



Your website is your front door – the first impression

Can visitors find their way in?

This is also true with your website – now more than ever! When somebody is searching for a church or business, they are most-likely going to do an internet search to see what they can find – whether that be a phone number, physical address, worship times, or a new church altogether. A first impression occurs immediately when the seeker opens your website, just as it would if they were to walk through your church doors. Is your site welcoming? Informative? Easy to navigate without having to get around clutter? Are worship service times, and church phone number and address clearly stated at the top of the page? Is there an easy to find donate button? Are there engaging images?

Many of us go to great lengths to make sure that the front room in our home is perfectly arranged, clean, and welcoming before our guests appear. Is the same true for your website? A very wise business man told me that he wants the home-page of his website to be as welcoming as his lobby, and keeps in mind that if they have a negative experience on his website, it won't even matter what his lobby looks like. This is a great way to think about it! And, if you don't have a website, how will anybody even know you have a front door?

Bishop Brown believes that your website is one of the most powerful assets your parish owns, as it is very much at the forefront of inviting, welcoming, and connecting with our seekers, visitors, friends, and parishioners. He remarks, "Parish websites are stunning in their potential reach and their power is quite remarkable. A statistic has shown that 90% of potential church attendees will visit your website – some multiple times – long before they ever visit your building." Something this powerful is certainly worth our time, effort, and expense. Think about how much money your church used to spend on putting their listing in the Yellow Pages or an advertisement in the newspaper. Your website is more powerful than either of those and can actually cost you less.

I would ask that each of you go to your website with the below information in mind and honestly discern if your website meets these criteria. Or, have somebody unfamiliar with your church – or better yet, any church – take a look at your website and provide honest feedback. Current members are not well equipped to figure out how successful your website is at welcoming seekers. It is good to remember the purpose and who we want to reach through our websites. A parish website is first and foremost for guests and seekers and should provide great information that is current, easy to

find, friendly, and welcoming. While a church website is a good tool and resource for parishioners, they are not the primary audience. With that in mind, remember that your site should be welcoming and useful to the seeker first, then a useful tool for your parishioners and diocese – but, that information can be tucked away.

Good things to keep in mind for a quick website review are:

1. **Name of church, complete physical address, phone number** at the top of the homepage and in the footer of every page on your website. Yes, there are church websites that do not include their address and phone number. Bonus: linking to Google Maps.
2. **Worship times** located at the top of site's home-page or easily found on the home-page. A separate worship button near the top of the homepage is a great idea. The type of service, e.g. Rite II, Holy Eucharist, etc. can be tucked inside. Keeping in mind that it is good to use language that a seeker or newbie can understand.
3. **Online giving** button easily found, without scrolling or clicking. Don't assume that guests won't want to give. Seekers usually understand that churches rely on contributions and would like to support you. Bonus: have an online pledge card available. Web forms could be a good option for an online pledge card. Call me at 302.345.9392 if you would like to learn more.
4. **A welcoming image** is imperative for church websites (candid photos of people are great, but sometimes it is difficult to find the right photo for your front-page hero image and takes more tools than some parishes readily have). It's a great idea to have a photo of the outside of your church on the front page of the website, because a first-time visitor will want reassurance they're at the right place. Using a high-quality, attractive photo of your church can be helpful for several reasons. Continually changing your front image is great if you have the people and tools (to resize and compress) available to do so, but many of our churches do not and that is okay. This is when a high-quality, attractive photo of your church might be a good choice for the hero image on the home-page and will work fine. Videos as the front image are popular at the moment, but please make sure the video is not moving so quickly it interferes with the visitor trying to focus on the information they are seeking. I am happy to come to your church and take photos for you if you do not have a photographer available.
5. **Use photos** on every page to show who you are. I can't stress it enough that your photos are important and they should be of high quality. But, you don't need a pro for that. Good mobile phones can take the image you need. Get candid, compelling photos of people worshipping, doing outreach work, enjoying fellowship, and praying. It is good to be honest with your photos – be careful in walking a line between showing who you hope to be and who you are now. Remember, I am happy to come to your church to take photos if you are unable to find somebody in your congregation to do this for you.

6. DO NOT USE STOCK PHOTOS. JUST DON'T DO IT.
7. **Easy and simple navigation!** Visitors to your website want to be able to find what they need easily and quickly – assume everyone is in a hurry and a newbie. Attractive, clear, concise, and to the point on the home-page is good rule of thumb. Too many tabs and too much verbiage can seem overwhelming and cause people to click out of your site quickly. Just like a living room – too much clutter makes it harder to navigate and find what you are looking for.
8. **Scroll more, click less.** A newer statistic shows that readers now prefer to scroll instead of click (not too long ago it was the other way around). This is because, in most cases, the majority of visitors are using a cell phone and it is easier to scroll instead of click and then return. However, this doesn't mean your home page – or any page – needs to scroll until your thumbs are worn out. Moderation is a good friend here.
9. **Sites must be responsive and look great on all devices.** In most cases, over 50% of visitors will be using a mobile device. If your site only looks good and works well on a desktop all your efforts are all for naught.
10. **Your site should be secure.** You don't want your visitor to see a padlock on your browser with a red line through it or the words 'not secure'. If your website is not secure, call your webhost and ask them how to make this happen. If you are using the diocese to host your site, we will ensure all sites are secure at all times.
11. **Content must be current.** Do not show outdated events on your site. For example, when somebody is looking for your Holy Week worship schedule, they shouldn't see your Christmas service schedule in bright lights with the Easter schedule nowhere in sight. This might seem extreme, but it happens. If you are unable to keep your events current, then I would suggest not putting events on your site, and make it static – Sunday services only for example. That is not ideal, but it's better than stale information.
12. **When thinking about content within your site:**
 - Make worship seem important
 - Say something about your beliefs
 - Talk about your ministries and outreach programs, providing candid images
 - Show your social media connections
 - Introduce your staff, and make them accessible for questions
 - Talk about how children will be welcomed and provide information about your children's program, if you have one
 - Provide information on how to join the church
 - Ensure everyone would feel welcome to visit your church after viewing your site

13. **It doesn't have to be complicated, expensive, or difficult to update.** In most cases, anyone who can get around in Microsoft Word should be able to update a managed website. Three popular drag and drop sites are: WordPress, Weebly, and Squarespace. I use WordPress. For guidance and information on how to get started, please give me a call and we can talk through all of your questions and concerns, step-by-step.
14. **Finally, the diocese can host and safekeep your WordPress website and domain name** (we do this already for several churches). Give us a call to learn more. Hosting and safekeeping your site and domain name (URL) will allow the church to leave the technical, backend 'stuff' for the diocese to take care of, allowing you to concentrate on content only. It can also give you the comfort of knowing that your website and domain name are in safekeeping with the diocese. Have you experienced your site going down, or wondered who your webhost might be and what service they provide? The same with your domain name? Or maybe you've wondered, what is the difference between the webhost and domain name registrar? These things can be overwhelming for many. Also, some parishes (in Delaware as well as in other dioceses) have experienced well-intentioned parishioners or friends who have volunteered to provide this service and then, for one reason or another, have taken off without providing credentials for either the website or domain hosts. In essence, this hijacks your website and domain name. We can help answer all those questions and take on the hosting responsibility for you. Reach out – we can help.

I hope you have found this helpful and won't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. You may reach me at cbimbi@delaware.church or 302.345.9392.

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"Your website is one of the most powerful assets your parish owns. Period. How powerful is yours? What is it saying to those who might be looking to yours for Good News?"

– Bishop Brown