

JUL 2023

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Research Report

Church Website

UX Study

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Introduction

Some churches redesign their website every 2 to 3 years. And that was before a global pandemic forced churches to rethink how they engage people online.

So what makes a good church website in 2023? We began exploring the answer at the start of the year. But as we reviewed hundreds of prominent church websites, the question changed.

What makes a good church website?

There is no shortage of technology, products, designers, and experts for standard church websites. If you are a typical U.S. church with 65 people,¹ you have plenty of products to choose from.

But there is a gap in products and solutions for multisite churches. Research needs to explore how multisites can better engage people online.

- » What's working?
- » What's not?
- » What are the unique challenges that multisites face?

In 2022, we surveyed and interviewed 32 churches and assessed hundreds of additional church websites to discover their unique needs and pinpoint best practices and solutions.

This report delves into key highlights from our study.

¹ 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT), “Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview,” 11. In the past twenty years of this survey effort, the median attendance size has decreased by over 50% from 137 to 65 attendees in weekly worship services. This means that at least 175,000 faith communities (half of 350,000) in the country have 65 or fewer people in attendance on any given weekend.
<https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>

Behind the Research

The churches we surveyed come from a broad spectrum of denominations, cultures, geography, and ministry models. While the majority of these churches are listed among the largest and fastest-growing U.S. churches, we interviewed churches as small as 600 in-person weekly attendance and as large as 45,000 in-person weekly attendance.

Geography

- 25% from U.S. Midwest
- 22% from U.S. Northeast
- 22% from U.S. Southwest
- 16% from U.S. South
- 15% from U.S. West

Regional Scope

- 62% located in a single metro
- 16% located in multiple states
- 1% located in multiple countries

Denominations

Denominations represented include but are not limited to:

- Baptist General Convention
- Christian & Missionary Alliance
- Evangelical Free
- Nondenominational
- Presbyterian Church of America
- Southern Baptist Convention
- United Methodist Church

User Experience (UX)

How are people experiencing your website?

Your website's purpose is more than displaying information. You should be curating, crafting, and cultivating how people interact, perceive, and respond to the content.

User experience (UX) considers how to tailor your website to the needs of specific users. Every element matters - the words you use, the visual design, the layout, the navigation, and how people interact with and flow through the site. It's not just subjective. Good user experience design uses strategy, research, and testing to hone solutions that work.

Examples of UX Insights

- People scan your website based past on their past assumptions, experiences, and culture.
- The most important information should go in the either the top third or left third of a webpage that is above the fold (i.e., the part that is viewable before scrolling down).
- Write for 7th graders because the average person reads at an 8th grade level.
- Break information into small chunks to make it easier to digest.
- If you want something to get attention, design it to look different from the rest of the webpage.
- Design for colorblindness, which affects 9% of men and 1% of women. You can test your website's color accessibility with tools like:
<https://www.toptal.com/designers/colorfilter>

UX: User Segments

Define the specific users you want to design for by creating user segments and high-level user bios or high-level user personas. For churches, four user types that serve as a great starting point are *Prospective Visitors*, *Not Yet Connected*, *Engaged Regulars*, and *Church Leadership*. But don't stop there. We recommend adding some personality and details by creating high-level personas to help you think through how they might actually use the site. Below are some generic examples to serve as a starting point.

Prospective Visitors

- New to town family with a teenager and a 7-year-old (with peanut allergy).
- Recently divorced mother with 2 young children.
- College student who loves Jesus but has been burned by their last church and cares deeply about the homeless.

Not Yet Connected

- Spiritually curious young professional (in wheelchair).
- Young mixed-race couple interested in Bible study & peer groups.
- Shy single woman craving connection but unsure where to start.

Engaged Regulars

- Long-time members with a new address and a rocky marriage.
- Recently retired couple looking to give back.

Church Leadership

- Centralized communications staff member.
- Ministry director

UX: Site Navigation

The site navigation is one of the first elements that visitors interact with on your site. Optimize the navigation to make it easier for them to find what they need.

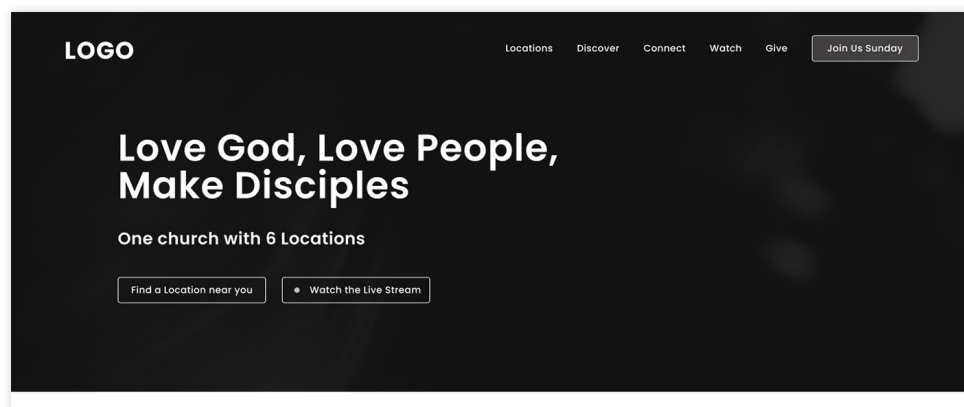
- **Design the navigation for what users want.**
What are they looking for? Their priorities may not always align with your priorities, so identify any misalignments. Focus on the answers & outcomes they need rather than your preferences.
- **Make all content discoverable within 1-3 clicks.**
The longer it takes to find content the more likely they are to leave. Keeping all content to 2-3 layers deep is easier for users, but it does require intentional design.
- **Limit the main navigation to 3-5 options (6 max).**
And when possible, keep those options limited to single words. Too many options slow users down and lead to fewer decisions. And more than 6 options may cause users to not fully process the choices.
- **Design for mobile phones first.**
People use their phones... a lot. Mobile cannot be an afterthought. Begin with the mobile strategy.

Sample Main Menu

Examples of main navigation menus that work well for churches are:

Locations About Connect Watch Give Join us Sunday [button]

Visit Discover Connect Watch Give Join us Sunday [button]



UX: Site Navigation

Most Common Main Menu Options

An analysis of the main navigations from 50 church websites (single location & multisites) identified the following as the most common menu options.

86%	Give (Giving, Ways to Give)
80%	Watch (Sermons, Messages, Listen, Media)
76%	About (Who We Are, About Us, Discover)
40%	Locations (Campuses)
38%	Connect (Get Connected, Grow)
34%	Events
20%	Church Online (Attend Online, Watch Online, Watch Live)
18%	New Here? (I'm New, Start Here)
16%	Ministries
16%	My Profile (Login, Sign In, Account)
14%	Next Steps
14%	Contact
14%	Home
12%	Groups (Life Groups, Find a Group, Join a Group)
12%	Get Involved
12%	Care (Get Support)
10%	Visit (Plan a Visit, Join Us Sunday, Come Visit)
10%	Serve (Volunteer)
10%	Grow
8%	Resources
6%	Store
6%	Missions
6%	News (Happening Now)
6%	Blog
4%	Worship
4%	Jesus (Know God)
4%	Help

UX: Church Homepage

Your website has less than 50 milliseconds to make a good impression. That's faster than 0.05 seconds. Twice as fast as the blink of an eye.

Gitte Lindgaard's research¹ set the 50 ms benchmark in 2006 by discovering that people judge a website's visual appeal almost instantaneously. Then a team of Google researchers² measured first impressions as quickly as 17 ms in 2012.

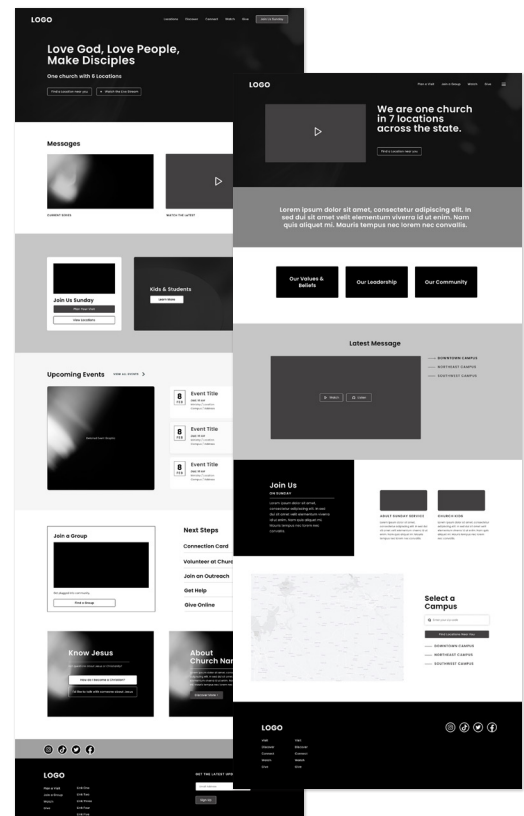
Google's research discovered "users strongly prefer website designs that look both simple and familiar. If the visual complexity of a website is high, users perceive it as less beautiful, even if the design is familiar. And if the design is unfamiliar, users judge it as uglier, even if it's simple."³

Your church's homepage should be tightly honed in for new visitors who have yet to form a first impression about you.

Sample Homepage Content

An example of homepage content that works well for churches is:

- Hero Banner
- Latest Message and/or Current Series
- Plan a Visit / What to Expect
- Kids / Families
- Events
- Groups
- Next Steps
- Select a Campus Map
- Jesus / Altar Call
- About
- Newsletter



1 Lindgaard G., Fernandes G. J., Dudek C. & Brown J. Behav. Inf. Technol., 25. 115 - 126 (2006).

2 Alexandre N. Tuch Eva Presslaber Markus Stoecklin Klaus Opwis Javier Bargas-Avila International Journal of Human-Computer Studies, vol. 70(11), pp. 794-811 (2012).

3 Javier Bargas-Avila, "Users love simple and familiar designs – Why websites need to make a great first impression", (2012).

UX: Site Navigation

Most Common Homepage Content Options

An analysis of the homepage content from 15 church websites identified the following as the most common content.

Hero Banner (100%) [Static Hero (73%), Video Loop Hero, (27%) Hero Tagline (47%)], Featured Event(s) (67%), Give (67%), Plan a Visit / What to Expect (60%), Social Media (60%), Latest Message (60%), Current Series (53%), Kids / Families (47%), Featured Next Steps (47%), Newsletter (47%), Groups / Outreach (33%), Volunteer (33%), Featured Program (27%), Get Involved (20%), Jesus / Testimony (20%), Meet Pastor (20%), Multiple Calls-to-Action Module (20%), Prayer (20%), Resources (20%), Beliefs (13%), Bible Reading Plan (13%), Blog / Podcast (13%), Ministries (13%), Featured Content (13%), Worship (13%), Church Online (7%), Invite a Friend (7%), Our Stories (7%)

Page Order of Most Common Homepage Content

An analysis of the average order on the page that the most popular content appears is as follows. In this case, most popular is defined as used by 27%+ of sites.

Usage Rate	Page Order	
100%	1.0	Hero Banner (static image with tagline)
60%	3.7	Latest Message
53%	3.9	Current Series
60%	4.1	Plan a Visit / What to Expect
47%	5.6	Kids / Families
47%	6.3	Featured Next Steps
27%	6.3	Featured Program
67%	6.5	Give
33%	6.6	Groups / Outreach
67%	6.7	Featured Event(s)
33%	8.4	Volunteer
47%	9.3	Newsletter
60%	10.4	Social Media

User Journey: Visitor

View your website through the eyes of a first-time visitor.

Step 1: First Impression

When I visit your website, it takes 0.2 seconds for me to start forming a first impression and 2.6 seconds¹ to reach the section that most influences my first impression. I scroll through the homepage's top sections and form opinions about who you are, if I like the design, and if I can trust you.

Those seconds determine whether I stay or go.

- According to one study, trustworthiness is 94% design (including usability) and 6% content.²
- Your design is your credibility. You can't stop people from making assumptions, but you can create an image that produces the right assumptions.
- Keep it simple. Easy to scan and digest. Limit how many options are visible at a time.
- Use happy, welcoming imagery of your church in action (worshipping, greeting each other & serving).

Step 2: Do I fit in?

In the next 10-60 seconds, I quickly scan the homepage to gauge if your church is a culture fit and to look for any red flags. This is BEFORE I dive deeper via clicking on any buttons or links.

- Is this church actually in my city?
- Are there clues about your church's beliefs, priorities, or approaches?
- Do I see photos of people like me? Would I fit in?
- What are the teaching and worship styles?
- Is Jesus mentioned at all?

¹ Missouri University of Science and Technology. "First impressions form quickly on the web, eye-tracking study shows." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 16 February 2012.

² Proceedings of the 2004 Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, CHI 2004, Vienna, Austria, April 24 - 29, 2004.

User Journey: Visitor

Step 3: Diving Deeper

If I am still interested in possibly visiting after scanning the homepage, I MAY want to dig deeper into an area BEFORE coming to the decision to click on a button/link or visit in person.

- Can I find a link to beliefs, values, or church history?
- Can I find more information about children's ministry (safety, curriculum, etc)?
- Can I discover who the pastor and leaders are?
- Can I a sample sermon?
- Can they accommodate a special need (sign language, autism, etc.)?
- Does the church support causes or offer ministries that matter to me (e.g. foster care)?

Step 5: Planning a Visit

If I am strongly considering visiting your church, then I would like to find detailed information about my first visit so I feel more comfortable.

- Can I view and select locations (if I haven't already)?
- Can I find the service times & address (or get directions)?
- Are there any special arrival instructions (parking, where to go, etc)?
- How should I dress?
- Do you have classes for my kids' age group?
- Do I need to pre-register?
- How do I contact the kids ministry about a question (e.g. allergy, disability)?
- Can I contact a welcome team if I have questions or to let them know I'm coming?

User Journey:

New Attendee (not yet connected)

Consider what information a new attendee might need. How can they go from “not yet connected” to “engaged?” Can they easily find what they need in 1-3 clicks?

Connect

- Find an available group near me & show interest in joining.
- Find a relevant ministry & take the first step to connect.
- Review serving opportunities & sign up to serve.
- View upcoming events & register (or add to my calendar).
- Sign up for a class/gathering for new people.

Follow

- Sign up for emails.
- Sign up for text messaging.
- Subscribe to the podcast.
- Follow on social media.

Seek Spiritual Answers

- Find information about who Jesus is.
- Discover how I can become a Christian.
- Ask someone about Jesus or spiritual questions.
- Search for sermons on a topic I'm curious about.

Grow Spiritually

- Listen to a sermon I missed.
- Look for devotional or spiritual growth resources.
- Learn more about baptism & how to sign up.
- Get help, support, or counseling (1-on-1 or from a group).
- Give financially for the first time.

User Journey: Regular Attendee

Is it easy for regular attendees to find and access what they need?

Update My Data

- Update contact info, family details, etc.

Give

- Sign in to my giving profile.
- Make a one-time donation.
- Set up a recurring donation.
- Edit a recurring donation (i.e., payment method, billing address, frequency & amount).
- Cancel a recurring donation.

Serve

- Learn about volunteer opportunities.
- Sign up to volunteer on Sundays.
- Join an outreach team.
- Complete background checks & training.
- View volunteer schedule & manage availability.

Lead

- Find resources to invite someone to church.
- Indicate interest to lead or host a group.
- Sign up for discipleship or evangelism training.

We are here to help if you need us.

We hope you find this research helpful. We sure did.

Using the insights, we created better [UX frameworks](#), a [location finder tool](#), and a [sermon player](#) optimized for both single site and multisite church websites.

For a demo, a site audit, or to explore a new website, say hello at support@missionlab.dev

