



Creating Effective Church eNewsletters

Introduction

Church e-newsletters are a staple of congregations everywhere. No matter what size your church is, your members want to stay in the loop.

Church e-newsletters foster a sense of community, encouraging members to stay connected with one another and with church leaders.

In the days before the pandemic, many churches used printed bulletins distributed during services to inform people about current events in and around the church. Today, a church's e-newsletter — essentially your bulletin in digital format — is more important than ever to stay connected. Members can receive church news wherever they are.

An e-newsletter is just another name for a nicely designed and formatted email. Most people receive a lot of emails every day. It's not unusual for people to get 100 or more a day. That means that even among your loyal church members, folks are probably not going to want to scroll through and read a very long message — even if it's beautifully designed. So how do you decide what's the right amount of information to include in your e-newsletter?

You certainly can use your printed church bulletin as a starting point. If you copy it all into an email, some people may read it. But you're also going to overwhelm many other readers with long, full-length articles. Instead, think of your e-newsletter as a condensed version of your printed bulletin.

If you put yourself in the shoes of a person receiving commercial email messages — and yes, your church e-newsletter is really commercial rather than personal — you know it can be daunting to see a ton of text. The more you can lighten it up with white space, headings, photos illustrations, clip-art, charts, and so on, the more engaging it can be. All of this is very doable!

Let's begin by looking at the basics of deciding what to include in your e-newsletter, who should write it, how to format it, and the timing and logistics of sending it out.

The A-B-Cs of church e-newsletters

1. What should church e-newsletters include? You can adjust to meet your own needs, but here is a list of some types of content to consider:
 - a. News – past, current and upcoming events in and around the church community
 - b. Order of worship – including song lists and Scriptures

- c. Photos – the best newsletters include candid, genuine photos of members engaged in worship, ministry, fellowship, etc.
- d. Contact info – always include an email address, phone number and address in case current or potential members want to get in touch
- e. Prayer requests
- f. Online giving information — don't forget to include prominently in every e-newsletter!
- g. Event registration details
- h. Inspirational quotes — e.g., from a favorite devotional
- i. What Presbyterians Believe — great ideas at
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe>

✓ From time to time, you can also create specialized newsletters when needed — e.g., a holiday newsletter (how to prepare, Bible reading plan, spiritual practices, etc.), fundraising (building fund, missionary support, VBS fund, special ministry outreach), special events (a church BBQ or picnic, concert, prayer event, guest speaker, ministry meal), urgent need (give, volunteer), staff update, emergency events

✓ Check out “the competition”! See what other churches are doing to help you find inspiration.

✓ Have an objective for each e-newsletter: what are you trying to accomplish or what do you want readers to do? Some examples: give important information, encourage better participation at worship, solicit more giving, etc. Lead with the important content just the way a newspaper article uses “inverse pyramid.”

2. Who should write the newsletter? Figure out ahead of time who should do what so one person doesn't get stuck with too much work. Plus, the more people who get involved, the better. Everyone involved will feel responsible for the success of your newsletter, encouraging them to do their best work.
 - a. Church administrators – should be in charge of setting publication dates and working on the logistics of distributing newsletters on time
 - b. Pastors, ministers, preachers – every so often, pastors should contribute articles to the newsletters, guiding members through passages or sermon themes
 - c. Staff and leadership – the majority of content for newsletters should come from them
 - d. Church members – include the words of your members from time to time. This ensures that they feel appreciated.
 - e. Change the writers every once in a while to keep content fresh
3. How long should the newsletter be? You want enough content to inform readers but not so much that they quit reading. A good rule of thumb is to keep it between 500 and 1,000 words. How many pages is 500 words? In a document with standard margins,

single spacing and size 12 font, you can fit about 500 words in a page. If everything you want to include runs longer than that, I recommend that you edit it down! Do keep your photos, and try to make your paragraphs short — just 1-4 lines if possible. Draw attention with formatting. If you have particularly important points you want to emphasize, highlight with bold, italics and the use of color. Make it attractive!

- ✓ You don't have to "tell all" in your newsletter! Think about giving a headline, a short description and a link to your website to "read more." Not only does this save valuable space, it also helps you find out which items are most popular.
 - ✓ Use a friendly, informal, personal tone. Aim to be informative while also being somewhat informal and conversational. Think of it as a conversation between a church leader and a member. Make it enjoyable.
 - ✓ Make the content exclusive – people won't stay interested if you simply reiterate information they've already heard. Prominently feature information that hasn't appeared elsewhere.
4. Write a strong or catchy subject line! Don't just call every newsletter "First Presbyterian Church Newsletter." Instead, give some indication of what's in it and make it sound appealing. E.g., "Winter's heating up at First Pres!" or "3 Easter events you won't want to miss at First Pres."
 - ✓ You can test the effectiveness of a subject line with "A/B subject line testing." You can write two different subject lines to see which one gets more of your members to open your email! This kind of testing is included with some service provider accounts.
 5. Designing your e-newsletter
 - a. You can certainly create your own newsletter from scratch if you or someone in your congregation has graphic or web design skills, but it's probably a lot easier to use a ready-made template and modify it to fit your needs. Most email service provider accounts come with a selection of professional-looking templates that are pretty easy to use with simple drag-and-drop or cut-and-paste functionality.
 - b. Start by making an attractive header, one of the first things your readers will see when they open your message. Brand it with your logo, or the PC(USA) seal, and perhaps a great photo of your church. Use a legible font.
 - c. Break up your content with plenty of subheadings. Your newsletter will be easier to scan if you present it in bite-size chunks.
 - d. Think mobile users. Chances are, many if not most of your members will open your newsletter on their phones. Stack your content in a single vertical column to make it easily viewable on mobile devices. Avoid content that will require scrolling gymnastics — like complex tables and charts or very wide, narrow pictures.

- e. Split up text with images. Pictures tell stories and build reader engagement. Can you use a photo with a caption, or a simple chart or even a cartoon to make your point? You can also use clipart of Christian symbols, for example, to break up solid text.
- ✓ Consider signing up for an account with an email service provider. There are many free or low-cost options. Most offer a variety of templates — and they offer lots of built-in tools to help you manage your distribution list, schedule and automate your messages, and much more. Some vendors to consider:
- MailChimp - <https://mailchimp.com/> - You can have up to 2,000 subscribers and send up to 12,000 emails a month. Above this limit, the cost begins at \$10/month
 - Vertical Response - <https://www.verticalresponse.com/> - It's free for up to 4,000 emails per month and 300 contacts. This option provides free templates, social media integration, subscription services and more. If you upgrade to the basic package, you get unlimited emails but pricing is based on the size of your email list, starting at \$11/month
 - Constant Contact - <https://www.constantcontact.com/>
 - AWeber - <https://www.aweber.com/>
 - Mailer Lite - <https://www.mailerlite.com/>
 - Benchmark - <https://www.benchmarkemail.com/>
 - iContact - <https://www.icontact.com/>

6. Some legalities to keep in mind

- a. There's a federal law that governs mass emails, including e-newsletters, known as the CAN-SPAM Act. It mostly applies to commercial enterprises, but it's prudent to follow the good practices in this law. One key provision is to always include a link to let people unsubscribe from your mailing list.
- b. Don't lift content — especially photos — off the internet without permission! This is particularly true for websites, but it also applies to e-newsletters. You're always better off using photos that you took or people submitted.
- c. Speaking of photos, be careful about using photos of children without a parent's permission. A simple email exchange requesting permission is enough — "Is it OK if we include Nora's photo in our next e-newsletter?"
- d. Be aware of copyright laws. This especially applies to music. If your church has a license to reproduce music or lyrics, then you're fine. If not, you're better off not to copy them.

7. When and how often should you send it out?

- a. Begin by assessing your audience size. Larger churches with a lot to report may want to use weekly or every-other-week newsletters. Smaller churches might get by with a monthly newsletter.

- b. Also take into account how much information you plan to include. Long articles require research, writing and editing time. If this is what your content will be, you might want a monthly newsletter. On the other hand, if you plan to just publish quick updates and a listing of upcoming events, maybe a weekly or biweekly version would work better.
 - c. After a few issues, you might ask your members what frequency they favor. People like it when you invite them to share their opinion!
 - d. Is there a best time to send out your e-newsletter? According to Mailchimp, a popular email service provider, 23% of emails are opened within 60 minutes after being sent. They also report that the best times to maximize open rates are Tuesday and Thursday morning between 6 and 8 a.m.
- 8. Your distribution list – you want to make sure that your newsletter is getting into the proper hands without a lot of “bounces” (undeliverables).
 - a. Is your membership roster up-to-date? If you’re moving to an e-newsletter for the first time, it might be worthwhile to pull together a group of people to call all your members and get or verify their email addresses. It’s OK to include multiple family members if appropriate. (For instance, if you have an active youth program, you can also send your newsletter to young members.)
 - b. Promote your newsletter on your website and invite people to sign up for your e-newsletter. (That could be as simple as having them send you an email to say “Add me to your list”)
 - c. Are there other people in your community you want to include? Some suggestions: other churches and nonprofit organizations in the community, local media, your library, presbytery leaders.
 - d. When you do have in-person events, always have a sign-up sheet so people can subscribe to your newsletter.
- 9. Analytics – How is your e-newsletter performing? If you have an email service provider account, you’ll be able to get numbers — known as “metrics” — to show some key indicators of how well you’re doing. Here are some useful statistics worth looking at:
 - a. Delivery rate. The percent of messages that actually get through to people’s inboxes. Start with the number on your distribution list. Subtract the number of “bounced” emails. Divide this smaller number by your original list size. If your delivery rate is lower than 95%, clean up your list!
 - b. Open rate. The percentage of messages sent that people actually open. The average open rate is 25%, but hopefully you’ll do much better than that.
 - c. Click-throughs. If more people clicked on certain types of content in your newsletter, you know to continue writing that kind of content. Use this information to shape future newsletters.
 - d. Forward rate. The more people who forward your newsletter to a friend, the more exposure your church gets. Include a suggestion to forward to a friend.

- e. List growth. Get into the habit of checking the number of subscribers you have at the end of each month. If your list is expanding, you know you're on the right track.

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