

Effective Communication: A Guide for Congregations

Design Tips for Congregational Communicators

Your congregation newsletter, Web site, bulletin or other communication piece should look both professional and inviting. Long gone are the days when the pastor or secretary cranked the mimeograph to produce off-center, smudged, and often out-of-focus materials. It is a new day for congregational communicators, and here are 10 principles to keep in mind when designing your material.

1. Know your audience

Probably the most important principle of communication: When choosing graphics, graphs and font (size and weight) you need to take into consideration the comfort of and appeal to your audience. For example, when designing you shouldn't use 8-point type if many of your readers over 70. Another example: use a photograph of a mother and infant in a story about bringing young children to worship services but NOT in a story about the youth group bowling night.

2. Use the ELCA emblem

You need to know your audience, and your audience needs to know you. Identity is important! All official entities in the ELCA are urged to use the ELCA emblem and tag line in publications or Web sites. For instructions on use and to download print-quality emblems (in color and black and white), visit www.elca.org/emblem/

Do you know the ELCA tag line? (Answer at the bottom of this document.)

3. Use white space

If well-employed, white space or empty space will increase the readability and attractiveness of your layout. People are reluctant to read something so wordy that it has the inhibiting look and feel of a textbook and will tend to put it "aside" to read later. Observe how publications you consider attractive incorporate white space, and try to use those techniques.

4. Choose fonts wisely

Just because you have over 100 fonts doesn't mean you should use all of them in the same piece. Using more fonts does not enliven a publication – it just makes it look sloppy and unprofessional. It is best to stick to two or three fonts and use specialized fonts sparingly.

Be consistent. Pick a sans-serif font (e.g., Arial or Helvetica) for your headline, and a serif font (e.g., Times New Roman or Palatino) for the body text.

5. Plan your design to support your purpose

Before beginning a new communication project, articulate your goals. Is it your aim to simply inform? Recruit? Inspire? Educate? Renew spiritually? Once you establish your purpose, choose the appropriate graphics and stories.

6. Using photos and graphics

Use photos and clip art optimized at 300 dpi (dots-per-inch) for printing and 72 dpi for Web work. When you take photos or clip art from a Web site they are optimized for the Web at 72 dpi, which looks fine on a screen, but if you print them, they look fuzzy.

Do not use postage-size graphics. Make sure, when you use photos of people, that their faces are big enough to recognize. Also, remember that it is better not to use photographs if you are photocopying the newsletter for distribution. Photographs simply do not photocopy well.

Use graphics sparingly. As a general rule, use no more than three graphics (including photos and clip art) per 8 ½ x 11-inch page. Always remember to use high-quality clip art (*tif* files are best).

A word of caution: When using photos of children, be sure to get written permission from parents before printing photos of their children under 18 with their names. Large group shots of children are generally OK, as are photos of children's faces turned away from the camera.

7. Layout

Use multiple columns in your layout, but do not use more than four columns on a portrait-layout 8 ½ x 11-inch page.

Studies have found that the most readable length for a line of type is from 1.67 to 4.5 inches (approximately forty to sixty-five characters). That is why newspapers use narrow columns.

The distance between columns can be measured in *picas* (i.e., a unit of measure used by typographers equal to 0.167 inches -- using one to two picas between columns), or, especially when developing a brochure or other folded piece, the space between columns should be twice the width of the side margins.

In newsletters, always include a masthead – the box that includes the name of the editor and basic contact information for the congregation. Try to keep the masthead in the same location for each issue.

Balance – All of the elements of a publication or Web site appear to have different weights to the human eye. Large items appear to be heavier than small ones; dark items appear to be heavier than light ones; bold text is heavier than regular text. People tend to prefer balanced pages and spreads that are not heavier on one side or the other. Balance heavy items near the center with lighter items at the edges.

8. Paper

Congregational newsletter pages are usually 8.5 x 11 inches because that size is easier to fit into a business envelope, file folder or three-ring binder.

For smaller items you can also design something that uses half the size -- 5.5 x 8.5 inches. When folded twice horizontally, it fits into a standard billing envelope.

When folded in half, a tabloid-sized paper (11 x 17 inches) will give you a four-page newsletter. This paper and format is well suited for longer articles and large artwork.

The choice of paper size might be the easiest decision to make: the size of paper your printer can handle will usually determine the size of your paper.

Never print on dark-colored paper. While dark red or green paper may be festive for the holidays, it is extremely difficult to read text printed on it.

9. Use skimming aids

To draw attention to an important item or to break up long chunks of text, use “skimming aids” (e.g., headlines, pull-quotes, subheads, captions, bullet-points, etc.). These aids can be larger and darker and set in a different text style than the body of the piece. They are also effective in setting off important information so that it can easily be found at a later time.

10. A word about content

Always think through what you put into print. Fifty years after a sermon is given there are few members who remember it. But at the 100th anniversary of a congregation, event organizers will dust off old newsletters, bulletins and other print material for a trip down memory lane.

Be careful when using humor. Many jokes are offensive to people -- especially ethnic humor.

Do not assume everyone in the church is a cradle Lutheran. It’s irritating for a visitor or newcomer to read “As we all know ...” or “Remember 5 years ago ...” Use church jargon sparingly -- newcomers may not know what a “tithe” is or where the “narthex” is located.

Have your text proofread, preferably by more than one person, before anything is printed.

ELCA Mission Statement:

Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered, and sent for the sake of the world.

ELCA Tag Line:

Living in God's amazing grace



