefore preferable that the current research controls for the size of congregation for this aspect of the study to allow for comparisons to be made. Background information relating to church size is given below. Statistics have been obtained from the annual registrations (within the Church of England) which are freely available on the Diocesan website. Broadly equivalent statistics for the Catholic Church in England, the Eastern Baptist Association and the Methodist Church were obtained by request from the relevant denominational authorities. Establishment of the categories is described in the next section.

3.13.1.1 Church size categories

Brierley (2005) provides detail on the congregation size across all denominations, giving the average size of a congregation as 84. There is a wide variation between

the smallest and largest. The chart below shows the relative proportions of congregations in the four denominations under consideration (these do not sum to 100% as there are other categories in Brierley’s data that are not represented). 49% of all churches in England have congregations of fewer than 50 people. Other points that illustrate the skew of the population are:

- 25% of churchgoers attend 70% of churches in congregations of less than 100
- 50% of churchgoers attend 26% of churches in congregations of between 101 and 400 people
- 25% of churchgoers attend 4% of churches in congregations of over 400 people.

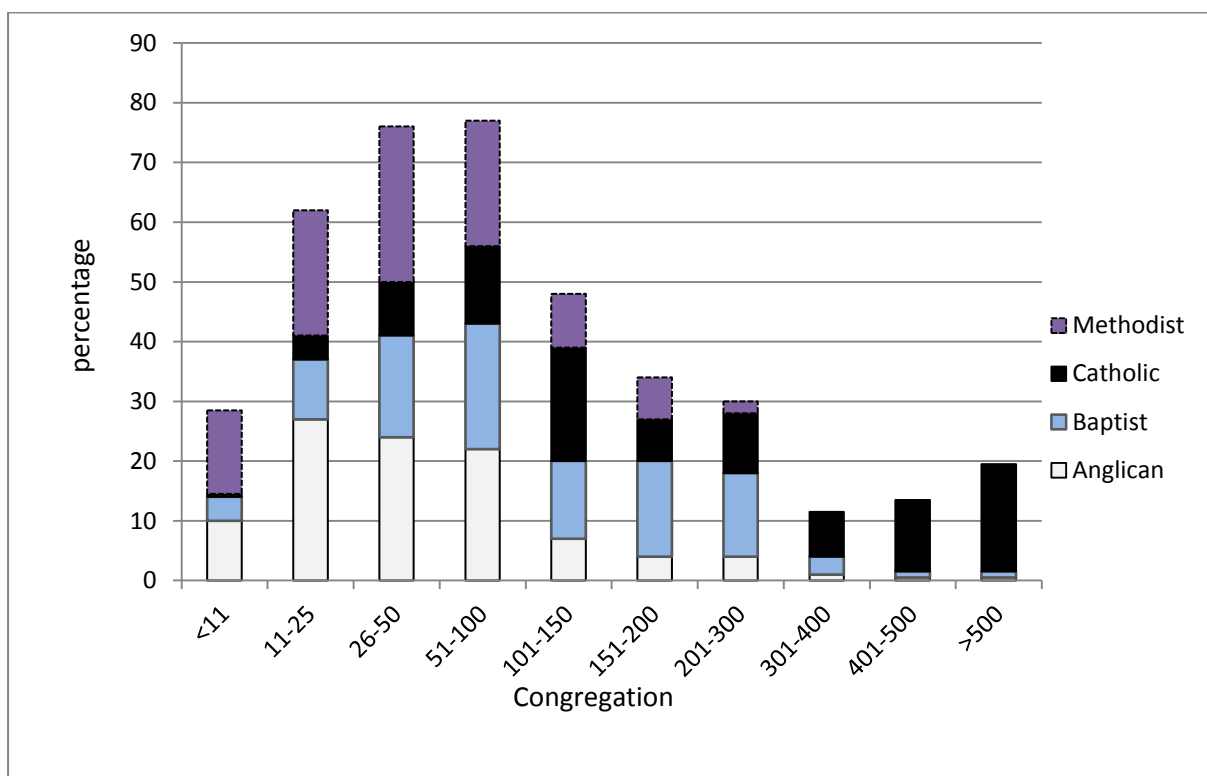


Figure 3-2 Church size by denomination

The table, which includes all denominations, shows the spread across categories.

Size of congregation	<11	11-25	26-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	201-300	301-400	401-500	>500
All churches	8	20	21	21	11	7	6	2	2	2

Table 3-6 Church size across all denominations

The spread of congregation sizes is so uneven that equal categorisations would not be meaningful. The categories used are given in the table below. If a congregation size cannot be ascertained, the church was assumed to be a medium-sized church.

Category	Size	Percentage of churches included in category
Small	0-50	49%
Medium	51-200	39%
Large	201-500 or more	12%

Table 3-7 Categorisations to be used in content analysis

Each website was checked for external hyperlinks. If these were located the target URL was recorded separately in a spreadsheet. The first task was to aggregate a number of individual local links under more meaningful headings. Therefore, links to individual local churches, councils or schools were grouped together under those broader topics. This meant that the essence of the point of the link was maintained, but it was not necessary to record each individual target site separately, thereby simplifying the data but not losing meaning.

Subsequently, each link was categorised following those used by Scheitle (2005) given above.

The difference between a site categorised as one to 'encourage personal faith' and one that was 'religious resources' is that the former contained prayers, worship, Bible resources designed to be used by an individual. The latter covers more general content such as games for children, other link gateways or online theological

courses. Evangelistic sites are those which explain Christianity to non-believers. Community sites include links to local drama groups, local newspapers or events. Social action/ social justice covers both local concerns and international charities as well as sites that are campaigning, not just fundraising. Web 2.0 links were links to any social media site.

Sites were coded by denomination and by link target. In total, 1,064 links taken from 88 websites were examined and placed in one of 64 possible categories. This coding was carried out by hand without the use of any proprietary software.

3.14 Welcome pages

Objective 6 is concerned with understanding differentiation between audiences on a church's web page. One way to explicitly measure the extent to which churches make provision for a specific category of visitor was to investigate whether a separate page for newcomers or visitors is provided. Each time a dedicated 'welcome page' specifically labelled for newcomers was discovered a PDF was created for further investigation. Of the whole sample only nine had an identifiable page. No Methodist churches' sites contained such a separate page. These separate welcome pages were the units of analysis.

These nine were printed and read through. Various word clouds were created online of the words in the texts. A word cloud, which randomly arranges words according to their frequency, was a simple way to acquire a sense of the way terms had been used within the welcome pages. This was used as a starting point to generate the expected categories for the coding units. Coding units were sentence phrases. An example word cloud is given below.

What the individual does	
Dress code	Guidance on what visitors should wear
Where to sit	Guidance on where in the church a visitor should sit
When to sit/stand	Any mention of when in the proceedings people sit, stand or kneel and how to know when to do which
Singing	Mention of the way songs or hymns are presented, how visitors can join in or not
Money	If there is a collection and what to do with the collection bag
Children	Information or guidance on what children can or cannot do in the service
Directions external	Statements directing the visitor
Directions internal	Statements informing the visitor when and why to move around the church
What the church does	
Welcome people	Statements that explicitly contain the word “welcome”
Words that convey welcome and acceptance	Statements that imply welcome without using the specific word e.g. Please feel free/ Do whatever makes you most comfortable/ There is no obligation / No-one will think anything of it
Music style	How the church presents its music – modern, traditional, hymn books or projections
Service style/ format	Statements that explain the way a service proceeds; if this is traditional or modern
Disabled access	Information on disabled access for visitors
Directions external	Statements giving directions or maps for visitors
Directions internal	Statements which indicate when people move around the church or what they may do
Offers contact details	Invitations to contact church or church personnel for further questions or information
Traditions	Statements that convey a sense of what usually happens, what tends to happen, what will happen on most weeks
Times	Statements that give service times and durations
Language	
Jargon without explanation	Use of religious language without nearby or linked explanations
Jargon with explanation	Statements that include use of religious language but that include also an explanation or a link to an explanation

Table 3–8 List of categories for welcome pages

Jargon terms were identified from the websites in addition to the glossary from “*What am I doing here? A beginner’s guide to church*” (Brand, Walker 2008). The list contains a number of relatively common words such as ‘blessing’ and ‘congregation’ but these do have specific meanings within the religious community that may not be known to a newcomer to church. Therefore the list is broad to include both the very technical (e.g. ‘stoup’) and the words in general use but with specific meanings. The list is given below in *Table 3–9 Jargon terms*.

Jargon / religion specific terminology as used in welcome pages
all age service
altar
baptised
blessing
Book of Common Prayer
choir loft
christened
confirmed
denomination
evensong
genuflect
happy clappy
minister
offertory
prayer for healing
priest
sacrament
sermon
service of the word
stoup
spiritually ready to receive
tabernacle
worship

Table 3–9 Jargon terms

The nine welcome pages were coded on a spreadsheet with a binary presence/absence measure in the same way as the main content analysis. This was completed in August 2010.

3.15 Interviews

3.15.1 Question development

Interviews assisted in explaining the content analysis data, as well as providing insight into the role of the church leadership as protagonists or avoiders of social media tools. Interviews were semi-formal, following a structure, but allowing any conversation to develop that would touch on the points under consideration without being restricted by a set question format. The questions were developed with this in mind. A longlist of all possible questions was drawn up.

3.15.2 Pilot interviews

In September and October 2010 three interviews with Church of England clergy were conducted. This permitted the initial list of questions to be tested and reduced to manageable proportions, as well as for rehearsal of interview technique, recording and transcription.

An Apple iPhone 3G was used to record the interviews as voice memos, and a backup recording was made via a digital dictaphone. Interviews were saved to a laptop via iTunes and replayed via an iPod for transcription. These were transcribed directly into Word as text documents by the researcher. These arrangements were deemed satisfactory for the main interview stage.

3.15.3 Further interviews

3.15.3.1 Interviewees

Participants were recruited via several methods. The intention was to interview the church leader of a proportion of the churches considered in the content analysis phase of the research project.

35 requests for interviews were sent via email between 5 February and 31 August 2011 using the contact details supplied on the church websites. Of those 35, only two refused outright to participate. Four agreed in principle but despite repeated attempts could not find a mutually convenient time to talk. Of the remaining 29, nine agreed to participate and the remaining 20 did not respond in any form.

In March 2011 a local directory was used to contact possible participants whose churches had been part of the content analysis sample. Six clergy were contacted by telephone and three agreed to be interviewed. An item to publicise the research and ask for volunteers was printed in the Chelmsford Diocesan newspaper in spring 2011, but no responses were forthcoming. One leader, whose church was already identified as a target, volunteered during a conference at which the researcher was present.

The volunteer webmasters were recruited via an article in the Baptist Times in January 2011. These were all carried out over the telephone. One of the three interviews did not fully record and was therefore only able to be partially transcribed.

Interested parties were a national church organisation's communications officer, the local area's communications officer, and a social media officer for a national church newspaper.

It was recognised that in order to gather a wide range of views via interview, the connection between clergy and church sites previously analysed was lost. It was unlikely that a random sample of volunteers would be possible, but the factors that this would help mitigate will be acknowledged. For example, it is possible only those who are already interested in online communication agreed to take part in the research, leaving the opinions of those who are not involved unheard.

The key consequence of the approach employed is that the interviewees are more of a convenience sample, with a purposive element, defined thus by Gorman & Clayton:

one chosen by the researcher to include representatives from within the population being studied who have a range of characteristics relevant to the research project – (Gorman and Clayton 2005, p128)

Church leaders were defined as the vicar, rector or minister in charge of a single church or a group of churches. Volunteers involved in the production of websites, but not in church leadership, provided some background information, but were classed as interested participants and not leaders. Full details of the interviewees are given in 4.2 below.

3.15.4 Interview process

Interviews were conducted either in person or via telephone. During the invitation stage, and at the start of the interview, permission was sought to record the conversation. Participants were also briefed as to the nature of the research, the topics to be considered and their ability to refuse to answer any questions. The anonymity of responses was also mentioned. Finally it was emphasised that the

purpose of the conversation was to investigate personal opinion, not to test knowledge of online tools and social networking.

3.15.5 Structure of interviews

A semi-structured approach was taken to the interviews. The first questions were asked of all participants; these served as an icebreaker and were intended to allow the interviewee time to adjust to the process. Further questions were used to ask for more detail or explanation on topics. Interviews lasted from just under 20 minutes to 57 minutes.

The same equipment was used as for the pilot study and the same post-interview process adopted. iTunes and iPod were therefore the initial means of noting interview metadata. Each audio file was coded with a prefix denoting the denomination (or if the interview was with an interested party). Transcription was carried out as soon as possible after each interview was conducted. 16 were transcribed by the researcher and two were transcribed professionally. This allowed for a schedule slip to be made up.

The interviews were conducted between February and November 2011.

3.15.6 Coding

A dual approach to coding to find themes and answers from the interviews was employed. The twelve clergy interviews were printed, read and individually annotated as answers to questions, points relevant to the aims and objectives, interesting ideas or themes were seen.

Separately, and at the initial stage independently from the paper & pencil process, the clergy interviews were viewed in Atlas.Ti and the text tagged with concepts/

codes. This led to the development of a set of elements which were cross-referenced with those from the printed notes. Those concepts on Atlas.Ti were expanded or renamed to accommodate the extra information from paper notes and the electronic versions of the interviews were re-coded to include these new or amended concepts.

This process was repeated with the non-clergy interviews; all interviews were re-read with all concepts to hand.

The next chapters present the longitudinal, content analysis and interview findings.

Chapter 4: Interview Participants as internet users

4. Introduction

The next four chapters describe in detail the findings from the three strands of the research project. This chapter introduces the interview participants and their parishes. The interview results reported include the leaders' views and use of the internet. Chapter 5 looks at the creation, maintenance and governance of websites and includes the longitudinal survey and first content analysis results. Chapter 6 describes the role of churches as information providers – what is being published and what are the decision processes behind the publication of information? Lastly, Chapter 7 shows how churches and leaders are using social media and interactivity.

Interview participants are introduced below. The chapter outlines the profiles of the parishes and the church leaders. The responses to questions relating to the ways in which leaders use the internet for a variety of tasks are presented, along with the leaders' views on websites and email in particular. It concludes by reporting what the leaders' ideal church website might contain.

4.1 Interview process and recruitment

Interviews with church leaders were conducted between January and September 2011, with the first interested party being interviewed in October 2010, one in January 2011 and the final conversation recorded with an interested party in November 2011. The recruitment process is described in section 3.15.3.1 above. Interviews were recorded and transcribed shortly after each took place, allowing initial assessment of the themes which were emerging. Despite the mix of denominations and locations, key points and topics were common to many

interviewees and once the point was reached where no new themes were emerging, no more interview requests were issued.

All respondents' details have been made anonymous. Both leaders and their churches have been given invented, representative names. Assurances of anonymity were given to the participants and the intention is that individual churches cannot be identified. Therefore data or opinions that could have identified a specific individual are excluded from these findings. Churches or area names that are not the main church of the respondent have been replaced with the symbol [•] rather than a further fictional name.

Respondents were, on the whole, recruited by email from churches whose websites were included in the content analysis sample. This means it is not wholly representative of the area's church leaders. One interesting question is whether the email requests that were unanswered were dismissed as spam, ignored, or did not in fact reach their intended recipient. It is likely that the interview sample is biased towards those with sufficient interest in either research or the internet to have been willing to participate.

4.2 Leaders and their parishes

Table 4-1 below sets out the invented names used in the project and the key characteristics of the interviewees' locations. For consistency, 'parish' is the term used to refer to a particular church's catchment area, although it is acknowledged that this is generally seen as an Anglican/ Catholic term. Likewise, 'leader' is used to describe the ministers, rectors, vicars and priests-in-charge who made up the interviewees.

Leader	Church name	Parish profile	Anglican parish or equivalent area: rank in Indices of Multiple Deprivation (12682 is least deprived parish)	Anglican parish or equivalent area: decile of population Higher decile=least deprived
<i>Clergy</i>				
Robert	St James	Inner City Anglican	506	1st
Colette	High Road Methodist	Inner City Methodist	835	1st
Benjamin	Valley Methodist	Seaside Methodist	1,483	2nd
Mark	St Michael	City Suburban Anglican	4,051	4th
Helen	Central Baptist	Town centre Baptist	5,107	5th
Kester	St Bride	Town Centre Catholic	6,806	6th
Aaron	East Methodist	City Suburban Methodist	7,921	7th
Wendy	St Timothy	Town Suburban Anglican	8,609	7th
Thomas	St Margaret	Town Anglican	11,790	10th
Gayle	Christ Methodist	Town Centre Methodist	11,921	10th
James	St Saviour	Town Suburban Catholic	12,353	10th
Lee	Shelley Baptist	City Suburban Baptist	12,642	10th
<i>Webmasters</i>				
Oscar	New Life Baptist	Webmaster, Town Centre		
Howard	Gate Ecumenical	Webmaster; City Suburban		
Alan	Bridge Baptist	Town Suburban Church		
<i>Interested parties</i>				
William	n/a	Publisher & webmaster		
Michael	n/a	Communications professional		
Murray	n/a	Local communications		

Table 4-1 Interviewees and characteristics of parishes

Background information of note concerns the churches' location, affluence and the churchgoers' age.

4.3 Location

Whilst there are not representative churches from every denomination in every kind of location, apart from rural, there are churches from a variety of places. Given that the choice of location of the church was a secondary consideration in the

recruitment of interviewees, it would have been outside the time scale of the project to attempt to have a completely representative sample. The webmasters were all from Baptist churches, recruited following an article in the Baptist Times. Although relatively local to the project's main catchment area, their churches were not amongst those which had been sampled for content analysis.

4.3.1 Neighbourhood affluence or deprivation

In 2011 there were 12,682 parishes within the Church of England. Statistics supplied by the Chelmsford Diocese have ranked each parish according to the 2010 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)¹⁵ (McLennan et al. 2011) so it is possible to identify the areas that are most and least deprived relative to the rest of England. Baptist, Catholic & Methodist churches do not map directly onto the Church of England parishes but it is possible to identify the relevant area, particularly given the sample was originally drawn with geographical equivalence as a factor (see 3.7.2 in the methodology). The last two columns of Table 4-1 above list the rank of each church or equivalent area whose leader was interviewed and the decile in which this ranking places the church. Lower ranking numbers (the least deprived ranks at number 12,682) and lower deciles indicate higher levels of deprivation.

Two churches in this study – Anglican St James and High Road Methodist – are located in inner city areas which are classified as some of the most deprived English places (the top 10%). Valley Methodist, a seaside parish, is in the top 20%. Other areas have fewer factors scoring highly on the IMD. The equivalent Anglican parish for Shelley Baptist church ranks as 12,642nd in England – in the 10% least deprived

¹⁵ Thanks are due to Canon Don Cardy for supplying the IMD ranked data

areas. The sample has more churches in less deprived areas, but does include churches from a range of situations. It was mentioned in interview that the congregation at St James is international in its nature, a foreseeable consequence of the church being located in the inner city. Understanding the social background of the churches in question helps contextualise the answers given in interview.

4.4 Congregation age

Church name	Age profile of congregation: as recorded in the interviews
Central Baptist	predominantly 50+ but with a growing, very very healthy under 18s
Christ Methodist	a lot more people in the 20–45 age group now than we did have
East Methodist	if you averaged it out around about 60 as there are some young and some old
High Road Methodist	It is a mix. We have young people, children, babies we have middle aged and elderly people as well
Shelley Baptist	we are generally an older congregation
St Bride	[...] might be more elderly with some young families, [...] is mostly young families
St James	the majority of the congregation are between 30 and 45
St Margaret	Lots of families but a preponderance of 50–plus
St Michael	it's right across the age range
St Saviour	I would say younger families
St Timothy	Large proportion elderly, 50 upwards
Valley Methodist	mix of ages

Table 4–2 Broad classification of congregations' age profile, as identified during interviews

Two parishes self-identify as having predominantly older congregations, the others suggest a spread of age ranges. The age profiles do not appear to be related to location – High Road Methodist and St James are both inner city, but characterise themselves differently; the variation here could be a denominational difference.

4.5 Size of congregation

One church has a regular congregation of 25; others approach 200 on a regular basis. These quantitative differences are summarised in Table 4–3 below. The variety in size is probably not attributable to any difference in denomination except it should be noted that Catholic parishes are generally larger in size and fewer in number than their Anglican counterparts.

The size and age breakdowns given in Table 4–2 and Table 4–3 are direct quotations from the interviews.

Church name	Size: as recorded in the interviews
Central Baptist	membership is about 250
Christ Methodist	we're creeping up to 300 again
East Methodist	25 in three of them and ten in one of them
High Road Methodist	150 members
Shelley Baptist	160 members
St Bride	220–240 at Mass on a Sunday
St James	we average about 50
St Margaret	Electoral roll 400, 180–200 in attendance
St Michael	can be up to 200 people
St Saviour	I have three churches and I have an attendance on Sundays of round about 500
St Timothy	it's got an electoral roll of 300
Valley Methodist	Half a dozen to 80 members over 4 churches

Table 4–3 Congregation size or attendance, as identified at interview

4.6 Interviewees' profiles

4.6.1 Leadership status

Level of experience and seniority varied between respondents. Some were relatively new to their position. Others managed parish areas with two or more churches, often with different age profiles and characteristics. For example Mark (St Michael,

Anglican) has two church buildings, one of which is a suburban modern building, but he also has a historic village-set traditional church under his leadership. Aaron (East Methodist) has four congregations under his jurisdiction, the smallest of which has a membership of ten. Kester (St Bride, Catholic) looks after two churches in neighbouring towns.

4.6.2 Gender and age

Age and gender of interviewees were not factors in the recruitment of volunteers and no questions were asked to identify the respondents' age. The final sample of clergy interviewees was four women and eight men; all webmasters and interested parties were male.

4.6.3 Internet use

Leaders' own experience with websites and online tools varied too. Although all used at least some of a variety of online tools, hardware or gadgets, levels of enthusiasm and engagement differed with some actively seeking out novelty and others being deliberately late adopters. No marked differences were noted between genders, with the women in leadership as likely to be engaged online as the men. Age of the leaders was not a consideration. No leader said that they did not use the internet at all for any purpose.

4.7 Leaders as internet users

4.7.1 Attitudes towards the internet

Part of the interview was intended to assess the leaders' personal opinion of the web and the services it offers. It was felt that there may be an identifiable relationship between the leaders' experience of the internet and their expectations

and attitudes towards their churches' websites. This section will explore the views expressed on the positive and negative aspects of the internet as a phenomenon, with further sections also exploring the leaders' personal relationship with online information seeking. These questions were related to the second aim, and objective 10.

4.7.2 Internet Positives

Interviewees were asked if they agreed that 'the internet has changed life for the better.' All the church leaders did suggest this was the case; with Robert (St James, Anglican) being more reluctant to agree unequivocally:

...to me it's on a par with junk food, motorways, environmental pollution, etc – it's as good as all that, as well as having some extremely convenient and useful aspects. (Robert, St James)

Respondents suggested a range of reasons why access to the internet had benefits. Time savings in terms of easily locating resources were a key benefit, allowing swift research work and the ability to look answers up almost instantly.

James (St Saviour, Catholic) mentioned online book retail as important. Helen noted that online book retail may have been a factor in the closure of the town's dedicated Christian bookshop, presenting a negative side to the changes in book buying habits. Others also used online banking and other retail sites.

All respondents used email and many cited the ability to correspond via email as being a benefit. Further consideration of the leaders' use of email is below in section 4.8.2 below. Other benefits mentioned included:

- Access to sermons and resources beyond one's own church (Helen, Lee)

- Podcasts for those who are not keen readers (Helen)
- Access to information on the move (Kester)
- Ease of genealogical research (Benjamin).

In a considered answer, Kester suggested that one of the major benefits of the internet was that it allowed ‘a light [to be] shone in dark places’ and expose scandal or wrongdoing more easily.

Web access was accepted as part of everyday life and an established method of gathering information and communication. Robert (St James, Anglican) was a slight dissenting voice when he expressed concern about the cost of the equipment needed to set up an internet connection (others had suggested generational differences might be a limiting factor, see section 6.6 below). The next section will consider some of the negative aspects of the internet as discussed in the interviews.

4.7.3 Disadvantages

Compared with suggesting positive aspects, more negative consequences were suggested and these will be considered here.

4.7.3.1 Bullying

Wendy (St Timothy, Anglican) cited online bullying as a cause for concern amongst younger people, and also said:

I do know that there can be problems with social networking – it can take over people's lives, it can cause an awful lot of pain...with children just being nasty and malicious to others so I think there's a, there is a downside to it which you have to be aware of. (Wendy, St Timothy)

4.7.3.2 Security of information

One specific example came from James at St Saviour, a suburban Catholic church. On the one hand, he did not sign up to Facebook or other social networking sites because he was cautious about sharing personal details. On the other, he had purchased goods over the internet from sites he had identified by Google search. This had not occurred to him as contradictory behaviour, but was noted as potentially so during the course of the interview. For James, a generic suspicion of online communication was held to be more of a potential problem than providing banking details to an internet retailer. Subsequently, his justification for this contradictory position was that online retailing saved him time, whereas social networking was a timewaster, however, he remained suspicious of sharing personal data.

4.7.3.3 Timewasting

The possibilities of wasting time online were mentioned by others; with Mark (St Michael, Anglican) admitting to spending a whole day responding to comments on a blog. Kester would probably use this as an example to back up his assertion that time spent online can be a 'gross distraction.' Other timewasters mentioned were the problems relating to the necessary hardware and software (Robert), fruitless searches or too many search results (Wendy and Colette).

4.7.3.4 Effect on relationships

Robert had serious misgivings about the way moving communication online affects community:

I think it enhances the anonymisation of, and therefore alienation, and depersonalisation of community and what it is to be a neighbour (Robert, St James)

This is the more extreme conclusion of views voiced by others who were concerned that email might damage face-to-face relationships; either by misunderstandings arising through messages being misread or by reducing the amount of personal contact. Email was described as a 'blunt instrument' (Thomas, St Margaret). Concern was generally expressed that online may not be the most appropriate forum for a conversation and whether sufficient care is taken when choosing how to send a message. Helen expressed her misgivings about having congregation members as Facebook friends as it meant she altered her way of interacting with non-church friends (see section 7.4).

4.7.3.5 Age of users

There was a general perception that the internet is for the younger generation and churches with an overall elderly population may scale back their activities or not begin them in the first place, because there is no expected audience within the church (see also section 6.6 below). This could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. With no online content the younger members may feel their information needs are not met by the church leading them to either seek alternative places where they can engage more flexibly with a home church, or more likely, leave altogether.

4.7.3.6 Accuracy and completeness of information

Information literacy was cited by Wendy and to a certain extent by James. Wendy suggested one drawback of online information is that people tend to assume that all information is true, and gave an example of a quiz night where incorrect answers had been provided. James (St Saviour, Catholic) expressed concern that extreme or dogmatic information could be taken as representative of the church's teaching, when in fact it would only be the website producers' opinions. Michael (national church communications officer) made a related point that the national organisation had to be cautious about publishing a definitive church policy, when local leaders

were autonomous and could make their own decisions on matters. So a website for the national church could not risk setting up conflict between itself, enquirers and local churches. Hence, even the relatively simple task of publishing more than basic information can become complicated.

4.7.3.7 Interactivity

Drawbacks with interactivity on the internet were also given. Michael (national communications) cited issues with the public's perception of senior leaders blogging. First, that the public may not necessarily see publishing an opinion online as a core part of the senior leaders' roles. In contrast, in interview, it was discussed that a letter to a newspaper expressing the same opinion would be seen as legitimate activity. Secondly, the senior leaders themselves needed to be taught to cope with trolls and other attacks. The trolls (commenters who post deliberately antagonistic messages) were also mentioned by Kester and Aaron. Aaron (East Methodist) cautioned against 'nutters, crazies and weirdos' and Kester (St Bride, Catholic) suggested that where online comment forms for sites such as the BBC were concerned:

it is ninety percent madness what is written, [laughs] so I don't think churches should be in the, encouraging madness. (Kester, St Bride)

4.7.3.8 Adult and illegal content

The availability of adult websites was mentioned –specific reference to the ability to easily find content such as pornography or gambling sites was made. Colette talked of their attempts to guide the church's youth:

We try to encourage our young people to be very careful about what they watch on the internet for example. Look for the good things. There are some

things they don't understand and you definitely want to shy away from.

(Colette, High Road Methodist).

Several times the dangers of 'chat rooms' and so on were specified as reasons for a lack of interactivity or involvement online. However, the impression that these references convey is not so much that leaders are very aware of specific dangers but that there is a general fear of the possibility of danger. There is no commensurate knowledge or understanding that, for example, access to a Facebook group could be controlled. The unspecified nature of the threat was clear from the statement from Gayle, when talking about her congregation's reluctance to use Facebook:

...you hear things, don't you, about chat rooms (Gayle, Christ Methodist)

To conclude, leaders had no difficulty in articulating their ideas on what harm the internet can cause to individuals and to society. Their responses ranged from risks that were specifically understood, to more loosely held opinions on dangerous aspects. Not all of these are necessarily accurate. One explanation for this level of negative opinion might be that for most clergy, their only training on the internet is as part of child protection and safeguarding practice (this was mentioned by James and Benjamin in the Catholic and Methodist churches respectively). This would necessarily focus on the safety aspects of working with young people and could skew the participants' perceptions of the internet if at no point were the positive aspects for their own practice highlighted as part of a training course.

4.8 Clergy information seeking

Questions were asked which aimed to contextualise the churches' websites in the experience and expertise of the leaders' online information seeking preferences.

This covered both the general use of the internet and for research specifically linked to the leaders' roles in their church.

All leaders said that they used the internet for other purposes to varying extents. Some self-characterised as infrequent users but when prompted were able to list several ways in which the internet was used. Robert (St James), who was the least enthusiastic about the changes that the internet has brought, still sees it as 'incredibly useful':

I use the internet a lot entirely almost entirely for convenience for looking things up, for finding information about things, checking my facts, it's very good... There are various religious, the Bible, you can get religious texts and so on. (Robert, St James)

It is clear that even the reluctant users accept that online information is now part of everyday life. How that translates into their role as church leader of course varies between the leaders and their expectations.

4.8.1 Internet for inspiration or information

One specific question was aimed at addressing the ways in which using websites or the internet is integrated into the leaders' religious role. Interviewees were asked how they would approach preparation for a sermon. Answers broadly fell into two themes. Some suggested that their collection of books would be the first place they would look, and that online search would be for factual research only such as checking a quotation or looking for an image as illustration. Gayle would always begin with her book collection, as would Thomas. Both will combine the print and online sources, however, and would, for example, Google a particular word or phrase in Greek or look for clarification on a point. Robert would use websites only

to check facts. Kester would also refer to his print collection first, but would use Google for a specific piece of information such as a quotation.

The second theme suggested that others used online sources as a source of inspiration to start a creative process. Helen, Lee and Mark were likely to turn to websites for help. Helen said that one thing she found particularly useful was the ability to listen to podcasts of other people's sermons and talks on a topic – she was not a keen reader, so this allowed her access to new opinions and viewpoints:

I always go and listen to sermons and read sermons and sort of see what other people are saying about things...the ideas from other people who have looked at the passage are interesting so I do use the internet a lot for preparation of sermons and things. (Helen, Central Baptist)

Lee described a situation where a search might be very useful if his inspiration was failing:

...all you need to do is type into Google, "sermon", that passage, and you will find sermons that have been written on that passage that will hopefully, you know you're not going to use and copy, but at the same time will give you the prompt that you might need. (Lee, Shelley Baptist).

Helen is a younger church leader, so would probably be part of the generation that James (St Saviour) seems slightly wary of. He would not turn to the internet for sermon preparation:

...every day of my life I preach because we have a daily mass and I always say something, and I've never used the internet. I know by rumour that some younger clergy do, they'll sort of get information off the internet and use that

as the basis but I have never have done and I can't imagine ever doing so.

(James, St Saviour)

Aaron described at length one website he used¹⁶ that was a gateway to various resources and would be his starting point for any research. For him, this site was comprehensive and a useful portal and he would not use any other site. In contrast, Benjamin was more eclectic in his use of websites, and would use any one of many sites for inspiration or for prayer or hymn suggestions. Aaron's reliance on one website means that his pool of available online resources is shaped by the selections of a third party – in this case, a third party in the US – who could potentially introduce their own bias into curation of their website. Aaron could therefore find his information limited or biased.

4.8.2 Email

Well, the Church of England and the Diocese... runs by emails so my inbox is overflowing most days. (Wendy, St Timothy)

During the interviews, leaders were asked about their opinion of the internet in its widest sense. Many participants mentioned their use and opinion of email. A number of strong opinions were offered which was unexpected. Email was one of the aspects of online communication given as an example in the question, so it is possible this had a priming effect. Interviewees who did not have a wider experience of social media or using websites may have picked this as a cue to talk about something with which they were experienced. Nonetheless, the emerging theme of the importance of email is interesting not only for the way it demonstrates that an

¹⁶ <http://www.textweek.com/>, accessed March 17 2012

online tool has been widely adopted and highlights the pitfalls therein, but it suggests there is an established level of online computing activity and familiarity which could be built upon if more sophisticated tools were to be introduced.

Respondents both praised and criticised email as a tool for communication. The convenience of email was recognised – allowing asynchronous conversations, and a more measured approach to responses. Kester (St Bride) saw the effect of the rise in its popularity as his congregation now ‘casually’ communicate by email, in a way that did not happen in his previous parish. At the same time, problems with email were mentioned by almost all participants and it appears to be tolerated as a necessary evil rather than embraced. Section 6.1.2 suggests that not all church websites publish an email address, which could be in order to limit the amount of unsolicited contact.

The quotation from Wendy given above hints at the wider concerns of many regarding the volume of email received. Both Anglican and Catholic diocesan authorities send administrative details and updates via email. Several participants expressed frustration at being copied into irrelevant threads, and a sense that email conversations can take much longer than a short and efficient telephone call. Colette had not yet ventured on to Facebook because she found the volume of email enough to cope with, without adding another source of messages. More serious drawbacks were mentioned, including the difficulty of judging tone of voice used via email and the risk of accidentally upsetting the recipient of the message. Or indeed even purposely using email as a medium to send unpleasant messages:

...sometimes people say things in emails that they would never in a million years dream of saying to somebody's face or over the telephone (Gayle, Christ Methodist)

And also from Helen:

it's so easy to just chuck out an email about something, sit there at the computer send it off and then have to pick up the pieces afterwards because somebody's taken something you said the wrong way (Helen, Central Baptist)

These criticisms were levelled at general use of email by all members of the community. Helen's opinion suggests that she has had to act as mediator when other people's messages have been misunderstood, and also reflecting perhaps her own experience.

It was also noted that it is easy to assume a message has been communicated because an email has been sent, despite the lack of guarantees of delivery or that it will be read or understood as intended. Given the sensitive nature of a number of conversations and interactions that church leaders will have, it is unsurprising that many find email to be a cause for concern. Helen also noted that email might not be the recipients' preferred method of communication and it was important to be sensitive to the needs of others. Thomas (St Margaret) carefully described his approach, and in doing so summarised several potential problems:

...anything that's difficult or hard to hear, whenever I am saying no to something, I'd rather do that face to face or at least on the phone. ... so you want to try to foster face to face communication as much as you possibly can, otherwise, it doesn't, relationships get weakened. It's quite a blunt instrument, email, because you miss out on tone of voice and body language, that kind of thing (Thomas, St Margaret)

Robert (St James) highlighted one perceived benefit of email:

I think you can have a semi-conversation by email that is in some ways freer than a phone call and there is a kind of spontaneity combined with the ability to save and go over it again and I think that can be good (Robert, St James)

He also described a situation in a previous parish where access to email – or not – was a real barrier to communication within a collaborative community project, which had helped shape his overall suspicion of online media.

In contrast, email was valued by others for team-based communication. James (St Saviour) said that when committees or working parties were established, email was his preferred method of communication. Thomas (St Margaret) runs a lot of the administration for his church teams via email. Alan, one of the webmasters, described the mailing lists his church operates. Aaron (East Methodist) has run theological discussion groups via email. James (St Saviour) suggested two key benefits for email as a method of communication – convenience and record keeping. Email is ‘less intrusive’ than calling someone and it also allows for a record to be kept of a conversation. With some communication for clergy being sensitive or possibly controversial, the ability to keep a record would be an important benefit.

One point that Kester raised was his different interaction with different media. He said that whilst he frequently initiated email contact with various people, he only responded to messages via Facebook. For participants, email is a key communication tool and now an indispensable part of their work, even if it is sometimes a source of frustration as well as a convenience.

4.9 Ideal website

Participants were asked what they would like to see on an ideal church website. Mark noted that the basic factual information is important alongside the efforts to

convey welcome via images of people who are members of the church. Wendy noted that broken links and sites that do not work are off-putting. Aaron explained that his church's website had very little content, because there was not the staffing to make this feasible. So the creation of his ideal site would be unattainable in the current circumstances because of the difficulty in keeping it maintained. Gayle felt that her church's site combined the factual and welcoming aspects by mentioning the varied activities that are linked to the church, aimed at giving a sense of welcoming community and place where new members would be able to feel comfortable. She referred to a small church in her circuit that currently does not have a website, saying:

now they haven't got a website but if they did it would say [•] Church, Sunday worship six o'clock and that's all that would be on it. And that would tell you a lot, wouldn't it? (Gayle, Christ Methodist)

Benjamin offered an opinion on the way that churches should approach the selection of content for the website. With his wider experience in communications theory and practice, he had been encouraging other churches to think about their online presence and in his previous role, had co-ordinated awards for good websites. Benjamin reflected that:

people thought once they had a website up with a picture of the church and a few bits of information that was it, but it is actually more than that, it is saying well, if there is a group meeting what's the purpose of the group? put the programme up – all welcome – things like that, and always keeping it refreshed (Benjamin, Valley Methodist)

There was agreement with this from the interviewees who expressed an opinion in that the basic information was not enough, and the key aspect of an ideal website would be its ability to give a flavour of the kind of experience a visitor would have. Whether churches are achieving this is considered next.

The preceding sections have presented a picture of the church leaders' environment, their use of and frustration with websites and email. Moving away from the personal experiences and turning firstly to the content analysis data, the next chapter investigates the ways in which websites are created, their subsequent maintenance, and the leaders' experiences.

Chapter 5: Website creation, maintenance & governance

5. Introduction

This chapter examines the technical production and presentation elements as well as the ongoing maintenance of the websites researched, answering objective 3. Quantitative results from the longitudinal analysis are presented first. Following this, content analysis results are given, and where available, interview data which seeks to explain the observed results is included.

5.1 Longitudinal results

To provide background and context for the later parts of the research study, objective 1 was to establish a baseline measure of the number of parishes or churches in England with a purpose-built website. The way in which this was undertaken from January 2009 to December 2011 is given in 3.6 above.

In December 2011 the fifth and final data collection was completed. The results are given in Table 5-1 below. This shows that:

- The number of churches with websites increased during each phase up until December 2010
- The rate of change was different for each denomination
- By December 2011 the increase had largely levelled off.

	Anglican %	Baptist %	Catholic %	Methodist %
Phase 1 - January - April 2009	40	57	37	28
Phase 2 - December 2009	46	67	41	39
Phase 3 - July 2010	48	72	53	59
Phase 4 - December 2010	58	84	63	61
Phase 5 - December 2011	55	84	61	64

Table 5-1 Percentages of churches with websites found (n=400)

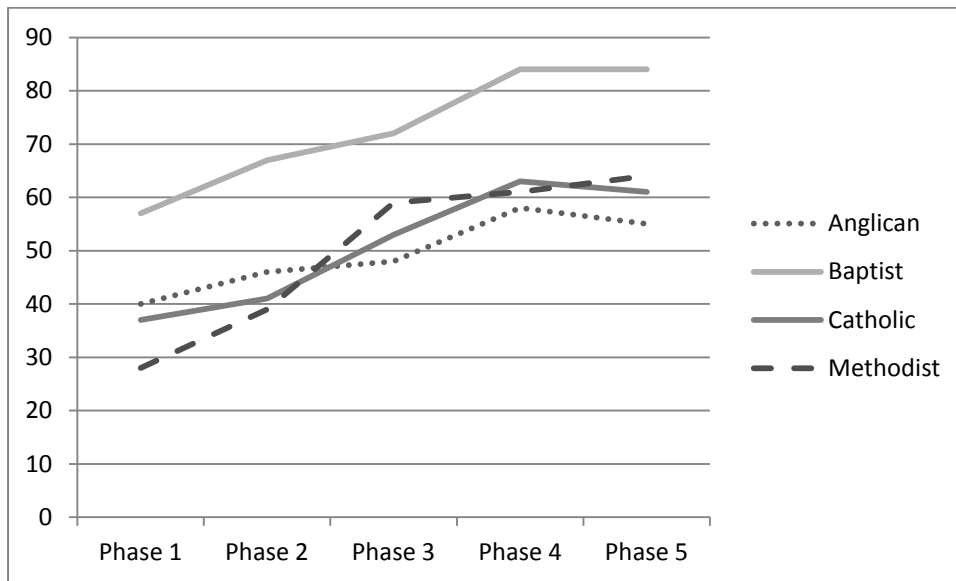


Figure 5-1 Graph showing increase in number of church websites found over time, 2009-2011

Plotting the changes between phases gives an interesting picture in that although all denominations showed an increase, the rate of change is different. From Phase 1 to Phase 2, all showed an increase. During the next phase, more sites were found for all denominations, but the increase was proportionately higher for Catholic and Methodist churches. Between the third and fourth data collection period, the growth in the number of sites stabilised at between 17 and 19%, except in the case of the Methodist churches where there was only a small (3%) increase in the number of sites found. A year later, the rate of change had stalled for all four; with Baptists showing no increase, Methodists a small 5% increase and Catholics and Anglicans showing a decrease in the number of findable sites.

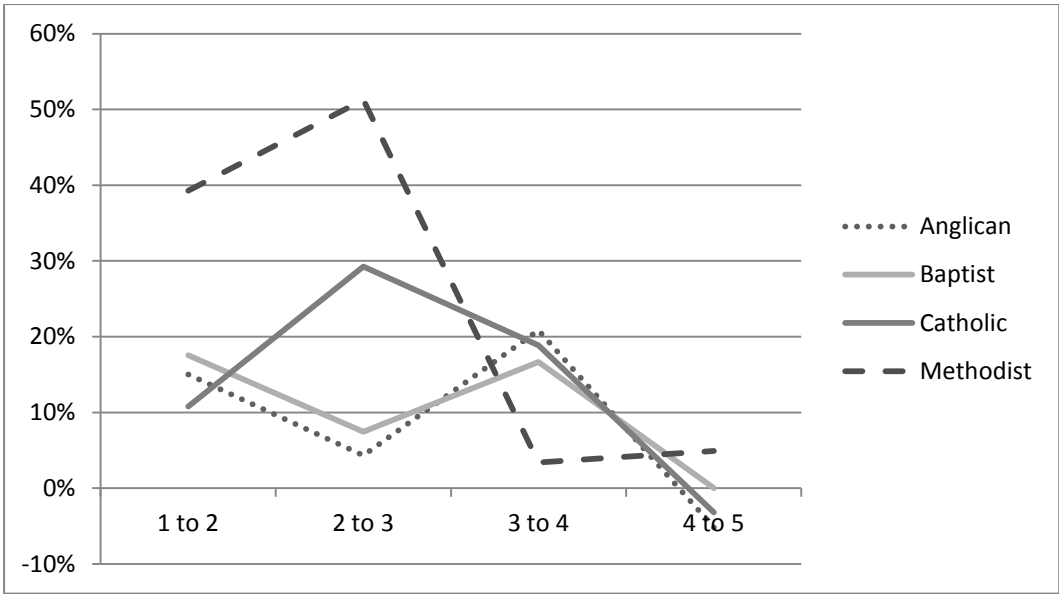


Figure 5-2 Graph showing percentage increases in number of websites found over time

Possible reasons for the different increases and decreases are discussed in section 8.8.1 . Having established the national picture for website prevalence in general, the content analysis results below focus on a smaller region of England.

5.2 Creation details

5.2.1 Church-specific URL

All %	Church-specific URL
Anglican	86
Catholic	90
Baptist	88
Methodist	71
All churches	85

Table 5-2 Percentage of churches with name-specific URL (n=147)

One item of data collected related to whether or not a church had its own URL rather than being listed as a page within a wider or more generic website. In order to have a named URL allocated it is likely that the church leadership will have had to approve the nominal expenditure, thus be involved in the decision-making process.

It is therefore an indication of the involvement of the church in at least the establishment of a website. The majority of sites did have their own named URL.

5.3 Blog-based platforms

All %	Blogging services acknowledge
Anglican	5
Catholic	0
Baptist	21
Methodist	13
All churches	9

Table 5-3 Sites acknowledging blogging service as website platform (n=147)

There are, in 2012, many ways a website can be created without the need for extensive knowledge of how to code HTML. This category counted the sites which acknowledged the use of the service provided by one of the major blog platforms, such as Blogger and Wordpress. Overall, only 9% mentioned or used one of these services. No Catholic sites said they used such a platform, and 21% of Baptist sites did. There are a number of possible contributing factors to the low take-up of the potential for creating sites via a prepared platform:

- Webmasters are unaware of these services
- Webmasters choose to work independently because their skill is in HTML coding
- Inherited sites have not been transferred
- Churches do not want to rely on a secular third-party platform for their websites

5.4 Design

The research is concerned more with the content of the sites than their aesthetic appeal, particularly since the acceptability of different designs can be a matter of individual taste. There are, nonetheless, established conventions and guidelines for websites to adopt. Some relate to ease of use, others relate to exploiting the multimedia potential of the internet and maximising the impact of messages. The placement of the menu bar is an example of the former kind of convention, and the number of graphics or photographs are representative of the latter.

5.5 Construction elements

All %	Menus in standard places	Use of frames
Anglican	92	8
Catholic	85	15
Baptist	82	9
Methodist	67	13
All churches	85	15

Table 5-4 Percentage of churches following accepted design guidelines (n=147)

The majority of, but not all, sites followed web conventions and placed their menu bars or items in standard places. Over time, the convention for navigation bar placement arrived at is that which is, for example, described by the Internet Evangelism Day website: "Typically, bars are arranged vertically in the left-hand margin, or sometimes horizontally along the top of the page" (Internet Evangelism Day 2012).

Frames, in principle, allow a screen to be split with some parts static and others changing independently as users navigate the website. In practice, they rather complicate navigation – making bookmarking and web indexing difficult, and are no

longer widely used. The practical guide to website construction by David (2007) recommends frames are not employed – this is a five-year old guide, which indicates the length of time since frames were abandoned on mainstream websites. The noticeable minority of sites that still have them may be maintained by people with either a lack of current design knowledge, or insufficient time or skill to update an inherited site.

5.6 Photographs and graphics

	Photographs: Mean number per site				Graphics	
	Church buildings	Clergy/ leaders	People not engaged in worship	Other	Any graphics (mean)	Logo (%)
Anglican	4.0	1.5	4.4	2.8	2.8	18
Catholic	2.4	1.0	1.5	3.0	1.4	0
Baptist	1.4	2.7	3.9	2.9	4.5	6
Methodist	2.6	0.7	3.6	7.6	1.8	33
All churches	1.6	3.0	3.7	3.7	2.8	15

Table 5-5 Mean occurrences of photographs and graphic elements (n=147)

5.6.1 Church buildings

Anglican websites have a higher mean number of photographs of the church buildings as shown in Table 5-5. This may be because the buildings are older, architecturally valuable and are thus recorded online in some detail, or because it reflects the tradition of the parish church building being a focus for the congregation. Fewer pictures of the buildings on the other denominations' sites may also be because their designers have heeded guidelines that encourage a focus on the community rather than the facilities.

5.6.2 People

Website creation guidelines such as those by David (2007) suggest that photographs of the church's people are a key element in establishing credentials as a welcoming site and organisation. The number of photographs on each site were therefore recorded.

Photographs of people not engaged in worship, i.e. in any other situation than a church service, were counted. This measure was taken to show the emphasis that is put on the congregation as a community by the website and as an aspect of the welcoming nature of the church. Anglican churches had the highest number; perhaps counterbalancing the number of buildings photographed. Baptists and Methodists had a similar 3.9 and 3.6 mean number per site; Catholics had fewer with 1.5 photographs per site. The difference here could be because of the relative formality of the Catholic church as well as the possible lack of attention to photographs as part of a website. These results are in Table 5-5 above.

All other photographs were counted and the Methodist church had a far higher mean number of 7.6 per site. Baptists have the highest mean number of photographs of their leaders and Methodists the least. The organisation of the Methodist church means that there are fewer leaders per church, so this is a reflection of the off-line reality. Catholic churches have a mean of one photograph of a leader per site which reflects their leadership structure.

The Baptist churches have a higher number of other graphics. Methodists are most likely to have their denomination's logo on their home page and no Catholic site included an equivalent design. Methodists are also most likely to have any other kind of photograph on their website.

5.6.3 Photographs as part of ideal website content

During the interviews, leaders were asked what their ideal website would contain. Wendy (St Timothy, Anglican), Mark (St Michael, Anglican) and James (St Saviour, Catholic) all specifically mentioned pictures as being an important aspect of establishing the sense of welcome. Mark suggested he would like to have a video of the kind of services that happen in his church, because he felt that they were possibly livelier than visitors might anticipate based on their perception of the old church building:

I don't think we have any pictures on ours at the moment of actual church life... I'd like even perhaps a video clip of a service so people have an idea of what we're like, because sometimes it's a bit of a surprise when people cross the threshold (Mark, St Michael).

James (St Saviour) referred first to the pictures of the building when talking about the new site his church was creating. This will include the ability for visitors to have a virtual tour of the inside of the church. He also wants the site to emphasise the liveliness of his churches:

the fact that we have the one in [•] and it's a quiet service, it appeals to older people, it's slightly shorter, there's something about that, and then about the fact [•] is lively, busy, and crowded... so there is something about what you might find if you come. (James, St Saviour).

It is interesting to draw a parallel between this soon-to-be established Catholic site and that of the Baptist church run by Lee. His aim was to remove a lot of the content that focused on the ability to hire the church and its facilities:

you could take a tour through the rooms...it doesn't necessarily say much about the church - [the website is there] because we want to point to the church in order to point to Christ in that sense (Lee, Shelley Baptist)

Here, therefore, are three diverse churches, all attempting to solve the same problem of how to convey a sense of welcome but in different ways –using video, pictures and descriptions. Lee has the least focus on the church’s buildings as the starting point, which seems perhaps to be a direct contrast to James’ approach. However, Lee leads a one–church parish, and James has four communities under his leadership, with varying styles of architecture. So there may be an important role for James to disentangle expectations about Catholic worship from the assumptions people make about the buildings, in the same way that Mark wants video to show the contemporary style of worship happening in his medieval building.

What is worth noting is that for this aspect of websites there is agreement in principle that non–text elements would be useful, and the leaders’ opinions are in accordance with established design advice and practice. The content analysis suggests that churches still have some way to go to actually implement this advice. This could be in part because the website creators are still mostly amateur – the next section presents results from the content analysis which investigate this claim.

5.7 Professional creation

All %	Credits to a professional design company
Anglican	20
Catholic	35
Baptist	21
Methodist	17
All churches	22

Table 5–6 Credits to a professional design company (n=147)

To establish the extent to which church sites were being built in-house or by professional web designers, the presence of credits or copyright statements was coded. Between a third and a fifth of sites by denomination had an acknowledgement that suggested there had been at least some input from a professional firm, as given in Table 5-6 above, with the overall figure at 22%.

There are many possible reasons why a church would choose a professional design company. They may have no in-house expertise and/or prefer to have the site supported as a paid-for resource. The leadership may have preferred the possibilities for a more sophisticated site than could be created by a keen amateur. Or it may simply be that the marketing for a particular company arrived at a particularly opportune moment and the leadership decided it would be an appropriate investment.

5.7.1 Status of webmaster

In the interview sample, two of the 16 churches had paid for their sites to be created – one by a student, (East Methodist) and the other by a design company (Shelley Baptist). That is a slightly lower proportion – 12.5% – compared to the overall 22% of the content analysis samples. It would appear the majority of websites in both samples had been created by volunteers. Lee (Shelley Baptist), with his interest in blogging, had created a separate blog from the church website. Benjamin (Valley Methodist), who has had a number of years of experience in digital communications, created the website for his area and this is maintained by a paid, part-time administrator who had been trained to update the website on behalf of the 21 individual churches in the circuit. All other church websites in the sample were maintained by volunteers, a minority of whom were involved in online work as

their day job (for example, those working on the High Road Methodist church site).

Benjamin said, in explaining his experience of 'enthusiastic amateurs':

it's how we all started to learn, and these days if you want a very whizz bang website you've got to pay for it and churches are not flush with money.

(Benjamin, Valley Methodist)

5.7.2 National involvement

The variations in skill, quality and commitment led some to question why the church nationally did not provide assistance with church websites. Michael (national communications officer) outlined his organisation's difficulties with providing support at an individual church level. First, that the church organisation is not intended to function in that way – each church is autonomous and can make its own decisions. Secondly, and of more practical significance, is the level of resourcing – Michael's organisation would struggle to find resources to adequately support thousands of churches' likely IT problems. Finally, providing a template would involve endorsing a particular provider, which the church could not be seen to do without compromising commercial impartiality.

One local body represented by Murray (regional communications officer) provides encouragement and advice on a one-to-one basis, but only in the short term. Advice is also available via their website. Benjamin (Valley Methodist) has also provided training for his local area. There is a level of support available from the church, therefore, but not perhaps at the very basic level some interviewees would have liked.

5.8 Maintenance

5.8.1 Currency of websites

...it's like church noticeboards, if you don't keep them up to date it appears that we are always behind the times (Benjamin, Valley Methodist)

One area of interest is the frequency of updating of information on websites. Churches work on various time cycles – weekly services, monthly rotas, Anglican seasons.¹⁷ Seasons include the major festivals such as Easter or Advent. Weekly notice sheets are common within many churches. Regular updates to a site suggest there is an investment in and understanding of the importance of the website as a channel of communication with the congregation and wider public.

5.8.1.1 Calculating the currency of information

The intention was that each site would be coded for the date last updated. However, very few sites gave such a clear indication. The scarcity of information meant a change of approach for analysis was necessary. Other measures were used instead where they were present as an indication of the last change in content. It had been intended to calculate the number of days since the last update at the time of coding, allowing for the anticipated weekly cycle. In the absence of a date the other measures used were:

- Most recent/ forthcoming event dates
- Date of weekly notice sheet available
- Whether a monthly calendar was current

¹⁷ Please see the definition in the Glossary

- Dates of news/ announcement items

The variety of ways in which the currency could be indicated meant that a simple count of days elapsed could not be calculated. Therefore the sites were assigned to one of five categories representing the length of time since the last update:

- Less than a week
- More than a week but less than a month, or in the current month for calendar/ newsletter
- Over a month but less than three months
- Over three months
- Not possible to determine

The results are shown in Table 5–7 below.

Category/ Denomination	<1 week	>1 week < 1 month	>1 month < 3 months	3 months +	Not possible to determine
All %					
Anglican	41	35	3	9	12
Catholic	55	15	0	20	10
Baptist	24	27	6	12	30
Methodist	31	15	8	12	35
Overall, all denominations	37	27	4	12	20

Table 5–7 Currency of websites: percentage of sites in each category (n=147)

For the Baptist and Methodist sites, the most frequent observation is that the site’s currency cannot be determined. Within the Catholic community, more sites – over half – are more frequently updated than not. This is also true of the Anglican churches, but the difference is not so marked. 41% are up-to-date within a week, but 35% – a third – are only up-to-date to the current month.

Taken together across all denominations, a noticeable proportion were over three months out of date and a fifth gave no indication of when their content was last

updated. The Anglican churches classed as ‘over three months’ out of date included two sites that were several years out of date at the time of coding. It is possible that these are no longer the current church website. However, the URLs were obtained via the official Diocesan links, so if the churches’ site has changed, this has not been notified to the Diocese. This is possibly indicative of the regard with which the website and the processes around it are held by the church if this key piece of communication policy has been neglected. It could also be that the Diocese has not maintained the church links page.

5.8.2 Currency and professional design

Currency of site – time since last update as per Table 5–7 above	Number of sites with a credit to a professional in each category (all denomination)	%	Percentage of population of all sites (Table 5–6 above)
A less than a week	15	48	37
B >1 week < 1 month	8	26	27
C >1 month < 3 months	2	6	4
D 3 months +	3	10	12
E Not possible to determine	3	10	20

Table 5–8 Currency of websites compared with credits to professional designers (n=147)

One aspect explored was whether sites professionally designed might be more current – if professional design is a marker for the level of commitment to the site. Of the 31 websites with such credits, 48% were updated weekly, compared to 37% of all websites. The percentage updated monthly was similar – 26% compared to 27%.

It is possible therefore that a church which uses a professional designer is prepared to spend more resources caretaking its site – more was invested in its creation, so more is expected of its contributors, and it may have a higher profile within church communications. Conversely, the churches who have paid for a professional site but are not keeping it updated are losing out on their investment. This could be

explained by a change of personnel, meaning that the site is no longer viewed as an integral part of the church's work. Or, it could be that there was enthusiasm within the organisation only for the project's initiation, and the day-to-day maintenance had not attracted sufficient volunteer input.

A custom URL, an up-to-date site, consistent design and good use of graphics are all important parameters. They signify the professionalism with which the site has been approached – whether or not it has been created by a volunteer – and how it might compare with others published on the internet. These are not particularly complex or expensive aspects to address in the process of creating and maintaining a website, but the first conclusion from the available content analysis data is that there is further progress to be made in many areas. These results show that many church websites are not frequently updated and in many cases are presenting old information. This does not create a favourable first impression of an organisation. The interviews suggested a number of reasons why sites were not receiving the input that might be expected for a key communication medium.

5.8.3 Working with volunteer webmasters

The reliance on volunteers had caused problems for some of the leaders in the interview sample. All three of the webmasters interviewed had volunteered themselves for the post, based on experience gained elsewhere in creating websites. Howard (Gate Ecumenical) had enlisted the help of his daughter, who was a full-time web designer. Alan (Bridge Baptist) had been paid for his work on websites elsewhere, although this was only a hobby and not his main employment. Oscar (New Life Baptist) also manages the church computer for presentations during services.

The three agreed that on the whole, they were left to their own devices when creating and subsequently maintaining the site. Howard said that the site for his church had mainly been ‘built on trust.’ The church he attends has a very democratic structure with a church meeting which oversees the governance of the community. This meeting had approved the website when it had been proposed by Howard but subsequent maintenance was left to him. Howard would ‘occasionally demonstrate it to them [church meeting] to remind them what's going on.’

Alan (Bridge Baptist), in a more traditional church, also had main responsibility for the website, having originally created it in 1996. For his church website:

The bulk of it is written by me, it's mainly me that decides what should go on and I actually write the text. When I have anything that I am a bit unsure about I take it to the leadership...and I think they have almost always said yes, but it really is down to me, nobody else really contributes anything or even comes up with suggestions. (Alan, webmaster, Bridge Baptist).

For many of the leaders, the website and its support volunteer were inherited from the previous incumbent and was a work in progress. This arrangement was not always satisfactory if the volunteer webmaster was either busy, limited in skills, or unwilling to change their direction or mode of working.

Lee (Shelley Baptist) described a situation whereby his webmaster was difficult, “resenting intrusion into his domain” but neither Lee nor the webmaster are sufficiently expert to alter the hard coding of the website. Two specific examples of the problems this caused are as follows. First, the publication of information on the website was erratic. The interview took place in January and Lee was annoyed that no Christmas information had appeared on the site. Second, the hard-coded

graphics of the site featured a group of people, many of whom were no longer church members. No-one had the expertise to be able to alter the graphics.

Gayle talked about convincing her webmaster to add more forward-looking dates and how she felt she could not ask him to step down, but that if someone new were to take over, things would improve. Kester phrased his response very carefully when he suggested the previous webmaster had been “very kind to agree to not carry on doing it.”

There is evidence that even where the leader is engaged with the website, the reliance on volunteers means change can be stifled for lack of time, willingness or expertise. A further barrier may be that leaders do not want to over-burden their volunteers, and so possible ideas are unexplored. Robert (St James, Anglican) said that he had used his Gmail account to publish photographs instead of asking the webmaster to upload them, as this would be too time consuming.

5.8.4 Available training and guidance

Interviewees were also asked for their experience of training or guidance in websites or online communication since the majority of the work is being done by volunteers. It is interesting to contrast the responses received. Certainly for the Methodist and Anglican churches, training is available at Diocesan, national and circuit level – the interviews with Murray, Michael and Benjamin make this clear.

Robert did not think that much of the Diocesan training was relevant to him in his inner city, poor parish. He also felt that the training assumed that one would have access to and expertise in setting up IT equipment. He would have looked for more basic guidance with hardware and software. Colette and Gayle both said they had

not been on any formal courses or received any guidance; whilst Colette's web team had had training, this had not been via the church.

Benjamin had organised media training locally for Methodists and has been involved in national events to promote online communication. He was aware of the need to think beyond replicating a notice sheet online, and to make a website interesting and dynamic. Kester had not received any formal training from the Catholic church on website creation or maintenance, but had benefited from being in a parish previously with a very good website. He was therefore aware of the importance of a good site:

but it was just knowing the importance of it, that there's no formal training on it. I suppose to me it would seem a fairly sensible thing for the diocese to say we would encourage all of our diocese to have websites, we'd even put a day on to help you get into it (Kester, St Bride)

More than one leader when asked about online training responded in terms of safeguarding children. This seems to be the way that most sessions that deal with the internet are presented – or that is the only training that the leaders attend that talks about online communication. If discussions about using the internet are only held in the context of safeguarding policies, highlighting the dangers, that would surely impact on participants' perceptions of the web as an unsafe tool.

Others were unaware of places to go for advice or guidance and left it to their webmasters, and this was echoed in the opinions of the three webmasters interviewed. No leader said that training on digital communication had been part of their ordination training – understandable for some of the older leaders who would have trained years before the internet became popular, but less so for those who

were newer in post. Clergy have busy, complicated and multi-faceted roles in their community. It would be impossible for them to become expert in everything related to the running of a church. However, a basic accurate awareness might be a factor in ensuring good decisions are made regarding churches' websites. Mark summed up the situation as it appears when he said:

I think there are occasional trainings...but I've not been on one and nobody's talked to me about setting up a website. it seems to me that every parish does their own thing. (Mark, St Michael)

Michael, the national communications officer, said clearly that there were nationally-organised training courses available.

5.9 Governance

One aspect that the interviews were intended to address was the level of consultation and evaluation to which each website was subject. For James (St Saviour) the website is not part of his daily concern and he did not sit on the committee that oversees communications for his church:

it's a volunteer who does it and about the only contact that I have that's through my secretary (James, St Saviour)

Yet, he had picked most of the hyperlinks, based not on systematic appraisal but on serendipity:

I guess things come my way and I think 'that's really interesting,'...if I think it's something that people might be interested in and might find useful and helpful I suggest it. (James, St Saviour)

So on the one hand, the leader admits to having limited contact with the site creator, yet on the other, is responsible for one key aspect of the site's content.

The way control operates for Thomas (St Margaret), is also informal, with the webmaster having free rein under Thomas' oversight:

[the webmaster] would generally take requests from anybody, if he thought there was something dubious or something I might not want to be on there then he would consult ... I basically have an overview of the website so I know what kind of things goes up there, ... but in those kind of cases he would say would you want it up there, and I would say yes or no, so I am sort of a, a bit of a backstop. (Thomas, St Margaret)

Lee was more explicit in his appraisal of the situation and less than ideal relationship between himself and the webmaster:

it always seems to me that the webmaster of the church is... not necessarily someone who's easy to deal with ...particularly if you require html coding and so forth, it's not something that the normal minister or church leader is going to be au fait with (Lee, Shelley Baptist)

Helen admitted:

I think we've generally just gone with the flow, and its turned out all right and because [•]'s very good at not just the graphics but putting the words, the content – it just works somehow (Helen, Central Baptist)

None of the leaders described a situation where the website was evaluated or monitored on any formal basis. Where websites could come under scrutiny varies by denomination and because of individual arrangements. The Baptist and Methodist

congregations could discuss the websites at their church meetings, which tend to be democratic, whereas the Anglican and Catholic churches tend to have a more hierarchical structure with a church council meeting. However, the frequency with which the website is discussed at any church seems to be less to do with the denomination and more to do with the attitudes of the leaders. If it is not added to the agenda, it cannot be discussed.

Approaches vary from the site being set up with no discussion (Helen, Central Baptist), to initial discussions regarding the launch of the site but nothing ongoing (Wendy, St Timothy; Howard, webmaster) and a third set with occasional discussions on the site:

It's just not come up on the agenda with other things at leadership. It might be that you have sparked that off in my mind that we should, at some point, actually acknowledge it. (Helen, Central Baptist)

Kester, who leads a Catholic parish, has a very clear idea of the purpose of his site and it is regularly discussed at quarterly meetings, where the statistics are examined. James, another Catholic leader, has much less involvement. St Saviours' website is considered only by a sub-committee of the church, and James does not chair these meetings. However, few other churches appear to have formal discussion of the website and its role in the life of the church. The prevailing attitude seems to be that once the site has been established, it can be left to its own devices. This is reflected in the lack of evaluation or review of the purpose or content of the websites as discussed in the next section.

5.9.1 Evaluation

For many of the churches, feedback and evaluation appears fairly rudimentary. The three webmasters made reference to using hit counters and page view statistics to gauge the level of interest in a site:

we've got a counter on it so we know how many people look at, visit it, but we haven't gone much further except by what we hear by word of mouth really (Howard, Gate Ecumenical)

One, Alan, said that another useful source of feedback was comments from people who attended his church because they had found it via the website:

we get feedback because ...[we] will ask them why did they choose us, and quite often they will say we found you on the web, we were attracted by your website, it sounded like a nice church, and so on. (Alan, webmaster, Bridge Baptist).

Whilst this is better than no feedback, it is always going to be biased towards those who did find the website inviting, and against those who never discovered it or who were not encouraged to visit by its content.

Helen worked with a colleague who had benefited from communications training in a previous role and who had sought to influence their standing in Google rankings because there were increasing numbers searching for a church via the web:

... he said we've got ourselves to the top of the list and knew what that meant and was excited about it. I was like, 'oh great ok...' (Helen, Central Baptist)

Kester's church discuss the website at their quarterly meetings, including looking at the page view statistics. For Gayle, the annual church meeting was the place where

the membership had an opportunity to discuss the organisation's digital presence. Robert was aware of the number of hits the site received, but his church leadership did not receive this report. Within the other churches there were no formal mechanisms for evaluating the websites as part of the churches' governance or leadership structure. For the majority of churches, therefore, the pattern seems to be that the site was discussed at its creation but is now left to be looked after by volunteers with little or no formal evaluation.

The foregoing results have shown how churches are creating their websites, how up to date they are kept and other aspects of the maintenance and evaluation of the website. The next chapter examines the information actually published and attempts to understand how the websites reflect the churches' understanding of their role as information providers.

Chapter 6: Church as information provider

6. Introduction

Publishing a website puts the church in the role of information provider. Objectives 4,5 and 6 are concerned with the kind of information published and the purpose behind the site. This chapter will examine the content analysis and interview findings intended to explain what churches are publishing, and why.

6.1 Church as information provider: content analysis

6.1.1 Basic information

The content analysis examined categories intended to create a baseline for the standard of the information on the websites. These relate to the absolute minimum details to be published on any organisation's website which acts as a gateway for further exploration – where they are, and how to contact them. They have equivalence with the sorts of information that are regularly published in print notice sheets distributed at church [an example of which is presented in appendix 11.10] These elements are concerned with objectives 3, 4 and 5 related to content choice.

6.1.2 Directions and contact details

All % of denomination total	Percentage of sites with a dedicated contacts page	Percentage of sites with a 'Contact Us' link	Contact email given	Contact telephone number given
Anglican	77	68	91	88
Catholic	55	85	95	90
Baptist	85	73	94	88
Methodist	67	67	71	75
All churches	74	74	89	86

Table 6-1 Contact details (n=147)

Table 6-1 above shows the number of sites that provided contact details. It is possible that some sites had both a contacts page and a 'contact us' link as these were not mutually exclusive categories. It also shows that almost all websites provided an email address, which would either have been on the contacts page or listed as part of the main body of information. Fewer churches provided a telephone number, except for the Methodists, who slightly preferred to publish a telephone number ahead of an email contact. Overall, 11% do not allow direct email contact from the website and 14% do not publish a contact telephone number. Table 6-2 shows a further breakdown, by number, of whether the sites with no email or phone have neither or just one. Nine have neither telephone nor email; five publish only a telephone number and nine only an email address.

Number	No email or phone	Phone only	Email only
Anglican	3	1	3
Catholic	0	1	2
Baptist	2	0	2
Methodist	4	3	2
All	9	5	9

Table 6-2 Contact details – further breakdown

6.1.3 Maps

All %	Percentage with map from commercial service	Percentage with map produced in-house	Percentage with no map
Anglican	53	24	23
Catholic	60	20	20
Baptist	82	15	3
Methodist	42	8	50
All churches	59	19	22

Table 6-3 Churches using commercial or in-house maps (n=147)

The provision of a map was also considered to be a marker for whether very basic information was available on a site. The majority of churches did provide or link to a map, as shown above in Table 6–3. However, half of Methodist churches do not provide any kind of map and overall 22% had no map at all.

Most made use of one of the free sites such as Googlemap or Streetmap to link to their location details, rather than drawing a map themselves, although nearly a quarter of Anglican websites did use an in-house map. This is an interesting finding which could be down to one of several reasons:

- Webmasters do not trust external sources of mapping information
- Webmasters are unaware of the sources of external and scalable maps
- The websites were created before these services were widely available and have not been updated since.

In addition, the lack of maps for all denominations, but specifically the Methodists, could be because this kind of information has not been deemed necessary. Perhaps the church building is a sufficiently well-known local landmark – although that is of little assistance to visitors from outside of the immediate parish. All reasons for lack of map would point to a lack of expertise or awareness of resource availability which would have possible implications for the website construction as a whole. This further reinforces the findings in 5.8.3 that sites appear to be entrusted to untrained volunteers.

In this sample, a majority of websites provide some basic contact information including a map of their location. Email addresses are widely available, as are telephone numbers. Providing such information shows that churches expect there to

be further interaction from the initial point of contact via the website. Provision for more sophisticated information via the internet is discussed in section 6.3 .

6.1.4 Times of events

All %	Times of services	Details of services
Anglican	95	29
Catholic	95	10
Baptist	100	18
Methodist	79	17
All churches	94	22

Table 6-4 Service times and details (n=147)

Publishing the times of church services is another piece of vital and basic information. Further explanation of what those services involve and in what format they take place may be less crucial, but do give a visitor an indication of the kind of organisation that particular church might be.

A high proportion of churches give the times of their services, as shown in Table 6-4. There are 6% who do not. Omitting this key piece of information may suggest the website is not a high priority for the church.

6.1.5 Service style

Far fewer give details of their services. This refers to information on what is meant by the title given to the particular event, for example, 'Eucharist,' 'Mass,' or 'Evensong,' or whether a service is family-friendly. It might also explain what happens during a service; if there is singing, a collection, a procession, a time of silence. This is distinct from the detailed liturgy or content described in section 6.3 below. The lack of such information suggests that the website may be being written without taking into account new or non-churchgoers as an audience. It is possible these numbers are an underestimate as some churches would have this information

on a third-level page, or on a specific newcomers' page which was coded separately (see below at 7.3). There is the possibility that the information is not presented because the audience for, or purpose of, the website have not been clearly articulated, and so the information has not been considered necessary.

6.1.6 Major festivals

All %	Christmas	Easter
Anglican	3	35
Catholic	0	0
Baptist	0	0
Methodist	0	0
All churches	1	16

Table 6-5 Information on major festivals (n=147)

In addition, specific festivals' details (Easter and Christmas) were coded. The coding of the majority of Anglican churches happened around Easter 2010, however, the time delay between completing those and the other denominations meant that the measure would not be a reliable indicator of currency. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that only 35% of Anglican churches made reference to Easter on their websites. No other denominations mentioned the major festivals on their sites.

6.2 Practical and reference information

These categories are concerned with information that is practical in nature, rather than being concerned with spiritual or pastoral development, sermon content or the kind of notices that would be relevant for an established church congregation.

6.2.1 Rites of passage

All %	Baptism	Marriage	Funeral
Anglican	30	35	14
Catholic	35	35	10
Baptist	3	3	0
Methodist	4	4	4
All churches	20	22	8

Table 6-6 Information available on rites of passage (n=147)

Despite falling regular attendances, people do still use churches for weddings, christenings and funerals. One set of statistics suggests the number of weddings rose in 2010 in the Church of England (Beckford 2012). Baptism and christening are, for the purposes of this project, interchangeable terms. It is likely that churches will receive enquiries from non-members about these special services for ‘rites of passage’ or ‘occasional offices’ as the Church of England refers to them. Therefore, it would follow that this would be one of the key pieces of information that a website would carry.

More websites for Anglican and Catholic churches provide information on this kind of event than do Baptist and Methodists, but still only a third have published such detail, and only a fifth overall. The marked difference is possibly because it reflects the Anglican and Catholic position as parish churches – these are the institutions to which non-churchgoers might automatically turn to in order to arrange one of these ritual events. It reflects the Church of England’s place as the established church of state. It may also have a relationship to the kind of buildings these churches own – a medieval parish church is picturesque, whereas inner city Baptists’ buildings may not be the wedding background that people wish for.

6.2.2 Architecture and Genealogy

All %	Architecture/ Genealogy
Anglican	53
Catholic	40
Baptist	39
Methodist	54
All churches	48

Table 6-7 Architectural or genealogical information (n=147)

The coding rubric for this category was as follows:

Does the site contain any information about the history of the church or its community? This covers surveys of historically interesting buildings as well as stories of the establishment of younger churches. It also includes any sections on how to trace parish records for genealogical research. It is not concerned with the current community or congregation.

Almost half (48%) of all churches provide information on their architecture or their available parish records for researchers. Several sites present onward contact information for records centres, so it may be that this is one of the key requests for information from church visitors. It is also information that does not necessarily demand or invite further interaction or conversation with the church, in the way an enquiry about a wedding might. Hence, it would be made public in order to assist the researchers without needing input from the church leadership.

Benjamin and Alan from the interview sample also mentioned projects to provide parish records, as detailed in 6.5.3 .

6.2.3 Local information

All %	Local information
Anglican	29
Catholic	70
Baptist	9
Methodist	8
All churches	27

Table 6-8 Local information (n=147)

Local information was coded as follows. This was intended to contribute to a measure of the extent to which churches locate themselves in their local community or act as a possible hub for information:

Does the site contain any links to local secular or religious institutions? This includes associated church schools but also NHS facilities, local charities or community groups. Code NO if there is just a coded list of these organisations in the main body of the site.

Of all churches, 27% publish this kind of information. However, it is notable that a higher number of Catholic churches publish local information. This could be explained because many have related church schools, and details of local schooling was counted within this category. Less than a third of Anglican churches provide any information on the local area and even fewer Baptist or Methodist churches do. Possible reasons may be that churches may not want to link to third party information over which they have no control, or they may not have the resources to check external sources and update their pages accordingly. Or they may perceive the church site as being strictly for church information, reflecting the assumption the website is the online equivalent of the notice sheet. Results of the extent to which local information is imparted via hyperlink is contained in section 7.6 below.

6.3 Spiritual & faith information

All %	Denomination		Statement of faith		Service content		Liturgy		Bible verses	
	Coded	Linked	Coded	Linked	Coded	Linked	Coded	Linked	Coded	Linked
Anglican	4	44	26	0	11	11	5	0	9	21
Catholic	0	80	0	0	30	25	10	0	0	15
Baptist	27	61	67	15	33	9	3	6	39	15
Methodist	5	50	50	4	25	21	0	4	17	17
All churches	9	54	36	4	21	14	4	2	16	18

Table 6-9 Churches showing faith-based information (n=147)

These items given in Table 6-9 aimed to address whether churches have provided information about their denomination, their statement of faith, prayer or service content, or any explanation of the liturgies in use. Information could be coded within the site, or provided by way of links to third party sites. The categories for coded or linked information are not mutually exclusive so some sites may have information that is in both and is recorded in both. It was felt to be useful to differentiate between the two because there is more thought involved in adding text to a site about these areas than just adding a link, so coded information implies there has been more consideration of the usefulness to site visitors. It also attempts to measure the extent to which information provided centrally rather than that written locally might be used, reflecting objective 3.

6.3.1 Denomination

In this category, sites were coded for any information on their affiliation over and above a statement along the lines of ‘this church is a member of denomination Y.’ Denomination information is mostly provided by links to the individual denomination headquarters’ site, rather than each site coding its own interpretation or copying an official statement. This is potentially an effective way of exploiting the linked nature of the information on the internet, and saving the individual churches from keeping a separate page up to date. The four major denominations are

organised differently, with different hierarchies and responsibilities, so there are key variations in the life of these ‘English Christian’ churches. Please refer to Appendix 11.9 for a discussion of the key differences in the four church organisations.

6.3.2 Statement of faith

All %	Statement of faith	
	Coded	Linked
Anglican	26	0
Catholic	0	0
Baptist	67	15
Methodist	50	4
All churches	36	4

Table 6-10 Churches publishing a statement of faith (n=147)

For this category, the coding instructions were as follows. Firstly, for a site with embedded/ coded content:

Coded: Does the site include a statement of faith (‘This is what we believe’) or a wider mission statement? – either can be just a sentence or a full page or pages.

For linked content:

Linked: Does the site link to any third party sites that give a statement of faith (‘Baptists believe that...’) or a wider mission statement? This would not include a link that was labelled just as a link to the parent denomination site.

Results show that Baptists and Methodists are more likely to include a statement of faith. No Catholic sites do, and also only 26% of Anglican sites. A statement of faith defines the outlook of the church, including, to some extent, its politics as well as its stance on areas of potential doctrinal disagreement within the wider Christian community. As well as being of use to those who are considering joining a specific

church, a clear statement of faith could also suggest a strong church leadership, aligning the congregation with a wider movement or outlook. The category also included any mission statements, which would explain the way the church defined its purpose, not necessarily in doctrinal terms. The statement of faith or mission is not necessarily something that can be inferred from knowing the church's denomination. Churches may define themselves as 'evangelical' regardless of their affiliation, for example, so this category can cross over these formal boundaries. Within the Catholic church this kind of statement may be seen as unnecessary because there may be less variation within the Catholic tradition.

6.3.3 Liturgy

All %	Liturgy	
	Coded	Linked
Anglican	5	0
Catholic	10	0
Baptist	3	6
Methodist	0	4
All churches	4	2

Table 6-11 Explanation of liturgy (n=147)

This was defined in the coding instructions as looking for:

Content or links to any third party site that explain the content of a service, or the form of words used. This would include more than the name of a prayer book being used but would attempt to explain why a service is conducted in a specific manner.

Within the Anglican tradition the words used and the overall structure in which an act of worship is delivered can have wide variation between, and within, churches. A service may run using the Book of Common Prayer in a version finalised in 1662 or it might be a relatively unstructured gathering based on a type of 'Fresh

Expression¹⁸.’ A church therefore might want to explain its most popular liturgies in use. However, results demonstrate that few sites provide any information on the liturgy in the first or second layer of pages explaining the form of the content of a service, or the form of words used and their origins or meanings. 10% of Catholic sites do, but no Methodist sites carry this information. Figures in Table 6–11 above show this, and also that a small percentage – 3% of Baptist churches offer this kind of information as part of their site, but 6% do link externally.

6.3.4 Service content

All %	Service content	
	Coded	Linked
Anglican	11	11
Catholic	30	25
Baptist	33	9
Methodist	25	21
All churches	21	14

Table 6–12 Service content (n=147)

This category is concerned with whether actual extracts from services or prayers are given, again either written as part of the site or via an external link. This covers the content of the actual act of worship, whether or not there is an accompanying explanation:

Does the site include any prayers from any source or any extracts of services?

This could include things like set responses used as part of a baptism, or a

¹⁸<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/>, accessed 19 March 2012, also see glossary of terms in Appendix [•]

creed or confession. It does not include any explanations of the worship style or what might happen in a service e.g. 'children leave after the first hymn.'

Does the site include links to third party sources of prayer or service e.g. the Church of England Daily Offices?

Service content as a whole is given on more churches' sites, with a third of Baptist and almost a third of Catholic sites providing this detail. Sites also use linked information, such as that provided by the Church of England, with a quarter of Catholic churches giving a link to an external source.

Whereas section 6.3.3 focused on explaining the form of service to a visitor, this information category is concerned with presenting the actual content, a difference that is perhaps more subtle in explanation than originally intended at the coding stage. The Church of England publishes a feed for daily prayer and their daily services which churches can use on their own sites. Using this would be a simple way to link the church to a wider body and the wider tradition of prayer, but the results show that this is not happening on the websites under consideration. It is possible that the Anglican webmasters are just unaware of this source of information, and the same holds for the other denominations' webmasters. Or, it could be that the churches choose not to rely on external content or do not feel this is relevant for their organisation.

6.3.5 Bible verses

All %	Bible verses	
	Coded	Linked
Anglican	9	21
Catholic	0	15
Baptist	39	15
Methodist	17	17
All churches	16	18

Table 6-13 Bible verses presented on websites (n=147)

Relatively few churches include any Bible verses on their sites, which is noteworthy since the Bible is the central text for the Christian faith. There are many sources on the internet from which the linked Bible verses can be taken. Biblegateway.com is one of the most well-known but as is demonstrated in section 7.6.1 below this was only linked to from seven out of the 147 websites.

More Anglican and Catholic sites use links as a method of sharing the Bible than present it as part of the text on their site, and fewer Baptist churches use links to Bible sites than include the quotes on their sites. An equal proportion of Methodist churches use both links and code on their sites. This last piece of information considered in this section further suggests that website creators are not thinking outside their immediate realm for information that could be of use to their sites' visitors. The implications of this, combined with the attitudes towards content selection uncovered during this interviews, are assessed in section 6.5.4 .

6.3.6 Sermon available for download

All %	Sermon/ talk available for download
Anglican	17
Catholic	10
Baptist	39
Methodist	4

Table 6-14 Percentage of sites with downloadable sermons (n=147)

Few Methodist churches had a facility for publishing a sermon or talk on their website, but nearly 40% of Baptist churches did. The majority of churches still do not offer the facility to download a weekly sermon. Whilst this is a possibly useful function for the site, it does demand a certain level of commitment and technical ability to maintain this service. It could be that the churches just do not have the resources to create this facility. Leaders' attitudes regarding publishing sermon content as discussed in the interview process varied.

Not every leader mentioned a sermon or talk's recording as being useful content for a website, but where they were suggested as possible content the leaders had clear reasons why they were or were not suitable. Where mentioned, the response was mixed in terms of whether the church website was an appropriate place for a sermon to be uploaded. Aaron, (East Methodist), felt it was not:

A couple of people have asked me to post or e-mail my sermons on something and I said "No". I don't see that as the nature of preaching, it's for the moment and it's in that moment. (Aaron, East Methodist)

Gayle talked at first in terms of not having sermon notes available to post, because she would speak off the cuff, then said they did not have the technology to record the talks. The idea that publishing sermons would detract from their context was

also mentioned by other leaders. Mark suggested this was something that was being considered, as he was aware the site was not doing as much as it could. Helen said that sermons were posted as MP3 audio files. She also shared her initial trepidation at the idea of the talks being freely available, agreeing with Aaron that the sermon was ‘of the moment,’ and expressing concern that one day’s talk would be taken as her final opinion on a topic.

6.4 Purpose of websites

Sturgill’s 2004 paper compared four kinds of information presented on church websites – information designed to convert the reader, to provide information about the church as an organisation, to present the church as part of its community and to allow interaction with the church. The current research followed a number of Sturgill’s original categories in the content analysis so it was possible to answer objective 4 by using the same four broad categories. The allocation to each category is noted in the content analysis schedule in section 3.8 .

Table 6–15 English churches' categories, following Sturgill (2004) shows the mean number of items per category per denomination, and also the overall mean for all churches regardless of denomination.

Mean number of items per category	Organisational	Evangelise	Interact	Community
Anglican	18.7	2.5	1.1	0.9
Catholic	13.8	2.8	1.1	1.5
Baptist	15.5	4.3	1.2	1.0
Methodist	19.1	2.8	0.9	0.8
All churches	17.3	3.0	1.1	1.0

Table 6–15 English churches' categories, following Sturgill (2004)

The sample of English churches in this study reflects the findings from Sturgill, in that organisational information is presented more often than any of the other three

categories. English Baptist churches have a slightly higher mean number of items classed as information designed to evangelise the reader. This element of the results helps summarise the answer to objective 4 investigating differences in information topics across denominations.

6.5 Church as information provider: interviews

Turning now to the interview findings, the next sections explore how leaders expressed their church's intentions behind the website, how the content is created and by whom, and to what purpose. In addition, the differences in strategy because of the congregation's age are considered in this section. These interview findings complement the content analysis described above as the intention was to understand how the choices around information to publish were made.

6.5.1 What is the purpose of the site?

Questions were posed which were intended to probe for a sense of whether the site had been set up with definite aims and a defined purpose, and if the site was a part of an articulated communications strategy. The interviews did not suggest that the latter aspect was true although this is partly unclear because follow-up questions were not widely used where, with hindsight, they could have been. Regarding a purpose for the site, however, a number of answers were given. That from Thomas, (St Margaret, Anglican) is one example:

we want to put everything there that would be of interest to anybody who would be surfing the net or got a particular concern or a particular interest they want to pursue (Thomas, St Margaret)

Although this sounds at first like a clear purpose, on reflection it is not a defined purpose – publishing everything of interest to anyone would make for a cluttered site. It was acknowledged with further questioning that the site was intended to be more useful for those who did not attend the church than for its membership, so there had been some narrowing of focus.

6.5.2 Defining an audience

Many suggested their sites could have a dual purpose, serving the church community and those who were visitors. However, only nine of the churches in the content analysis sample had pages with newcomers' information in a signposted page so there may be more defining needed in terms of arranging the content on a site for these disparate groups.

Mike noted that a lot of the early argument about the establishment of St Michael's (Anglican) website hinged on this point – whether the site was for the church or the outsiders. Kester was very clear on this point when he said:

[the website] is about making, putting our presence out there, making people aware of us, so if they Google "catholic church [•]" they'll find a website where they can easily access information (Kester, St Bride, Catholic)

Kester and Benjamin both described their church website in terms of being an extension of the noticeboard. This is rather outdated thinking about the way that websites work. It is a good starting point, but may be much less than the general public would expect of an organisation's website. Robert had a fundraising option – the only site to do so – in an attempt to bolster interest in the restoration of his Victorian church.

6.5.3 Architecture and Genealogy

Two churches (Valley Methodist and Bridge Baptist) published historical records on their websites. Whilst this is no doubt a time saver and taps into a very popular amateur genealogical research trend, it could be argued that this is not a core part of the church's work, and certainly does not reflect the church as a living community, something that leaders were keen to reflect on the websites. However, it clearly indicates that the external audience is one for which information is being provided. Content analysis results at section 6.2.2 show that many churches publish similar information. The next section considers where all published content comes from.

6.5.4 Content origination

Benjamin (Valley Methodist) was the only leader to have created the site himself. Leaders had generally contributed the bulk of the text to a site which is created and managed by someone else. This is not unreasonable since website creation is a technical skill that would have to be purposely acquired.

Webmasters used either pre-existing text from leaflets, or requested specific information from the leader during the creation of the site. Subsequent content came from a variety of places. Wendy (St Timothy) had not, at the time of interview, supplied any new content for the website. Helen (Central Baptist) said that now their site was up and running, different groups supplied content. In the extreme case mentioned, James (St Saviour) works via his secretary, and does not directly supply any content on a regular basis direct to the web team.

One question that was not asked in the interviews was the extent to which the text supplied would be edited and adapted for the website. Helen mentioned that the

words from leaflets would be used as a basis, but there was no exploration with other leaders of the extent to which their content was open to be sub-edited by the webmaster. It would have been a useful line of enquiry as it could have shed further light on the methods of content generation.

None of the sites under consideration had facilities to allow church members to directly upload their own content. Although most agreed that anyone had a right to ask for content to be included, the webmaster would act as gatekeeper:

anybody can say they would like something on the website, providing it fits into the categories that are already there. (Thomas, St Margaret)

This is another example from St Margaret of a statement that on further consideration does not necessarily prove to be wholly positive. By restricting content to established categories, the site may be missing out on ways to expand or include new or broader content. The statement implies a subtle level of control over the content based on pre-existing topics. Further discussion of the ways sites are controlled is at section 8.2 below.

6.5.5 Ideal content

Content analysis has revealed what the churches are actually publishing on their websites. The interviews allowed clergy to describe what their ideal site would contain. Six of the participants suggested the kind of content they would like to see. The key theme that emerged here was that the sites needed to be inviting and welcoming. Pictures and graphics, as already discussed in 5.6.3 formed part of the respondents' wish-list for content.

6.6 Congregations' age and information provision

Chapter 5 includes detail on how church congregations tend to be predominantly comprised of older people. This is remarked upon by a number of the leaders, noting that even those congregations with growing youth or family membership still have a preponderance of older people in the congregation. Robert (St James, Anglican) suggests that his church does deviate from the trend in that his congregation is mostly single, and mostly between 30–45 as well as being international in composition because of their inner-city situation. The breakdown of congregations' age profiles is given in 4.4 above.

The influence of age on the churches' use of the internet seems clear. A number of leaders commented that their congregation would not turn to online sources of information, for example:

the vast majority of my church members wouldn't necessarily have a computer that they'd go on the internet every day, they wouldn't look automatically on the internet for church news (Lee, Shelley Baptist)

However, being older does not always mean a lack of familiarity with IT, as this point from Gayle makes clear:

we've got one man who's eighty three and he's a nib on the computer, he'll put graphics and things up you know, for projecting, but he would be very anti Facebook page (Gayle, Christ Methodist)

It is, however, noteworthy that competence with a computer does not necessarily translate to understanding of the potential that a site like Facebook could offer. Gayle described a situation within the church when the suggestion of a Facebook

page had been voted down by the governing meeting, because the mainly older members expressed fears about its use.

Helen (Central Baptist) raised a related point that online communication can be at times informal, perhaps more informal than older church members are comfortable with. It was suggested that this was a definite generational difference. This could lead to conflict and misunderstanding if the younger and older members used the same media to exchange information. There is no great expectation that older congregation members would be interested in new methods of communication:

...at a recent meeting we asked how many people were on Facebook and of a meeting of about 40 people there were 3. And I think that was because they're mainly elderly (Aaron, East Methodist)

Indeed many of the churches felt that Facebook would have to wait until there was a more youthful focus:

It may be something we could look at because we are bringing on more young people into the leadership team (Colette, High Road Methodist)

One implication of this approach is that by focusing only on the internal congregation, there may be missed opportunities to engage with a possible younger audience outside the church. It lends weight to the suggestion that leaders and their church governance structures do not systematically consider for whom their website is intended. It is clear from the interviews that use of the internet is limited by the age differentials in church, with websites assumed to be mostly used by younger people, thereby affecting how the church sees itself as an information provider.

Chapter 7: Community, social media & interactivity

7. Introduction

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have described the results in terms of the websites' technical details, the leaders' personal use of the internet, choice of content or audience and the effect of the congregations' profiles on the way the websites are viewed by leadership. This chapter investigates whether churches are focusing deliberately and implicitly on non-members via welcome pages, their local community, and how hyperlinks might define the churches' place in the virtual community. It also outlines the results of the attempt to use a platform-neutral assessment of interactivity. Finally, the use of social media as a tool for communication, and how this affects the authority of the leaders is considered.

7.1 Welcome pages

Objective 6 is partly concerned with the extent to which churches present different information for different audiences. One key audience encompasses visitors and newcomers – has a sense of welcome and specific information been presented distinctly within the website? The unit of analysis was thus separate visitors' pages. Of the 147 sites coded, only nine (6%) had such a page: two Catholic, four Baptist and three Anglican churches. There may have been sites with visitors' text as part of the main introduction, but by keeping the unit of analysis as an obvious place for newcomers to go, it was felt that this would identify the churches for whom clarity of welcome was most important. The small number found means that conclusions may not be robust compared to the whole population of church sites. In addition,

the two Catholic sites contained extremely similar text and phrasing, although neither linked to a common source for the text. Nonetheless there are interesting points of note. The full information gathered is given below at Table 7-1.

To recap, when the coding framework was originated, targets were divided into words and phrases that reflect what the individual should do, and those which reflect the role the church expects or performs. The derivation of these categories is explained in section 3.14 in the methodology.

Eight sites contained phrases that included the word 'welcome' – 14 incidences overall. Eight also included internal directions. Seven referred to traditions or what usually happens at their services. The presence of jargon, without explanation, was the category with the highest number of incidences – 51 words or phrases on 7 sites.

Four sites offered advice on where to find a seat, and when to stand, kneel or sit during the service. Five offered guidance on when other movement around the church is expected. Linked to this were four churches whose pages contained phrases that implied welcome, for example, 'feel free to remain seated' or other qualifications to the internal direction statements.

These nine sites have attempted to present information for newcomers in a friendly and welcoming way. The use of jargon is to a certain extent inescapable in an organisation where there are technical terms in use for people, events or things but general familiarity with these terms cannot be assumed. Despite this, the nine sites covered a range of items that a casual church visitor may want to know, potentially putting strangers at ease. Visitors may be attending a wedding, or baptism or funeral and be unfamiliar with the way things are conducted. This is not only to do

with any unwritten codes of conduct, but also about dispelling assumptions that may be held about churches.

	Number of sites	Number of incidences	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Sum
What the individual does						
Dress code	1	1	0	1	1	1
Where to sit	4	6	1	1	2	6
When to sit/stand	4	8	2	1	3	8
Singing	3	3	0	1	1	3
Money	1	2	0	2	2	2
Children	2	3	1	1	2	3
Directions external	3	3	0	1	1	3
Directions internal	8	28	7	1	8	28
What the church does or publishes						
Welcome people	8	14	2	1	3	14
Words that convey welcome	4	13	8	1	9	13
Music style	4	7	2	1	3	7
Service style/format	6	14	6	1	7	14
Disabled access	1	1	0	1	1	1
Directions external	4	4	0	1	1	4
Directions internal	5	6	1	1	2	6
Offers contact details	2	2	0	1	1	2
Traditions – usually/tend to	7	26	7	1	8	26
Times	4	9	3	1	4	9
Jargon without explanation	7	51	11	4	15	51
Jargon with explanation	4	9	3	1	4	9

Table 7-1 Welcome page results (n=9)

The welcome pages that were found covered a range of possible experiences and situations. That there were so few, only nine from 147, suggests that there is far more scope for churches to consider their visitors. It appears that very rarely is church attendance considered thoroughly from the point of view of a stranger.

The discussion relating to photographs and the use of images and video suggests some are more mindful of the need to welcome their visitors (see section 5.6.3 above) Mark, James and Wendy all considered that the website should be welcoming – whether their churches had managed to achieve this or not.

7.2 Websites located in community and wider web

7.2.1 Community groups sharing facilities

All %	Links to non-religious groups that use church buildings	Links to pages for internal use only
Anglican	8	6
Catholic	20	20
Methodist	6	6
Baptist	33	13
All churches	13	9

Table 7-2 Percentage of websites with links to outside users or internal administration (n=147)

One category coded that was intended to measure the extent to which the church was located within its physical community was whether mention was made of non-church groups who can or do use the church buildings. It is relatively common, in the researcher's experience, for church facilities to be made available to the local community. Few churches made reference to this, as shown in Table 7-2 above. However, it is not possible to tell whether this omission is a deliberate choice of information content or is because no outside groups do in fact use the church

buildings. Lee (Shelley Baptist) commented that although it was a positive thing to have a thriving external community using his church’s facilities, sometimes it was difficult to schedule actual church commitments around these activities.

7.2.2 Administrative or internal-use sections

Counting the pages or links denoted as internal or administrative use was intended to provide a measure of the focus of the website – is the site carrying much that is designed for those involved in running the church, or is it predominantly outwardly-focused? Is the site a hub of information for the church’s internal purposes?

Websites could be repositories of a great deal of detail that would be of use to the congregation. Low percentages of sites carried such a flag, suggesting that the websites are not being used as a communication medium within the church. Or it could be that nothing is protected. The Catholic sites did have a higher proportion of sites with internal/ administration links (20%) but given the smaller sample of Catholic church sites this represents only four of the overall sample.

Thus neither of these two measures provided a conclusive answer as to the extent to which the churches were deliberately placing themselves in their local community.

7.2.3 Third-party content

All %	Third party downloadable content
Anglican	17
Catholic	15
Baptist	24
Methodist	4
All churches	16

Table 7-3 Availability of third-party content (n=147)

This was coded for as it was felt it would give an indication of the ways the church located itself within the wider sphere of Christian resources, in addition to the hyperlinks studied to meet objective 8. Using third-party content would suggest an awareness of the range of online resources available, enrich individual church sites and save webmasters' time. There are a number of mostly US sites which provide Bible readings, commentary, music and spoken word that can be freely downloaded for leaders and for the general congregation. For example, Lifechurch.tv and Mars Hill¹⁹ both provide free resources. These sites were not specifically coded for in this study, and the scarcity of links to other sites is worth noting. It may be that there are not UK resources judged to be of sufficient quality. Perhaps each church wishes to be self-sufficient in its teaching and resourcing without resorting to US imports. Or more simply, the people choosing the links are unaware of what is available. Few sites offered any third-party religious content for download (although more linked to other Christian websites – see section 7.6 below). Many presented information produced in-house (sermons and newsletters). Of the sites offering any third-party content, a download of Adobe Acrobat was the most-observed link.

7.3 Social media in local and national church

Interviews with two interested parties (Michael and Murray) afforded the opportunity to examine one local Diocesan-equivalent and one national view about the church and social media. For reasons of anonymity it is not possible to fully expand on the principles and problems experienced because it would reveal the identity of the interviewee.

¹⁹ <http://resources.lifechurch.tv/> and <http://marshill.com/> (5 February 2012).

The national organisation had been running training on blogging for two years at the point of interview (October 2010). The aim was to inspire people but also to allow realistic contemplation of the commitment involved. Michael highlighted some of the issues he aims to tackle on these courses for would-be bloggers – that it is not the best medium for just posting a weekly sermon, for example.

Murray said that at the local level, encouragement, advice and listing was available for individual churches. His organisation uses a Facebook account for its social responsibility work, and Twitter for their news and vacancies. However, he was aware that these media were not being exploited to their full potential as media that allow ‘immediacy, intimacy, interactivity and campaigning.’ As a communications professional, however, Murray was clear that what was needed from individual churches was the setting of clear objectives and consideration of whether these are served through social media. This is perhaps the first stumbling block for the churches within this sample; in that clear objectives come from clear leadership of the communications process and the interviews in section 6.5.1 above suggest that this is not the case in this study. Murray also raises the legal issues of ‘being on the record, defamation, privacy, intellectual property and personal security.’ Interestingly, whilst Helen’s experience with Facebook touched on personal privacy issues, there was no mention of these other topics from any of the interviewees. Finally, Murray also cautions against the use of social media as a method of exchanging messages with children in the church – suggesting it is not appropriate under any circumstances. Lee and others would disagree with this statement, as they have clearly thought carefully about their use of online tools. If the local church does not encourage any interaction online with its younger people, it could be missing a potentially fruitful communications channel. The implications of this approach are explored in the discussion in section 8.6.2 .

7.3.1 Social media: content analysis

All %	Link to blog	Links to social media services	Email list	Sermons/ talks available for download	Third party downloadable content
Anglican	6	15	5	17	17
Catholic	0	10	0	10	15
Baptist	15	24	3	39	24
Methodist	13	13	4	4	4
All churches	8	16	3	19	16

Table 7-4 Church websites using social media & interactivity (n=147)

The items listed in Table 7-4 above are indicators of the level of engagement with online interactivity or Web 2.0 tools, marking the extent to which churches are embracing user generated content or the ability of a website to be more than a static broadcast medium. These items relate to objective 7.

The majority of sites do not include or link to any of this kind of content. Social media services include blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Yammer and MySpace. No Catholic sites make mention of or link to a blog, only 6% of Anglican sites link to a blog. The highest proportion is the 24% of Baptist sites which include links to social media websites such as Twitter or Facebook.

It is possible that social media tools are being employed to a much greater degree by individual churches or church members but are not linked to by the main church website. One explanation could be that what is seen as trivial information is on social media but the serious information is on the church site. Or that by keeping the social media at arm's length, the church authorities do not feel obliged to monitor or endorse the information and interactions happening elsewhere on the internet sites. Thirdly, it could be that the social media is set up from the grass roots, within the congregation in an entirely unofficial way and the leaders have no

knowledge of its existence. The online networks may be more friend-based than linked to church structures. This scarcity of joined-up online networks was addressed during the interview process and results are given in section 7.3 .

The presence of an email list or a discussion forum does not necessarily indicate a deliberate decision to promote this kind of online collaboration. At least one of the companies providing website platforms specifically for churches provides these tools as standard on a basic site. So the congregation may have the facility to log in to the site as a member, or join in discussion with other members – but if these are not promoted, they will not be used, or they will be redundant rivals to more immediate and accessible platforms for collaboration, such as Facebook.

7.3.2 Social media: interviews

Despite the lack of interactivity found on websites via content analysis, there is evidence that churches are beginning to embrace social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. There is a range of opinion and experience expressed in the interviews, reflecting the different levels of engagement and understanding of the tools as discussed in section 4.7 .

7.3.3 Facebook

Michael (national communications) noted that since Facebook had such a huge user base, it made sense for the church to be there – the church would not ignore a country of 500 million people. This is not yet the prevailing attitude amongst the leaders interviewed. Of those that do have Facebook pages for their church or groups within it, a number said that these had been created independently by church members and had only then been assimilated into the church's official online presence. This encompassed groups such as the Scouts (Mark), the youth

group (Lee) and one smaller church within a Methodist circuit (Benjamin). Benjamin was of the opinion that no-one outside that small church would have access to or find new information via the Facebook site since it would not be their first source of news. If this is a common occurrence – a Facebook group being established independently – this would explain why so few official websites mention or link to the groups. Wendy and Lee both suggested that Facebook would be inappropriate as a tool for their congregation because of the age of the church members, but could be implemented if there was need – this being the same opinion as held by Colette and Thomas. Other age-based factors are recorded at section 6.6 and 4.4 above. Colette's children were Facebook users and would use their personal pages to advertise church events to their peer group which suggests there might already be a need within her church. Gayle had an interesting situation in that the church meeting had vetoed the creation of a Facebook page for the church itself, but the youth group was allowed to have an officially endorsed page. Aaron had considered a Facebook presence for the church, but had decided against it on the grounds of insufficient time. He also felt that Facebook was better at providing a platform for purely social communication, and was not well used by corporate bodies. This echoes the use of Facebook as a method of maintenance of weak ties (Lomborg, Ess 2012).

In terms of the leaders' personal use of Facebook there are again differences. Lee and Kester are the most clear about their use of the site – Kester has an account, but only for his chaplaincy work, responds to messages rather than initiating and rejects requests to connect from people who are not part of that team. Lee explained his policy about friending younger members of the church and how he also has a policy of responding to, but not initiating, contact via Facebook. His Facebook friends though are from all parts of his life, including people from his

church. Mark, by contrast, did not have any of the younger members of his church as friends.

Mark, Gayle and Aaron all used Facebook personally to keep in touch with friends and family overseas but Gayle felt that she did not have sufficient time, however, to devote to keeping up with the site. Helen used Facebook and had a mix of church and personal friends on the site. She noted, though, that her intention had been to use it to keep up with her friends, but had not wanted to refuse friend requests from churchgoers. That had led to a change in her use of Facebook, in that she had moderated some of the status updates she had posted and that there was no room for banter or 'silliness' which might offend some of the older members of her church.

7.3.4 Blogs and Twitter

Twitter is a micro-blogging service where users post 140-character updates, distinct from traditional blogging sites which generally have more measured and longer articles posted. It is not universally welcomed:

*it seems to me a supreme waste of the seventy years we have in life to
Twitter* (Kester, St Bride)

This quote from Kester represents one extreme of the views expressed about Twitter. Lee and Mark were far more enthusiastic about it as a tool for creating and maintaining connections – finding inspiration for teaching and for their own learning and growth, taking relationships begun via the service further by meeting in person. Twitter was also a service that Aaron had considered for his church but, like Facebook, decided it was too time-consuming.

Lee had created a blog for his church in addition to the website – possibly as a way of circumventing the webmaster’s delays in updating the main site. He was the only leader to be actively blogging during the time the interviews were carried out, and said that such was his interest that:

... the internet is littered with blogs that I have started and rejected... I have all kinds of blogs that are half-started or were there for a particular purpose but the purpose has passed (Lee, Shelley Baptist)

Mark had begun a blog but had not had sufficient time to regularly post, but welcomed the feedback he received when he did. His time was spent either on Twitter or on a third-party site belonging to a particular radio programme, and Mark had on one occasion spent the best part of a day contributing to various conversations on that site. Alan and Benjamin both reported issues with the amount of time commitment a blog needs to be interesting. Alan had dissuaded his leader from beginning a blog, because he felt the leader would have insufficient time to make regular contributions.

Robert is reluctant to engage with any social media service, saying that:

it doesn't excite me, I don't understand why people find it exciting, whereas stopping someone and talking to them in the street seems to me really important and very interesting and that's what I should be doing (Robert, St James)

Kester was more positive in his approach to blogging. Whilst he did not have his own personal blog, he had contributed to a Diocesan vocations project. It is interesting to note his comment that his Bishop asks for priests to inform him if they have a blog:

I think there can be much good to a good blog, the bishop asks us to tell him if we do blog, because they are part of the public face of the church and I know some priests who blog and I think it's an invaluable tool that they do, I think it's very good that they do it. (Kester, St Bride)

In terms of consumption of blogs, a number of people did read postings although no-one had subscribed to any specific site for regular reading. Kester and Benjamin both use news services provided by organisations in their denomination that include the content of blogs. Kester and Colette named blogs from relevant national organisations that they would read, and Benjamin and Colette had both followed the most recent Methodist Conference via blog posts. Wendy said that she quite often found herself being bored by the content of blogs, even those from relatively well established media-friendly clergy. Helen admits that she does not particularly enjoy reading, so would not turn to the written word in any form for pleasure, but would read a blog post if it was the equivalent of reading an article:

if I was actually genuinely researching but people's random thoughts about things – well I'm not really interested in those, they don't interest me (Helen, Central Baptist)

Other services such as Flickr were mentioned in interviews. Helen in particular with her dislike of reading was a fan of podcasts and the ability to listen to others' opinions whilst out walking the dog, for example, was for her a huge advantage. It would appear then that blogs and informal online publications are accepted as a source of information, and for some, contributed to, but are still viewed with scepticism by others.

7.4 Representation of self online

Respondents noted that emailed messages needed to be written with care to preserve their intended meaning. In talking about wider social media, Helen, Lee and Mark made reference to the need to understand who could be reading information that is posted online and the need for care in its selection. These three were the only interviewees to talk in any detail about their use of social media. As mentioned already, Helen noted that having members of the congregation as Facebook friends meant that she moderated some of the things that she might post as a status. Lee, who is a keen user of Twitter and blogs, discussed at length the potential difficulties of keeping private life and public life separate when personal information is posted online. He had decided that there should be no distinction between his role as a minister and his private life, since both aspects were fundamental to his whole self. Mark suggested that deciding how to portray oneself online was not so far removed from the ways in which he as a minister has to adapt his style to work with the many varied people he comes into contact with. He admitted though that he did feel he had an online persona, and that he might say 'wackier' things on the internet.

The local communications officer stated in his response discussing the use of social media that leaders needed to be aware that it is "impossible to separate their personal identity from their vocational identity." (Murray, regional communications officer). Helen's outlook suggests that she does try to maintain more of a personal and vocational separation than Mark or Lee. The porosity of the boundaries between online and offline communication with social media do not yet appear to have been considered in any depth by the other leaders, because they are not particularly engaged in social media or providing information online.

From a slightly different perspective, William (publisher and webmaster) discussed the need for accuracy of information, and how he would sometimes respond to a Tweet to the corporate account from his personal account to permit a more personal interaction. He suggest that

the thing about Twitter...the way [accounts] interact is all about who's behind them...some people are quite conversational and quite good...there are some organisations who just use them really badly and just use them for a feed from their website or something, which is fairly unhelpful, and I am hoping that's the thing we don't do. (William, publisher and webmaster)

7.5 Hierarchy and authority

One of the consequences of allowing more interaction and feedback, and more conversation unmediated by the church leader could be reduction in their status as the authorised preacher. Research literature (e.g. Cheong, Huang & Poon 2011, Campbell 2007, Campbell 2010a) has suggested that because online church allows for a bottom-up approach to organisation, traditional hierarchical notions of authority would come under fire. The interview questions were designed to uncover any experience of this, or opinions about its possibility, as set out in objective 9.

Aaron raised a question about the nature of congregations in England. He wondered whether churchgoers, who tended to be older, were raised in a tradition of acceptance and would never challenge the preacher. He noted that actually more feedback and more challenge would sometimes be welcome, as did Wendy and Lee, who both said that in principle they would welcome good debate. Benjamin also pointed out that as a leader, it was part of his job to teach people and that invited interaction, and with a clear purpose this is not a threat:

we have a defined role of what a minister's duties and responsibilities are, but how can you encourage discipleship if you are not prepared to enter into conversations with people? (Benjamin, Valley Methodist)

There is one aspect to church websites that does hint at a change in the relationship between the leader and their congregation. This is in the ability of people to check up on or challenge the truthfulness or factual correctness of their talk, if the talk should be available online. Mark said that there had, in the past, been very healthy exchanges on his blog and that he was aware of the need to be accurate as information could very easily be checked. Helen, discussing the recording of her talks and the congregation of her church:

we've got enough people that are quite academic theologians in the church anyway that could challenge stuff, that could say on much higher level ...which would freak me out more than somebody that's discovered it on Wikipedia or something like that, so, if people are interested and they want to go and research more about it that's fantastic that they can. (Helen, Central Baptist)

In this instance Helen is widely appreciative of the fact that congregants do have a number of ways of researching the topic she has spoken on, but is more concerned about academic and perhaps intellectual challenge to her sermon than one who had perhaps merely Googled for an opposing point of view. James at St Saviour recounted an experience whereby his teaching on a subject had been challenged by a churchgoer whom he felt had been misled by information on the internet. Speaking more generally about the issues of Christian teaching online, and disagreement with his opinion, James cautioned:

... you can get some very conservative right wing views being promoted as if it's church dogma which in actual fact, it is a very sort of exaggerated version of church dogma and very specific and very honed whereas the actual teaching is wider and more fluid. (James, St Saviour)

In one respect, then, challenges to the leader's opinions in the pulpit can help reinforce that teaching if the leader has an opportunity to debunk extreme or exaggerated versions of the church's teaching online. The authority is not diluted in situations where the leader is still part of the conversation. The leaders in the interview sample were all welcoming of debate and the opportunity for people to think their views out for themselves.

7.6 Hyperlink analysis

Denomination	Number in sample	Number with links	% with links	Total number of links	Mean (sites with links)	Mean (all sample)	Min	Max
Anglican	66	36	55%	330	9.2	5.0	1	25
Baptist	35	25	71%	243	9.7	6.9	1	47
Catholic	20	17	85%	348	20.5	17.4	2	127
Methodist	26	10	38%	153	15.3	5.9	4	37

Table 7-5 Overview of hyperlinks found on church websites

Where present on a website, hyperlinks were noted. Links were selected as a component of the analysis following work published by Scheitle (2005) in order to address objective 8.

A total of 1064 links were collected from 88 individual churches. The number of sites with links varied from 38% of Methodist sites to 85% of Catholic sites. Of those sites with links, the mean number per Anglican site was 9.2, the lowest number, and 20.5 links per Catholic site. These results are given in Table 7-5 above.

However, these figures contain an outlier. One Catholic site contained 127 links, 82 more than the next highest number of Catholic links and far higher than the maximum of the other denominations. The site was a commercially-produced site, and the links it contained pointed to range of local and national Catholic and secular organisations. Once this was removed, the mean number of links per Catholic site reduced to 13.8, more in line with the results from the Anglican, Baptist or Methodist churches. These results are presented in Table 7-6 below. It is possible that the outlier contained many links that were included because they were identified with the Catholic church as a global organisation rather than necessarily being relevant to the local church members. That would perhaps point to inefficient use of the website as a medium, or possibly a lack of evaluation of the sites included in the link list. Even removing the one site from the analysis, Catholic churches still had the greater proportion of sites with hyperlinks (80%).

Denomination	Number in sample	Number with links	% with links	Total number of links	Mean (sites with links)	Mean (all sample)	Min	Max
Anglican	66	36	55%	330	9.2	5.0	1	25
Baptist	35	25	71%	243	9.7	6.9	1	47
Catholic	20	16	80%	221	13.8	11.1	2	45
Methodist	26	10	38%	153	15.3	5.9	4	37

Table 7-6 Overview of hyperlinks found on church websites- outlier removed

Scheitle (2005) claimed that the level of external hyperlinks was linked with the conservatism of the church; those with more links were more interested in controlling the whole internet experience for their congregation. This is a plausible explanation for the different mean rates of links on the four denominations' sites. However, it is possible that the differences arise from more structural reasons; that there may be something inherent in the churches' governance structures that makes it more likely an Anglican church will not provide external links. More collaborative

denominations or more outward looking churches may naturally choose to include more outward links on their churches' site. The decision to include external links and the mechanism by which they are chosen was discussed during the interviews and the outcome can be seen at section 7.6.4 below.

7.6.1 Link targets

Target	Number of times linked
Local church	86
Anglican Diocese of Chelmsford	33
Local school	32
Church of England	25
Local information	22
Local Methodist circuit	22
Baptist Union of Great Britain	21
Baptist Missionary Society	15
Catholic Diocese of Brentwood	14
Alpha Course	13
Rejesus	13
Christian Aid	13
Churches Together	12
Methodist Church of Great Britain	12
Eastern Baptist Association	11
CAFOD	10
RC.net	9
Find a Church	9
Tearfund	9
Vatican	9
Evangelical Alliance	9
Bible Gateway	7
Individual missionary church	6
Brentwood Cathedral	6
Christian Aid	6
Catholic Church in England and Wales	6
Bible Society	6
Traidcraft	6
Church Times	6
Premier Christian Radio	5
Clipart	5
BBC	5
Bedford Essex & Herts District	5
Brentwood Cathedral Music	5

Table 7-7 Destinations of hyperlinks

Examining the links gives a league table of both the actual resources being linked to and the categories of resources (based on the definitions of Scheitle). Table 7–7 above lists the targets linked to five or more times across all denominations. This represents 45% of the total number of links identified. The local links for churches, schools and information have been counted as one category rather than as individual targets. It was felt this gave a better sense of the kind of link being used than recording each individual local school or church. It is more useful to know that churches choose to link to a local school than to know necessarily which school that is.

These local church, school, circuit or other information sources are the most widely used links. Local and national hierarchical organisations also figure highly. The most popular religious organisations – those which are not tied to denominations, or concerned with broader level objectives – are the Alpha Course, Rejesus and Christian Aid. Christian Aid²⁰ is a development charity, supported by Methodist, Baptist, Anglican and other churches (the Catholic church has its own development agency in CAFOD, the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development). Rejesus²¹ is an agency of Churches Together in England²², providing information on the Christian faith aimed at people who are looking for independent opinions and facts. The Alpha Course²³ is a widely–advertised and supported introduction to Christianity

²⁰ <http://www.christianaid.org.uk>, accessed March 17 2012

²¹ http://www.rejesus.co.uk/site/about_us, accessed March 17 2012

²² <http://www.cte.org.uk>, accessed March 17 2012

²³ <http://uk.alpha.org/facts-and-figures>, accessed March 17 2012

franchised across churches globally, with strong brand recognition and high advertising spend.

It appears, therefore, that churches' priorities when choosing links are to align themselves with their denominational hierarchy, and also to provide information on national charities and faith information sources as well as promoting local links.

7.6.2 Link categories

Again following Scheitle (2005), the links were classified into categories reflecting the nature of the organisation being targeted. Every link discovered was assigned to a denomination-specific category (unlike Table 7-7 above, which deals only with those organisations linked to five or more times by any church). Using these broader categories also allows for more meaningful numbers since some areas would otherwise have fewer links once the denominations were separated.

Table 7-8 below lists the categories by popularity. The figures are counts of links in each category, so it is expected that there would be more Anglican categories represented as there were more Anglican churches analysed. The list bears out the claim made in section 7.6.1 that churches do choose to identify themselves in their local area, and their national hierarchy. However, Community, Social Justice and Resources are more popular categories than Evangelism. In the analysis in section 7.6.1 two of the most popular non-denominational sites would be classed as Evangelical - Alpha Course and Rejesus. This suggests that as a whole, the churches under consideration do not place evangelism via the internet high on their priorities when choosing hyperlinks or associations with which to align themselves, but that in fact the campaigning or charity work has more of an influence on the statements the churches are making about themselves via the website.

Category	Grand Total
Anglican Hierarchy	66
Catholic Resources	51
Catholic Other Congregation	50
Baptist Hierarchy	41
Baptist Social Justice	39
Anglican Other Congregation	37
Catholic Hierarchy	35
Anglican Social Justice	34
Catholic Social Justice	28
Anglican Community	25
Methodist Hierarchy	25
Anglican Resources	20
Methodist Social Justice	20
Baptist Evangelism	17
Catholic Media	16
Methodist Other Congregation	16
Anglican Personal Faith	15
Methodist Community	15
Baptist Community	13
Baptist Other Congregation	13
Anglican Media	12
Catholic Affiliated education	11
Catholic Link broken	11
Baptist Other	10
Catholic Personal Faith	10
Catholic Parachurch group	10
Methodist Evangelism	10
Anglican Evangelism	7
Baptist Resources	7
Baptist Link broken	7
Baptist Parachurch group	6
Methodist Resources	6
Anglican Commercial Sites	5
Methodist Parachurch group	5

Table 7-8 Hyperlinks classed by category

7.6.3 Congregation size

	Congregation size – mean n of links			Grand Total
	Large	Medium	Small	
Anglican	13.38	9.27	3.60	9.17
Baptist	8.33	9.33	12.50	9.72
Catholic	22.36	11.67	–	20.47
Methodist	11.50	19.83	5.50	15.30
Grand Total	17.33	10.73	7.18	12.20

Table 7–9 Mean number of links and congregation size

A further exploration based on hyperlinks related to the links and the size of the church in question. It could be assumed that a larger church will be more effectively resourced, and that that resourcing will include those with the time and expertise to maintain a church website. Furthermore, a larger church may have more organisations that it is associated with or interested in, and consequently would have a higher number of outgoing links on its website. To explore this assumption, churches were assigned to a size category of small (<50), medium (51–200) or large (>200). Those for which a congregation size was not available were assigned to the medium category. Discussion of the derivation of these size bands is in the methodology at 3.13.1.1 above. Table 7–9 above gives the mean number of links per denomination according to size of church.

There are two caveats to these data. The Catholic figures include the church with a large number of links. Secondly, statistics for the Catholic churches were at parish level, not individual church; so the number of church members is likely to be artificially inflated. Several churches may be served from one church rather than having their own individual identity, and the headcount is at this higher parish level. Thirdly, no statistical tests have been attempted given the very uneven numbers of churches within each group so the claims made for the differences are based only on the means presented.

It appears that the assumption that larger churches will list more links is not borne out for all denominations. Within the Anglican and Catholic churches, larger churches do have more hyperlinks. But for the Baptists, this is reversed, with smaller churches presenting more links on their website. For the Methodists, the medium-sized churches provide more links than do the smaller or larger churches. Therefore the number of links does not appear to relate to the size of the church. The assumption that a larger congregation will have a more sophisticated site (if more links is a proxy measure for sophistication) does not appear to be true. There are other factors that should be taken into account. For example, a larger church with a more elderly congregation may be wealthier, but a smaller church with a younger and more IT-literate membership may have the skills and motivation to investigate and recommend websites or resources worth linking to.

7.6.4 Hyperlinks: interview findings

Of the churches under consideration, all had links to other websites. The content analysis demonstrated that the most popular linked-to places were the denomination, local churches and national Christian organisations or charities such as Christian Aid or the Alpha course (see section 7.6 above). The interviews afforded an opportunity to discover who within the church chose the organisations and what level of input the leader and congregation had to this decision.

For some, the choice of links was entirely down to the webmaster. Colette, Helen and Gayle all said that the main responsibility for choosing the outbound links lay with their webmaster. From the webmasters, Alan said links were chosen by him, and Howard that the church meeting had suggested many. Aaron could list the links that were on the church's site, but he had not picked them himself. Benjamin noted that there were too few links on his circuit's site to other websites that discussed contemporary issues, citing Ship of Fools as an example.

Kester and James both claimed to have chosen the majority of links on their churches' sites. This pairing is an interesting contrast – Kester appears to more enthusiastic and informed about the internet than James. James seems more suspicious of online communication, although he does use websites for personal purposes. Kester said he had chosen 90% of the links, with the webmaster contributing the rest. James' approach seemed to be more serendipitous, suggesting links when he came across sites that were of interest to him. So two leaders with differing experiences online have both elected to lead on one aspect of their churches' site. Of the churches in the study, Kester's Catholic church seems to be the only one with a systematic approach to choosing its external links. The links help define the church in terms of its place in the wider online landscape – do they reflect the church as a local organisation, or one concerned with evangelism, fundraising or charity? A process of choosing links based on what the church finds interesting would create an identity that mirrors the community; a set of links based on what the leader happens to come across might not produce the same quality of identity. In addition, the choices are possibly being made by the person in the church with the least experience of, and time to spend, locating relevant external sites.

7.7 Expertise of leaders

The foregoing interview results suggest evidence for a certain incongruity between the level of expertise or interest and the level of control over the site that leaders want.

The majority of leaders interviewed said they used the internet only for general reference, for email or for shopping sites like Amazon. Lee and Mike were exceptions to this with their interest in blogging, and Benjamin has a wider experience of online tools than many others. However, several expressed little

interest in understanding more about the benefits of online communication. The dangers and drawbacks were expressed in very broad terms – ‘chat rooms and so on’, even though the leaders had not explored the benefits of the internet to any great extent. In terms of the updating of the content, the sentiment seemed to be that it was best to leave it to the volunteer, even if that volunteer was not particularly skilled in current web technologies.

In contrast, leaders had written most of the web content, and most exercised a final authority on what was published. Regular updates were made without recourse necessarily to the leader because the content had originated elsewhere – the most common method was to update either by taking the content from the printed newsletter or adding this as a PDF. However, the bulk of the content had been written by people with relatively limited engagement with website creation. Hence, people with no experience or interest in online communication are keeping control of the content and making decisions about the way their church is presented.

This could have two effects. First, misunderstanding the media means it will not be exploited fully. A website has far more potential than to merely be a means of circulating a PDF of a weekly newsletter. If the site is seen just as a digital noticeboard there will be no impetus for improvement. Second, it could be disempowering volunteers – the relationship with the volunteer webmaster may be strained in some churches, but if the volunteer is only allowed limited freedom it may be that these restrictions contribute to the poor relationship. If the leader feels the site is good enough then they may not pass on training opportunities.

7.7.1 Social media

The sense that the danger of social media is emphasised at the cost of potential benefits, or actual knowledge comes out in this remark from James, St Saviour which is worth quoting at length, with added emphasis:

Safeguarding is something that I am involved in professionally so although I don't understand social networking and so on I am beginning to understand some of the dangers involved...I occasionally get an email from someone saying they want you to join such and such some sort of social networking thing and I always just delete the email because...I just worry a little bit about it you know is this going to be something bad. (James, St Saviour)

One interviewee who was a keen Facebook user described the precautions he would take when communicating with younger parishioners via the site, again, phrased in terms of the dangers being more prominent than the benefits:

...I recognise that is the difficulties that sometimes Facebook causes and that kind of social interaction on the internet so I am very careful about how I deal with what we might perceive as more vulnerable folk in the church on the internet (Lee, Shelley Baptist)

However, for many, the churches' online presence seems to be in the hands of either a leader with little enthusiasm for the media, dictating content, or an untrained amateur working with no corporate guidance. There is also a risk that by allowing the volunteer to be the gatekeeper for information on the website, the church may find itself tacitly endorsing viewpoints or organisations that reflect the webmaster's interest rather than those of the church as a whole. This is most possible via the links sections, with choice of links in a number of churches left to

the webmaster. Sites could be selected to be linked to without a full understanding of their content, including their political or doctrinal basis.

7.8 Interactivity: content analysis

The last section of the findings considers interactivity on a more abstract level. The current research aimed to replicate McMillan et al.'s (2008) platform-neutral study of interactivity, using the categories developed in that research to assess the extent to which church websites had engaged with these activities. As well as the peer-to-peer interactions possible, the framework also allows for analysis of the ways in which the sites themselves are customisable or permit interaction.

As a reminder of the approach explained in section 3.3.2.1 in the methodology, McMillan *et al*/use a three-dimensional construct: human-to-computer, human-to-human and human-to-content. These had further subdivisions so the list of thirteen aspects being coded for is based upon these following, plus a miscellaneous 'other'. Within the current research project, these variables were operationalised and coded for in the following way. Table 11-3 in the appendices gives the full list of the component items coded for and results for each denomination.

This section of the current research aimed to replicate McMillan's findings, so Table 7-10 below recasts these findings in the same way that McMillan's are presented in the original paper.

	Anglican	Baptist	Methodist	Catholic
Navigation standard (mean)	1.56	1.3	1.17	1.45
Max	7	4	5	4
Min	0	0	0	1
Navigation personalised (mean)	0.2	0.18	0.13	0.25
Max	2	2	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Action standard (mean)	0.12	0.24	0.17	0.15
Max	3	2	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Action personalised (mean)	0.18	0.12	0.08	0.3
Max	2	2	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Transaction standard (mean)	0.94	0.75	0.21	0.53
Max	5	2	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Transaction personalised (mean)	0.12	0.03	0.04	0.15
Max	2	1	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Organisational/ individual synchronous	0	0	0	0
Organisational/ individual asynchronous (mean)	0.98	1.06	0.92	1.2
Max	2	2	2	2
Min	0	0	0	1
Individual/ individual synchronous (mean)	0	0.03	0	0.5
Max		1		1
Min		0		0
Individual/ individual asynchronous (mean)	0.1	0.12	0.25	0.5
Max	2	1	3	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Add content (mean)	0.05	0.03	0.21	0.5
Max	1	1	2	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Customise content (mean)	0.12	0.24	0.25	0.1
Max	2	4	1	1
Min	0	0	0	0
Other (mean)	0.09	0	0	0
Max	2			
Min	0			

Table 7-10 Incidences of interactivity, following McMillan (2008)

7.8.1 Interactivity categories

Results show that few of the websites analysed included any kind of interactive feature as defined by McMillan et al (2008). The two categories where the mean is or approaches one item per site are *navigation standard* and *organisational/individual asynchronous*. The former are accounted for by the presence of menu bars; the latter by availability of email contact. Anglican and Baptist sites have means of 0.88 and 0.75 for *transaction standard*, which includes downloading a newsletter. For no other element is the mean higher than 0.53 items per site.

Even if an interactive element is part of a site, and several commercial sites have various elements such as chat rooms available, there is no guarantee of the quality or depth of the interactions that may be in progress. Churches may not have the resources to implement fully the 'bells and whistles' that come with a pre-packaged church website. It could be more beneficial to have a smaller, less functional site, than a more complicated but under-used web presence.

This part of the research project aimed to replicate work that would measure interactivity independently of any specific platform or method of interaction. Despite the low numbers of incidences and therefore the limited conclusions that can be drawn, the work permits a slightly different focus to the main body of content analysis. This helps build a more detailed picture of the characteristics of the websites under consideration.

7.9 Interactivity: interviews

Questions addressing the apparent reluctance to invite interaction formed part of the interview research. The explanation appears to be a combination of supply and demand. The congregations were assumed to be too old to be engaged online, and the volunteers did not have sufficient time to dedicate to the kind of administration

and monitoring that a web-based forum would need. That said, there was a general agreement that feedback on preaching or church activities was welcome, but by different communication methods. Aaron and Kester felt the most appropriate channel for feedback would be a private email, and that the church should not necessarily have a role in online conversations:

If a group of people want to have an ongoing social conversation they don't need the church website for that ...I mean, how fruitful is the comments section to any whether it's the BBC or the Observer or the Daily Mail? (Kester, St Bride)

Helen felt that the church should not offer what could not be done well, that a bad forum was worse than no forum at all. Alan alluded to this being a circular situation – websites were not frequently updated, so people did not visit them and want to contribute; but if they were more frequently updated people might change their habit and the content would be generated and be interesting, encouraging more visits.

Murray was clear in his advice that social media and open forums would only be useful for certain kinds of conversation and specifically not any kind of pastoral care from a church leader. These cautious limits on what online interactivity might offer perhaps help explain why there is very little evidence of church leaders finding it a useful tool. Wendy reinforced this argument when she suggested that one of the reasons that there is little interactivity is that the church is lagging behind the rest of society in its approach to being online; Michael also made a similar point that the conversations the church is having now were those that other organisations had been holding five or more years previously. Considering the national church as a whole, he suggested that for a long time there had been a very risk-averse environment, where the tradition was for top-down conversations. The change to

more peer-to-peer conversations that online tools afford was something to which the church is still adjusting. As Wendy pointed out:

...the Church of England is usually about twenty years behind the rest of the world. (Wendy, St Timothy).

7.10 Findings summary

Content analysis results point to websites which can be out of date (5.8.1), limited in content (6.1.1) and unwelcoming to outsiders (7.1). Few have been created by a professional company (5.7) and a minority are still using web technology that was abandoned by the mainstream over five years ago (5.5). The evidence suggests that churches rely on volunteers (5.7.1) and that even where the volunteers are willing, they may be lacking in expertise or awareness of new possibilities (5.5). As volunteers, their time is restricted and relationships with the leader may not be running smoothly (5.8.3). Content comes from newsletters or pre-existing publications, and has mostly been written by the church leader (6.5.4). Interview evidence suggests that there is little ongoing governance or evaluation of websites – they may be discussed at their establishment but not often considered by the leadership on an ongoing basis (5.9). The creation of a site is influenced by the leadership, its maintenance by the level of official governance and evaluation (5.9.1), the expertise of those involved and to a certain extent by the age of the congregation (6.6). There is an assumption that older people are not interested in visiting the church's website or engaging with social media and so churches are not investigating the potential of these avenues of communication.

7.11 Church as information provider

Evidence from the content analysis shows that whilst almost all websites provide a basic level of detail (6.1.1), many are not publishing further information. The

prevailing sense is that the website is an extension of the weekly pew sheet (6.5.2). Interviews suggest that for many, the content is restricted because there is no-one in the church with the time or expertise to be more involved (5.7), and the apparent cost of a more sophisticated site is a barrier (5.7.1). In addition, interviews also point to a lack of considered strategy and governance over the information the church could or should be providing (5.9).

7.12 Clergy engagement and information skills

Interviews suggest that the level of engagement personally from the leader could have an influence on the church's website (7.7). Many feel email is sufficient in terms of online communication, if not a cause of information overload in itself. (4.8.2). There are issues for the leaders relating to their use of social media as a leader and in their personal lives (7.4). All leaders use the internet in one form or another, but in this study, the level of expertise and experience varied (4.8.1).

7.13 Church in wider community

Content analysis did not find evidence of Facebook or other social media being widely used (7.3.1), but interview evidence suggests this is misleading, with many churches having official or unofficial Facebook pages (7.3.3). Churches had links to external organisations (7.6.1), but are not necessarily including their physical neighbours in their online links. Social media appears to be viewed as something for the young, (7.3.2) so again age influences the perspective. Interview evidence also suggests that leaders have not felt their authority challenged by changes in communication (7.5). The leaders' expertise in online content, which is related to their personal habits, will also affect the level to which a church corporately engages with social media (7.3).

The discussion in the following chapter shows how these findings relate to the existing body of research knowledge and explores the reasons behind attitudes and opinions of leaders. It also includes recommendations for future research topics and practical guidance for churches – or any other small, volunteer-dependent organisation – on the setting up and maintenance of an online presence.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8. Introduction

This research set out to investigate what, how and why information was being published on English Christian church websites. Research questions were concerned with the extent use was made of social media, email and websites and whether the predicted challenges to authority had been experienced by English church leaders.

The research has been largely exploratory in nature, since little equivalent work focusing on the English experience has been published upon which to build. It has included the reworking of some US studies in the English context, and has tested US ideas about authority with English leaders.

Combining a longitudinal survey of web presence, content analysis and interviews, the results portray the situation across England with a spotlight on the area broadly equivalent to the Diocese of Chelmsford. This chapter focuses on key points from the results, highlighting implications and opportunities for application or recommendations to church hierarchies. The ways in which findings relate to and extend the current body of knowledge are also discussed. Exploratory research does not involve testing specific theories or comparing experiences against academic models. Instead, a narrative describing the situation and suggesting further research is developed. Where there are deficiencies in the research design or implementation these are considered in chapter 10.

The research has identified a number of factors which offer a possible explanation for the way that churches' media involvement operates. Leader engagement influences the whole process. If the church leader is interested in, and sees value in the use of online communication, then the wider church membership has the

necessary guidance and permissions. Within the interview sample, some leaders were taking the initiative and others were more reluctant adopters. Related to this is the leaders' own online information seeking behaviour. The attitude of the leader regarding their role in governance or control of the process is a factor which influences the ethos of the web presence. A leader who is not enthusiastic about web media but who demands a high level of control can stifle the creativity of their volunteers. Conversely, a leader who has no interest in the control might see a website created which did not match the church's stated ethos or theology at all. In terms of website creation and maintenance the majority of sites are run by volunteers. In many cases these volunteers have key responsibility for the content creation – in others, content is determined by the leader, again, showing the influence of the level of control the leader influences over the site. The content choice is determined by how the church sees its role as information provider – who forms the key audience for the information they are publishing? The evidence suggests that this question and the assessment of website content that its effective answering would imply is not often investigated. These choices influence the sense that the church has of being part of a wider community – the ways in which the organisation links to others online, or signposts to its physical neighbours, or engages with social media to allow interactivity. There may be concerns about how online information challenges the authority of leaders, influencing the choice of ways in which the church is outward-facing.

Three factors influence the relationships between these themes of creation, information provision and engagement with the wider community. The first is expertise – what level of skill or willingness to learn is available to the church from within either its volunteer community or its paid leadership? A lack of current skill will hinder the volunteers' ability to develop new, or maintain current, websites. The age of the congregation is also a factor. Research suggests that there may be an

influence on the willingness to use online tools dependent on the age profile, with older congregations seen as non-users. The final factor is the time available to volunteers and leaders. If they feel under time pressure, as most do, there will be less willingness to invest time in an activity deemed non-core.

The evidence from the current research project for this summary, the relationship with the wider research literature and how that reinforces – or contradicts – the findings is discussed below.

8.1 Clergy engagement and information skills

8.1.1 Leader engagement

Interview results suggest the level of engagement each leader feels with the idea of online communication influences the quality and purpose of the website for their church. It is an oversimplification to assume that there is a direct causal relationship, but it is one strand of the possible overall explanatory narrative.

Without a leadership that encourages a good standard of content creation and presentation, even if they are not expert themselves, church sites may be ineffective and church webmasters will not have encouragement or vision to improve the site or their own skills. In this sample, although all leaders used the internet as a source of information (as discussed in 8.1.2 below) not all were mindful of any need for church sites to be well presented in terms of currency, content or layout. The evidence from the content analysis suggests that sites are falling behind generally accepted standards.

8.1.2 Clergy information seeking

All leaders interviewed used the internet to meet information needs in both their personal and vocational roles, with some noticeable differences. The two Catholic

priests would not use web resources for researching preaching whereas the Baptist ministers would be prepared to turn to Google as well as God for inspiration. Whether this is a personality difference independent of denominational allegiance was not explored, and the direction of influence could run either way. Those who were not minded to use online resources could have other personality traits that led them towards Catholicism as an expression of their faith, whereas those who might be more open to innovation may prefer a less formal denomination. No firm conclusion can be drawn on this matter, given the small samples involved. However, the key point to note is that all leaders understood the value of online resources, even if they only reluctantly or sceptically adopted their use. This extends the findings of Park and Taylor (2007) who say ministers are more likely than the general US population to turn to the internet for information, in that there is acceptance of online information as a useful source, and builds on the PICTURE findings (Cantoni *et al*/2012) of Catholic priests' use of internet resources. Leaders were also aware of the potential negative aspects of working online.

Previous literature is based on either small *n* case studies or larger purely quantitative survey work, so direct comparisons cannot easily be made. Lambert and Michels have published work on the information seeking of US ministers. (Michels 2009, Michels 2012) reported case studies with a small number of ministers, concluding that their information seeking was enriched by online resources, and also that they judged resources based on whether they fitted with the understanding of orthodoxy. The ministers in Michels' (2012) later interviews were prepared to use resources from outside their denominational boundaries. The English leaders in this project did not have a uniform approach to selection of resources. One preferred a non-denominational portal run by an amateur as a starting point, but this was the only strong preference noted across the interviews. A number of English leaders mentioned the importance of their personal print

collections as a resource. Carr (2004) found that in his London sample, only 32% of respondents had used the web for sermon preparation, compared to 65% researching liturgy and 69% looking for educational or theological information. In Singapore, leaders find a benefit in using websites as:

...web resources provide a relatively cheaper and faster way of conducting research and gathering sermon illustrations than referring to books.

(Cheong, Huang & Poon 2011, p944)

Amongst Catholic priests, only 8.7% had never searched online (NewMinE Lab (USI), School of Church Communications (PUSC) 2010). Lambert (2010) analysed information-seeking behaviour across different work roles that church leaders fulfil. The current research reinforces the idea that the general trend is towards further acceptability of online resources as valid sources of information for ministers. In addition, the distinction between different processes and sources for different roles noted by Lambert (2010) is reflected by the findings from the English leaders.

As leaders begin to use online information sources more frequently, there is a need to ensure that they are well equipped to judge the resources available. The pastors in Michel's sample used their understanding of orthodoxy as a judgement tool. As new sites and sources spring up, is it reasonable to consider how conflicting voices and sources may be heard and accommodated? Or will leaders stick to a small number of reliable, safe sites for their content use, limiting the potential for enrichment or inspiration?

What is also interesting is the conflict between national and local sources of information. Michael, national communications officer, outlined the difficulty of having a national body providing information that covered the practices of many local, and independent churches. It was important for that organisation not to be

seen to contradict the local church, and therefore found that publishing less detail was the solution (see 4.7.3.6). This position is echoed in the Dutch and Danish experiences (Lomborg and Ess 2012, Noomen, Aupers & Houtman 2011). Both authors suggest that national church websites or social media strategies risk blandness for broadly similar reasons. Noomen suggests it is hard to 'present substantial religious content' because it 'is almost inevitably contested.' (p1109). Lomborg and Ess (2012) question why the Danish National Church does not have a social media strategy, and express concern that this leads to a fragmented and ad hoc approach from local churches.

This may be one explanation why a national parachurch organisation like The Alpha Course has a high profile in the links chosen by local churches. It gives the local churches a way of aligning themselves with a known source of evangelistic material. Alpha is an independent organisation, and does not have to follow any national church line on teaching. So it is able to publish without fear of contradiction. With only one focus (provision of commercial courses) their communication can be well-targeted and produced to a high standard.

If leaders only refer to a small range of online resources, then their understanding of the benefits of a well-designed site may also be limited. This could offer a partial explanation for the apparent tolerance of the problems with many individual churches' sites - leaders are just not aware of better possibilities, so their standard of expectation may be lower. The evidence from the use of email suggests that leaders are not averse to online tools per se, as will be shown in the next section.

8.1.3 Email

One theme which emerged from the interviews was how leaders felt under pressure from the volume of email they received. 'Email overload²⁴' is not a concern unique to church leaders, but it was not a concern that was specifically targeted in the interviews. What is perhaps different from other professions is the emphasis on personal contact and individuals' issues that the church leaders need to maintain. The nature of the pastoral role means that church leaders interviewed had developed strategies for deciding whether email was a suitable method of communication and had clear rationale for using other channels so to not diminish necessary face-to-face conversations.

Fischer-Nelson (2012) found high levels of email use amongst Danish pastors – 99% used it for work-related purposes. Mills (2011) examined pastoral care by email and concluded that it is a medium that can be used to deliver counselling instead of the traditional face-to-face meetings. This study looked at the role of email in a limited situation – a workplace chaplaincy – which is different from that faced by the majority of parish priests who are dealing with email requests on a daily basis. Mills (2011) does not look at the effect on the church leader of adopting email as a legitimate route for counselling provision and how this might lead to a greater sense of email overload, indeed, in the current research leaders were in some cases very deliberately limiting the ways in which email was used. Singaporean pastors reported that email communication has changed the context and content of the priestly encounter as some congregation members now perceive them to be “more accessible, not so much on a pedestal.” (Cheong 2011, p946). There are also reports of feeling overburdened by demands placed on them and that there is a risk

²⁴http://blogs.hbr.org/hbr/hbreditors/2012/06/the_responsiveness_trap.html?awid=8402711796186695328-3271 retrieved 7 June 2012

their role is being de-professionalised because so much time is spent dealing with computer-mediated communication (Cheong 2011).

Apart from Carr (2004), this current research project is the first recent work to examine the use of email communication by ministry professionals in England for day-to-day work. This is an area that could well benefit from further research – how does a move to online communication affect either the quality or essence of care a leader is able to offer, and what effect does email overload have on church leaders' ability to perform their role? Standard workplace email management tools do not translate to a church-based leadership environment where the demands on the leaders' time really can be matters of life and death. Advice and guidance on effective management of email could be offered to leaders to help them work with the information overload many seem to suffer.

8.2 Website creation and maintenance

8.2.1 Content creation

Objectives 3 to 6 addressed how websites were created, by whom, and with what level of expertise and oversight. Answers were sought by a mixture of content analysis and interview.

Content analysis results showed that most were created by volunteers, with a minority (22%) employing professional designers. A noticeable minority (13%) of sites did not follow established design rules or guidance, for example, unorthodox placement of menu bars. Many sites were out-of-date; some omitted faith- or service-based information. Too few churches had enough content to allow for denominational differences to be compared. A small minority of sites had specifically signposted information for visitors, and of those many still used church jargon terms, as shown in 7.1 above. The lack of currency of website information

shows that the sites are not being well maintained, even if their basic construction meets technical and accessibility standards.

One further question is raised. If webmasters have insufficient time to understand basic design guidance, will they have sufficient time and expertise to adhere to legal requirements? Will sites be accessible to all? Will volunteers be equipped to understand and, if necessary, comply with policies regarding cookies²⁵ and privacy, the latter highlighted in the US context by Hoy, Phelps (2003).

The content analysis and interview results help to define the barriers organisations perceive preventing them from working effectively online – even supposing that this was a goal the organisation wanted to work towards. The scale of challenge is laid out. It points to each church making its own decisions and own mistakes, wasting time and resources because there is an apparent lack of guidance or collaboration. The research has quantified the problem, if indeed lack of online presence is viewed as a problem – not only in the number of churches for whom a website is not available, as identified in 5.1 , but also in the difficulties of ensuring good basic design and construction of content of websites that do exist.

8.2.2 Images

Webmasters interviewed by Noomen (2011) suggested that it was easier to use graphic elements for a Catholic site because there is a greater emphasis on the visual – Catholic icons, representations of Mary, and so on. This was not borne out in this study. That may be because there are fundamental differences between

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http://www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/privacy_and_electronic_communications/the_guidelines/cookies.aspx, accessed 4 August 2012

Dutch and English church traditions, or because the content analysis was not sufficiently subtle to pick up a difference. The findings could provide an avenue for further research, as web design becomes routinely visual, mobile and app-driven, does the idea that a text-based faith tradition will have difficulty still hold? Do these non-text uses of digital media present a specific problem?

A finding of note was that for three of the four denominations (section 5.6.1 above) the images presented were more likely to be of buildings rather than people. For many, particularly older Anglican churches, the building will be of architectural significance. However, the building is not the community that meets within it. Guidance –for example, David (2007), Blackmore (2001) suggest less focus on the church building and more on the people. If the architectural features of the building are those deemed to be of most interest to visitors to the website, this suggests the church may need to reconsider for whom it is publishing the site. There is a tension here for volunteer webmasters operating on limited budgets and with limited skills. It is easier to capture the physical aspects of an organisation and far harder to convey an atmosphere of welcome or conversation or relationship via static pictures. Multi-media can help, but may need resources or skills that are simply not available to the individual congregations. The findings in 5.8.3 above show that leaders are aware of this tension and the difficulties of introducing improvements.

8.3 Webmasters

The majority of websites were created and maintained by volunteers (see 5.7.1). This is no different from many other local church activities. Most parishes have only one or two paid staff. Some larger churches may employ more people and in other areas parishes share a full-time minister. The relationships between the webmaster and the church leadership are sometimes difficult or strained, due to circumstances or personalities. In a number of parishes, the work of the website team is not given

ongoing consideration. The pattern seems to be that once the website is established, whoever has taken on that responsibility is more or less left to their own devices:

...it's something I volunteered for, I have a very strong interest in computing, computers, the web all self taught over the years and the church tend to see me as one of their experts now. (Oscar, webmaster)

In the existing body of research, a number of studies suggest volunteer-led web presence is the normal experience (Smith 2007, Sturgill 2004). The current research project confirms this is the experience for the English churches and extends the understanding of the dynamics of relationships between church leaders and the volunteers with whom they work. The level of evaluation of, and control over, content is discussed in the next section.

8.4 Governance and evaluation

Farrell (2011) claims that:

The congregation website is an accurate reflection of the values, purpose and identity of the individual congregation (Farrell 2001, p87)

Carr (2004) reported that in 2002, only 3% of churches commonly considered their website at Parochial Church Council (PCC) meetings. Smith (2007) found that non-profit parachurch groups did not regularly evaluate their websites' reach. Farrell's sample of US sites may be different, but what has become clear from the findings of this research is that the website's content is often not connected directly to the values and identity of the congregation since there is little oversight, evaluation or ongoing governance.

Interview findings suggest that it is unusual for a website to be discussed at leadership meetings on a regular basis. The pattern appears to be that there is much discussion on the point and purpose of the site when its launch is being planned, with little follow-up once the site is live and established (see section 5.8.3 above). Even though the webmasters in the sample were only from Baptist churches, they echoed back the sentiment from the leaders from all denominations regarding the minimal level of governance of the website. If websites are to be useful tools for organisations then their content, currency and maintenance should surely be reviewed in the same way other operational parts of a church might be, such as children's work or tea rotas. The number of sites publishing out of date information in section 5.8.1 above provides evidence that there is insufficient routine updating and maintenance of the websites.

There are two ways in which support could be given to churches to help overcome these issues. Firstly, support could be offered which would encourage churches to see their websites objectively and to discuss their purpose more frequently. This could either be from the national or local hierarchies. It could take the form of workshops, written guidance or specific sessions of advice at other meetings. Peer support could be encouraged, with groups of local churches working together to share best practice. Secondly, a level of theoretical support may be helpful – this could lie in formal communications training, but also as a way of embedding the idea of governance and evaluation as necessary aspects of follow-up at the point the site is being discussed for the first time.

The national church organisation has no direct influence on the day-to-day operations of the local churches within the four main denominations studied, shown for one of the denominations in the interview with Michael (see, for example, 7.3). The level of hierarchy and the relationship between 'head office' and the branches

varies between the four denominations. Methodists emphasise the ‘connexional’ nature of their organisation, and the Baptist Union suggests a looser affiliation. The Catholic and Anglican churches operate a more rigid hierarchy. The implications for the church communications are as follows. Although there are some initiatives and resources that are promoted on a national basis and adopted locally, for most decisions the local church finds its own way, and therefore makes its own mistakes. Carr (2004) describes the Diocese of Southwark’s approach, which at the time, was to offer advice informally, but not official support. This is likely to have changed and the possible training sessions mentioned by Carr (p56) may well have been implemented by now. Certainly the Diocese of Chelmsford offers advice and guidance via their website at <http://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/adminarea/websites.html> (accessed 8 September 2012).

Interview findings suggest a patchy approach to planning and implementation at a local level. There is little church-wide consideration of the website or of the church’s methods of communication or marketing so the purpose and effectiveness of the website is rarely tested. Feedback is obtained, if at all, informally. It seems therefore that although collectively much work is being put into these local websites, there is no real measurement of their effectiveness.

It is possible that formal evaluation of an endeavour is not viewed as compatible with the voluntary nature of the contributions that are made to the running of a church or organisation. Whilst there are obvious measures for some activities – the number of children in a Sunday School, for example – and consequences that are noticeable for some activities being performed badly (no coffee after services, no sermon being preached) – the site’s existence can be taken for granted. Effectiveness can be hard to evaluate if the wrong measures are being noted, and

there were unclear targets or objectives set at the outset. How do churches define the effectiveness of their site? The hit counts (section 5.9.1 above) only capture one aspect of the site's use; and the informal feedback from those who found the church via the website (for example, Howard, Gate Ecumenical, also in 5.9.1) only captures positive experiences of site visitors. The invisibility of effort may be a further reason why evaluation is rare – the sites are left to 'tick over' by themselves, apparently needing little intervention. There may be other reasons – perhaps there is fear of real or implied criticism of a volunteer, or as seems to be the case in this sample, relationships, although strained, are too valuable to be abandoned:

...we do have someone in the church who helps to look after it but if I am honest he is not the most co-operative of people and this is his domain and he resents intrusion into it, he will not always do what you ask him to do.

(Lee, Shelley Baptist)

8.4.1 Arbiters of content

Whilst there may be a lack of concern towards evaluation, the actual content does have some scrutiny. A sense of needing control without web expertise was seen in some interviews. Several church leaders took the view that they had responsibility for the content, and either created or judged the text before publication. It was likened to being the final arbiter for the parish magazine. Conversely, webmasters expressed a sense of being left to their own devices, meaning there was expertise on the medium but not the content. Across all the interviews, then, there was a mix of high interest/ low control from the leaders in question. In some cases leaders with no interest beyond web shopping were writing all the content and deciding what was important for it to publish. In other cases the opposite was true.

Interviewees who said their website should be an online noticeboard may well have articulated one of the main barriers to having a contemporary and welcoming site. They are attempting to translate a paper form into a digital presence. This is under-using the capacity of a website to be a rich environment; and those that attempt a more multimedia approach do so without much assistance, guidance or funding. The communication strategy falls between a gap from the 'head office' not being in a position to dictate implementation, and the 'branch office' working independently.

The research highlights the results of this approach. Church websites are variable in quality, as measured by their currency and the depth of information they provide. Leaders are struggling to find volunteers with current skills to exploit the tools available on the internet such as blogging platforms. On a practical note, the results suggest a number of ways in which the churches could be assisted with their conversations on their websites (see the recommendations and questions at 9.4). The research also highlights the problems inherent in this distributed approach to website building which would be of relevance for all voluntary organisations or others run on similar lines. It shows how simply not having enough time, or expertise, in apparently well-resourced organisations, is a barrier to providing effective information online.

There may be a complementary explanation for the apparent lack of involvement in online communication, explaining where cautiousness and potential lack of interest originates. The next section considers the role of moral panic and fear of apparent online danger in decisions to move content online.

8.5 Moral Panic

There is a long history of moral panics about the alleged harmful effects of exposure to popular media and cultural forms... in these media panics the spirals of reaction to any new medium are utterly repetitive and predictable.
(Cohen 2002, p xix)

Comments from the interviews point to moral panic as a reason for a lack of engagement. Phrases such as 'you hear things about chat rooms' and 'this Facebook stuff's really dangerous' from Gayle or 'it can cause an awful lot of pain' from Wendy suggest that the idea of the internet as a dangerous place is pervasive and affects the decision making of the churches when considering what level of online engagement to adopt. Anonymisation, and a general sense of decreased wellbeing, was a theme touched on by Robert in the interviews.

Moral panic is a term that has been widely used, defined by Cohen in 1972 following a study of the media scares based on the 1960s Mods and Rockers conflicts. A moral panic has five key elements (Cohen 2002, pxxvi):

- **Concern** about a real or imagined threat
- **Hostility** and moral outrage towards the folk devils, 'them' pitted against 'us'
- Widespread, if not universal **consensus** that 'something must be done'
- Public concern is **disproportionate** to the actual risk posed
- **Volatility** meaning the panics disappear quickly as the news agenda moves on.

Commentators such as (Marwick 2008) have identified furore over stranger danger on the internet as being a moral panic – now modified too into a media panic, or in Marwick's case, 'technopanic.' It is interesting to note that as each new media form evolves and arrives, there are criticisms levelled at its immoral and undermining nature. Campbell (2010) sums this up as follows:

Technology is framed as posing a threat to religion and so it is perceived that it must be resisted. Campbell (2010, p4)

The same kind of accusations were levelled at comic books, the cinema and television as are now being made about Facebook and other peer-to-peer methods of communicating (Drotner 1999). Media stories about changes to brain function²⁶ (Swain 2011, Greenfield 2010) as well as violence and abuse all point to the demonisation of the internet. Hoover (2012) suggests there is a 'kind of moral panic' (p.vii) about discussions of new media and their ability to unsettle the status quo. In 2012 politicians are discussing regulation to force internet service providers to block pornography unless customers have agreed to opt-in²⁷. Little wonder then, that as a starting point a bystander may assume that going online is a moral danger; let alone the problems with viruses, bogus websites or spam emails to be faced. The women in the study from (Stewart 2011) were wary of 'aberrant' content (discussed on page 52 above) and took their direction from church leaders. In the same volume as Hoover (2012), Hogan and Wellman (2012) also suggests that the popularity of social networks and always-on connectivity has led to:

...reigniting moral panics about stranger danger, anonymous crowds, and alienation in modern life. (Hogan, Wellman 2012, p49)

Understanding the actual risks posed is a first step to using a technology safely, and to its best and most meaningful extent. Marwick suggests that one issue in the

²⁶ For links to rebuttals of these claims, see <http://mindhacks.com/2012/02/29/at-least-its-not-twitter/>, accessed 4 April 2012

²⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/may/04/pornography-online-cameron-opt-in-plan>, accessed 7 May 2012

US at least is the absence of positive encouragement of young people's engagement with digital culture. This may also be the case in the UK, and is discussed here alongside the way that age is a factor influencing churches' use of online tools.

8.6 Age

Age has an influence on the production of websites and the use of online media in two ways. Firstly, there is an assumption that older congregations are not interested in going online, so there is no need to build a website that is more than a digital notice sheet. It is worth noting, however, that recent research puts the average age of an US Facebook user at 38 (Hampton et al. 2011), so perhaps that particular site is not as youth-oriented as some might have thought. Secondly, there is a correspondingly general assumption that younger members of the church will find it second nature to be online – but that it is fraught with dangers, as the quotations above highlight. These two generalisations have implications for an ageing church and for organisations that need to balance safeguarding with outreach and contacting their young members via online tools.

8.6.1 Working with older people

An older congregation was seen as the key reason why there was limited use of social media and online communication within many leaders' churches. This is despite the age breakdowns given in section 4.4 which suggest the church membership is not universally elderly. Five of the leaders interviewed said their congregation was 'mainly older' people, only one used the descriptor 'elderly.' The consensus appears to be that older people have little or no interest in the internet. Evidence from the US suggests this is not universal, with Hoover, Clark and Rainie (2004) concluding that 50–64 is the age group most likely to look for religious information online.

Farrell (2011) links the age of a congregation to the level of functionality available on websites. It is claimed that more traditional congregations, who use no technology in their worship and whose average age is older, will have fewer instances of interactivity on their websites, preferring to use the site for basic information provision. It is possible that this translates to the English experience, and could afford one explanation of why the church websites under consideration did not permit much interactivity. There is no evidence for denominational differences from the work undertaken, because there were so few incidences of interactivity recorded (as given in section 7.8 above).

Population trends in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2012b) suggest that by 2051, 24% of the population will be aged 65 or over. In 2010 the proportion was 17%. For those over 85, the percentage will rise from 2 to 7%. By 2035 there will be 15.6 million people of pensionable age. Given that the Church of England, at least, is marked by the older nature of its members, the average age of congregations will rise in future. Indeed, the Diocese of Chelmsford is undertaking a broad review of needs for the future based partly on changing demographics. (Diocese of Chelmsford 2012)

It is outside of the scope of this project to fully explore research that considers implications of the age-based assumptions that are being made within church congregations, but it is worth noting that there is ongoing work examining how older people might be supported in their use of online communication. In a society where so many routine transactions are moving away from personal contact and towards web-based interaction, there is a real risk that the older members of a community will be disadvantaged, either socially, financially or practically. Also, given the increasing complexity of everyday technology, a basic level of technological understanding would be of assistance to many (Malinowsky et al.

2012). Social media does not have to be age-dependent and can provide many opportunities for older people to create and maintain networks (Ongeri 2012). Far from ignoring the older congregations, the church could have a role to play in supporting older people in getting online. There are three ways in which this could happen. First, a church website could be promoted as a safe place where people can start to engage with the internet and understand its uses and limitations without the risk of accidentally seeing illegal or disturbing content. Second, peer learning is known to be effective in enabling older people to learn new skills (Sayago, Blat 2011). Community connections within the congregation could facilitate this. Thirdly, few websites are designed with older users in mind – or users with any sensory or cognitive impairment, not just those which are age-related. There could be a self-fulfilling prophecy in action here. Sites which are difficult to negotiate will put older users off, so there will be no momentum from an older congregation who find websites confusing. In turn there will be no impetus to address the problems caused by confusing websites because few people are engaged with the process. These three areas all point to possibilities for further research.

8.6.2 Working with younger people

During interviews, mention was made of the need to follow safeguarding procedures when working with young people. This involves careful schemes of engagement with social media and young people. Both the Methodist and Anglican church have model policies which specifically forbid the establishment of relationships via social media – in practice this means that leaders cannot be friends with young people on Facebook. At least one leader in the sample studied felt this was an unworkable policy. In the US in 2011, the state of Missouri created a statute which prohibited teachers from friending pupils or former pupils on social

networking sites²⁸ although this was later amended after protests, further suggesting that merely prohibiting contact is not seen as a helpful solution to the problem.

Safeguarding policies will be implemented at a local church level with information coming from local Dioceses or national organisations. Comments in the interviews suggest that safeguarding training may be the only point at which the use of social media is discussed – and in the context of the Methodist and Anglican churches, with its use being banned. Whilst there is no doubt that there have been incidences of abuse from church leaders, it is also possible that the reaction to use of Facebook or other online tools is exaggerated partly because it is framed within the context of a moral panic around internet use. Small wonder then that churches are not making use of this media, or are leaving it to groups within the church to establish their own Facebook pages. One Baptist church's safeguarding policy seen as part of the research includes the option for parental consent for young people to be contacted via email, text message or Facebook which seems to be a more pragmatic solution.

Safeguarding policies are designed to ensure behaviour is transparent and can be monitored and are vitally important given the past scandals of abuse and ill-treatment. Online bullying does take place, and was acknowledged by at least one interviewee (Wendy, St Timothy, p126) and the nature of online communication means that it would be easy to send private messages of an unwanted nature. The concern for the church therefore is how to use social media safely, transparently

²⁸ <http://www.senate.mo.gov/11info/pdf-bill/intro/SB54.pdf>, s162.069 (accessed 31 July 2012).

and effectively – to be present in the online places where the churches’ own young people already are.

By categorising the internet as a dangerous place, and only discussing its use within the context of safeguarding, leaders’ perceptions of the possibilities of websites may be clouded. A sense of negativity might pervade the discussions if the dangers and not the benefits are highlighted. Studies of young people’s use of the internet have shown that the incidences of unwanted contact may be over-reported and taken out of context (Marwick 2008, Holmes 2009).

In contrast to Marwick, whose focus has been on the US, (Holmes 2009) has investigated the situation in the UK. His suggestion is broadly similar:

Therefore, although data suggest it should not, online stranger danger remains a central discourse of youth internet use. (Holmes 2009, p1176)

Holmes notes that there is little evidence from the US regarding young people’s use of social media and what is available is outdated – assumptions based on studies conducted before broadband and mobile internet are rapidly dating. One finding reported of note is that from Ofcom, which suggests most online communication is within established offline peer groups, and thus an extension of everyday interactions at school or college (Ofcom 2008). Holmes concludes that those at risk from exploitation online are those at risk in many offline situations too. News stories covering discovery of paedophile use of the children’s site Habbo Hotel in June 2012 had a sensationalist tone, with ‘moral panic’ being invoked as a suitable

response²⁹. At the time of writing there have been no formal inquiries into this scandal.

These findings do not suggest that the problems can be solved by removing online tools as a source of communication, and indeed restrictions on use would be disproportionate to the risk incurred by removing young people's access to their social spaces. Educating those young people to negotiate dangers safely might be a more appropriate course of action. (Thornburgh, Lin 2002) use the analogy of a swimming pool to recommend education as a strategy. Children do drown in water. The cure for this is not to fence off pools but to teach children how to swim.

If English churches' fear of harm from abuse outweighs the understanding of the positive benefit of using Facebook or other social networking tools with their young people, a major channel of communication may be missed. Although it is worth noting that Bobkoswski's (2011) work suggests that it is wrong to assume younger people are happy to discuss their faith in the same online spaces their secular peers inhabit. It could be that churches' efforts to use these spaces are unsuccessful because young people do not want to mix their church and secular life online.

One final point is to note an apparent discrepancy between the age ranges of the churches quoted by the leaders and the involvement of young people. Few said their churches were definitely made up of older people, a number said there was a spread of ages in the congregation. So if the church meetings are rejecting, or not considering, using online tools, is this because the younger members of the church

²⁹ <http://www.channel4.com/news/striptease-and-cyber-sex-my-stay-at-habbo-hotel>, accessed 31 July 2012

are not being represented in these forums? If governing bodies are dominated by the older members of churches, perhaps the decision making is skewed.

The current research appears to be the first academic investigation of reasons why social media, successfully employed in many parts of society, is not being widely adopted by churches. The contribution made by this study is to begin to highlight some of the assumptions and prejudices against online communication in general, such as the presence of a moral panic.

8.7 Church as information provider

8.7.1 Content choice

Content analysis showed that many websites carried far less information than had been anticipated. The coding scheme had been originated based on prior studies of church websites e.g. Carr (2004), Baab (2007) as listed in section 3.8 so the list of possible website content was grounded in reality. The most popular categories of information related to the operational, organisational aspects of the church, rather than the community life or attempts at evangelisation (reflecting Sturgill 2004). If the expectation is that the website needs only to replicate the weekly notice sheet³⁰ then this limited information will meet that need. However, there is evidence to suggest that this paucity of information downplays the role that the church plays in the local community. Statistics from the Church of England show that 48% of churches host some kind of community activity: after-school clubs, farmers' markets, advice surgeries are just some of those given (Archbishops' Council 2012). Yet only 8% of the Anglican churches in the study sample made mention of this kind of activity (Table 7-2). The proportion was far higher for other denominations at 33% for Baptist, 20% for Catholic, but lower at 6% for Methodist churches.

Interviews suggested that leaders, and the church governing bodies which they lead, did not have clearly articulated aims for their websites. Deciding who the audience is, and what their needs might be, acts as a framework for the choice of content. As well as defining what should be published, it also helps define what is not relevant and what a realistic updating schedule might be. Leaders were not specifically asked about their perception of their role as information provider, so

³⁰ Please refer to Appendix 11.10 for an example of an Church of England notice sheet

this is potentially an avenue for further investigation – indeed, local church communication strategies and information management, combining the pastoral, theological and administrative roles and how information is handled accordingly would be of interest (see also the comments regarding email use in section 8.1.3 above).

8.8 Denominational differences

One aim of the project was to establish whether there were any differences in the choice of information topics on websites across different denominations – the four main variants being the Church of England (Anglican), Catholic Church in England & Wales, the Baptist Union and the Methodist Connexion. These four account for 75% of the churches in the UK.

The results show that there are some apparent notable differences for some of the information categories, for example photographs at section 5.6 ,rites of passage (6.3.2) and statements of faith (6.2.1). These have not been tested for statistical significance: so few churches carried information that statistical comparisons would be unreliable.

With hindsight, perhaps a wider approach may have yielded more interesting information. Looking at the mission statement and the theology of a church and comparing that with the information it published may have shown whether the websites were reflecting the way the church described itself. This would have partly replicated the work of Sturgill (2004). This reported a study of evangelical churches that were part of the US Southern Baptist Convention³¹ which was intended to evaluate the scope and purpose of their websites – focused either on the church as

³¹ <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/default.asp>, accessed 4 April 2012

an organisation, as a tool for evangelism, locating the church in the wider community or providing interactivity. Sturgill's research suggests that the organisational role was prevalent in the churches sampled. The English results replicate this. However, differences found between denominations were less marked than the differences between types of information provided. Given the explicit evangelical nature of the Southern Baptist churches (their main aim is to increase their membership) this is of interest. In 2004, the churches were perhaps not exploiting the internet to its full potential – it is quite possible given the rise in social networking and ubiquity of the internet that a follow-up study with the same US churches would give a different result. Of note though is that the English sample drawn in 2010, six years later, mirrors that earlier position of the US churches. It could be expected that the predominantly local, Anglican parish churches would focus on the organisational topics on their websites because that reflects their role within parish life, and the same is true to a certain extent of all the denominations considered within the study. The results show that with one exception (the higher mean number of items for evangelism on Baptist sites) all denominations followed the same pattern, i.e. more organisational items than evangelistic information, and fewer items relating to community or interactivity. (A broader discussion of interactivity found on websites is at 8.11.2). There is no evidence to suggest significant denominational differences in what Sturgill would designate the purpose of the church website. Interview evidence suggests that this focus on the organisational, replicating online the weekly news sheet, is deliberate, since no interview respondents suggested evangelism as the primary purpose for their site. Rather than seeking converts, churches saw their website as a way of advertising their presence to people of faith who were looking for a church to join.

The current research shows that the categories of information used by Sturgill for a specific denomination in the US are applicable to any of the four main

denominations in England, and that patterns of information content are broadly similar. This extends the relevance of Sturgill's research, and further formalises understanding of the purpose of English church websites.

8.8.1 Differences in the number of websites

One area where denomination differences were established was in the longitudinal survey which ran from January 2009 to December 2011, establishing the number of English churches with a website. This was in order to answer objective 1, against which context further investigation could proceed. The number of churches with a site increased for all four denominations. The survey shows that of the sample, there are more Baptist churches with findable websites. This could be an artefact of the way that the data was collected (see 3.6 in the methodology). It could also reflect the different organisational aspects of the four denominations – the Anglican churches are more likely to be smaller than the other three, because there are more of them.

The survey did not account for a number of factors that may have influenced the results. There was no account taken of the church size, nor its location other than having an English postcode. With more than half of English churches having a congregation of fewer than 50 people (see 3.13.1.1 3.13.1.1 above), it could be that the remaining churches either feel they have no need of a web presence or have insufficient talent within their community to implement one. The sample was also separate from that used for the content analysis. In addition, the sample drawn was not proportional to the number of churches in each denomination but of 100 each, so the Baptist and Methodist churches are possibly over-represented. The Methodist church organisation means that individual churches might not have a site, but do have a web presence elsewhere but this was not taken into consideration. Finally, the numbers are an aggregate count, in that they do not note

changes for individual churches – one church removing its site and another publishing a site would not affect the overall total. One major limitation of this piece of work is that the interviews did not address what the reasons for the changes and variants in number of sites might be. There is no existing literature to draw comparisons with or to suggest reasons for the variation.

These limitations aside, the results do pose some useful questions. The tailing off of the rate of increase between December 2010 and December 2011 suggests that a point has been reached whereby no more churches will invest in a web presence. The decrease in the Anglican churches may be down to parishes merging, so only needing one website. Were the churches in this section of the study those that have no interest in publishing a website, or were they just not listed or visible via a Google search? Was the Findachurch.co.uk website used current and its data reliable?

If churches feel they do not need a website, the results from this project suggest that the leading reason will be the age of their congregation. Without knowing more about the demographics of the churches in the study it is impossible to make that connection with conviction. Other reasons for withdrawing or not publishing a website may be because the leader and governing body do not feel it is necessary, or they do not have the relevant enthusiasm and expertise in amongst the community to lead such a project. The effects of varying levels of skill on the websites that are published are discussed in the next section.

8.9 Expertise

The reliance on keen, but possibly unskilled volunteers and the lack of training take-up means that webmasters may not be expert in web design and maintenance

even if their approach was cutting-edge when they took on the responsibility, and they have not lost the reputation of being the computer expert in the organisation.

Training is available at national and diocesan level as discussed by Michael and Murray. Michael described their offering:

We have a separate section of our department which is just communications training, that is aimed at both lay and ordained members of the church, but also members of [churches]...I've been doing [courses] for the last two years. We have a website... we also have a paper programme that's sent out to all [local areas] who then put it up on their websites or sent it out to their clergy in their normal mailings. (Michael, communications professional).

Evidence for lack of current expertise in website creation and maintenance was found in the content analysis. The continued use of frames, out-of-date information, disregarding of conventions of menu bar placement and other guidance all suggest the webmasters lack current skills. In a community like a church with a limited pool of volunteers upon which to call, the leader is often left with whomever is willing to work on the project, and they may not be the most appropriate person. Without outside help or new volunteers to oversee the website, it is likely to be ignored or stagnate. In addition, if there are compulsory, legal requirements to be attended to first (like safeguarding) then parishes with limited time or money may not prioritise training in online communication.

One further point to note is that the prevailing assumption may be that a good website can only be achieved if it is paid for, which is a suggestion made by Benjamin (Valley Methodist): "if you want a very whizz bang website you've got to pay for it and churches are not flush with money." However, this view may be dated. There are sufficient free tools now to ensure an accessible and clear web presence

without the need for professional design input. It is possible therefore that aiming for a smaller website, presented clearly, rather than a site which aims to cover many communication targets would be a more successful option for many organisations.

8.10 Time

Time influenced willingness to adopt online tools in two ways. First, several interviewees felt that online applications were timewasters. Second, that their time as church leaders was already full, and adding another layer of communication would be too much extra commitment. The experience of those who have embraced online tools suggests that these extra avenues of communication do provide benefits in connecting with people outside of the normal face-to-face relationships in a congregation. Fischer-Nelson (2012) reported that Danish pastors found the internet beneficial for creating and maintaining contacts. 75% of those aged 26–39 and 58% of older pastors said they were in contact with more parishioners via the internet. Finding time to build an online network and train oneself in a new tool is clearly a barrier to adopting social media. It is entirely reasonable for a church leader not to devote significant amounts of time to an activity deemed non-core. A third, implied, barrier caused by time is the time volunteers need to create or update a site or their own skills, as mentioned above. This is a problem faced by many voluntary organisations – the experience of English churches helps enrich the picture of difficulties of finding time and expertise for effective communication within all volunteer-based enterprises.

A further avenue of research could be to investigate how those who combine online and offline busy lives feel they have succeeded: is it at the cost of other activities, or a changed notion of work and personal time? How has 24/7 connectivity via smartphones and mobile devices affected personal boundaries? What support is available for churches' IT infrastructure?

8.11 Church as part of wider community

8.11.1 Welcome pages

It is possible that the number of welcome pages encountered was low because the content was elsewhere on the websites. The decision was to scrutinise a smaller subset of website pages which had been specifically flagged as there for newcomers. In itself, the signposting of this kind of information shows a sensitivity towards those who may not want to read an entire site to find the ‘way in.’

The results showed that technical language is still prevalent. The writers of these pages could perhaps be encouraged to put themselves in the shoes of complete newcomers. Once more, the need is to consider their audience. What might be relevant to a wedding guest might be very different from someone approaching the church as a potential congregation member.

8.11.2 Interactivity and social media

8.11.2.1 Interactivity

One aim of the research was to replicate the research McMillan (2008) undertook to evaluate websites offering interactivity in a way that was platform-neutral. This would allow for comparisons between sites which were not dependent on the expertise or design or specific use of tools. The original research defined three concepts which were also followed in this replication:

- Human to computer
- Human to human
- Human to content.

The framework that this work provided was deemed suitable for this research because it was anticipated only a minority of the sites under consideration would be

built with sophisticated technologies. The results showed that so few of the sites carried interactive elements that a full evaluation of the applicability of the model could not be made. In addition, the rest of the content analysis study coded for presence of a contact email, link to a blog or comments section and whether any third party content was available. 9% of all sites made mention of a blog, 89% had a contact email published and 16% had third party content. These results taken together show that church websites do not include interactivity in their construction. The interviews confirmed that this was a purposeful omission, as many leaders felt that face-to-face communication was more important than opening up websites. It should be noted that McMillan's work was formulated in 2005, before social media sites became widespread and popular. It is likely that the online focus has shifted, and that those who do want to connect online are doing so via a third party platform like Facebook rather than at the level of an individual organisation's own site. There would be little value now in creating separate church-site based forums when a Facebook page can perform that function and is where people already read content and interact with each other.

8.11.2.2 Social media

Linked to this last point on interactivity, the discussion now turns to social media. Objective 11 was to explore the use of social media by churches and their leaders as a tool for sharing information.

Interviewees mentioned the difficulty of keeping personal and vocational life separate when using social media websites. The fact that comments from a vicar deemed inappropriate make it into national press (Britten 2012) would suggest that this is a well-founded concern, although perhaps on a slightly smaller scale than an apparent national scandal. Alongside the issues of separate identities, reasons why the interviewees were not involved with social media were more practical – feeling that there is insufficient time available, to find time to spend it online. Even those

who were enthusiastic about online work were aware of the potential for distraction and time wasting. Content analysis showed that few churches had a link to Facebook or a blog.

So is the contemporary church ignoring social media? It could just be that the websites did not link to blogs, or Facebook accounts because they are under the control of separate people and seen as having distinct purposes. Interviews suggest this could be one explanation. It is also possible that leaders and church members are using social media individually rather than collectively; that their churchgoing is only one part of their identity and so their social media use is not directly tied to the church. The points raised in the interviews about maintaining separation between vocational and personal life online may also have an influence on the willingness of leaders to run official social media accounts. However, the most likely reasons are firstly, that leaders feel they have insufficient time, as discussed in section 8.10 above. Secondly, that social media might be a useful secondary source of online communication but that email remains the primary method by which information is exchanged online.

Cheong (2012) shows how Twitter has been used at a corporate level in the US to build church participation and to share statements of faith with fellow users of the service. She calls for further research, particularly into the negotiation of roles and:

How leaders can balance social chatter (alongside potential narcissistic self promotion) with the need for quiet reflection and rest that spirituality entails
(Cheong 2012, p203)

The interview findings from this project show that there is an awareness of this balance – both from the non-participants, who see the site as a complete waste of time, and from those who have potentially wasted some time but have found more

relational benefits. Mark, for instance, had found a spiritual director (similar to a personal counsellor) via a Twitter conversation, which had provided him with a clear benefit, and he and Lee were keen to meet offline those with whom they chatted online.

Lomborg & Ess (2012) addressed concerns about identity in their case study of a Danish pastor and his interaction on Facebook. The same kind of experience as Helen reported was noted. Although the pastor:

considers it professionally helpful to give the congregation members who are part of his Facebook audience glimpses into his private life...he is careful not to post status updates that could compromise his status (Lomborg & Stine 2012, p177)

He is, therefore, making deliberate choices about where the boundary between public and professional life lies with each status update. The negotiation of public and private roles via a shared space like Facebook is a process that each church leader has to tackle individually. It is clear that no one set of denominational guidelines would suit all circumstances, churches and personalities.

8.12 Authority

Many authors have considered whether religious use of the internet would lead to changed nature of authority for church leaders, for example (Cheong, Huang & Poon 2011, Campbell 2007, Campbell 2010a). It has been suggested that new religious movements would usurp the traditional rituals (Dawson 2000); that freely available information that explained unorthodox positions would lead to the erosion of traditional leadership. The preceding discussion too on the boundaries between public and private identity has a bearing on this. Objective 9 of the research project

was to ascertain whether there was evidence of any challenges to authority on a local, individual level.

No strong evidence was found of the church leaders in the interview sample having noticed negative effects of easier access to theological or ideological information.

The leaders interviewed by (Cheong, Huang & Poon 2011) expressed concern that new media allow for the 'amplification of heresy' (p948), in other words, about wrong information or theology going viral. These Singaporean pastors reported similar experiences to those in the English interview sample – congregants will question what is said in sermons and will query teaching based on having Googled for answers. The English church leaders did not view this as a negative effect – but as a positive encounter, giving them opportunities to reach out and teach and get feedback on their work. Campbell (2007, 2011) also found little evidence to corroborate earlier claims that online communication may undermine leaders' authority. So perhaps the challenge to authority lies not at the level of the individual church leader but at a more macro, organisational level. Perhaps also the threat is lessened with an established church as in England and Wales, which may derive some authority from its status within society. There may also be other cultural or demographic differences between the populations studied in the US and in England. If English congregations are made up from older people, they may well still adhere to a custom whereby criticism of a minister of religion would be unthinkable.

Younger US churchgoers, used to questioning, and part of a larger church with a larger leadership team, may think differently. Perhaps, too, the English leaders are more personally psychologically secure in their status as trained theologians than their US counterparts, welcoming the opportunity to engage in theological debate rather than seeing it as a threat. Returning to the Facebook study mentioned above, Lomborg & Stein (2012) claim that the Danish church is an 'environment marked by

greater equality and democratic processes' (p172). They found no evidence of challenge to authority related to social media.

Finally, there are different kinds of authority, as Campbell (2007) makes clear. The interview questions were broad, and did not facilitate a more in-depth discussion of the definition of authority that may or may not have been under consideration. The interviewer's concept of authority may have been different from that of the interviewees – these differences were not explored. A fuller exploration of this is outside of the scope of the project.

8.13 Hyperlinks

Objective 8 investigated whether churches used hyperlinks to locate themselves in local, national or global online communities. Analysis of the outgoing links from the content analysis sample raised some interesting points. The number of links varied across churches, and not all websites had outbound links.

Scheitle (2005) suggests that there is a relationship between the links a website carries and the ecclesial identity of the church. It was not possible to replicate this investigation exactly because there was no way to assess the politics of each church, but it is interesting to note that of the four denominations studied, the Catholic churches had the highest mean number of links. If, as Scheitle claims, more links indicate a more conservative church, then this would suggest that of the churches in content analysis the most conservative were the Catholics.

This research indicates there is no link between the size of the church and the number of links, but there has been no significance testing to establish relationships. This relationship was explored again to test Scheitle's work with an English data set. The size of the church might have an influence on this factor – a

larger church might have a broader range of interests or related organisations. Results showed that this was not the case, as reported in section 7.6.3 above.

The categories of links that were popular provide interesting information. Of the links that were used five or more times from any site, the most popular were local schools, the main denomination site or another local church. These target organisations could suggest the churches are keen to identify themselves as part of a wider national network, and of having local relevance. The Catholic churches linked to schools most frequently, because they often have close relationships between schools and their churches. Across the board, these are conservative choices in that no radically Christian sites are linked. The most popular non-denominational links were to the Alpha course and Rejesus.co.uk. Although the Alpha Course began at an Anglican church, the course itself is now seen as being ecumenical and has a very high brand awareness. Churches may choose to link to it because it is a simple way to point visitors to a way of exploring Christianity – a well-respected site which allows visitors to find a local Alpha course. Rejesus.co.uk is a site designed for people enquiring about Christianity, run as an agency of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. It provides more information than the Alpha course site, as it is designed to be a resource in itself rather than provide information on an offline course in the way the Alpha site does.

Only one of the top 30 most-linked sites was based overseas, and that was Biblegateway.net – this is an international site hosting numerous translations of the Bible. Although linking to it makes the individual church part of a network of users, the use of this resource is more to do with the resource itself than linking to something outside the UK. It is also the fourth most popular site in the sample of 49 non-denominational sites in the US, as identified by Smith, Scheitle & Bader (2012).

Smith, Scheitle & Bader (2012) investigated the ties shown by hyperlink networks between non-denominational churches in the US. The study found a degree of overlap between churches, which did not directly link to each other, and third party sources creating a strong sense of coherence among apparently independent organisations. The research shows how investigating these links can provide a richer picture of the online landscape than that found by looking at each website as an individual data point, as it uncovers hidden relationships. The hyperlink analysis in the current research project is not at a similar level of sophistication, but as one of the first link analysis of English churches, it begins to build a sense of the networks.

Smith, Scheitle & Bader (2012) claim that 'the link itself represents a statement about the identity and interests of the congregation' (p269). However, interviews suggest that the choice of links is not systematic so the use of links for identification within the wider Christian online landscape may not be deliberate. Two leaders picked them for the site themselves. One said they had been suggested jointly between themselves and the webmaster. So there is unlikely to be guidance from the leader as to which might be appropriate – or inappropriate – links to include. A situation whereby a site that was controversial but popular was included could well arise. It is difficult to make robust claims about the characteristics of the collection of outgoing links when the interviews suggest there is no coherence to their choice.

Nonetheless the lists of links and categories is interesting as it offers a perspective on the most popular websites and organisations, showing which have a high brand awareness within church circles. This could possibly be a starting point for wider research into marketing and branding of religious organisations and media as well as the inter-denominational networks.

The preceding discussion has highlighted findings and posed questions for further research into the information use, communications and digital culture of English churches. The next chapter outlines the final conclusions and answers to the research questions, and suggests practical implications for the research findings.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

9. Research questions and aims

9.1 Research questions

The research set out to answer three research questions. This chapter will provide those answers, and outline how the individual objectives have been met.

Question 1: To what extent have English Christian churches established a distinct individual web presence?

The longitudinal study reveals that around two thirds of English Christian Churches from four different denominations have an individual web presence. From a random sample of 400 churches in England, tracked over three years, by December 2011 66% had a website that could be found by an online directory or simple Google search. This was an increase from 41% in January 2009. The trend had been upwards from 2009, but the December 2011 figure represents a 1% drop in the overall total.

This project has shown that not all churches have created a website and has been the first survey investigation of English churches of all sizes.

Question 2: To what extent do churches and church leaders use email, websites and social media tools to find and publish information?

To a large extent, churches are using online tools. Interviews suggest that email is a frequently used method of communication by church leaders, but that it is not always problem-free. Many reported feeling overwhelmed by the email traffic received. Social media is used by some leaders, with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Content analysis of websites shows that although a majority of churches may have a website, few use any kind of interactive tool to engage visitors. Whilst very basic information is present on the majority of sites, most do not publish more detail. Only a small number (nine) had a separate page for newcomers. Hyperlinks are used by a majority of sites to external sources of useful information.

Question 3: Is there evidence that traditional notions of hierarchy and authority been affected by online sources of information and communication?

The interview evidence shows that no English church leader questioned had seen negative effects of online information on their authority. In fact, when their teaching had been questioned the leaders had welcomed the opportunity to enter into conversation and thus had seen a positive effect. Literature had suggested that authority might be undermined by the ability of churchgoers to find answers from sources other than the pulpit, but no effect was seen in this project. It is perhaps that the authority effects are at a macro level, affecting society, rather than individual church leaders.

9.2 Meeting aims and objectives

In order to avoid repetition of large parts of the results text, the summary of the objectives is given below with references to the results sections providing evidence for the achievement, or otherwise, of the individual objective.

Objective	Met?	Evidence
Establish a baseline measure of the number of parishes or churches in England with a purpose-built website.	Yes	5.1 Percentage of churches with websites increased from 2009, but had levelled off by 2011.
<i>From a smaller sample, investigate key aspects of website production, publication and content choice to establish whether:</i>		
Websites are part of a planned information and communications strategy	Partially	6.5.1 There is insufficient interview evidence to conclusively answer this point. There is a lack of ongoing governance, and many sites are out of date, suggesting a lack of due attention to the websites.
How content is presented and created	Yes	6.2 Practical and reference information Content analysis shows that there is little shared content other than hyperlinks.
There are variations in the choice of different information topics across denominations	Yes	6.2 shows variations in the number of churches with information on specific topics
Content includes information which explains or highlights the congregation's faith, worship or community	Yes	6.2 6.3 detail the information on these topics located via content analysis
Any differentiation is made between church members and the wider community as audiences for local church websites	Yes	6.2.2 , 6.5.2, 7.1.7 Few had a specific newcomers' page. Many provided architecture/ family records information for specific visitors
Churches use interactive tools including allowing user-generated content (CA, interview)	Yes	7.8 7.9 Interactivity was not found on the majority of sites
Churches use hyperlinks to locate themselves in local, national or global online communities(CA, interview)	Yes	7.6 Content analysis shows the popularity of various organisations linked to
Leaders have experience of challenges to authority led or encouraged by online media	Yes	7.5 No leader felt they had seen this kind of challenge
Explore the ways in which church leaders use the internet for vocational and personal tasks	Yes	4.7 4.8 Leaders use the internet regularly for a variety of vocational and personal tasks
Explore the use of social media by churches and their leaders as a tool for sharing information (interview)	Yes	7.3 Leaders and some churches do use social media, to varying extents

Table 9-1 Evidence for meeting aims & objectives

All objectives, except for one, have been met. Objective 2 has not been met fully due to insufficient evidence from the interviews as to the existence of planned communication strategies. An answer could be inferred from the number of sites that are not maintained or the number of churches that do not discuss their websites on a regular basis, but this is not as satisfactory as direct interview evidence.

In summary, the research has described the ways in which websites are produced, how social media is used and identified the pitfalls and barriers encountered. With so much of church life reliant on volunteers and restricted funding, the available expertise will be limited. Leaders and volunteers do not have time and resources available to invest as much in websites as they perhaps require. A sense that younger people are at risk from online dangers, and that older people are not interested, may also limit the desire to engage with websites or social media. Email use is widespread, to the point of becoming a problematic source of work overload for church leaders.

9.3 Contributions to knowledge

This research intended to explore one aspect of how English life has been affected by the increasing adoption of online methods of communication. Little previous work had studied the information content of church websites in England or examined how and why these smaller organisations are publishing information.

It has contributed to knowledge of the barriers such organisations face using the internet as a primary means of communication. There are issues with the perceptions of the needs of an ageing population, concerns about the safety of the younger generation, and whether volunteers possess sufficient skill to perform an effective role. This project helps further the understanding of how barriers can be

anticipated and avoided, in order to fully exploit the potential of digital communication.

It is likely that these issues will be familiar to many voluntary groups working on a semi-autonomous basis. Do volunteers have sufficient time and skill to investigate and implement new or simpler ways of working online, or the willingness or ability to challenge their current methods? Organisations may feel that they have effective top-down policies and training in place, but evidence from this project is that these messages are not always filtering down to the grass-roots. The overall message from the top-level organisation might be that it is important for units to have a website but who is suggesting ways of ensuring that these websites have useful, current and quality information?

The research also serves as a reminder that not all organisations have the money to implement sophisticated online solutions and in a small way helps identify instances of the digital divide. As more and more public services move online, the ability of older people to use the internet securely and efficiently becomes important. The understanding gained from this project that many still see it as an irrelevance, or even as a threat, even for something as familiar as going to church, may be able to contribute to the debate about internet access. In particular, the prevailing opinion arising from this research that older people are not interested in digital communication is yet to be tested.

Different clergy have different perceptions of the usefulness of the internet. Some have a limited range of trusted sites and others are prepared to search for information. Email is still a widely-used method of communication. With the rise of alternative methods of sharing information and headlines suggesting email has been surpassed, it is important to reinforce the idea that outside of business and IT, email is still a key method of communication. The research findings have potential

use as a basis for understanding how church leaders, and other professionals, might approach the use of email as a tool in order to minimise its potential as a cause of workplace stress.

9.3.1 Relationship to other literature

The research relates to how churches use the internet as a tool to promote religion and religious practice, one of Campbell's four discourses (2005), which are:

- Spiritual medium facilitating spiritual experiences
- Sacramental space suitable for religious use
- Tool to promote religion and religious practice
- Technology for affirming religious life

The findings suggest that the emphasis is on churches promoting church, not necessarily Christianity as a religious practice and there is some evidence from the social media users that the English experience also shows technology is affirming religious life (fourth discourse).

Cho (2011) also classified the approaches within the research community and the current research project contributes to understanding further the English experience of the first:

- The internet as an information transmission
- Online religion's relationship to offline religion
- Online influence on the offline
- Online-religion and religion-online
- Basic observations on the Internet as a medium

The relevance to the work of Scheitle on hyperlinks, Sturgill on information types and McMillan on interactivity have been discussed in detail above. Finally, the

research project shows how the church as part of English society is contributing to what Wellman calls the 'everyday internet.'

9.3.2 Authority

Cheong (2011) found evidence that Singaporean pastors were changing their behaviour – becoming more engaged online – because of perceived threats to epistemic authority. The project found no evidence that there has been any challenge to authority structures within local churches in the UK arising from social media or the internet generally. However, the exploration of authority was limited and did not fully explore the different ways in which authority can be manifested.

9.3.3 Three phases of research into church and internet

Various authors characterised the history of research into the internet into three phases (for example Wellman 2004, Hojsgaard, Warburg 2005, see 2.4.6 on page 19). The research project can be characterised as a third-phase project. It has been concerned with what Wellman (2004) calls the domesticated internet. The project has extended the understanding of how small scale projects (church websites) are transmitting local information and expecting there to be a demand for it, reflecting further domestication. It has also integrated work from religious studies with information science, furthering the 'bricolage of scholarship' (Hojsgaard and Morten 2005, p9).

9.3.4 Content analysis and hyperlinks

The project focused on small, mostly volunteer-led church websites. There was little equivalent work to be built on in the UK – previous studies are dated (Carr, 2004) or are from the US, investigating larger, international sites. Other work is either out of date or focuses on large international sites. The project is a new example of how content analysis can be used to evaluate websites. It replicated

previous interactivity (McMillan 2008) and hyperlink research (Scheitle 2005) showing how little interactivity is available, and how links are used within English church sites.

The preceding sections have explained how the project has contributed to the body of relevant research knowledge. The final sections in the discussion will focus on applying that knowledge – providing practical recommendations for national and local bodies, and a set of questions to enable churches to plan effectively their online presence.

9.4 Recommendations

The following section lists recommendations and discussion points for local churches, or in fact any smaller voluntary group seriously considering its online presence, as well as suggestions for actions that national organisations might take.

9.4.1 Expertise

This research shows that there is a possible lack of expertise in creation and maintenance of websites. Keeping skills, and therefore sites, current is important to ensure the information is accessible and appropriate.

To address this, local churches could exploit peer-to-peer learning. There are skilled webmasters and other interested parties in existence. Local areas could create opportunities for collaboration and learning between churches, setting up informal networks. Two recent Christian conferences have hosted ‘Social Media Surgeries’ where keen users have shared their experiences and shown people how to make the most of blogs, Facebook or Twitter. This kind of learning experience is not dependent on top-down hierarchy, is relatively cheap and can tackle one or two

issues at a time, instead of attempting to be a comprehensive formal course in web authoring.

The Dioceses or equivalent may also need to reconsider how their available guidance is provided and marketed. If there is guidance available, but it is not widely publicised, resources are under-used and each individual church will continue to work independently, and possibly make the same mistakes independently.

9.4.2 Use available platforms

Many of the websites in the sample had been created from first principles. This limits the number of people who can easily learn to update information to the site. Using a free or open source platform like Wordpress or Drupal removes much of the need to learn complicated code. Sites can be added to if a need arises. The Dioceses could provide ready-built templates for parishes to adapt.

9.4.3 Simplicity

Websites which carry limited information do not have to be overly complicated. If the church determines the most important information to convey, and concentrates on this, the website will serve a useful purpose. The research found little interactivity on church websites but it is arguable whether this is needed – with Facebook and other sites so popular, there are other places which provide better platforms for this kind of interaction. A church website may therefore benefit more from focusing on simplicity.

Focusing on simplicity brings two additional benefits. Firstly, a simpler site is easier to maintain, so more people can assist. Secondly, mobile internet use is a growth area. Keeping a desktop site simple makes it easier to view on a mobile device if a mobile version is not feasible.

9.4.4 Email guidance

Interviews showed that one recurring problem for the leaders was the volume of email received. Whilst it is a useful tool, if it adds to a sense of stress, it can have a detrimental effect on the leaders' wellbeing. If this proved to be a widespread problem, Dioceses and their equivalents could consider how they could provide support in sharing best practice techniques for dealing with email in the context of the job role of church leader.

9.5 Discussion questions for local churches

These discussion points could form the basis for a project plan to create and publish a new site or undertake a serious review of an existing website. They do not cover the technical aspects such as deciding which platform or hosting site to include, as this was not part of the research project's capability. Instead they aim to create a framework for thinking carefully about how a website can be used effectively as part of a church's communication strategy.

9.5.1 Why create a website?

Why do you want to publish a website? What are all the possible reasons you can think of? (The list might include information, evangelism, organisation, membership, fundraising, mission). How do you translate those reasons onto the web? How can you prioritise those purposes and balance exclusive and competing reasons?

What kind of information is regularly requested by church members, visitors, potential visitors, researchers, or strangers?

Which group(s) of people constitute your key audiences?

9.5.1.1 Content & architecture

What platform will you use? Is there a benefit to having a commercial provider?

Do you need separate pages for established church visitors, for newcomers and for church groups? How will you signpost people between them? Who will have access to decide the content?

How can you prioritise the information for different groups of readers?

What do you *not* need to include?

What guidance can you give your contributors regarding appropriate images, length of sentence & paragraph, to make the content clear?

9.5.1.2 Best practice: graphics, design and maintenance

Are your photographs clear, not distorted or pixellated? What is the ratio of pictures of the building and pictures of people? Can you include video content? What about audio?

Who will update your site? On what frequency? Who will have responsibility for originating the content? Will you have a gatekeeper?

How will you ensure you stay current with web trends? Where can you access training from?

9.5.1.3 Contact

What is your preferred method of contact? Do you tell people this? Who monitors emails received from the website? Is there a policy for responding?

9.5.1.4 Legal and access

Is your site accessible? Does it work with a screen reader or magnifier? Is the navigation clear and standard? Can your site be navigated by keyboard only? What are current industry standards?

What about cookies, privacy?

Will you create a specific mobile-friendly site? If not what can be done to make your site accessible on the move?

9.5.1.5 Evaluation

How will you evaluate effectiveness? What would count as success? When will you review the site and its content?

Google Analytics – free, better than a hit count

Is it appropriate to have a website at all?

9.6 Limitations

A number of areas where a different approach could have been taken have been identified and are given below.

9.6.1 Choice of sample populations

Focusing on the top four denominations, making up 75% of English churches, allowed for the most popular kinds of church to be included. Smith, Scheitle & Bader (2012) suggest that independent congregations may have more homogeneity than a disparity. It may have been beneficial to include smaller denominations as a fifth, ‘miscellaneous’ category to paint a broader picture, and to allow for comparisons between churches with strong denominational links and those with either none, or with looser affiliations.

9.6.2 Longitudinal analysis

During the development of this aspect of research, much consideration was given to the numbers of churches and the denominations of churches that should be included in the sample. The benefit of a proportional sample which would allow for a more accurate representation of the number of churches was outweighed by the disadvantage of the unequal distribution of the denominations.

9.6.3 Content analysis

Content analysis did not include any way of coding for the church's ecclesial identity. In other words, how liberal or conservative or not it may have been, or whether it would identify as 'evangelical.' Certainly within the Church of England there is a wide variety of different identities and kinds of churchmanship (the way things are done). In the existing, predominantly US, literature, the identification of a church as 'evangelical' has played a part in understanding its philosophy and thus its attitude towards communication and media. This project did not take this kind of distinction into account, so there is a possibility that interesting differences have been missed.

Content analysis as a quantitative technique does not allow for fine distinctions when coding a website. Either an element is present or absent, and the scheme employed in this research project did not permit other measurement. Therefore, subtleties of presentation differences may be lost in the coding process.

With so few sites presenting the information being searched for, if time had permitted, an alternative approach could have been to focus on fewer sites and adopt a more case-study led investigation; allowing for in-depth study of a smaller number of sites. This would have addressed the difficulty of the absence of information and the inability to detect the subtle differences. However, part of the

value of this research project is in its quantitative and objective approach. There have been many other case studies of one or two sites or blogs; by taking a broader range of sites in a quantitative content analysis the project was able to include more, smaller sites.

On balance, a more in-depth and nuanced analysis of fewer sites may have been a suitable alternative, and content analysis remains a very appropriate tool for researching the information published.

9.6.4 Hyperlink analysis

One change would be to use software to gather links and not attempt to categorise by hand. This was time consuming and produced a possibly less sophisticated analysis than would have been possible. The link study was not a key part of the study but was disproportionately time consuming. The later paper by (Smith, Scheitle & Bader 2012) suggests that with a more in-depth analysis, more 'leaky' information about networks and resources could be uncovered. However, this approach would perhaps form the basis of an entire research project by itself rather than being a component of a wider investigation.

9.6.5 Interviews

Recording interviews via iPhone with backup dictaphone, or via Skype was a cheap and effective method, but not completely foolproof. Twice the dictaphone backup was needed, once after an iPhone user error and once after Pandora, the application used to record Skype, crashed. One interview with a webmaster was lost after recording so only limited comments that had been transcribed to that point were available. There were no complete failures to capture any interview content.

The major drawback with the interviews in this project came from the relative inexperience of the interviewer. The intention was to conduct semi-structured

interviews, following a pattern but allowing for diversions and near-natural conversations to arise. On reflection, some interviews were too unstructured when interesting stories or anecdotes were told, taking a disproportionate amount of time and meaning that not all interviewees were asked questions on all topics. In addition, the interviewer was not experienced at drawing out introvert and possibly reluctant participants so one in particular that was recorded at the start of the data collection phases (Wendy) was much shorter than others.

The question 'Many people think the internet has changed life for the better. Would you agree?' was the final form of a question intended to be an opening into a discussion about the benefits, or drawbacks, to using the web. It was noted, however, that this is a leading form of question after it had been posed several times, and so the interviewer attempted to compensate for this in later interviews. Whether the church leaders interviewed were more used to disagreeing or having a point of view, not many agreed without qualification.

The research did not address the accessibility of sites for older users or viewers with visual or cognitive impairment. This could provide a useful avenue for future research, particularly taking into consideration the remarks made in interviews about the ageing nature of the congregations.

Interviews only took place with church leaders who had a website, as planned, to attempt to maintain a clear link between the content analysis and the interview stage. The project topic means that it may have been difficult to recruit leaders from churches without websites, without strong persuasion skills as the subject may have seemed irrelevant. It is possible that a broader perspective could have been gained by including those whose churches do not have websites. In light of the interview findings, it would be particularly interesting to find out how leaders cope with email traffic if they are not particularly keen on online communication.

9.6.6 Other data sources

It was acknowledged at the outset that this project was not concerned with the design of websites because 'good' design could be seen as a subjective quality. However, design and layout are factors which assist in the navigation and understanding of content of websites so with hindsight, these factors might have provided a useful data source. The inclusion of some basic layout features in the content analysis did not allow for a judgement on their quality. A number of sites were quite poorly laid out, or had outdated design features that hindered comprehension but this could not be taken account of in the content analysis.

The project also did not have a remit to look for usage information. Whether or not the churches in the sample would have been willing, or able, to supply page view or Google Analytics or similar information is debatable but those who could would have provided another reference point for the study.

9.6.7 Other omissions

During the life of the project, mobile access to websites increased as smartphones proliferated and became more affordable. The research did not look at whether church sites have mobile-friendly websites, but this would be a useful future research topic.

The denominational differences that were looked for, but not apparent in the content analysis, were not focused on in any further way. Lomborg & Stein (2012) claim that US churches can be clearly defined along denominational lines (p172). The differences between denominations in England are perhaps less clear, and there is certainly a wide variation within the Church of England traditions. There is less likelihood that a church would have a particular political outlook because of its ecclesial identity in England, than in the US.

9.7 Opportunities for further research

There are a number of lines of enquiry emanating from this project that could form the basis for further research projects. The list would include:

Email overload and work/life balance: How can church leaders be trained effectively and supported in responding to email and dealing with the sense of overload?

Church as support for older people online: As government, business and society move more functions online, could the church have a role to play in supporting the information literacy of its older congregations?

Social media at institutional and individual level: How do national and local churches understand and use social media? What are the successful and poor examples? Has this enhanced communication or ministry?

Typologies of authority and the affect of online information: What kind of authority might be under consideration, and how does that relate to the theological positions of leaders? Is there any sense of a shifting in authority, and if so why?

Church leaders training and information seeking habits: How are trainee leaders developing online search and information literacy skills? Why do they choose the resources they rely on? Do older or younger trainee leaders view these differently?

Denominational/ ecclesial identity differences: How do non-denominational/ independent churches use websites? Is there a difference in England between evangelical congregations and those of other traditions? What affect does the identity have on the way a church might use the internet?

Voluntary organisations: Do the findings translate to other volunteer-dominated organisations? How do other hierarchical organisations arrange their internet/

safeguarding guidance and training? How can this inform development of policy as more services become volunteer- or charity-led?

9.8 Concluding remarks

Despite limitations, and possibly asking more questions that have been answered, a clearer picture of the state of individual churches' use of the internet is now possible. The research has contributed to the limited body of work investigating how English religious organisations are working with online tools. The project has practical applications for the English Christian church, and provides a fresh insight into the challenges one part of society faces in working online.

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11. Appendices

11. Content Analysis

11.1 Content analysis coding categories

Objective number (s)	Item to code for	Information being assessed	Sturgill (2004) type
3,4,6	Map showing location – linked or provided by external site	Does the site link to or include a map from one of the major providers? This could be in the form of a link ‘Find us on a map’ or a page in which the map is embedded	O
3,6	Google/ Streetmap/ Multimap	Which provider has been used? Coded as G/S/M/other	O
6	Map showing location – drawn by local church	Has the church included a drawing, a scan of a road map or any other kind of non–proprietary method of including a map?	O
4	Times of the church's regular services	Does the site include the times at which the churches’ regular services are held?	O
4	Details of the church's regular services	Does the site include any explanation of what the services might involve? This needs to be more than just naming the service, e.g. Holy Communion or Matins, but to include indications of what Matins might be	O
4,6	Dedicated contact page	Does the site have a page with any contact information on, separate from the main landing page?	O
4,6,7	Contact us link	Is there any form of link inviting contact online or by email on the landing page?	O
4,5,6	Links for specific information: Baptism	Does the site include any information on its policy for baptism, who to contact, fees, etc?	O
4,5,6	Links for specific information: Marriage	Does the site include any information on its policy for marriage, who to contact, marriage preparation, fees, etc?	O
4,5,6	Links for specific information: Funeral	Does the site include any information on its policy for funerals, who to contact, fees, etc?	O

4,5,6	Links for specific information: Christmas	Does the site contain any information about the celebration of Christmas: special services, information on the religious meaning of the festival?	O
4,5,6	Links for specific information: Easter	Does the site contain any information about the celebration of Easter: special services, information on the religious meaning of the festival, Lent activities?	O
4,6	Links for specific information: Architecture/ Genealogy/ History	Does the site contain any information about the history of the church or its community? This covers surveys of historically interesting buildings as well as stories of the establishment of younger churches. It also includes any sections on how to trace parish records for genealogical research. It is not concerned with the current community or congregation.	O
4,5,6	Newcomers page	Does the site have any information directly aimed at people who are new to the church or visiting for the first time for worship, not for historical or genealogical research or for a specific rite of passage?	O
	If yes to Newcomers print page to PDF for later	If there is a newcomers' page this should be saved as a PDF for later analysis	
4,5,8	Links to local information e.g. schools, hospitals	Does the site contain any links to local secular or religious institutions? This includes associated church schools but also NHS facilities, local charities or community groups. Code NO if there is just a coded list of these organisations in the main body of the site.	O
	If yes to local info save links	Record the links on the separate spreadsheet tab	
4,5	Links to non-religious groups that use church buildings	Does the site include links to parent organisations of any groups that use the church buildings, e.g. Weight Watchers, Scouts or Guides? Code no if there is just a list of the related organisations with no further opportunities for information.	C
6	Pages or links labelled for internal administration only	Are any links or pages labelled for administrators? This includes any member-only areas as well as those for site management	O
4,5,6,8	Links to any other local churches	Does the site contain any links to local churches? Code yes if a Methodist site links back to its parent circuit page.	C

4,5	Photos of the clergy/ leaders	COUNT: Include all those in positions of authority or employed by the church	O
5	Photos of the church	COUNT: Include interior and exterior photographs, and those that are part of a historical narrative	O
2, 3	Photos of groups of people not engaged in worship	COUNT: Include all pictures of people in any setting other than a worship event	O
2, 3	Photos of anything else	COUNT: Include all other photographs unless they are used as a purely graphic element e.g. a header bar.	0
2, 3	Other graphics e.g. Clip art	COUNT: Include all clip art picture and graphic elements	N/A
2,3	Credits to a professional design company	Does the link include any reference to any professional design company e.g. Churchinsight. Do not code yes for a Wordpress site.	N/A
2, 3	Use of frames	Does the site use frames in its design?	N/A
2,3	Main menu(s) in standard places	Code yes if the main menu bar(s) appears at the top or the left hand side of the page. Code no if there are no recognisable menu bars or if they appear on the right hand side	N/A
4, 2, 3	Logo of its denominational lead body on the home page	Does the landing page have a logo for the parent denomination?	O
8	Links to third party websites	Does the site contain links to other websites? These can be either embedded in the text of a page or as a separate Links page. Code NO if links are listed but not activated and cannot be followed	C
	If yes to 3rd party links, copy links to Links spreadsheet	Record the links into the separate tab, classified by church number.	
4,5	Coded i.e. Part of HTML information on the denomination	Does the main body of the site include any information on the denomination as part of the text? Do not code yes if this is only a sentence that says "Church X is a part of Denomination Y"	E
4,5,8	Links to information on the denomination	Does the site link to its parent denomination?	E
4,5	Coded prayer or service content	Does the site include any prayers from any source or any extracts of services? This could include things like set responses used as part of a baptism, or a creed or confession. It does not include any explanations of the worship style or what might happen in a service e.g. 'children leave after the first hymn.'	E

4,5	Linked prayer or service content	Does the site include links to third party sources of prayer or service e.g. the Church of England Daily Offices?	E
4,5	Coded liturgical explanation or content	Does the site include any content that explains the content of a service, or the form of words used? This would include more than the name of a prayer book being used but would attempt to explain why a service is conducted in a specific manner	E
4,5	Linked liturgical explanation or content	Does the site include links to any third party site that explains the content of a service, or the form of words used? This would include more than the name of a prayer book being used but would attempt to explain why a service is conducted in a specific manner	E
4,5	Coded statement of faith or mission statement	Does the site include a statement of faith ('This is what we believe') or a wider mission statement? – either can be just a sentence or a full page or pages	E
4,5	Linked statement of faith or mission statement	Does the site link to any third party sites that give a statement of faith ('Baptists believe that...') or a wider mission statement? This would not include a link that was labelled just as a link to the parent denomination site	E
4,5	Coded scripture	Does the site include any scriptural content – either a short passage as part of a wider text or as a daily Bible reading or similar?	E
4,5	Linked scripture	Code yes for links to Biblegateway.com or similar, including to denominations' daily reading plans	E
2, 3	Frequency of updates	Add the last date or month on which it can be deduced that the site was updated e.g. via the most recent newsletter, forthcoming event dates	N/A
2, 3	Church-specific URL	Is the URL a custom URL or is it an unrelated domain name?	N/A
7	Blogger, Typepad, Wordpress acknowledged	Code yes if the site has been produced using any of these platforms	I
7	Link to a blog or comments	Code yes if the site includes a link to a separate blog, comments page or guest book	I

7	Reference or include links to Facebook/ Twitter / YouTube	Code yes if the site includes a reference or link to a Twitter feed, Facebook page or similar, or if it includes any YouTube content or Flickr photos/ links to iTunes or any other third party social networking tools	I
7	Email list advertised	Code yes if the church offers a mailing or discussion list function	I
7	Contact email given	Code yes if there is an email address rather than just a form to be submitted	I
7	Contact telephone number given	Does the site list a contact number?	I
7	Sermons/ talks available for download?	Code yes for audio and also for written notes	E
7	Third party downloadable content?	This would include Adobe Acrobat; YouTube or audio content; Lectionary downloads.	E

11.2 CA instructions

CODING OVERVIEW

General instructions

Each link or menu item on the landing (level 1) page should be followed. The subsequent pages are level 2 pages. Only count new items at level 2; but count different instances of kind of feature e.g. if the same search function is on several level 2 pages, code it only once; count separately different kinds of searches (e.g. search photographs, search services, etc.)

Paste root URL at the top of each column. Take snapshot of the site in Zotero. Save a pdf of the level 1 landing page.

- Code 1 or 0 for presence or absence of a feature as per the list on the coding sheet
- Copy external religious links or links to secular local information onto the separate tab of the spreadsheet
- Copy text of statement of faith/ newcomers page into relevant cell.
- Count and describe the interactivity features – this will probably need a second pass of the website.
- Code and record a 3rd party search e.g. from Google
- Anything added as 'Other' needs a description
- Ignore external sites
- Don't need to run searches or log in to sites

Rules for interactivity.

Items are coded for only one type of interactivity except items that are both a navigational tool and something else. Code on both levels if there is a signpost for interactivity and a further element is presented at level 2.

Items that look like a set are coded once. E.g. multiple items in a menu bar are one feature. If items are substantially different, code once for each type.

Note where hyperlinks appear e.g. body copy, don't count every link.

Examples

Navigation – count the total number of menu bars on a page. Visible submenus are visible either directly or with a mouse rollover, are additional menu bars. Don't count items on each menu bar.

Action: count number of different types of surveys, games, registration options, etc. Count each type only once – even if they appear on multiple pages.

Transaction: count the total number of opportunities for ordering materials but not the number of things available for order. Code for transaction if it takes to a 3rd party site note that includes link to 3rd party and note URL.

Human-to-human communication:

Count different types of options, but not every single opportunity.

For opportunities to add content, count each option separately – a guest book is different from adding an item to a calendar.

For opportunities to customize content, count each type of customization opportunity. E.g. a language option is one feature even if multiple languages are available.

TYPES OF INTERACTIVITY

These are general descriptions of the types of interactivity that will be coded. Can code as *other*, but describe what these other incidences are.

Human-to-Computer Interaction

Enable interaction with the computer but not communication with another person or contributing to or customizing the content of the site.

NAVIGATION is the “baseline” that makes Web sites function and allows users to find their way among various elements of the site.

Navigation/Standard

Features that offer users options for how to navigate among the content.

Menus, hyperlinks, buttons, and banners are clearly navigational tools. Also top/bottom of page links

Navigation/Personalized

Give the user more control. Search function is personalised – use own search terms.

ACTIONS send information to website but not for purchase or other transactional exchange.

Action/Standard

Options are same for all users. Online surveys and polls. Print this page. Bookmark this page.

Actions/Personalized

respond to specific information provided by the user. Login and registration activities

TRANSACTIONS: user will receive something that has been requested through the Web site but is often delivered outside of the site itself.

Transaction/Standard

Unchangeable items such as a book, brochure, or e-mail newsletter.

Transaction/Personalized

Individuals customize what he/she wants.

Notes on Human-to-Computer Interactions

If selections are “yes/no” type options (e.g. I want this brochure, but not that one) code it as standard.

If input from the user requires more individual information (e.g. requesting that a specific kind of content no longer be sent to a personal e-mail address) then it is personalized.

Rules do not give any preference to graphic elements.

If a navigational tool leads to an action or transaction of any kind, then there is an added element of H2C interactivity.

Do not double-code things that are elements of a single H2C function. Eg a login screen with place to type your name as well as a button to click to login is coded once for the tool (this e.g. is action/personalized).

Human-to-Human Interaction: Enables people to communicate with other people.

ORGANIZATION/INDIVIDUAL SYNCHRONOUS Real time. e.g. live chat. Put Twitter feed here.

INDIVIDUAL/INDIVIDUAL SYNCHRONOUS Real time' conversation among visitors to the site. This could be an IM function, for example. Would Twitter fit here?

ORGANIZATION/INDIVIDUAL ASYNCHRONOUS Contac forms, e-mail links, etc.

INDIVIDUAL/INDIVIDUAL ASYNCHRONOUS - Any tools that allow for "lagged time" two-way communication among site visitors. Examples include the option for e-mailing content to a friend. Facebook page link. THIS is where I would code adding comments to a blog.

Notes on Human-to-Human Interactions

McMillan codes this differently. They say:

Reserve the individual-to-individual coding for interactions that allow the site visitor to communicate with other individuals whom they choose to contact. Do NOT include here postings to bulletin boards/chat rooms that become part of the content of the site. Those are Human-to-Content interaction.

I say:

A blog which invites comment and possibly leads to an asynchronous conversation between individuals counts as H2H interaction. I think it serves two functions: yes, it does add to site content but the conversational function is more important.

Human-to-Content Interaction: Enables users to “engage” with content.

ADD CONTENT – Features add content also have some elements of human-to-human interaction, but they go further by allowing the user to contribute content that others can see *without the expectation of engaging in a conversation*.e.g. signing an online guest book.

Code the dominant type of content to be added: photo/ audio/ text/ video

CUSTOMIZE CONTENT –Related to navigations and/or actions but go further by allowing users to change the actual appearance of the site. Mostly text-based e.g. change size of font, text background

OTHER INTERACTIVITY Anything that seems to fit but cannot be captured by any of the other categories. Provide a detailed description of the interactive feature.

Notes on this for me

How do I want to handle this extra data? Do a separate coding scheme or integrate?
How will I record that information if I stick with using Excel; as two columns per church? Do I want to also record whether 'my' features are at level 1 or level 2? It would make sense if I want to go on to do later comparisons. Do I want to code for all links or just the first 10 on each site? Has anyone else used this formula or has McMillan published this again elsewhere?

Define churchy things under McMillan's headings

- prayer request would be human to human
- light virtual candle human to content
- contact clergy human to human
- download pdf of notice sheet human to computer (?)
- add items to calendar human to content
- blog comments human to human

11.3 Calculating sample size

Elementary Survey Sampling by Scheaffer, Mendenall and Ott.

On sample size determination for a proportion it gives the formula (on page 74 of 4th Edition) as:

$$n = \frac{N \times P \times (1 - P)}{(N - 1) \times D + P \times (1 - P)}$$

Where:

N is the population size (i.e. 196), and

P is the proportion having the attribute (which you may have to estimate prior to the study or you can simply use a value of 0.5 if you have no idea), and

$$D = \frac{B \times B}{4}$$

where B is your bound on the error for your estimate. For example you may want to estimate the proportion give or take 10%, in which case B=0.1.

So if you pop size was 196 and you use P=0.5 the required sample size to estimate the true proportion to within +/-10% is given by

$$D = \frac{0.1 \times 0.1}{4} = 0.0025$$

So

$$\begin{aligned} n &= \frac{196 \times 0.5 \times (1 - 0.5)}{(196 - 1) \times 0.0025 + 0.5 \times (1 - 0.5)} \\ &= \frac{49}{0.4875 + 0.25} = \frac{49}{0.7375} = \mathbf{66} \end{aligned}$$

11.4 Reliability calculations

Content analysis agreements

Church ID			Percentage agreement
A109		0 1	
	0	45 1	98
	1	0 2	
A4		0 1	
	0	20 4	85
	1	2 15	
A9		0 1	
	0	36 0	96
	1	2 7	
A53		0 1	
	0	25 4	82
	1	4 11	
A160		0 1	
	0	34 2	96
	1	0 11	
A119		0 1	
	0	33 2	85
	1	5 7	
A18		0 1	
	0	33 2	85
	1	5 7	
A19		0 1	
	0	35 2	91
	1	2 8	

Table 11-1 Individual agreements for re-coded websites

	0	1	Percentage agreement
Aggregate	0	261 17	89.9%

score

1		20 68

Table 11-2 Aggregated reliability data

11.5 Interview invitation email and preamble

11.5.1 Invitation

Dear

I am a part-time Loughborough University PhD student investigating churches' use of the internet. Although I'm registered at Loughborough, I'm resident in Colchester, and so I'm focusing on churches here in the local area. Desk research has formed the first part of my research, but now I would like to talk with church leaders and understand more about the ways that websites and other internet tools like Facebook are being used – or if they're not being used.

Further information can be found via the links below. Would you be willing to provide a short interview?

I have chosen a sample of local churches, which has included Leyton Methodist Church. Those I have conducted so far have lasted between 20–45 minutes. The results will be anonymised, so you would not be directly identifiable in the final research reports. The interview could either be face-to-face or over the phone. I would be most grateful for your help particularly as I do understand the time pressures you are probably facing. I'm hoping to run some interviews next week, if that would be at all possible? If you are able to help, I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

Sara

11.5.2 Interview introduction text

This was read to participant at the start of each interview:

I will, with your permission, be recording this interview so I can transcribe it later. Anything you say that I use in the reports will be anonymous and non-attributable to you directly. If there should be anything that I would like to use as a direct quote then I will ask your permission first. If you don't want to answer any questions, that is perfectly fine. If you've got any questions for me then do please ask either now or as we're going along.

I'm going to ask questions about your church generally, about your personal use of online tools; how the church puts its website together, and how the church uses social media. Is that OK? This should take around 30–45 minutes.

11.6 Interview coding tags

age profile
audience
behind the times
blogging church
blogging diocese
blogs
book v internet
choice of links
church building
content writing
day-to-day maintenance
decision making
defining purpose
defining strategy
denomination
differences by age
editing
evaluation of website
FB church
FB diocese
FB personal
hierarchy
i-product
ideal website
influence on authority
information seeking
inspiration vs fact checking
interactivity
internet positives
involvement with blogging
level of leadership
location
Management help
named links
online v offline personality
overall oversight
parish characteristic
personal experience of internet and media
podcasts
primary use of internet
purpose of outbound links
reasons for no interactivity
religious information
secular information
size
social networking
sources of help
status of webmaster
training
trouble – attitudes
trouble – mitigation against
trouble – practical
trouble – theoretical
Troublesome aspects
Twitter church
Twitter personal
use of email
very interesting point
workload

11.7 Interview questions

11.7.1 Initial draft/pilot study

Background / opening questions

What is actual job title(s)?

How long have you been in your current role?

What are your main responsibilities?

Ask for description of church(es) and congregation – building style, ethos, demographics

Personal web use

What do you use the web for, for non-work related tasks?

Which social media sites?, if any and not mentioned in previous question

How do you use the web for your work?

Do you have a website/ accounts/ presences that are outside of the main 'official' church site?

Do you access via a mobile device?

Attitude towards the internet

What would you say are the most positive and most negative aspects of the WWW?

Note aspects and ask why they are classified as such?

Have you had personal experience of the positive/ negative?

Church structure & web presence

What are the main purposes of the website?

Have they ever measured this effectiveness?

What would their ideal website look like?

In what ways do they tailor content for non-members of the church?

Who in your church is responsible for the web presence - volunteer/ staff /independent company?

How was it decided that would be the way the web site would be handled?

Who decides what / when/ where information is published?

Do you use content from any third party?

Is there an editorial control process? How is the control linked with formal authority within the church?

How often do the church leadership discuss or plan their web presence?

How is the budget decided ?

What kind of training or guidance have they received ? (Diocese/ denomination/ independent organisation e.g. Evangelical Alliance)

11.7.2 Final guideline questions developed

Background

Please can you tell me a little bit about yourself, the church and your main roles here. *Prompt for info on the congregation profile & general location*

Personal web use and history

EXPLAIN: Internet broadest terms; websites, gaming, iphone apps, email.

Many people think that the internet has changed life for the better. Would you agree with that?

What kinds of drawbacks are there?

What kind of use do you make of the internet for your everyday life?

What about things directly related to your role as a vicar/ church leader?

Church structure & web presence : the mechanics of getting a site out there

Who in church is responsible for web presence – volunteer/ staff

What purpose do they believe the website serves?

Have they ever measured this effectiveness?

Who makes up the primary audience?

What would their ideal website contain? Defined key messages?

Who decides what / when/ where information is published? Is the control based on authority within the church or left to others?

How often do the church leadership discuss or plan their web presence?

What kind of training or guidance have they had from their Management? Where would they start if they needed help?

Church and Social Media

EXPLAIN: By social media I mean applications that are designed for online sharing, like a blog or a Facebook account; but also Delicious, Runkeeper, LibraryThing as examples

Do you have an individual presence on social media sites? Do you read any blogs?

Does your church have a corporate presence on social media sites? Has there ever been formal discussion about a strategy for this?

Are there structures/ accounts that are outside of the main 'official' church site

Do you use mobile devices or desktop access?

How would they encourage interaction via the internet?

KEY: How do you see peer-to-peer communication having an influence on your authority within the church as a leader and teacher?

Questions for those not particularly engaged

Why not?

Specific reasons – practical, or philosophical?

What purpose do they imagine a website could serve? Any particularly successful models from elsewhere they would like to emulate?

What factors would influence your choice of method of communication?

Questions arising from the content analysis

Only some sites have links to other websites.

Should sites have these outbound links? What kind of links would be useful? Who would choose them?

Would you expect to see links or embedded Bible verses?

Things that invite interactivity – either between the church and its congregation or amongst congregations – are quite scarce; why do you think that would be?

I've started to see Facebook pages for churches; is that a useful substitute for a church site?

11.8 Interactivity results

Navigation Standard

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
Menu bar	63	20	32	20
graphic links	2		2	1
link areas	2			
changing with page	1			
navigation in book			1	
change front page on different day of week				1

Navigation Personalised

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
Search	9	5	4	3
Search calendar	1			
Choose dates from calendar	1			
Search sermons			1	
Menu bar expands	2			

Action Standard

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
Print page	3		1	
PDF page	1			
Email page	1		1	
Resize font	1			
Take poll		1		
Choose links to display		1		
Print calendar			1	
Log in			5	1
Read newsletter				1
Add documents				1
Kids' games				1
Printable view				

Action Personalised

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
Login	5	5	1	2
Change password	1			
Set as home page	1			
Register for newsletter	1		2	
Personalise Google Map				

Sign into webmail		1		
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Transaction standard

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
Download Adobe	2		1	
Download newsletter	15	8	6	2
Sermon audio	2		1	
Sermon PDF	4			
Subscribe to podcasts	1		2	
Request CD of sermons	1			
Download Gift Aid forms	1			
Poll on home page	1			
Music on loading page	1			
Download parish profile	1			
Download music	1			
Subscribe to RSS	2			
Magazine download				
Watch video	1	1	3	
Watch slideshow	1			
Audio Bible			1	
Donate via paypal				1
RSS feed				2
Download sermon	8			
Diocesan news RSS	1			
RSS of Twitter feed	1			

Transaction personalised

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
RSS feed for calendar	2			
Link to Google calendar	4			
Listen to music	1			
Email alert for page updates	1			
Subscribe to email group	1			
Search sermons		1		
Log in & personalise appearance				1

Organisation/ Individual Asynchronous

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
Contact via webform	6	4	2	2
Email link	48	18	30	18

Online prayer request	1	1		
Blog comments			1	
Guest book				1

Individual/ Individual Asynchronous

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
Forum	1		2	
Email site to friend	3			2
Links to social networking sites	2			
Blog comments			1	
Message board				1
Like on Facebook				2

Add Content

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
Sign guestbook	3			2
Edit wiki				1
Prayer request				2

Customise content

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
Download calendar	1			
Low graphics version	1		1	
Change view of calendar	2		3	2
Listen to screen reader	1			
Online tour of church				
Large print version		1		
Choose announcements		1		
Filter calendar			1	
Change list of links shown			1	
Change search options				

Other

	Anglican	Catholic	Baptist	Methodist
Premier Headlines	1			
Music	1			

Table 11-3 Actual numbers and incidences of characteristics

11.9 Denominational differences

Since the very early days, Christianity has had different sects, divisions and approaches and the modern church is not without its difficulties. The evolution of the church into different denominations who broadly agree on the basics of their faith, but often bitterly disagree on the specifics of religious practice, means that there are numerous approaches to teaching, worship and church structure across the world (Tomkins 2005).

All four English denominations in this study have some form of national body and hierarchy, but the key differences lie in the way those hierarchies are organised and the sources of authority. This is a brief sketch only of the denominations that are considered within this research project, designed to highlight why there may be differences in the way each church approaches its communications. Explanation of the fundamental theological differences is beyond the scope of this outline, but can be traced via Tomkins (2005) and useful comparisons have been provided by the website Religion Facts.³²

11.9.1 Church of England

The Church of England is now the established church. The history of this establishment is long and often brutal. In 2012, the C of E maintains a civic duty,

³² http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/charts/denominations_practices.htm, accessed 25 March 2012

and has a legislative role with 26 Bishops still part of the House of Lords as well as being the largest denomination in Britain³³.

Elected Parochial Church Councils (PCC) oversee the running of each church, led by the incumbent (whose appointment is also the PCC's responsibility). The kind of services that are held, fabric repairs, outreach and fundraising are also part of their decision-making.

The C of E says of its priests:

From ancient times through to today, they, and their bishop, are responsible for the 'cure of souls' in their parish. That includes everyone. And this explains why parish priests are so involved with the key issues and problems affecting the whole community. <http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure.aspx>, accessed 25 March 2012

11.9.2 The Baptist Union

In 1891 the General Baptists and Particular Baptists came together to form the present Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB). The first Baptist church in England had been established in 1612³⁴. The BUGB describes itself as:

...made up of churches, regional associations, the national resource centre and Baptist colleges. The Union works with others in mission locally, regionally and

³³ http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/cofe/cofe_1.shtml, accessed 25 March 2012

³⁴ <http://www.baptist.org.uk/baptist-history.html>, accessed 25 March 2012

internationally. It is a diverse union with small and large congregations, different nationalities and differing styles of worship yet united by core values and a common purpose...³⁵

Baptists think that a church should be a church of believers, not just those who are born in the local parish. They do not practice infant baptism. Their approach is not really hierarchical – they do not believe in apostolic succession. Decisions are taken at the church meeting, where each member has a vote³⁶. The meeting appoints leaders – ministers, elders and deacons, but final authority is vested in the meeting and not the leaders. The BUGB is not a denomination in the sense that the Catholic church is, as the organisation of the churches is from the grass roots rather than ‘top down.’

11.9.3 Methodist Church in Britain

The Methodist Church in Britain has 33 districts, each headed by a Chair³⁷. Each district has a number of circuits, under the leadership of a Superintendent Minister, and each circuit is made up of a number of local churches. This is similar to the structure of the C of E, with a Chair being roughly equivalent to a Bishop, except that men and women are in equal leadership positions.

³⁵ <http://www.baptist.org.uk/baptist-family.html>, accessed 25 March 2012

³⁶ http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/baptist_1.shtml, accessed 25 March 2012

³⁷ http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/methodist_1.shtml, accessed 25 March 2012

Each church is governed by its Church Council. The 'Methodist Connexion' is the whole denomination, and individual churches are part of this structure.

11.9.4 Roman Catholics

Catholics argue theirs was the church established by Jesus, and the Pope is the earthly head, St Peter being seen as the first Pope, whose authority has been directly handed down to today's leaders (apostolic succession). Protestant and Orthodox branches of Christianity have all split at various times and for various reasons from the Roman Catholic Church, indeed, there was no demarcation between different denominations for around the first thousand years of Christianity until these schisms occurred³⁸. The Catholic Church is the most hierarchical of the four denominations in this study. Catholic services are more formal and Catholics have some specific practices, including praying to saints and using rosary beads in prayer. Some High Anglican churches are identified as Anglo-Catholic and their weekly service would have more in common with a Catholic church than it would a different Anglican church in terms of liturgy, wearing of robes and use of incense, for example.

11.9.5 Key differences of note for this research project

- Church of English parishes have responsibility for everyone, not just members of the church.

³⁸ <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/denominations/catholicism.htm>, accessed 25

March 2012

- Baptists have no hierarchy within each church, Methodists also use a congregational style of governance
- Catholic hierarchy is extensive and formal.

11.10 Sample pew sheet

THE WEEK AHEAD, Monday September 17th - Sunday September 23rd

We give thanks for the Church of the Province of Uganda and for The Most Revd Henry Orombi, Archbishop. We pray for members of the Parish whose names begin with 'B' and residents of Colvin Close and Masefield Drive. In the Deanery of [REDACTED] we pray for the Rural Dean, Revd [REDACTED] and the Lay Chair, Mr [REDACTED]

MONDAY We pray for innocent victims of violence.

- 9.00am Morning Prayer
- 11.00am Holy Communion at Hill House
- 6.00pm Evening Prayer
- 6.00pm 7th Heaven in Church
- 7.45pm SL Club in Church

TUESDAY We pray for those who work in medical research.

- 9.00am Morning Prayer
- 6.00pm Evening Prayer
- 7.00pm [REDACTED] Chamber Choir at the rear of the Church
- 8.30pm [REDACTED] Choral Society in the Hall

WEDNESDAY We pray for all members of the Armed Forces, for their families who wait anxiously at home, for those wounded in body and mind and for those who have been bereaved.

- 9.00am Morning Prayer
- 10.00am Holy Communion - Open Church until 12.00noon
- 10.00am - 12.00noon Parents and Toddlers in the Hall
- 11.30am Holy Communion at Cheviot
- 12.30pm Funeral of [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] Crematorium
- 5.00pm Evening Prayer

THURSDAY We pray for the Church Army.

- 9.00am Holy Communion
- 6.00pm Evening Prayer
- 7.30pm Men's Group, Hospital Arms [REDACTED]

FRIDAY St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist

- We pray for those who will visit [REDACTED] Soup Run this evening.
- 7.30pm Beyond Blue in the Nicholls room
- 8.00pm Soup Run with Castle Methodist Church

SATURDAY We pray for the [REDACTED] Campaign.


- 9.30am - 2.00pm [REDACTED] Chamber Choir in the Hall
- 10.00am - 4.00pm Day of Prayer for Stewardship Campaign in Church

Next Sunday September 23rd Trinity XVI

- 8.00am Holy Communion (Book of Common Prayer)**
- 9.45am Parish Eucharist with Junior Church**
- 6.30pm Evensong and Sermon**

[REDACTED]
I [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

A warm welcome is extended to visitors and to those attending St [REDACTED] for the first time. Coffee, tea and soft drinks will be served after the 9.45am Parish Eucharist from the Tea Bar.



Please come and join in the fellowship.



September 16th Trinity XV

8.00am Holy Communion (Book of Common Prayer)

9.45am Parish Eucharist with Junior Church
Hymns: 192, 256, 99, 249, (blue) 337, (blue) 8, 237
(Junior Church today is led by Rachel)

5.30pm - 7.30pm OMG Film and Pizza night, The Rectory

6.30pm Evensong and Sermon
Hymns: 139, 415, 203, 12, Ps 119: 73 - 88

The Tax Justice Bus is coming to [REDACTED]

Christian Aid and Church Action on Poverty have teamed up to urge David Cameron to tackle global tax dodging. The two organisations will be touring in the Tax Justice Bus, a bright red double decker, for 53 days. The Bus will be arriving in [REDACTED] **Monday 17th Sept. at 6.30pm** opposite the Town Hall in the High Street. Drop in to look at the exhibition from 6.30pm until 7.30pm and then join us for a short service [REDACTED] Church, Eld Lane, [REDACTED] at 7.30pm with time for prayer and reflection. For more information, please visit:

www.christianaid.org.uk/tax-bus



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Readings at the Eucharist service: CWL pages 671- 673

Isaiah 50: 4-9a: Isaiah pictures a faithful servant of God who is deeply and unjustly humiliated, but remains dignified in suffering. Whatever the original context of these words, the church has always seen them as foretelling the suffering of Jesus.

James 3: 1-12: This general letter of instruction in Christian behaviour now tells us to take great care not only in what we may teach others but in everything we say. Our tongue can be greatly influential for good or for ill.

Mark 8: 27-38: Mark has already shown that opposition to Jesus simmered beneath all the popularity. Now we come to a turning point in his Gospel. He introduces the darker themes of cross and rejection - which in some way every disciple must expect to face.

Prayer

We pray for those receiving Communion at home: [redacted]

We pray for healing for: [redacted]



We pray for the departed: [redacted]

**Day of Prayer
Sat 22nd September 2012**

The Church will be open to give people an opportunity to pray for the success of our Stewardship Campaign:

- 10.00am - 10.20am Opening Act of Worship
- 10.20am - 3.40pm Silent Prayer
- 3.40pm - 4.00pm Closing Act of Worship



A guidance leaflet will be available in the Lady Chapel.

We want to ensure the Church is manned throughout the day. If you are able to commit half an hour or more please sign the list at the back of the Church.

Something to think about....

'The way that we give, both as a Church and as individuals, says something about where we are on our spiritual journey.'

Notices for the week beginning September 16th

- October Edition - Parish Magazine:** Deadline for items is TODAY. Written copy 11.00am, email copy 7.30pm. Items may be placed in the box marked 'Parish Magazine' or emailed to [redacted]
- Men's Group:** Next meet - Thursday, September 20th from 7.30pm in the Hospital Arms pub, [redacted] Contact [redacted] on [redacted] or [redacted]@btinternet.com for more details or just come along.
- 'Sunset Sessions 2012':** Saturday, September 22nd 8.00pm [redacted] Arts Centre. An amazing line up of Christian artists including GuvnaB (MOBO award winner) and special guests. Tickets £12 from Box Office.
- 'Robin Hood and the Babes in the Wood':** We are planning the next Parish Panto, and this time it's 'Robin Hood and the Babes in the Wood'. We hope to stage it in mid-January 2013 and are looking for people to get involved. We need actors, singers, dancers, backstage people, musicians, front-of-house - we welcome people of all ages with or without previous experience; if you want to help we'll find something for you. So what have you got to lose? If you are even slightly interested, why not come along and find out more? We are holding a get-together on *Sunday, 23rd September at 8.00pm at 24 [redacted] Close*. Alternatively, speak to David [redacted] give him a ring on [redacted] or e-mail him at [redacted]_j_[redacted]@msn.com'.
- 'Jubilee' House Group:** Meets on Monday, September 24th 7.30pm at the Rectory. The topic will be 'The Eucharist'. There will be an extended House Communion to give everyone an opportunity to find out more about it. All are welcome to come along - you don't have to have been before.
- Back to Church Sunday:** Songs of Praise service 30th September 6.30pm as last year. There are invitation cards for you to give to a neighbour or friend, or someone whom you know has not been to church for a while. Personal invitation always works best!
- [redacted] Is running the Royal Parks Half Marathon on October 7th, raising money for Christian Aid. If you would like to sponsor her, you can do so via 'http://www.justgiving.com/[redacted]'
- Harvest Festival 10.45am 7th October:** This year we are again supporting [redacted] Food Bank. Shopping lists are available at the back detailing items for donation. Pick up one today.
- Wanted:** Host/Hostesses for Harvest Lunch 12.30pm Sunday, October 7th. All you need to do is supply an apple pie for 8 people, look after 8 guests and enjoy yourselves! Please contact [redacted] on [redacted]
- Harvest Lunch Tickets:** On sale after services - see posters for more details and ticket prices. *Don't miss out, buy today!*

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