

Your website is a shop window



Communications adviser **Neil Pugmire** urges parishes to make more of their online presence

IMAGINE you're buying a new book, booking a holiday or researching a topic for college or work. The chances are that you head online and hit Google.

Funnily enough, so do people who move house and search for a new church, who want to get married or have their children baptised, or who feel curious about God. They rarely drive around looking at church buildings or noticeboards. As with so many other things, their research is largely done online. I wonder what they might think about your church's website?

Firstly, will they definitely be able to find it? Google's policy is increasingly to display more prominently those websites that can be viewed on mobile phones. If yours looks great on a laptop, but awful on a mobile, it may be becoming increasingly invisible.

Whether your website is 'mobile-friendly' is becoming important for other reasons. Around 87 per cent of online interactions now take place on mobiles and tablets with touchscreens. Old-fashioned layouts with menu options down the left-hand side simply won't work. In fact, many kind of drop-down menus are difficult to operate on phones.

Most modern websites these days

are what we call 'responsive' - in other words, the images and text automatically change size to look their best, whether they are being viewed on a laptop, tablet or mobile phone. Is yours?

And what kind of information should it include? Well, you can see your website as a shop window that allows people on the outside to see all the great things that go on in your church.

Explain why your church is so great to those who've never been

You can explain just what makes your church so great - its friendliness, its musical tradition or its family-friendly services. You can explain what actually happens on a Sunday morning, or in your toddlers group or lunch club for those who have never been.

You can include details that visitors always need, but that we often forget to provide: what's the postcode, so they can find the church via SatNav? Does it have toilets? Is there parking nearby? Are children welcome?

It used to be the case that

webmasters were discouraged from including large images because they would take a long time to download. These days, with almost ubiquitous broadband and mobiles that can handle plenty of data, it's less of an issue. Each of your web pages should ideally include at least one large photo of someone enjoying that specific church activity.

And you could film some video footage of those activities, to give people a better idea of what you offer before they even cross your threshold - with the permission of those featured, of course.

Our diocese runs a scheme offering parishes responsive websites with a contemporary design, plus full training in how to edit it and ongoing support afterwards. We already host around 30 parish websites. If you're interested, see www.portsmouth.anglican.org/parishwebsites for more.

If you don't feel able to maintain a website, your church's details already feature on the 'A Church Near You' website, so do make sure they are up-to-date. And from this autumn, you'll also get the chance to turn your parish's page on that site into a simple website of its own. See www.achurchnearyou.com for details.