

in a world of blogs, websites, tweets,  
video, & facebook pages. . . . .

Are written  
bulletins  
still needed in  
church?

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# Are written bulletins still needed in the church?

The question that prompted me to write this book was:

***“We’re doing our announcements on PowerPoint and we have all the information about our weekly activities on our website. We are an outreach oriented, contemporary church and our staff has been wondering—do we still need a written bulletin also in this age of technology?”***

This is a great question and one many churches are asking. The answer is more complex than a simple “yes” or “no,” because it’s part of the overall trend in communications today that involves every message we try to communicate to bring people into the church and to grow them to Christian maturity.

## **The all-encompassing trend in communications today, both in and outside the church: multi-channel**

The church bulletin is not the only church communication involved, but in this time of shifting and constantly new ways to communicate that bombard our lives in and outside the church, church communicators often ask:

***Is there ONE way to communicate that works best for churches today? If so, it is print as we’ve always done it? Or something new— the web, blogs, podcasts, video, email, PowerPoint? Is it social media such as Facebook, Twitter and whatever else new thing comes up?***

Understandably churches feel overwhelmed by the volume of communication that needs to take place. We want to reach our world, but this question also expresses the unstated desire that if a church could just concentrate on one or two technologically powerful tools, church communications would be so much easier. Though this desire is understandable, unfortunately, communications isn’t an area where church life can be simplified.

We live in a time of both/and, not either/or in technology and communication. We must keep adding new ways to communicate and we can’t completely drop any of the old ones if we want to reach the world Jesus called us to reach. Though demanding, communicating in a multi-channel setting is possible and may even be a bit exciting.

The rest of this publication will explain our current situation and provide some practical advice, particularly in the area of the church bulletin.

The website: [www.effectivechurchcom.com](http://www.effectivechurchcom.com) has many more articles, resources, webinars and information on Multi-channel Communication and at the back of the booklet is a resource list that will help you.

## Why communications in the church can't be limited to one or two channels

*We need every kind of communication from business cards to blogs if we are to reach our world **because our world is made of many kinds of people who prefer different ways of taking in messages.***

The reason we can't simplify communication to one or two methods is because, in the church today, we have people who span every level of involvement in technology from those who are never unhooked from their web-enabled cell phone to those who will live long, happy, and fulfilled lives and never go online.

Pastorally we can't ignore people who want to receive church communications in a way that we consider outdated. In addition, though it's easy to forget this, especially if you work in a church office with an adequate technology budget, not all the people in your congregation have smart phones that are video capable and many do not have a computer at home. If they do have a computer they may not have the same high-speed access to videos that you had when created them. Not everyone enjoys Facebook and YouTube. For many handwritten notes from the pastor and printed calendars that are easy-to-read and post mean far more than the latest cutting edge graphics.

In addition to pastoral concerns, in outreach if we follow the biblical command to "be all things to all people that we might win some," yes, we need the latest tech tools and means of communication, but along with the killer website and church Facebook page, plus the fantastic PowerPoint and video shows at worship, church business and invitation cards as well as postcards and door-hangers can accomplish significant results in church marketing of special events.

For both pastoral uses and for outreach, we live in an age where we do need to keep adding forms of communication technology to our ministry, but where we can't really do away with anything. We need to communicate through every available channel so that no matter where people are in terms of technology they can understand and respond to our message. One of the most important tools to do this is the church bulletin.

### What being outreach-oriented means to church communications

In addition, if a church is truly outreach oriented, and if newcomers are attending each week, though we may feel that cutting edge technology is useful for the worship service and image, it may not touch people who are new to the church.

*Without a printed bulletin to refer to, a visitor to your church may be confused about what is going on.*

For example, if someone comes in late, if they had trouble parking or locating child care, they may not make it into the service to see the PowerPoint announcements. Also a new person may not even know you have a website or what is on it. Without a written bulletin they will have no idea what sort of activities you offer during the week or what is happening in the worship service itself.

*The most impressive music and worship videos won't be appreciated if the visitor doesn't know what it means or how to respond.*

For a truly unchurched person to visit your church, for a service to start with 30 minutes of people singing songs they don't know and the performance of an often amateur skit, all with no explanation of what it's all about and not knowing what comes next, isn't particularly "seeker-friendly."

I often remind pastors that it can be a mentally challenging obstacle course for a new person to make it to the part of your service where you present your relevant and life-changing sermon. A written bulletin can explain the process and purpose and put the worship activities in perspective from the minute a visitor sits down, whether they arrive early or late.

One way to solve the challenge of how to inform people about what is going on at a church service is to have a clear Order of Worship in the bulletin. Some churches have done away with this key informational section because they assume “everyone knows what’s going on.” If the church operates on that assumption for long it will become true because visitors won’t come back a second time.

Having an Order of Service doesn’t need to be what it was in the past (though many traditional ones are excellent examples of great communication). Below are examples of how two totally different churches handled this challenge:

## Two examples of an Order of Service for Church Bulletins

*These examples are from: Ministry Marketing Made Easy, by Yvon Prehn. This book is currently under revision. Sign up for our newsletter on [www.effectivechurchcom.com](http://www.effectivechurchcom.com) to be informed of its future publication.*

The Order of Service is one of the most important parts of the church bulletin for both visitors and longtime members. For visitors it is literally the “program” and without it they can be confused and frustrated because they won’t understand what is going on or what’s next. For longtime members it can serve to remind them of why they do what they do.

There are many ways a church can improve the order of service to make it more understandable to visitors. Below are two of my favorites, sent to me from seminar participants. Many seminar participants have asked for these and I’ve reprinted below for you. Feel free to copy, modify, use anything that might help make your church service more understandable.

### **An order of service for a contemporary church:**

The following is from an church bulletin for a contemporary, charismatic church. It didn’t assume folks knew anything about what would happen and they explained in this way:

**Our Worship Service:** thanks for joining us today! We will begin with about 30-40 minutes of singing. Feel free to sit, stand, sing, dance or just listen as we express our worship to God using all of our heart, mind, soul and body. If you don’t know the songs, hang on, we’ll sing them a couple of times-and don’t worry, we didn’t know them at first either.

**The Message:** A time of practical teaching from the Bible.

**The Offering:** This is a time for church members to share with the church financially how God has blessed them. If you are a visitor, don’t feel you have to contribute-the only gift we’d like from you is your Connection Card. Consider this service our gift to you!

**Prayer Time:** there will be people up front after the service to pray for any needs you may have. Please come up if interested!

**Refreshments:** Join us for coffee, lemonade and munchies in the lobby after the service.

The above bulletin wasn’t complex or fancy, but a stranger would know what to do and wouldn’t feel awkward.

**ed. note:** Since I started sharing these ideas, a number of churches have used this shortened statement, either on the cover of their

bulletin or as a header on the service order page: ***“Feel free to sit, stand, sing, dance or just listen as we express our worship to God using all of our heart, mind, soul, and body.”*** This little statement alone is tremendously freeing and comforting to a visitor. Also, you don’t have to change it each week, it can remain the same and yet it says so much in just a few words.

### Explanations in a liturgical bulletin

This style of service has its own challenges. Though in many Lutheran churches, and in churches with a similar worship style, have the words of the service printed out, a person who did not grow up in the tradition may not have any idea the meaning of what they are reciting.

As a solution to help visitors feel welcome, some churches provide a running commentary down the left-hand margin of the bulletin that explains what is happening. Below is an example.

*Many terms that define who we are as a church will not have any meaning to visitors if you don’t intentionally explain them in your bulletin.*

On page one this bulletin had the traditional headings of *Invocation, Confession and Absolution and Introit of the Day*. To the left of each of these sections were the following explanations:

**“Invocation”** means “calling on” and here we call on the Lord’s presence.

In the **“Confession”** we name our sins silently before the Lord and accept responsibility for the harm they have caused in our relationships with God and each other.

In the **“Absolution”** the Lord speaks through the office of pastor to apply the forgiveness Jesus won for us on the cross to us in a personal and public way. (John 20:23).

**“Introit”** mean’s “entrance” in Latin. Now that we have been washed clean of our sins the pastor enters into the altar area. The Introit usually comes from a Psalm.

This bulletin continues in this way and provides excellent help in understanding for a visitor. Every church has terms that might not be familiar. Take time to explain them and it will do more to market your church positively than an expensive billboard on the freeway.

## Think of your bulletin as a PR or Outreach Brochure

A printed church bulletin can do so much more than let you know what is happening during the service, though that is vitally important. A printed bulletin, if done completely and carefully, can also provide something for a person to look over when they get home to find out more about your church. Things may happen quickly during the service, but if the bulletin takes the time and care to talk about what is important to you, what it means to be a Christian, what activities are going on in the church and how to be a part of them, the bulletin can be an extended dialog with a visitor.

In reality the bulletin functions as a PR or Outreach Brochure that people are actually coming to you to pick up. Think about that—you don’t have to pay for postage or a big advertisement in the newspaper. Every week, visitors come

through your doors and they will read ANYTHING you put into their hands.

Churches often complain that in the current church audience “nobody reads what we write” and that may be true to some degree (the reasons for that and how to solve it are dealt with in other materials on [www.effectivechurchcom.com](http://www.effectivechurchcom.com)), but regardless of the response of sometimes jaded church members, visitors come looking for answers.

### **What does your bulletin say to someone totally unfamiliar with the church?**

*Yes, there will be people who complain if you take the time and paper to explain in the bulletin what your church is about to visitors—gently remind them that the purpose of the church is to bring people to Jesus, not confuse them with insider jargon and incomplete communication.*

Churches make a HUGE mistake by printing short, brief bulletins that have little information in them. To understand the lost opportunities, hire (pay them a fair hourly wage along with perhaps a nice lunch) some recent visitors to your church to help you evaluate the bulletin. Don't ask leading questions such as “How do you like the bulletin or how friendly was the church.”

**Instead, simply ask: Tell me what the bulletin tells you about our church:**

- *What do we believe?*
- *What do we have for spiritual seekers?*
- *Where can people go for answers to questions?*
- *What activities are going on this week?*
- *How do you get to them?*
- *Why should you come back next week?*

If you sincerely ask those questions and give people permission to answer honestly, you'll be in for an enlightening time. Just let them talk. If you find you want to break in, explain, tell them what you really meant—that is information that you should have clearly explained in the bulletin.

Many churches totally miss out on answering these questions in the bulletin because they assume everybody in the community knows as much about what is going on in the church as the church staff does and they never bothered to check if that assumption was true or not. A few hours of your time and some money actually talking to people who do not attend, but who may be potential visitors at your church is well worth the effort.

### **Don't let saving paper or time be more important than saving people**

At this point in a discussion on creating an expanded bulletin, someone will always bring up the additional costs in terms of time and paper.

While these are valid concerns, sometimes I wish I could shake them and yell at the people who ask: “Dear folks, why do we do what we do! The church does not exist to save paper! What are you thinking?”

“You want to save a few pieces of paper, you think you don't have time to put more in the bulletin, but we have people coming every Sunday to the church, looking for answers, hurting from disappointments in life, people with unspoken needs and pain and what do we give them? The abbreviated version of what's going on presented in a way only insiders understand!”

Sometimes people think being involved in evangelism is some big, scary, difficult thing—it isn't. Often it is the little things that can turn a life around. One of those little things might be the church bulletin that clearly presents the answers to life found in Jesus and how your church can help them find Him.

People will take the church bulletin home; they look for answers, do you provide them? Do you have a link to your website, an email address, or a real person to call if a seeker to learn more?

You don't have to have a mailing list, pay postage, or take out an ad—every week visitors come to you—and they will read whatever you put into their hands, PLEASE make the most of it.

## **Pastoral uses of a printed bulletin**

For regular attendees, even if they see the PowerPoint announcements before church, chances are when Thursday night comes around and they need to know what the kids are supposed to bring to youth group and where it's going to be held, they won't remember the PowerPoint, no matter how beautiful the graphics. For regular attendees, if it isn't on the refrigerator in the form of a postcard, or bulletin insert, the chances of them attending an event late in the week are greatly reduced.

Reminding people (in print, through emails, posting on the website; printing it in the newsletter) is part of pastoring people. Reminding people takes many forms:

- Reminding them of events to attend
- Reminding them of prayer requests
- Reminding them of the financial status of the church
- Reminding them who needs volunteers in a church ministry
- Reminding them that hunger never takes a holiday and where to contribute to the food pantry
- Reminding them who to contact when needs arise
- Reminding them through sermon notes of the teaching
- Reminding them to be thankful for the blessings of God and the fellowship of the church

All of these pastoral actions can take place in a tangible, take-home, long-lasting form through your church bulletin. Remember also to make it clear when events are open to visitors (if they are) and to have all the details so people can connect with the event.

### **More on the pastoring aspects of various forms of communication**

How you choose to communicate shows how you value people. It is obvious that some age groups use technology more than others and some do not. There is a new church in our area that does not use a printed bulletin. They only email the bulletin to those on their mailing list; it is not available for general viewing on their website. What does this reveal about their pastoral concerns?

My husband was recently at a pastor's breakfast where he asked one of the



church staff what they did for the older folks who perhaps did not have access to email. The person he spoke with was quite honest in that she answered, “We aren’t interested in having those folks attend our church. We are targeting 30-40 year olds.”

I could digress into an extended rant on the current popularity of churches “targeting” a specific age or demographic group, a totally unbiblical approach, (the Bible makes clear the gospel is for “whosoever will” and the church made up of: “every tribe, nation.... male, female, slave, free, Jew, Gentile, and ages are NEVER a criteria), but this is not the place for that. I must comment, however, that I wonder what happens in a church like that when the staff setting the age limits, themselves age past their “target” range. Will they leave because they are no longer of interest to the church?

How easy it is to forget we will all be older and “not interesting or useful” someday. How easy to ignore the reality that someday a technology will be invented that may leave some currently cutting-edge people clutching an out-dated iPhone and feeling foolish because they don’t understand the latest and greatest tech wonder.

### **Your heart’s opinion of your view of people shows in how you communicate**

The somedays will come more quickly than the narrowly-focused imagine, but the point of this illustration is that the forms you choose to use for communication express your value of people whether you formally state it or not. If you follow the biblical commands to love and care for all people in your church you will create communications in formats that serve all of your people.

This means you’ll have an on-line bulletin for the people who prefer that, but you’ll also have your bulletin and other communications in written forms for those who do not have access to electronic communication. You’ll have the newsletter online, but also a print version available for those who want it. You’ll even mail it out to shut-ins. We are living in a transition time in communications and an explosion of communication devices are being used by the various groups in our churches. This won’t sort out or get easier for a long time.

You may want to expand the communication team in your church to include people who can make sure that the various messages of the church are available in the various formats you need. You may want to pray for insight and wisdom on the use and allocation of resources needed to reach various people. You most certainly will need to pray for strength to do all the forms of communication that are necessary.

What you cannot do, with pastoral integrity and biblical obedience, is to intentionally ignore the needs of one group of sheep. Your Chief Shepherd, who illustrated his love by telling the story of how the Good Shepherd goes after the one little straying sheep, would not be pleased.

## **Use your various communication tools: web, PowerPoint and print, to enhance each other**

In addition to creating the various forms of communication so they meet the needs of all the people in your church, the various forms can synergistically make

every form more effective.

The web site is a fantastic communication resource to refer to in the bulletin—many church members haven't visited it and don't know it has anything for them. Your church web site can be a great place to store the pastor's sermons for downloading with accompanying notes in PDF format and as a place to listen to sermon podcasts. It can provide in-depth discussion and links of a topic the pastor mentions in the sermon. In addition, if the website is continuously updated, it can provide background, directions and more information about weekly events.

Making certain your website is accessible with mobile phones will expand its outreach. Even if you only have the calendar mobile-phone accessible that's a great place to start.

PowerPoint can be a powerful worship tool and sermon learning tool. In addition, it can work well for announcements at the beginning and end of the service for things that are going on immediately after the service, for example to invite people to the Fellowship Hall for coffee and questions.

## **Bottom line: keep printing your bulletin**

Though we need every tech-savvy tool to illustrate our message and for the impact and repetitions they provide, printed bulletins are still a useful tool for ministry communications.

Printed bulletins are often a visitor's only link to understanding what is going on at the service and in the church overall. They can hold tangible message reminders such as inserts to put on the refrigerator, sign-up forms for camps and conferences, and sheets for taking sermon notes. They can be scribbled on by children, read by anyone, sent to the homebound and used as reminders of events.

Keep exploring, using and improving every new tool to enable your church to better communicate the gospel message, but don't let go of the time-tested and reliable methods such as a written church bulletin.

## About Effective Church Communications

Effective Church Communications is a ministry that provides training, resources, and inspiration to help church communicators

fully fulfill the Great Commission. The hub of our ministry is our website: [www.effectivechurchcom.com](http://www.effectivechurchcom.com).

Our approach to church communications includes more than design and communication construction how-tos, though we have lots of them. It includes foundational, biblical teaching related to communications, communication leadership, and church communication teams. We constantly remind church communicators that we have been entrusted with the words of eternal life and the eternal destinies of people depend on how well we communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Though we work hard to stay current with technology (our training is web-based, we tweet, podcast, and are moderate tech junkies), we value and teach timeless communication skills and principles. The majority of our training has application in every communication channel from print to podcasts.

We believe churches of every size, from tiny house churches to mega-churches benefit from clear, effective communication and we strongly emphasize that churches be who they are in their communications to their unique congregation and to the community they are called to reach. We strongly encourage churches to study their people, set goals, evaluate response to communication projects, consistently and clearly communicate, rather than copy the latest mega-church or marketing trend.

We do not allow, encourage, link to, or promote, in any way, irreverent, profane language or snarky, cynical approaches to church communication or in the discussion of it. We serve a holy God and we seek in all we do to walk worthy and communicate a worthy message.

We strongly believe church communicators, from any size church, who use any software, with any skill level, can help and encourage each other and we have a number of ways church communicators can share and interact through our website.

Though we encourage church communicators to pour their hearts, minds and souls into the hard work of communicating the words of eternal life, we are constantly aware that our words will only accomplish eternal results because of the blessing of them, and His working through them, by our eternal God.



### About Yvon Prehn

Yvon Prehn is the founder and director of the training site for church communicators, [www.effectivechurchcom.com](http://www.effectivechurchcom.com).

Yvon has worked in communication ministry for over 25 years. She was a free-lance newspaper reporter and religion writer for the *Colorado Springs SUN*. She was a top-rated, national trainer in desktop publishing for Padgett/Thompson, the nation's largest one-day seminar company when desktop publishing was first invented. She worked as a communications consultant and trainer for many of the ministries headquartered in Colorado Springs and was senior editor at both Compassion International and Young Life International. For fourteen years she traveled full-time all over North America teaching seminars on church communications.

Yvon has written for many of the major Christian magazines. Her most recent books include: *Church Bulletins, how to create and use them to touch and change lives*, *Church Connection Cards*, *The Five Steps of Effective Church Communications & Marketing*, available at [www.lulu.com/yvonprehn](http://www.lulu.com/yvonprehn).

Yvon has a master's degree in Church History and has done additional extensive graduate work in theology and communications. She has taught high school English and was an adjunct professor in church history at Regis University.

In addition to her formal experience, Yvon gets the opportunity to practice church communications in very practical ways. She is the wife of a bi-vocational pastor and does the secretarial and church communications work for her husband Paul, in addition to co-teaching in a variety of ministry settings at the church they work with in Ventura, California.