



Web Hosting & Web Design Best Practices



In today's communication world, nearly every organization needs a website. Think of it as the front door to your digital presence. Most churches, districts, and conference organizations of the United Methodist Church will launch a website as a tool for staying connected with members, reaching out to seekers, and visitors. Three components of the website are the domain, web hosting and website design. Web ministry is much more than having a Web presence or website. Let's be honest here, there are some fairly technical topics to deal with. But building and maintaining your site might be the perfect opportunity to find someone in your congregation who has the expertise and the calling to make this his or her ministry. You want the site to look professional and to be visually appealing. You want it to be up-to-date, from a content perspective. And most sites will need some maintenance and upkeep so that they stay technically current, as well as secure.

What is a "domain name?"

A domain name is your identity on the Internet (for example, www.vaumc.org). To set up a website, you need a domain name. Give some thought to your domain name: Try to make it as short and as easy to remember as possible, but also make it distinctive. For example, firstmethodistchurch.org won't work very well (plus it probably already is taken). Most churches will want to use a name such as xxx.org (.org is intended for nonprofit organizations). Domains are not free, typically costing about \$9.99 the first year and a bit more after that. Web hosting fees are separate in most cases; more about that later. If you can afford it, consider purchasing variations on your name (1stmethodistchurch.com), as well as different extensions (.com, .net, .). That prevents someone creating a site with a very similar name and using it in ways you might not like. You can buy your name separately, but it is easier the first time to purchase it at same time you buy your hosting package.

What is web hosting?

Just as computer files need to reside on your computer, a web page needs a place to call home, which is called web hosting. The difference between the two is that web pages are generally intended to be seen by the public. To do this, the computer where the files stored must be more robust than a personal computer, and must be connected to the Internet through a fast and reliable link. The computer where the web pages are stored is called a web server (because it serves pages to users on the Internet). All the web pages in the world comprise what we refer to as the World Wide Web (www).

Shameless plug: One of the best options to consider as a United Methodist congregation is the domain registration and web hosting service provided by UMC Communications (<http://www.umcom.org/services-products/web-services>). Several packages are available; the \$5 a month package to \$19.95 a month. The site also offers good support for beginners, including some web-based training.

What do web hosting companies do?

As well as providing web space, hosting companies also provide a number of other "value-added" services. The extent of these services varies from company to company but most provide the registration of domain names, email services, and tech support.

Are there different kinds of web hosting?

Yes, there are many different varieties of web hosting, designed to meet different needs. A two-page website set up by an individual will need far less services than a multinational high-traffic site.

Amount of web space is how much web space the web hosting company allows you to use for your website. Many hosting providers advertise unlimited space or have plans that allow you to grow your site as the com-

plexity of it grows. Read the fine print though because some allow unlimited space only during an introductory period, then afterwards the cost may increase.

Email addresses are another part of web hosting. All website owners should have email accounts with the same domain name as their website for a professional look (for example, pastor@domainname.org). Depending on which hosting package you buy, the method of setting up your email accounts will vary slightly. (Again, UMC Communications makes this extremely easy and the email can flow to an existing gmail account. The \$5 a month package includes five email addresses.) The hosting company will be able to walk you through this process. Once the emails are set up, you will need to know how to access them. Most people use Outlook or Outlook Express. There are tutorials online for this process and some hosting companies even provide that information for you. Different hosting companies allow for different numbers of email addresses so be sure to read the small print to get the numbers of emails you need without extra fees.

Bandwidth refers to the amount of data your website can transmit to web users. For example, if a web page in your website is 10 kilobytes (roughly about 1000 words on the page), and one Internet user views it, you have used 10 kilobytes of bandwidth. If 10 users request that page, you have used 100 kilobytes of bandwidth. Bandwidth is normally measured monthly. Most small websites will typically require half a gigabyte (52,000 web pages) of bandwidth per month. Some companies offer you "unlimited bandwidth". What it really means is that there are no set limits, but if your website attracts too much traffic, they will either close it down or contact you for an upgrade. Another factor to consider is what happens if you go above your allotted bandwidth. This is known as bandwidth overage. Some companies will switch off your website if this happens. Others will tack on additional monthly charges. Check the small print for any hidden bandwidth charges. Often extra bandwidth is charged at a much higher rate than your normal allowance. Again, if you plan to have a lot of video content, you need to be especially aware of your bandwidth; nothing is worse than a slow-loading, jerky video.

Features and components

Most websites are more than static web pages, and provide some degree of interactivity, including:

- forms for users to fill in, which email the data to the website owner
- databases which contain details of many products on offer
- ability for website users to send files to the website owner via the website

All web hosting accounts offer the ability to store static web pages. If you want the interactivity, you need to ensure that the host company offers the relevant components. Website scripting means you can tailor your web pages to behave in certain ways, using various scripts. Storing and retrieving data and sending emails are all done via special script which is embedded in your web page. Make sure your hosting package allows for several scripting languages, including PHP, Java, Perl, Active Server Pages (ASP) and .Net (ASP.NET).

What kind of web hosting do I need?

The hosting package you choose will depend on what kind of website you wish to set up, and how big you think it may get. For small congregations, a plan that allows 10 email addresses, 1GB of web space and 20GB of bandwidth is a great start. Most come with a dedicated control panel for easy email set up. If you expect your site to get a lot of traffic (say 1000+ hits per day) you may want to consider a hosting package that offers 2GB of web space and 100GB of bandwidth.

Once I have web hosting how do I get my website online?

Once you've decided on your web hosting package, you will need to design your website and get it online. This isn't as hard as it sounds. There are thousands of sites built by people who have no experience! If you don't have experience in creating a website or don't have the funds to hire a professional, use a template with content management capabilities such as WordPress, Drupal, or Joomla. Many hosting companies have their own templates as well. If you want to take it a step further, you can buy a software program, such as Microsoft Expression or Adobe Dreamweav-

er that will help you create and edit your web pages. Some hosting companies offer an editor as well.

If you aren't using WordPress, Joomla, etc., you should initially create your website on your computer. Once it's ready upload it to the web servers. Be sure to check it against different browsers (Firefox, Internet Explorer, Safari, etc.). Browsers tend to treat websites differently.

As part of the process of setting up web space, the hosting company will send you the username, password, and other details needed to access your web space on their servers. You may need to set up your web page editing software with these details. How to do this will vary between programs. There are tutorials online to help you with this process. Once the files are uploaded to the servers, people can access them via Internet!

Recommended Hosting services

iPage.com	Hostmonster.com	ShareFaith.com	JustHost.com	WebHostingHub.com
E-zekial.com	Web.com	Fatcow.com	HopOffaCloud.com	Hostgater.com
InmotionHosting.com	Dreamhost.com	Bluehost.com	Greengeeks.com	UMC Communications

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