

Effective Communication: A Guide for Congregations

Newsletters

The congregation newsletter is an important part of your total ministry. It helps you nurture and inform the congregation and new members, as well as reach out to others in your community. The newsletter, more than any other piece of communication, lets your neighbors know who you are. It provides a clue to prospective members of what it would be like to be a part of your congregation. It is an opportunity to extend your congregation's preaching and teaching ministry beyond Sunday morning and to reach readers in their homes.

The newsletter should:

- + Express the congregation's concern for people
- + Provide basic information about the congregation's programs and goals
- + Provide spiritual enrichment
- + Inspire readers to respond to the invitations and challenges the congregation offers
- + Boost stewardship efforts by explaining how gifts are used

What to write

Write and edit with your readers in mind.

Write news! The first article on page one should be the biggest news story in your congregation since the last issue of your newsletter. Did the choir get new robes? Did you break the monthly record for new members received? Did the Jr. Highs win the basketball tournament? Did the yearly pledges double? Was a new Bible study group organized?

In order to appeal to the largest number of readers, you need to write and edit with them in mind. Think about specific people as you make a list of articles to include in each issue. News from the regional and national bodies of your church as well as of community events related to church concerns, have a place in your newsletter. Include a calendar of events and a regular column by the pastor.

Encourage lay people to share their personal faith stories and reflect on concerns of the congregation. Letters to the editor are opportunities for members to express their opinions. Build community by sharing joys and concerns, including occasions such as births, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, illnesses and deaths. Include accomplishments of members of all ages, and don't limit them to activities within the

congregation. For example, you can recognize students for academic and extracurricular successes.

Introduce new members in your newsletter. A paragraph about each person provides conversation starters for coffee hours and helps longtime members greet new members. Photos of new members make this even more effective.

Include reports from congregation committees and organizations in your newsletter. Don't print meeting minutes in full; just summarize the significant actions. Summarize budgets and financial reports, too. Although it is good practice to make full reports available through your congregation office, most newsletter readers will be best informed if you explain only key expenditures and significant changes in giving or spending patterns. Throughout the year use your newsletter to explain how financial offerings are used. Provide regular features of interest to youth and children of the congregation. A picture to color, a comic or a puzzle can entice young members to become congregation newsletter readers early - a habit they may keep for life.

Recipes, poetry or cute sayings used to fill space are best left out. They distract your readers from your real messages. But include meaningful or relevant cartoons and drawings, especially if they're from a congregation member.

How to write:

Your newsletter is not the great American novel: it's straightforward communication. Before you begin writing, think about the purpose of each section of your newsletter. Is your goal to inspire? To inform? To invite attendance at an event? Decide what information you must provide to prompt the desired response from your readers, then write as clearly and succinctly as possible.

In paragraph one summarize the most important elements. Subsequent paragraphs expand the details which support the opening. Background, descriptions, additional facts and explanations follow. In each story rank the paragraphs in order of importance so if cutting is needed, you can start with the last paragraph and move upward.

The five "Ws" of journalism -- who, what, when, where, and why -- must be present in every story. They are generally packed into the first paragraph or two. The writer must decide which "W" takes precedence for a particular story.

Write the announcement of events like an invitation to a party. Is everything included for your readers to prepare for the event? Date, time, and place? How to dress? Who's expected to attend? How to RSVP or make a reservation? How to get there?

Headlines with a noun and verb recruit readers. Keep sentences short. Opening sentences should be 20 to 23 words, and paragraphs 1 to 3 sentences. Don't search for fancy words; stick with words you use in conversation.

Sentences written in active voice will be more interesting than those that are passive. An active sentence structure is subject-verb-object, using as strong an action verb as possible. Sentences that start with "It" or "There" are often a tip-off you've written a passive sentence.

Avoid "generic" opening sentences that could be the same for any congregation's newsletter. Congregation members read the newsletter because it is from their church, and they are looking for their church's significance in their lives.

Each denomination and local congregation has its own language. The richness of these words is preserved and carried forward when they're used and explained, but if used without explanation they can alienate and confuse. Being cute or cryptic in the newsletter excludes people. If your newsletter requires reading between the lines or knowing what actually happened, you risk offending, confusing and not communicating.

Remember, you are using your newsletter to reach out to visitors and other potential members as well as to speak to "insiders." Be sure information is clear to all. Even abbreviations most familiar to your congregation should be written out in first reference in every item in your newsletter. For example, United Methodist Women (UMW) are often disheartened to learn their abbreviation is more often read as United Mine Workers.

The accuracy of every piece of information in the newsletter is essential. Being accurate requires double-checking and clarifying information, verifying spelling of names and titles, being sure

days of the week match dates. Pay attention to detail.

If possible, elicit help in covering and writing stories from other members of the congregation. Give your reporters clear assignments. If you expect to use only three or four paragraphs of a particular story, tell the reporter that. Keep records of the assignment, the story to be covered and the date the assignment is due.

Copy editing is more than correcting errors

- + Newsletter copy must be clear, concise and crisp. Delete unnecessary words and rearrange sentences so they flow smoothly.

- + Be sure all essential information is included. Cut out extraneous details.

- + When editing, look for overuse of adjectives, adverbs and prepositional phrases. These dilute the impact of action verbs and too often are used in place of strong verbs. William Zinsser in "On Writing Well" suggests a bracketing technique. When reading copy, bracket any words that seem unnecessary. Then read the sentence without those words. If it makes sense, cut the bracketed words.

- + When possible, prepare your copy and make suggestions to yourself in the margins. Then go back to it a day later to see if your suggestions still look good.

Size, Paper, Ink and Type

Designing your newsletter requires more organizational than artistic skill. The first step is to determine the newsletter's size and shape, then the width of the columns and margins.

No one size of paper is better than another. You may want to experiment to see what your readers prefer. Use a standard size that is available from your supplier to save money. Common alternatives include 8.5" x 11" (letter size) and 8.5" x 14" (legal size). Some congregations use these full size, while others fold them in half for a booklet format. You may also want to look into using 11" x 17" paper, which folds down to letter-size pages and can mean fewer printing or copying runs. This may save on printing costs and is a more cohesive unit than single pages stapled together. Make sure the size you use meets postal regulations. Use white paper, or another light color, and make sure your paper has a hard surface - no lint.

Use black ink. If your budget allows, use a second color for highlights. Preprinting your newsletter's nameplate in two colors can give your publication a design edge without the cost of a second color each issue.

Next, choose the type. Limit the number of type styles to one or two. A serif type and size is most readable for body copy. Use bold face for emphasis. Save italics for photo captions. You may use a sans-serif type face for headlines. These should be at least two point sizes larger than the body copy.

- + Use the same style throughout your newsletter for the body copy.

- + Don't use all italic or all capital type for body copy; both are difficult to read in quantity. Use type large enough for easy reading.

This is a serif typeface - good for body copy.

This is a sans serif typeface - good for headlines.

Column, Margin and Gutter Widths

- + The number of columns depends on the type and paper sizes you use. Optimum column width is 39 characters. How many inches that equals depends on the size and style of your type. Use a single width throughout your newsletter, with perhaps the exception of your pastor's column, which can be set wider if it doesn't run too long.

- + Leave the columns with a ragged right margin -- it improves readability.

- + Decide how wide to make margins and the spaces between columns, which are called "gutters." Generous margins increase readability. Gutters should be at least the width of the margins. Margins and gutters are planned, and are not just whatever space happens to be left over.

Folding and Mailing Label Placement

Determine how the paper will fold for mail delivery and place the area for the mailing label and return address in the correct spot, usually the bottom of the back page. Now you are ready to fill in the other pages.

Good editing is a matter of organization

Before you begin your layout, organize your copy by putting similar items together. Here are some groupings to consider:

- + local church news
- + children's corner
- + membership news
- + inspirational material

- + conference and national news
- + announcements of events
- + mission activities
- + committee reports
- + youth activities
- + letters

Use these categories as section headings and/or page designators to help readers find information they are looking for.

The Front Page

Readers are captured or lost by their reaction to the front page, so its appearance and content are critical. Put the biggest news on page one.

The front page should have at least two, and preferably more, big news items, not just one long story. It may include a photo or bulletin paragraphs which draw the reader's attention: e.g., St. John's Wins Basketball Title; see page 3. It should also contain an invitation or announcement of an important upcoming event. A list of future sermon topics is a possibility, but the pastor's column, with its "editorial" style, belongs on a later page.

Page one is laid out somewhat differently than the others. It always contains the nameplate, which includes the name of the newsletter, date and issue number, and often the address and phone number of the congregation, as well as some graphic design. If the address and phone number are not part of the nameplate, put them in the masthead, a small block reserved for this type of information on page two. Put the name and phone number of the editor and the pastor in the masthead. The nameplate tells the reader who is responsible for the newsletter and where to begin to read. Put it at the top of the page. The first page usually has the largest headlines. To fit a variety of stories on page one, you might have to continue one or more articles on a succeeding page. But try to keep each story confined to one page.

The Pastor's Column

The pastor's column and any other inspirational items should be in the same place in each issue. Your readers need to be able to find this copy in the same place each time. Page two or the back page are possible spots to consider.

Regular features

Consider the grouping or subject headings you have selected. Some of these will be regular features such as youth activities, letters to the editor and the calendar of events. Place them in the same general location in the paper each time.

A special feature story might be given prominence on page three, or perhaps this will be the area for conference or national church news.

Page design

Decide which item on each page is most important.

Lay out the page with the most important item as your focal point. This assures that your readers' eyes will go to that item first. You can do this by using a photo or illustration with the copy, using a larger headline, or putting the item at the top of the page.

Photos and art work always grab your readers' attention more quickly than copy. Use these sparingly and large enough for easy recognition. One photo or drawing or a group of either is probably enough on each page. Make photos original. As a rule, the greater the number of people in the photo, the larger it should be. Faces in a group shot shouldn't be smaller than the tip of your little finger.

Headlines are a key part of your design. They are your readers' road signs to what is coming and where to go next. The more complete they are, the more effective they will be. A headline works best when it uses a noun and a verb rather than a label. A few label headlines on regular columns are okay. Headlines should be flush left and set larger or bolder than your body copy.

Your calendar of events is most effective when designed in a grid format because that is what your reader is used to seeing. Including events on a calendar does not replace the need for narrative copy explaining events and inviting participation. Communication will be most effective when you do both.

White space (places in your newsletter where there's no copy) should be pushed to the outside. When trapped in the middle of a page, white space calls attention to itself. When pushed outside, it pulls readers into copy.

How often should you publish?

How often does your congregation make news? Are there lots of events and membership activities in your congregation? Does the pastor have something significant to share each week? Are there sufficient volunteers to gather news and distribute the newsletter more often than once a month?

Size and frequency of publication are intimately linked. Any newsletter that requires more than five to 10 minutes of reading cover to cover is probably too long. Readers are more likely to consume the same amount of copy in two shorter installments than in one long one.

Just as important as how often you publish is setting a publication schedule and sticking to it, so readers can count on timely newsletters. Newsletters that come out less than monthly tend to be too infrequent for timely coverage of events. Communicate deadlines to readers in each issue. Explain how and when to submit information. Leaving out information not received by your deadline may be harsh, but it is the only way to ensure copy arrives on time in the future.

Mailing lists: members and more

Consider your audience. Include eight groups of people on your congregation newsletter mailing list:

1. Members and active participants in your congregation -- Send your newsletter to each household in which there is a congregation member or a child in congregation school. Relatives living at the same address should receive their own copies.
2. Seasonal and former members -- Your newsletter should provide a connection with those who continue prayerful and financial support of your congregation.
3. Visitors -- Use the newsletter as part of your visitor follow-up. Gather visitors' names and addresses; send them copies of the most recent newsletter with a letter from the pastor or other key officer. Keep visitors on your mailing list for up to six months so that as they shop for a church home, their experience at your congregation will remain fresh.
4. Community leaders -- Include them, not for recruitment purposes but because they are in

positions to steer people to your congregation and its ministries. Community leaders include police and fire chiefs, elected officials, presidents of civic organizations and unofficial leaders who "effect" or "have an impact on" your town or neighborhood.

5. Real-estate agents, builders and developers -- They can direct people to your congregation, so add them to your mailing list. You may want to ask your community organizations that call on new residents to distribute copies of your most recent newsletter.

6. Homes and congregate living centers in the area -- Apartment houses, student dormitories, senior citizen centers or residences should receive several copies of each issue. Get permission to place them in a prominent location.

7. Religious editors at area media outlets -- Send your newsletter to local newspapers, radio and television stations. This won't lead to stories, but it will keep your congregation's name before the media. That can payoff when you send them a story or when they're looking for church response to an issue.

8. Exchange newsletters with other congregations in your area -- Exchanges can provide new ideas for newsletter content and design. They also let your denomination and congregations of other communions know what you are doing.

As you add nonmembers to your mailing list, let them know why they are receiving your newsletter. A cover letter should be sent with the first issue. Similar letters every six months or so are a good idea, as personnel may change.

Newsletter checklist

Use this checklist to make sure nothing has been forgotten!

Title Area

- Newsletter name and date
- Congregation name, address, phone
- Denomination name
- Art work or photo
- Pastor name, phone
- Secretary name, phone
- Denominational publications
- Editor name, phone
- How and when to submit copy
- News Sources
- Pastor
- Trustees, deacons, elders

- Congregation school personnel
- Choir director
- Youth and youth leaders
- Other congregation newsletters
- Ecumenical agencies

Headlines

- Headlines are lively
- Headlines use active verb/noun
- Headlines don't summarize story

Content of Articles

- Article: who, what, when, where, why, how
- First paragraph summarizes entire story

Departments

- Topical pastor's column
- Detachable congregation calendar
- Profiles of new members
- List of sick, hospitalized
- Births, marriages, obituaries
- Youth column
- Choir activities
- Denominational news stories
- Ecumenical news stories
- Letters to the editor
- Layout
- Biggest news on first page
- Layout uses white space
- Copy is in columns
- Photos, art work, but not overused

Printing

- Duplicator in good working condition
- Copy is clean and clear
- Address list is up to date

Additional Resources:

Editing Your Newsletter, by Mark Beach. Published by Coast to Coast Books, 1115 SE Stephens St., Portland, OR 97214, 1988, \$18.50.

The NEWSLETTER Newsletter, from Communication Resources, 1425 W. Maple St., P.O. Box 2625, N. Canton, OH 44720; 800/992-2144. Published monthly.
<http://www.newsletternewsletter.com/>

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