Chapter One

Create a Web Site

Creating a Web site is one of the most essential parts of conducting Christian digital evangelism. Without a Web site, much of your digital outreach will be curtailed. It takes a little time to get well-established in the search engines, directories, and link popularity of other Web sites, but once you are established, it is one of the most rewarding ministries you can conduct.

I have introduced this chapter first because I believe it is the cornerstone on which we build the rest of our Internet-based ministries. Without a Web site, ministry on the Internet is definitely limited, though not necessarily eliminated. In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate both the necessity of creating a presence on the Internet via a Web site and the particulars of doing so.

Let me answer a few basic questions here and now. Why have a Web site, and who should have a Web site, anyway? How and where do I even start? Well, the answers to those questions are really quite simple. *Everyone* needs a Web site, *especially* churches and other Christian ministries, because it is the one way everyone, including the least publicity-minded, can communicate with everyone else anywhere else in the entire world. No matter how inexperienced one may be in publicizing any thing, a Web site is the surest way to announce one's existence to the world and to share a message that might not otherwise get out. The problem, of course, is attracting attention to your Web site so that others will visit and benefit from it.

Creating a Web site may seem like a daunting task, but it need not be. Let me outline some of the key steps you must take in order to create a viable presence on the Internet.

Choosing a Domain Name and Web Host

The first, and perhaps most important, step you must take is the selection and registration of a domain name, immediately followed by the selection of a Web host. Choosing the right domain name – one that is fairly easy to remember, spell, etc. – is essential. You want it to be easy to remember, so you can tell someone without a pen and paper and have him/her still remember it when s/he gets home. Furthermore, it needs to be fairly descriptive of the purpose or content of your Web site.

Registering a complicated or unclear domain name, or using an unrelated free domain name, can prove rather detrimental to your success on the Web. If someone else has already registered the domain name you want, don't try such creative wording as to make your domain name virtually unusable. Save your creativity for a different, easier to use and remember domain name altogether. For instance, it would be much easier to remember and spell something like www.spreadthenews .org than www.spread-d-news.org. Having to remember where to place the hyphens and to substitute "d" for "the" is simply more than the average person can be expected to remember, not to mention that puns and contractions don't translate well into other languages and are therefore usually lost on those who don't speak your language.

Although you can search for available domain names from any of the domain name registrar sites, you are usually limited to one domain search at a time. An exceptional program to use in the process of domain name selection which allows for multiple domain name searches at once is called Domain Name Analyzer 4.1, by Softnik Technologies. You can download either a freeware version or a trial of the Pro version from the Softnik Technologies web site at www.softnik.com/download. This wonderful program will search the domain name registry on any number of domain levels (.com, .net, .org, .biz, etc.) simultaneously on any domain name you specify and let you know whether or not it's taken. It will even allow you to create

domain names from keywords. Of course, the Pro version does much more than the freeware version, but unless you're a professional webmaster, the freeware version is probably more than sufficient for what you need.

After securing your domain name, you must choose a Web host. Be sure to shop and compare before making your choice, because switching Web hosts once you're set up can be a truly unpleasant experience. In fact, it's best to register your domain name from the same company you choose for your Web host, if possible, as this will often make the setup much easier, and it keeps everything together. Furthermore, if you register your domain name through your Web host, you likely won't need to set the domain name server (DNS) for your domain name, since this is usually already done for you by your domain name registrar/Web host. If you use a different domain registrar than your Web host, you will need to set the DNS with your domain name registrar to point to whomever you choose for your Web host. An accurate DNS is required for Web browsers to resolve your domain name's proper location on the Internet. A missing or improper DNS will generate a **404 File Not Found** error and render your Web site inaccessible. Contact your Web host for the proper DNS information before you attempt to set it up with your domain name registrar.

If you prefer to use a Christian company for your Web hosting, there are a variety of reputable Christian Web hosts available now, in addition to the plethora of non-Christian Web hosts. Typing a search on the keywords "Christian Web hosting services" in any of the search engines will yield a variety of results to choose from. There were more than nine million pages listed on Google's search results when I last checked, though that does not necessarily mean there are nine million Christian Web hosts. You can also consult the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) Web site at www.icann.org for a comprehensive list of all approved domain name registrars, many of whom also offer Web hosting.

I must add, however, that while using a Christian Web host may be a noble idea, you must decide in accordance with what best serves your needs regarding such matters as amount of monthly hosting fees, amount of allowable storage space, amount of allowable bandwidth, number of email accounts allowed, customer service reliability, etc. Just because a Web host purports to be Christian owned and operated does not necessarily mean it will offer the best deal for you.

I believe digital evangelism is all about helping to spread the Good News of Christ through electronic media, including Web sites. It seems to me that a Christian Web hosting service ought to understand that better than anyone. If Christian Web hosts ever forget that goal and principle and settle into a business-only mindset, they are no better than the unbelievers who are strictly concerned with making money, and in some ways, they are worse.

Creating Your Web Site

Once you have registered your domain name and obtained your Web host, you must compose and upload your Web files. Depending on your skill level, this may well be the most challenging part of your task, but along with choosing the right domain name, it is just as important to your online success. If you know nothing about HTML (hypertext mark-up language) – the code in which Web pages are written – then you may want to hire this done by qualified professionals, unless you know someone who is qualified and willing to do it for you for free. However, you can teach yourself HTML in a relatively short span of time, if you're willing to study and learn. You simply can't afford to scrimp too much on this aspect, though, because how your site looks and appeals to visitors makes all the difference between success and failure, popularity and obscurity. If you hire it done, you can skip to the next subheading in this chapter, but if you choose to take the plunge and do the work yourself, continue reading from here.

The items you will need, assuming you already have a late-model computer with Internet access, are a current HTML manual (which you can read online or download for free at www.w3.org/TR/html4/, or you can buy one at nearly any bookstore) and a quality, easy-to-use HTML editor. You can find lots of good freeware HTML editors across the Internet. Just type in the search keywords "free HTML editors" at any search engine site and see what you can find.

One excellent editor I can recommend from personal experience is AceHTML, located at softwares.visicommedia.com/en/products/. However, the company has withdrawn its technical support from AceHTML 5.0 and earlier, since it wants to focus on its paid AceHTML 6.0 and later Pro version. You can still download a trial of the Pro version with limited features for free to see how you might like it. I used their free version for about a year before deciding to upgrade to their Pro version. Therefore, I can personally vouch for the value of their paid product, because I purchased their AceBundle package, which includes both the AceHTML Pro and AceFTP Pro programs for a significant reduction in the cost of purchasing both separately. I'll say more about the need for an FTP (file transfer protocol) program later. No matter which HTML editor you choose, you will have a learning curve to endure before you become truly comfortable using it.

Perhaps one of the best options for novice Web site creators is E-zekiel, found at www.e-zekiel.com on the Web. You can try it free for 30 days, and if you like it, you can keep whatever work you've already created when you upgrade to the paid service. The Rosinton United Methodist Church (where I am the senior pastor at the time of this writing) has been using this online software and hosting solution since early 2007. You can visit their site at www.rosintonumc.com to see how they've used E-zekiel, if you're interested.

E-zekiel is entirely Web-based and works like a regular word processor. You can create accounts for multiple users with various degrees of access, such as editor

and administrator privileges. One of the best features to this option is that, because it is entirely Web-based, every user can access his/her account from anywhere at any time and add, delete, or edit existing Web pages (so long as the user can remember his/her login details), because everything is saved directly to the Web server the instant you save your changes, which means it is live and visible to the world immediately. It is imperative, therefore, that you use the built-in preview option to check your changes before you save them, thus avoiding displaying any embarrassing errors to your visitors. Like everything else, however, E-zekiel has a decent learning curve, yet it's simple enough for the low-level intermediate computer user to pick up fairly quickly and be able to create complex Web pages without extensive knowledge of HTML.

If money is tight for you or your organization, and your HTML programming knowledge is minimal, here's another alternative for you to try. Since either Microsoft Word (not to be confused with Microsoft Works) or Corel WordPerfect often comes loaded on Windows operating system machines these days, and many people have also opted to buy them separately, it's possible that you already have one of these word processors on your computer. If so, you can use either of them to generate fairly complex Web pages. You simply type your text and format it precisely as you want it, insert any images wherever you want them in your document, and then choose to save it as a Web page from the File menu to have it automatically encoded for you. See Figure 1.1 for a screenshot of this menu item in Microsoft Word.

You may still have to do some fine-tuning of your formatting in places throughout your Web documents, but it could save you an enormous amount of labor, if you're less adept at HTML encoding. Eventually, though, you will need to become more proficient in order to improve and expand your site's appeal.

One drawback to using Microsoft Word for your Web file creation, however, is that Word includes so much technical code up front that it could dampen your

chances of rising very high in the search engines, since the Web spiders that index Web pages are very simplistic, text-based robots which prefer straightforward text with simple HTML commands. Inserting a lot of complex code, such as Word uses (or even one of those fun Javascripts that performs some kind of neat trick like posting the current local date and time on a page), can hinder a Web spider to the point that it could fail to index the entire content of your Web site. That's why it's essential you use an HTML editor to do the encoding yourself and remove all that extraneous code to the end of your Web document or to an external reference file altogether, if possible.

Of course, if you want to take the extra-cheap, bare-bones approach, you can use a plain text word processor, such as Windows Notepad, and type in the basic template you see in Figure 1.2. You can use that template for every page you create and simply insert your textual content between the opening <BODY> and closing </BODY> tags. Naturally, you will have to know enough basic HTML to encode your paragraphing, any font changes (such as italics or bold), any bulleted lists or graphic images you want to display, etc. If you're interested, you can also check out a short tutorial I wrote on my Web site at www.parsonplace.com/webhowto.html. It will help you create a very basic site with graphics and a coordinated color scheme for your font and background.

What you include on your Web site is, of course, entirely up to you. The bare essentials would be a "home" or start page and an "about us" page which describes who you are and any other particulars you deem important, such as a description and history of your organization (or yourself, if it's a personal page). Churches and organizations should also include a "Contact Us" page with directions to your location, plus a physical address and phone number for direct personal contact. You may want to use a Web form for visitors to send you email, or hide your email address in a graphic image, since posting your email address in the open on your

Figure 1.1 – You can save documents in HTML format with Microsoft Word.
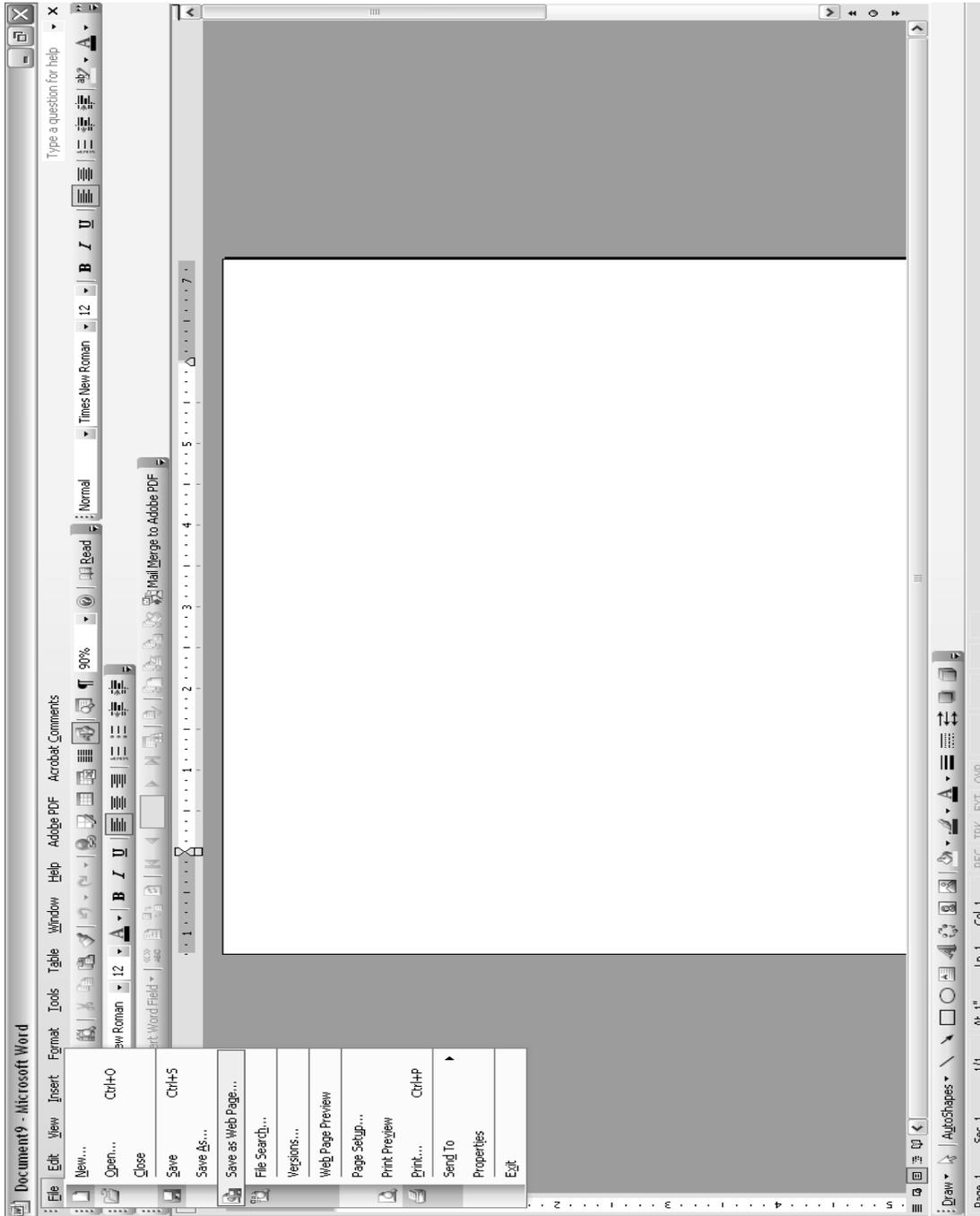
Web site is just asking for email harvesters to come along and grab it for spamming you with all sorts of junk marketing offers. Worse yet, they may use your email address as an alias to their own in sending spam to others, thus damaging your good reputation.

If you intend to collect any kind of personal information from visitors to your site, such as name, address, phone number, etc., you will also need to include two very important pages. First, you'll need a well-written privacy policy that states exactly what sort of information you will collect, how you will collect it, what you will do with it, and how you will safeguard it. Second, you'll need a thorough Terms and Conditions statement that explains what you are and are not legally liable for and what you will not tolerate in your online dealings, etc. You need both of these to cover yourself legally, or else you could be opening yourself up to some unscrupulous law suit opportunist. You can either copy what other Web sites like yours have done, or you can seek professional legal counsel. Perhaps there is a good-hearted attorney in your area, or even in your local church, who will provide this for you on a pro bono basis.

Uploading Your Files to Your Web Host

Once you have all your Web files created, you're ready to upload them to your domain name hosting site. Don't forget to include all your image files and any other externally referenced files, such as your cascading style sheet (if you have one) and any Javascripts, etc. I strongly recommend creating a mirror on your personal computer's hard drive of the same folder tree you create on your Web host's server. This will not only cut down on the confusion of where you have all your Web files stored on your personal computer, but it will also make it easier to test your Web pages offline before you upload them, thus enabling you to catch many embarrassing

Figure 1.2 – You can use this HTML document template with any plain text word processor, such as Windows Notepad.

```
<!DOCTYPE html PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD HTML 4.01 Transitional//EN">
<html>
<head>
   <meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=windows-1252">
   <title></title>
   <meta name="description" content="">
   <meta name="keywords" content="">
</head>
<body>

</body>
</html>
```

errors before they go live to the world. Of course, this may be a little more challenging if you use E-zekiel as your host, but it will still be beneficial to you.

Depending on your Web host, you will probably have to transfer your Web files to your Web host's server by means of file transfer protocol (FTP), though some hosts (including E-zekiel) have a special Web-based interface to make it easier for beginners. Although a Web-based interface may be easier, it is by far one of the slowest ways to upload files to a server, although E-zekiel's service seems fairly fast. Your Web host will explain how to use their Web-based interface, and/or how to use FTP to connect to your hosting site, or else your Web site designer/creator can do this for you.

If you choose the do-it-yourself route, you'll need a good FTP program. Some of the most widely used FTP programs are WS_FTP (which you can download from www.ipswitchft.com/resources/evaluation.asp), FTPCommander (which you can download from www.ftpcommander.com), CuteFTP (which you can download from www.cuteftp.com), and the companion program to AceHTML – AceFTP (which you can download from shop.parsonplace.com/software.html).

For a completely free FTP program, you may want to consider the open source program, Filezilla (filezilla-project.org) or the technically unsupported freeware version of AceFTP (software.visicommedia.com/en/products/aceftpfreeware/). Both are good. Whichever you choose, you'll need to check with your Web host for details on the specific settings to upload your prepared Web files to your site, such as the FTP site URL (normally, something like ftp.domainname.tld, where *domainname* is the domain name where your site is hosted and *.tld* is whatever the top level domain extension is, such as .com, .net, .org, etc.), as well as your username/password combination to use in logging into your FTP site. You must enter these details into your FTP software in order for it to be able to connect to and communicate with the remote server where your site is hosted.

Maintaining and Promoting Your Site

That's basically all there is to creating and uploading a Web site, but now you'll have to maintain and promote it. By "maintain," I mean you should update it regularly, or else your visitors will decide it's out of date and rarely, if ever again, visit. There are few things that will give a Web site a "stale," unappealing appearance than looking at information that is obviously out-of-date. While there may be some pages of your site where the information rarely changes, there will be other pages that require updating more often to give your site an up-to-date, happening feeling. You should include pages about recent events and upcoming events in your church or organization which will necessitate making frequent changes. Even those few pages which almost never change should be redone every now and then, just to give the appearance of maintenance. In fact, you might even consider redesigning your site entirely every once in a while in order to demonstrate progress or improvement. Truly, keeping your content fresh and updated is almost as challenging as creating your site in the first place.

Once you have uploaded your files to your Web host's server, your first priority needs to be having your site indexed by the search engines' spiders, or else your visitors won't be able to find your site by doing an Internet search. This is important because the prevailing wisdom seems to be that 80% or more of your traffic will usually come from search engines. There are a couple of ways you can do this.

First, you can submit your site's domain name to each and every search engine you know, or, at least, to the major players – Google, Yahoo, and Bing, which is MSN's new search engine introduced in 2009. A second, and perhaps faster, approach is to find a well-established site (meaning one that has been around a pretty good while) and ask the webmaster to swap links with you. The reason this approach is faster at getting your site indexed by the search engine spiders is because

they already visit previously indexed sites on an almost daily basis to check for updates. When they return to re-index a previously indexed site, they will find the link to your site and then follow it to index *your* site. This is partly why the Internet is called the World Wide *Web*.

Link swapping is one of the best ways of promoting your site, too, since this will alert visitors to other sites that your site is a viable source to visit. Since Google is the industry leader in Internet search, and since they use link popularity as a high priority criterion in evaluating site value relative to a searcher's keyword(s), obtaining a link back from another high-ranking Web site will increase your site's ranking.

Link popularity also plays a significant role in Google's PageRank, which is a feature of their freely downloadable toolbar (toolbar.google.com/intl/en). This is not the same thing as their search engine page ranking, but it is highly desirable nonetheless, because it is an indication of the importance Google places upon a particular page using a scale of one to five, with five being the best. While this may not seem to carry as much weight as a regular search engine ranking, it is still very much sought-after by marketers and even average webmasters for its prestige. Those who track it closely will target those sites with a high PageRank for link swapping, as obtaining a link from a site with a high PageRank is also believed to positively impact regular search engine ranking. It's hard to tell if this is true, but it surely doesn't hurt to do all you can to improve your site's overall ranking, as one is almost certain to affect the other.

Another important aspect of good site management for the purpose of increasing one's site ranking in the search engines is called search engine optimization, or SEO. This is a detailed list of rules and practices to follow and avoid, some of which you can read at the search engines' sites, such as Google's guidelines for webmasters at www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=

35769, as well as Yahoo!'s guidelines at help.yahoo.com/l/us/yahoo/search/basics/ basics-18.html.

Basically, good SEO is choosing keywords appropriate to your site's content and purpose, and using them appropriately (i.e., not over-using them) throughout your site's main body content, page title, keyword and description metatags, images' alternate text, etc. Over-using keywords is called keyword stuffing and is considered SEO spamming by the search engine developers. Since this is against their terms of service, they will punish violators either by reducing the culprit site's overall ranking in their search engine or by removing the site from their index, or even by banning a site from their search engine index altogether in extreme cases. This is an especially grave concern for you to have if you hire your Web site creation and management or SEO to be done by a specialty company. Even if your hired help uses these unethical practices without your knowledge or permission, you are still responsible for the outcome as the site's owner. Therefore, you need to insure you hire ethical and trustworthy SEO programmers.

One final aspect that can assist you with your site promotion is perusing your site statistics on a regular basis. When you create your Web hosting account, you will have the option for choosing which Web analytics software you want to use for analyzing traffic to your site. While I prefer using AWStats, Webalizer is another option, and even Google has gotten into the fray now with Google Analytics. Whichever option you choose, however, you need to stick with it, because you will likely lose your statistical history if you decide to switch options.

The wonderful thing about site statistics is that you can see all sorts of data about visitors to your site. It doesn't include anything personally specific, mind you, such as personally identifying information, but it will tell you how many total visitors your site had during the month, how many of those visitors were "unique" visitors (meaning repeat visitors weren't counted multiple times), which of your pages were

viewed and how many times each, which search engines referred traffic and what the keyword(s) was(were) in their searches, what times of day received more traffic than others, and much more. Site statistics are invaluable data in evaluating where your traffic is coming from (such as what other sites have linked to yours), how long your visitors are staying on your site on average, which aspects of your site are most popular, and so on. These data can assist you in determining how effective your keywords are in driving traffic to your site (if at all), which pages need tweaking to improve viewership, which search engines are sending you the most traffic, and more. It is well worth the investment of your time.

That pretty much covers the basics of establishing a Web site for your church, organization, or personal outreach. While creating a Web site is a very significant step in establishing a presence on the Web, what else can you do in this brave, new world of the Internet? In the coming chapters, I'll show you. In Chapter Two, I'll tell you how to start an email prayer list.