

# Moodle Goes to Church:



*Using the Open Source Application to Inform, Inspire and Engage Church Members*

By Cheryl A. Hemmerle

**Have you wondered how to create an online Bible study or encourage online interaction in a secured environment? Moodle might be just what you need.**

Moodle, an acronym for "Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment," is an open source application designed to support online interaction for learning, discussion and resource sharing. Created by Martin Dougiamas and launched in 2002, Moodle is fast becoming the premier online learning platform for educational institutions and business enterprises in more than 196 countries and 70 languages. And in 2005—through United Methodist Communications—Moodle made its way into The United Methodist Church to deliver basic online courses about the denomination. Today, United Methodist Communications offers more than two dozen courses, discussion forums and resource

groups to inform, inspire and engage the people of The United Methodist Church.

Free to download and install on any server, Moodle is a cost-effective way for United Methodist local churches, districts and conferences to develop online learning and interaction opportunities. In addition to creating traditional courses, Moodle's fully customizable system is great for developing social networking, open-discussion forums and resource sharing. In fact, some churches use Moodle to design and maintain their Web sites.

Moodle is flexible and easy to use. With basic Internet and word-processing skills, you can:

- Award certificates of completion or achievement for participation and learning;
- Complete online learning assignments, including uploading documents, images, audio and video;
- Complete questionnaires and feedback forms;
- Conduct polls;
- Create and share resources;
- Develop a glossary of terms, ideas or questions;
- Keep a journal only you can access and read;
- Maintain a blog;
- Make calendars for yourself, your course or the entire site;
- Organize files and other content into databases;
- Participate in discussion forums and real-time chat;
- Take quizzes to test your knowledge;
- Use a grade book for scored assignments or other interaction;
- Use a Wiki for collaboration;
- Use Moodle's instant-messaging feature or communicate with online users via e-mail;
- And more!

While The United Methodist Church is not the only religious organization using Moodle for online learning and interaction, it is believed to be the first to do so on a denomination-wide scale. Through the church's Online Learning Center, provided by United Methodist Communications, you can enroll in such courses as:

- "Exploring General Conference"
- "Open Hearts Welcoming"
- "Turning Connectional Living into Connectional Giving"
- "United Methodism 101"
- "Web Ministry 101"

The denomination's Moodle site provides resource sharing for Web and Internet technology, conference communications and face-to-face pre- and post-training. In addition, the Online Learning Center supports the Pastors' Course of Study in partnership with the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and discussion forums for the United Methodist Association of Communicators and the General Council on Finance and Administration.

To experience Moodle firsthand and explore how The United Methodist Church uses this dynamic Web-based tool, visit the Online Learning Center at [moodle.umcom.org](http://moodle.umcom.org). Many courses, discussion forums and resource sections are free and open to anyone. To learn more about using Moodle in your local church, district or conference, select "Moodle Goes to Church" under the Discussion Forums category. †



*Resources for Church Leaders*



## MINISTRY TOOLS & TIPS

*Inform. Inspire. Engage.*



United Methodist  
communications

### Web and Internet Technology Enhances Ministry

Blog. Chat. Podcast. Webcast. RSS. Audio/Video Streaming. CMS. E-mail. Instant messaging. If you've spent any time on the Internet, you've encountered these and many other technology terms. But have you considered how these tools could provide effective ministry in your local church?

United Methodist Communications offers online and face-to-face training and resources to help congregations, districts and conferences to harness the power of Web and Internet technology for effective ministry. If you're new to Web ministry, consider taking the free, online course, "Web Ministry 101." More than 1,500 people already have discovered the easy-to-follow steps for establishing a Web presence and beginning a Web ministry. When you're ready to explore new tips and tricks of the trade, connect with other Web ministry leaders through the Web and Internet Technology forum where you can ask questions, share resources and keep up with the latest and greatest tools.

If face-to-face learning and hands-on training is more your style, considering attending one of the regional events for Web ministry in 2008:

- Springfield, Ill. (May 16-17)
- West Chester, Pa. (July 25-26)
- Houston, Tx. (Sept. 12-13)
- Minneapolis, Minn. (Nov. 14-15)

You can learn more about online and face-to-face training and resources from United Methodist Communications that will strengthen your use of Web and Internet technology for effective ministry. Simply visit [web.umcom.org](http://web.umcom.org) or send an e-mail to [training@umcom.org](mailto:training@umcom.org).

Cheryl A. Hemmerle is the technical training specialist for United Methodist Communications and the site administrator of the Online Learning Center of The United Methodist Church. To contact Cheryl, send an email to [chemmerle@umcom.org](mailto:chemmerle@umcom.org) or call (888) 278-4862.

# Getting Off the Ground and On the 'Net

*So your church is ready to have a Web presence ...  
Now what? Consider the following tips.*

## Must Haves for Every Church Web site

**Personality:** People are attracted to other people; make sure your site exhibits your church's personality and energy with excellent photography and storytelling.

**Pastor and staff profiles:** People want to know who is in leadership, who to go to with questions, etc.

**'About Us' section:** This section should explain your church's core vision and beliefs as well as the core values of United Methodism. It can also include historical information and can house the pastor and staff profiles.

**Worship and regular event times:** One of the highest priorities of your Web site should be informing people about your primary worship services. People will be looking for information about time, style and what to expect when they attend.

**Current events:** Upcoming "calendar" activities keep members coming back to the site to stay informed about the life of the church. Making this prominent will give members the sense that the site is for them as much as it is for potential visitors.

**Directions:** In order for people to attend your events, they have to find you. Don't rely on MapQuest or Google Maps—build a page that gives both written and visual directions to your location.

**Program descriptions:** Many "church shoppers" will look at your Web site to find out what programs you offer. It's crucial to have well-written introductions to your key programming areas. Of special concern are the children and youth ministry pages—many people check out what they need to do with their children during the worship times.

**Basic contact information:** Give people a way to communicate with the church. E-mail is an excellent tool, just make sure that if you place your e-mail address on the Web site you have a process in place to answer the e-mails that come in.

**A good domain name:** Someone should be able to hear the domain name once and remember it well enough to go home and type it into their Web browser. This is crucial to driving traffic to your site.

**A promotion plan:** Without concerted promotion, Web sites often go unused. Make sure you have a solid plan in place to promote the use of the site to the congregation and to the community.

United Methodist Communications  
P.O. Box 320 Nashville, TN 37202-0320  
Phone (615) 742-5400 Fax (615) 742-5415  
[www.umcom.org](http://www.umcom.org)



## Promoting Your Church Web Site

It's not enough to simply build a church Web site; without an ongoing plan to promote it your site might become stale and unused. Here are some guidelines for getting started with a promotion plan:

Make sure all printed materials are branded with your Web site address. This includes:  
Business cards • Church bulletins • Worship Inserts • Signage  
Church publications, newsletters, etc. • Letterhead • Promotional materials • Media buys

Basically take any and every opportunity to put your church's Web address on materials that are being distributed.

## Web-based promotion

**Denominational placement:** Many districts and conferences maintain lists of church Web sites. There is also Find-A-Church, a national search tool that allows people to find United Methodist churches and their contact information including their Web site. **Find-A-Church** is located in the menu bar at [www.umc.org](http://www.umc.org).

If you don't know your conference or district Web site address, you can locate it at [www.umc.org/directory](http://www.umc.org/directory).

**E-mail newsletters:** E-mail newsletters can generate recurring traffic to your site. Offer several ways for people to sign up for the electronic newsletter, including a form on your Web site and physical sign-up forms at events.

**Link building:** Finding other Web sites willing to link to yours is one way of driving traffic to your site. These may include chamber of commerce or newspaper sites. It takes a little work to get sites linking to you but it's worth it in the traffic you will receive.

In addition to the above, you want to find ways to continually build awareness of the Web site as a primary communications vehicle. You can do things like promote the site during the announcement time at worship; send a letter to the congregation announcing the site's launch, put up posters and signs for the Web site and more.

## Church Web sites made easy with E-zekiel

E-zekiel helps anyone with Internet access and word-processing skills create high-quality, user-friendly Web sites. Tools that operate like a familiar word processor allow quick text editing and addition of pictures, icons and graphics. With E-zekiel, you don't have to know computer code to:

Design and publish your Web site • Plan and share event information on a public calendar • Send, receive and manage e-mails • Set up event registration • Learn about your visitors with polls, discussions groups and more.

Visit [umc.e-zekiel.com](http://umc.e-zekiel.com).

## The following are a few tricks and tips to help cut costs when creating or making improvements to your Web site.

### www.istockphoto.com

Give your site life and personality with royalty-free stock photography at unbeatable prices. Download photos in various sizes and resolution. Looking for more? Check out [sxc.hu](http://sxc.hu) for more royalty-free stock photography.

### Discount Photo/Image Editing

Adobe® Photoshop CS3 is the king of photo editing software, but comes with a hefty price tag. However, Adobe® Photoshop Elements is a sub-\$100 product that allows you to do the basics: crop and resize, adjust color/contrast, adjust resolution, and more!

### Free Photo/Image Editing

**Gimp (www.gimp.org)** is an open-source photo-editing solution that is free to download and use. Keep in mind, open-source software is not supported by any company—it was created by a group of people who donated their time and talent.

### Integrate Video

If you're looking for a cheap way to stream video content on your site, check out [www.blip.tv](http://www.blip.tv). You can post videos following a series, such as sermons or pastoral videoblogging, and then embed that video path to your site. Blip.tv streams the content, but it is visible on your Web page. A similar service is offered by [www.GodTube.com](http://www.GodTube.com).

### Podcast How-To

**Podcast411.com** links readers to tutorials, how-tos, and articles on best practices. Another great resource is [www.how-to-podcast-tutorial.com](http://www.how-to-podcast-tutorial.com).

### Test your RSS Feed

Now that you've learned how to set up your own RSS feed, time to test it! [feedvalidator.org](http://feedvalidator.org) is a great tool for testing your feed to ensure it is working properly.

### Free Web Analytics

Have you ever been interested in how your users are interacting with your site? Now you can know! For FREE! Google has put out a fantastic analytics tool at [google.com/analytics](http://google.com/analytics). Just place a small snippet of code on each page and this tool will track, map, and report user activity. For users of E-zekiel, this tool is built-in already!

Some of these products are available through <http://umcom.org/techshop>.

Technology need not be intimidating. As more people embrace it, technology providers focus on making their tools easier for "regular people" to use. Utilizing these tools for ministry allows churches to reach more people in more ways than ever.

*Inform. Inspire. Engage.*