Effective Church Newsletters Workshop

New Jersey Association Meeting on October 16, 2004
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Work on the newsletter with love.

It is not just one more task on the to-do list. Really. Newsletters build community, and thus are part of our core ministry, not a peripheral activity.

Who are the readers of church newsletters?

The church newsletter holds a special place among all the ways of keeping church members informed with what is going on. One does not have to be publishing "pro" to produce an effective and informative newsletter. Today's computerized tools are great and you can produce neat, eye-catching pages using your favorite word processing program. At the other end of the spectrum, there are programs like Quark XPress that are actually designed for producing professional caliber publications.

> A newsletter keeps folks connected with the church. This is not just a task -- it is essential ministry.

Regardless of your computerized tools, there are some basic principles that apply to all good church newsletters. Remember why you are doing it in the first place. It is so easy to get so caught up in the details of meeting newsletter deadlines that we lose sight of why we are doing it all.

- It keeps **active members** up to date on upcoming worship opportunities, activities, and meeting.

- It also helps to keep **occasional attendees** up to date and feeling connected to the church even if health problems, lack of mobility, or family demands keep them from attending regularly. This is a vitally important function.

- It presents to visitors and "friends of the church" the range of activities that the church offers and thus is an important aid to church growth.

- It also **keeps the Christmas-and-Easter-only folks** still connected with the church, subtly reminding them where there church home is.

- It also keeps former **members who have moved away** but who still love your congregation connection with the congregation. So the church newsletter is not just a paper "bulletin board", it is a vital vehicle in keeping people feeling connected with the church.

- By keeping people connected with the church it not only fosters our sense of community but it also contributes to stewardship as well.

Get the names right!

In every congregation, there are some difficult last names, some confusing first names, and some multi-career, blended families, and other situations in which we need to be careful and precise about what last name to use. If a church is to really be "family," it is actually *hurtful* to have our brothers and sisters make mistakes with out names. Get it right. Make notes in the church directory to remind you. Get feedback if there is a mistake one time and don't repeat the mistake. This is not editorial nit-picking. Rather it is showing that we care about each other. It really matters.

The newsletter is an extraordinarily good vehicle to help introduce new members. *This is vital*. It helps those who missed the "live introduction" during the welcoming service and it also provides the exact names — once again with correct spelling, children's names, and clarity about one or two different last names — to help everybody welcome them.

A newsletter is the single, trusted source for all of the details about church activities.

Like getting the names correct, check, double-check, and check again the times, dates, and locations of events. Double-check for conflicts. Once you've got the correct information, put it on page one. The newsletter is where people look for what is coming up, so don't make them dig for it and certainly, don't make them find worship schedule on one page, youth programs on another,

> Did I say yet that you simply can't have too much about children?

and committee meetings sprinkled throughout. You can repeat the times in the individual articles, but the newsletter IS THE CHURCH CALENDAR. *This is not to say that your church may not have an excellent web site with the same information, but a significant number of people do not use the web and you can't shove your web browser in your pocket to read on the train or while waiting for the dentist.* It is a ton of work to be comprehensive and correct, but it is worth every bit of effort. And once you earn the reputation

as the single-trusted-source, the info will come to you automatically, with much less effort required to chase it down.

The standard contact information is not an afterthought but an important feature.

In addition to information on changing events, the newsletter needs to always serve as the quick reference to the basic church information. Although it has appeared a hundred times before, with each issue SOMEBODY will reach for the newsletter to find the church phone, fax, web address, office hours, or Sunday School hours. It does not have to take up a lot of space, but it needs to be there...and if the hours change in the summer, the information needs to change because "not everybody knows it".

Brag about your congregation...they will love you for it!

Beyond posting the details of upcoming church events, the newsletter is the church's best medium to brag and to say thank you. Any opportunity to thank children *by name*, to recognize their participation in events *by name*, or to recognize their achievements *by name* helps to build their sense of belonging to the church and their sense of being loved by the church.

Many churches find a particularly popular item is a list of birthdays (no years) and anniversaries. And of course, it is impossible to mention children's names too frequently. I think I might have read this someplace before.

It's easy to add photos and artwork with today's tools

One does not have to be a great designer to produce a great church newsletter. It is important to remember, however, that solid pages of type are not visually inviting. There are many sources for nice, clean, attractive clip art that is easy to use and easy to resize. The Communications Resources Company (www.comresources.com) is a treasure trove of inexpensive art and help exclusively focused on church bulletins and newsletters. They sell great clip art collections on CD -- black and white, color, photos, high resolution, low resolution, seasonal, cartoons, calligraphy scripture passages, etc. quite reasonably. My wife and I have used them extensively and recommend them highly. It only takes one or two images to liven up a page. Used judiciously, boxes,
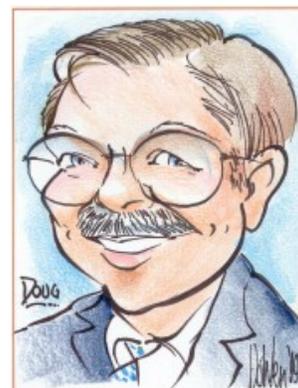
borders, and areas with shaded backgrounds all help to break up a solid page of type. But in general, use graphics and boxes as you would use salt in cooking.

Depending on how you produce the final newsletter – laser printer, photocopier, or printed – will determine how well you can incorporate photographs. Almost all output devices today do an acceptable job of reproducing photos. The current crop of digital cameras provides a quick, inexpensive, flexible, and endless source of illustrations. Even the promotional-quality $150 digital cameras work very well for this…while the $300 variety is just plain fantastic.

Essential to good design is coming up with a few good page templates

Work out a few page templates so that the newsletter has a sense of consistency from page to page, but also enough variation to be visually interesting. Simple layouts usually work out better than complex ones (unless you really are a publishing professional). Bear in mind, though, that not all columns have to be the same width. Look at newsstand magazines and you will see a trend to blend one wide column with a pair of narrow columns on a page. This works particularly well using the wide column for the text-intensive items such as the pastor's letter, and the narrow columns for items that contain lists of names.

Promise yourself that you will get the names of children in every issue. Nothing you do will have a greater long-term impact. Nothing.

Another trick of professional designers is to use more ragged right composition and less fully justified type. *It just gives a friendlier and less business-like feel to the page.* Also, although our computers can easily justify type, they to do so by hyphenating many words. This can be particularly irksome when they occur within peoples' names.

Now for a real secret from a professional magazine design (shhh...promise not to tell anyone). For all of our normal business and school writing, we use the combination of *Times Roman* and *Arial* typefaces on our computers. This assures that no matter what computer or printer is used to read and print our files, they will print correctly.

With our own newsletter, however, we control the output device and we are free to break out of the Times/Arial mold and give the newsletter some sense of style. We can deliberately make it look a little different from everything else people are reading each week. Experiment with the typefaces you already have on your computer. You are likely to find some wonderful fonts. As a starting point, instead of *Times Roman*, try *Bodoni, Palatino*, or *Garamond*. As an alternative to *Ariel*, check out *Eras, Futura, Helvetica*, and if you can find it, *Gil Sans*. I have set this paragraph in *Gil Sans* to let you see for yourself.

Several recent titles from our own Pilgrim Press are using the wonderful, innovative, and highly readable *Stone* typefaces. I am setting this paragraph in *Stone Informal* so you can see it for yourself and compare it with the *Times Roman* in the following paragraphs. The font was designed specifically to be readable whether set on a desktop laserprinter or high quality typesetter. Check it out on the web. If you like it, it can be licensed very inexpensively from many sources.

Unlock the power of your PC

PC's take a lot of the drudgery out of producing newsletters. Being able to store items and reuse them without retyping or photocopying is a great blessing…while the on-line dictionaries, thesaurus, spelling checker and grammar checkers — while far from infallible — are still wonderfully useful tools. Use the tools that come with your PC…they are worth investing the time to learn them and master them.

> You remember the point about the kids' names, right?

Also, there is a new generation of color laserprinter (not ink jet) for under $400 that produces full color pages. While the supplies are not inexpensive they are dramatically lower than ink jet cartridges. While it might still be cost-prohibitive to do every page of every newsletter on a color laserprinter, doing one really eye-catching full color cover and all black and white on the inside is a very effective compromise. If you think about it this is exactly what most commercial magazines have done for many years.

Get organized!

Make one physical box for all your newsletter papers. One. In the same way, create just one directory or folder on your computer. One. Just one. Things get lost physically, and things get lost electronically, but having one physical and one electronic bin gives you a fighting chance at controlling the chaos.

Plug the web site

A good newsletter goes hand-in-hand with a good web site — but never forget that they function quite differently. Wherever possible, promote web site...especially if it has full text sermons, color images, the entire annual report, and other stuff you can't put in newsletter. At the same time, remember that people have to take the initiative and log onto the web site to get the information. Sending the newsletter to people through the mail puts it into their hands without forcing them to take the first step. This is an important distinction. In the same way, people can read the newsletter on the train, while waiting to pick up the kids, and so forth. It is also a lot easier to circle an item on the page of the newsletter and put it up on the refrigerator door.