

Search Engine Optimization for a More Visible Church

By Christopher Jackson

A Word to Sheepdogs | Editor's Prologue

The Preacher says in Ecclesiastes 1:9, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun."

I am reluctant to call the Preacher a liar, but as a pastor, it sure feels like there is a lot of "new" under the sun. My great-great-grandfather (ordained as Lutheran pastor in 1891) knew nothing of cell phones, the internet, or Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and yet, these things are ubiquitous in our day. Does this make them "new?" Sure. "New" tools for age-old questions regarding communication, information, and visibility.

Christopher Jackson is well acquainted with SEO, and he is even more well acquainted with Jesus Christ, the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. When it comes to the plight of humanity and the "one thing needful," there is nothing new under the sun. There is only Jesus and His gifts, mediated to sinners through Word and Sacrament.

In this essay, Jackson aims to help pastors and congregations utilize SEO in order that sinners may be connected to Jesus through a church ministry where sheep will be rightly shepherded by God's Word and regularly sustained by God's promises and gifts.

- Timothy A. Koch

In January 2025, Lutheran X users began posting why they became Lutheran. One user posted: "I googled 'Churches near [redacted]' and an LCMS church popped up. Went, heard the gospel proclaimed through the liturgy, and saw how beautiful it was in how it reflected our Savior. So, I became Lutheran."¹ Another X user replied, "It's also how I found my LCMS church and then became Lutheran."²

Every weekend, 2.74 million people search for churches online.³ But most churches will never be found, because their websites are not at the top of search results. For example, when searching for "churches in {locale}:" beginning from America's largest metropolitan areas to its smallest, one will not find an LCMS church until Omaha, Nebraska, the 54th largest in the United States of America. That means that an LCMS church does not appear on page one of Google, where almost all clicks occur, in cities like New York, Los Angeles, or even LCMS strongholds like Detroit, Milwaukee, or Saint Louis.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the art and science of helping webpages appear prominently in search engines like Google and Bing. Each of these search engines uses algorithms to decide where webpages ought to appear in search results. SEO involves understanding how these algorithms work and applying those principles to webpages to

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help them appear more prominently and be easier to find.

SEO is the process by which your church ends up at the top of search results, and it isn't rocket science. But is SEO actually pastoral care? Does an article on SEO belong in a journal like *Seelsorger*? I would argue: yes. Every person searching for a church or seeking answers to spiritual questions online is ultimately looking for pastoral care. SEO offers a set of tools to make your church visible to such people. SEO is a way of saying, "I want to offer you spiritual care:"

This paper will examine how evangelism, mediated ministry, and a solid web presence all contribute to a church's work of pastoral care. It will also encourage church leaders to engage in basic SEO best practices and give them some entry-level ideas for how to get started. SEO-and digital activity in general-is not a replacement for in-person Word and Sacrament ministry. It is, however, one way to connect with individuals so that your church can bring them within Christ's fold and under his care. SEO can help churches enhance opportunities for pastoral care by making themselves more visible to people who are either looking for a church or seeking answers to spiritual questions online. To use the words of Christ, SEO is a means of letting your light shine before men (Matt 5:16), working so that good teaching and faithful churches are highly visible to those most receptive to God's work in Word and Sacrament.

Before we get into any technical details, we must address a big question that many readers may have about investing church resources into SEO. That question is this: "What does SEO have to do with pastoral care? Is learning and implementing SEO a good use of a pastor's limited time and resources?"

I contend that it is, and in the paragraphs that follow, I will show why.

Evangelism Is a Form of Pastoral Care

Sean McGeever defines evangelism as "announcing the Gospel":

The announcement that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead—Jesus is Lord of all—is the balm, ointment, and cure for our hearts throughout life. This announcement is central to the beginning of the Christian life: Christ carried our sins to the cross and conquered them through his resurrection.... Evangelism is not a one-time confrontational conversation Evangelism is at the heart of the ongoing work of pastoral care, inciting outsiders into the flock of the church and reminding insiders of the heart of the ongoing life of faith.⁴

“Most evangelism today takes place not by ringing doorbells but by showing up online in the digital spaces and forums where most people today spend most of their time.”

Framed thus, evangelism is just what pastors do: announce the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, as they have been called to do (John 20:23). That is a call to announce certainly to those within the fold. Week by week, pastors fulfill that command through preaching, teaching, visitation, and administering the Sacraments. But that is a call that extends as well to those outside the fold (John 10:16), even while that announcement may look and sound a little different to nonmembers and unbelievers. Evangelism is pastoral care, pastoral care is evangelism, and the Christian minister extends that care to all.

Mediated Ministry

Evangelism is thus essential to the work of pastoral care. In the contemporary world, however, most evangelism takes place not by ringing doorbells but by showing up online in the digital spaces and forums where most people today spend most of their time. Yet many may wonder: can real evangelism and authentic pastoral care even happen in such a mediated way?

In his seminal article on the topic, "The Apostolic *Parousia*: Form and Significance," Robert W. Funk argued that Paul exercised his apostolic ministry via three means:

Paul regarded his apostolic presence to his congregations under three different but related aspects at once: the aspect of the letter, the apostolic emissary, and his own personal presence. *All of these are media by which Paul makes his apostolic authority effective in the churches.*⁵

Paul's Mediated Presence

While on the one hand, Paul believed that typically it was best for him to personally minister to his congregations (more on that at the end), on the other hand, he believed that his presence could be mediated by the epistle and the emissary. Paul, like other ancient writers, believed that his persona could be transmitted by the epistle.⁶ The strongest example of this is his statement to the Corinthians regarding his standing in judgment over and against evildoers in the congregation:

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord (1 Cor 5:3-5).

The "presence in spirit" by which he stands in judgment against the scandalous man of 1 Corinthians seems to be his presence through the epistle, in which he states words of condemnation against his wickedness. Through his epistle, it is as if Paul himself is there.

In another circumstance, Paul arranged for the collection of the Jerusalem church to occur in Corinth via emissaries (2 Cor 9:1-5) because he thought that if he himself were present, the Corinthians would give out of a sense of obligation or embarrassment. But that would be counter to the Christian principle that gifts ought to be

given willingly and cheerfully. Thus, to avoid the gift being an exaction, Paul refrained from coming himself but sent emissaries to arrange for the gift in his stead.

We see yet another notable example of Paul's mediated ministry—perhaps the most relevant and compelling for a discussion of websites and SEO—in his letter to the Romans, which (like many of today's church websites) he constructed to introduce himself and his core doctrinal confessions to a community of strangers not yet familiar with him.

A Shrewd Web Presence Augments Ministry

Paul's wise use of mediators—whether the epistle or the emissary—to carry out his apostolic ministry is a good model for using digital media to carry out evangelism and pastoral ministry. Moreover, his eagerness to start conversations and share the Gospel in any synagogue, forum, or riverside (Acts 16:13) into which he stumbled—wherever people looking for answers to life's questions could be found—can serve as encouragement to pastors to be energetic in establishing an effective web presence for their congregations. Like Paul, they have license to use media, including digital media, for the extension of their ministries beyond the confines of personal presence. And just as the epistle or the emissary offered advantages in some circumstances over personal presence, digital media can empower the pastor to reach out to the lost and minister in ways previously impossible.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul asks, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (10:14).

We echo his question still today: how, indeed? In our age, an effective web presence supports and expands Word and Sacrament ministry. A basic website, together with a Facebook page and a Google Business Profile, embodies a congregation's obedience to Christ's commands to "be wise as serpents" (Matt 10:16) and "let your light shine before others" (Matt 5:16).

Yet for a website to be discovered and draw people into Christ's sheepfold, it must be discoverable-and too many church websites are not. That's where SEO comes in. If a church's web presence is the lamp that gives light to the surrounding community and the entire world, poor SEO is the bushel basket under which many of our lights are hidden (Matt 5:15).

The rest of this article, then, will explain what SEO is (and is not), why churches and pastors should eagerly invest a portion of their time and resources in SEO, and how a few simple steps can go a long way to raise your church's online visibility.

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What is Search Engine Optimization (SEO)?

Take a moment to search this query in Google: "churches near {your locale}:" For example, if you are in the Kansas City area, enter "churches near Kansas City:" Likely, a box with a map and three results will appear at the top of the search results. Underneath that box will be a list of links and perhaps some other features, like short-form videos. Is your church visible on that page? If not, keep clicking through the search results until you find it. How many clicks did it take?

SEO is how you end up as often as possible on page one of search results. It's that simple.

What SEO Is Not

If you're new to SEO, you may get it confused with other types of online activity. So let's be clear: SEO is not social media, web design, or paid ads.

► *SEO Is Not Social Media*

When it comes to digital outreach, most churches probably initially think of social media. A good social media presence can help your church's SEO, but these are still two distinct methods of online outreach.

A church presence on platforms like Facebook, TikTok, X, and Instagram, especially when paired with paid advertising, seeks to grab the attention of scrollers. Social media may also be used as a sort of message board for communicating with, and within, a church community. Few people go to social media specifically to find churches.

Succeeding on social media depends on creating scroll-stopping content that will drive user engagement, even when it's competing against outlandish pranksters and beautiful fitness gurus.

In contrast, SEO helps your church get in front of people actively looking for churches on platforms like

Google and Bing. Succeeding in search depends on anticipating the needs of those around you and creating content that answers the questions searchers are asking.

► *SEO Is Not Web Design*

Admittedly, there is much overlap between web design and SEO, but these are still two distinct fields. Many websites that look amazing have extremely poor SEO. On the other hand, a simple, bare-bones website can have extremely good SEO.

Good web design can help your SEO. Google wants to send users to websites that are attractive and easy to use. Even so, many professional web designers excel primarily at visual aesthetics and enhancing the user experience once on the site. They are often not particularly skilled in SEO.

► *SEO Is Not Paid Ads*

Once again, there is some overlap between paid

ads and SEO. Both paid ads and SEO attempt to get your church in front of the eyes of interested parties, and most search engines do offer paid placements.

However, search engine optimization attempts to get your church to the top of the free slots in search engine results, using either your own expertise and "elbow grease" or that of a paid or volunteer consultant. With SEO, no money goes directly to the search engines.

Why Work on Your Church's SEO

Churches and the pastors and other church staff that serve them have high demands placed upon them. Two things are never in enough supply at churches: time and money. Why should a church invest her efforts in SEO-efforts that could easily be spent in other ventures?

► *SEO Helps People Looking for Churches Find Yours*

Think of the reasons why an individual might Google "churches near *me*:' Perhaps that individual is going through marital difficulties, and she believes that a church can help her and her husband work things out in their household. If your church shows up high on that list, it is your opportunity to bring God's forgiveness into their lives, so that husband and wife can forgive each other. As that forgiveness opens their hearts one to another, your church can give them guidance on what a life of loving service one to another looks like.

Perhaps a young man has gotten his girlfriend pregnant. He wants to make things right: marry her and raise the child up loving God. So he searches for "churches near *me*:' If your church is prominent in the results, you may have an opportunity to help the young father and mother commit themselves to each other in marriage, give them the tools they need for a successful home and family, and help them raise their child up in the fear of God.

Suppose a man in his 70s has gotten a cancer diagnosis. All of a sudden, he is thinking of ultimate questions. What happens to me after I die? How can I reckon with the errors of my life? And so

he searches for "churches near *me*:' This is your church's opportunity to help him know of the grace and mercy available to him through Jesus Christ, bring him to baptism if he is unbaptized, and encourage him to seek forgiveness from those he has wronged, so that he can die in peace, assured of heaven, and with a good conscience.

How often do people make those kinds of searches? The statistics might surprise you. Every month,

- 2.74 million searches are done for "churches near *me*:'
- 9,900 searches are done for "St. Louis churches:'
- 5,400 searches are done for "Phoenix churches:'
- 2,400 searches are done for "Baton Rouge churches:'
- 590 searches are done for "Enid OK churches:'¹⁷

SEO is your chance to be among the churches that show up when such surprisingly large numbers of people search for a place of spiritual care.

► *Bearing Testimony to the Truth*

The Scriptures teach us that we are to bear witness to the truth: "[Be] prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15).

SEO is a means that churches can use to bear witness to spiritual truth when people search for spiritual answers online. These individuals may not be actively seeking a church, but they may have questions about topics such as life, death, God, the soul, and the good life. Helping to answer those questions from a Christian perspective has the potential to lead individuals to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Despite the trend of people disaffiliating from organized religion, people remain as spiritually curious as ever, and they bring that spiritual curiosity to the internet. Here are some spiritually oriented questions people search for:

- What is a soul? (22,200 searches/month)
- What does the Bible say about astrology? (3,600 searches/month)
- Is Jesus and God the same person? (3,600 searches/month)
- How do you get to heaven? (5,400 searches/month)
- What does the Bible say about crystals? (1,600 searches/month)
- Is the Holy Spirit female? (1,000 searches/month)⁸

Some of those questions admittedly might seem ridiculous to the average parish pastor. Yet the mere search volume associated with these and similar questions demonstrates the high level of interest people have in spiritual topics.

Churches can use these questions people have as an opportunity to spread the Gospel and invite them to church. For example, a church could write an article on the topic, "What does the Bible say about chakras?" That article could discuss the fact that chakras are not a biblical concept, but that the Bible talks about an even bigger problem within us: the problem of hearts that are hard against God and neighbor. That article could then discuss how the Gospel brings forgiveness for this hardness of heart and transforms the heart to beat with love for God and neighbor: imperfectly now, but perfectly when Jesus returns. It could then have a call to action to learn more about Jesus or to visit a faithful Christian church.

Addressing questions like that is as close to evangelistic mission work as it gets through digital media: helping direct people with spiritual questions to the truth of God's Word.

► *SEO Is a Wise Use of Resources*

As was mentioned previously, resources are limited in church life. Because of this, many churches may be hesitant to dedicate the resources necessary for SEO. The Scriptures, moreover, acknowledge our finite limitations and commend the wise use of resources: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but

as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil" (Eph 5:15-16).

While churches are certainly under no obligation to work on their SEO, it can be an extremely wise use of their resources.

► *SEO Puts Other Resources to Full Use*

Almost every church has both a Google Business Profile and a website. However, without SEO, these resources will not be utilized to their full extent, if at all.

Churches often spend thousands of dollars and many hours on their websites. However, if searchers never find those websites, that is money wasted. Spending time and money on a website that nobody visits is like purchasing a billboard in the wilderness-but that's precisely what many churches do. They purchase expensive websites but do not work on their SEO, essentially putting up a digital billboard in a digital wilderness.

SEO helps your website get precisely where it needs to be: in front of the eyes of people who are looking for spiritual care, whether that is a church to attend or answers to their spiritual questions.

Google Business Profiles are free, but that doesn't make them any less valuable. These are some of the most valuable digital resources a church has, because these are what show up in Google's map results, typically the first results on the page. A Business Profile is like a billboard that Google gives your church for free.

Once again, most churches are content with that billboard remaining in the digital wilderness. Gradually working to strengthen these profiles, though, can help to get them in front of the eyes of people looking for churches. It is putting to work an asset that otherwise would be useless to your church.

SEO also lets your pastor and other church leaders make more use of the content they are producing. Every week, the church's pastor produces at least one sermon, if not more. Your church probably also produces other forms of content, like Bible studies or newsletter articles. Many

pastors also spend time discussing theology online. By posting this content on the church's website, this content can serve others many times, over years or even decades. This content is not cheap to produce. Pastors went to seminary, dedicated years of personal study, and spent potentially hours to create this content. Reusing it online increases the value added to others through this content that was so costly to create.

While agencies can assist with SEO for a fee, the most impactful SEO work can be done completely for free. It costs nothing but a little bit of time to post a sermon on the church website or add a description to a website image. It costs nothing to post a photo to your Google Business Profile or ask a member for a review.

► *SEO Aligns with Searcher Intent*

SEO isn't the only form of outreach available to churches. Social media marketing (SMM) and traditional marketing (like newspaper ads, radio ads, and billboards) are other popular options. Yet SEO is a particularly powerful form of church marketing because it aligns with the intent of searchers. You are simply fulfilling the demand for information.

That's different than SMM and most forms of traditional marketing. Social media, newspaper ads, and radio slots are all interruptive forms of marketing. For them to work, your marketing needs to grab somebody's attention from everything else vying for his attention, whether that's other social media creators, newspaper articles, or the person swerving towards your car on the other side of the road. It's like Paul preaching Athens-good to do, but one voice in a city with many vying for limited attention. In the vast majority of circumstances, the people you try to reach through SMM and traditional marketing channels are not particularly interested in learning about a church or spiritual matters. This does not mean that you shouldn't try it, but it does mean that the competition for those people's attention is stacked against your church.

SEO differs from these other strategies in that you are attempting to get in front of the eyes of people with a high level of intent. It makes an

effort to answer the questions of people looking for spiritual answers or to be the church visited by a person looking for a church. It's less like Paul preaching in Athens and more like Phillip teaching the Ethiopian eunuch. In other words, the individuals you reach through SEO are already devoting their attention to things your church can provide. SMM and traditional marketing are often like trying to sell sand to desert dwellers. SEO is like selling them water.

► *SEO Is "Sticky"*

SMM and traditional forms of marketing can be powerful, but they tend to not be very "sticky." Unless your church owns the asset (like a road sign), SMM and traditional marketing require nearly constant renewal and upkeep.

Take social media, for example. To have any appreciable reach in today's social media climate, creators need to learn and implement complicated templates, master the art of writing, and in many cases implement good photography and visual editing skills. And those efforts need to be made frequently: at least a couple times a week, if not several times a day, to remain in favor with the social algorithms. As soon as you stop posting great content on social platforms, your reach ends.

Most forms of traditional marketing are no different. Radio slots need to be paid for every month, and the messaging on them needs to be changed regularly. Newspaper ads require the same kind of attention.

Make no mistake: just like these other marketing channels, SEO requires resources-most notably, time, energy, and expertise. It is, moreover, an ongoing process, not a one-and-done event. Yet its results are cumulative. They stack up over time.

And, once progress has been made, that progress tends to stick around. In other words, it's "sticky." Once your church is at the top of a search engine like Google, it tends to stay there. This is for several reasons.

First, this is by design in Google's algorithm. They have designed it so that it is hard to move the pages and profiles from the top slots in

search results. A big reason for this is that there is a positive feedback loop for being in the top slots. If you are in the top results, your website and Google Business Profile will be clicked on more often, and that means that Google gains more user information about your church and its online presence. That, in turn, helps Google trust you more. It truly is a case of "to the one who has, more will be given" (Matt 13:12).

Second, the vast majority of churches are not working on SEO. Even the churches that think they are working on their SEO may not be. Many churches are sold SEO services by the company that made or manages their website. In most cases, these companies are not doing anything to help the SEO. Unless your church is in a large metro area or a particularly competitive market for church advertising, you can be relatively certain that no other churches are going to match your efforts and outrank you in the future.

So ... What Do Algorithms Want?

Hopefully by now you're convinced that, for the sake of effective evangelism and pastoral care, a solid web presence and strong SEO are well worth the time and resources required. But where do you start? We'll go over some specific "pro tips" shortly, but first, it may be helpful to understand what Google and other search engines are looking for when they curate search results.

► *Accurate and Complete Information*

Just as a suit and tie are essential to a professional "look;" so, too, does complete, accurate, and consistent business information-on the homepage of your website, in your Google Business Profile, and in other places across the web like directories and social profiles-help your church stand out in search results. Failing to provide your full address and contact info, service times, office hours, and the like can make it harder for an algorithm to trust your church's legitimacy.

► *External Validation*

The other key component for showing up well in Google results is external validation. To show

up well in the map results, your church needs external validation in the form of citations of your name, address, and phone number. The more often Google sees your church's name, address, and phone number cited across the internet, the greater confidence it will have that people will find a real church to serve their needs and that your church hasn't closed, moved, or is fake. These citations are easy to build by listing your church in online directories and by also including your address and phone number on profiles like your church's Facebook page.

► *Reviews and Backlinks*

A crucial form of external validation to show up well in the map results is reviews on your Google Business Profile. Having many good reviews gives your church better credibility with Google and gives them more confidence to refer their users to you.

The most important form of external validation, however, to show up well in the link results is, fittingly, links from other websites to your church's website. In the SEO world, these are called "backlinks;" to differentiate them from "internal links;" which are links between pages within your website. Backlinks are votes of confidence from other sites on the internet, which causes Google to have greater confidence in your site and recommend it more highly in the link results. Good sources of backlinks for churches include directories, sister churches, Christian radio stations, funeral homes, chambers of commerce, and local news outlets.

What Practices Lead to Good Search Engine Optimization?

SEO is a long game. It is a process of incremental improvements over a large amount of time that together lead to improvement. Here are a few simple practices that can help your church improve its appearance in search. This list is not meant to be comprehensive, but it may give you some ideas of where to start.

► *Audit Your Web Presence*

Establishing a baseline for your web presence will help you determine a strategy and also help

you track your progress. Here are some steps you can take to audit it:

- **Make a list of your web assets.** These include your website, Google Business Profile, podcasts, social profiles-anywhere your church maintains a presence on the internet.
- **Search for "{your church's locale} churches?"** For example, if your church is in Lexington, Kentucky, search for "Lexington Kentucky churches." Write down where you stand in search results-are you in the map pack? Do you show up in link results? On what page? Do you have any short-form videos that show? These results can be different on both desktop and mobile, so make sure to check both.
- **Check the power of your website domain.** Navigate to *ahrefs.com/back-link-checker* and enter your church's domain in the search field. A display of your "Domain Rating" will show, along with a list of links to your church's website. The Domain Rating is a measure of the SEO power of your domain: the higher the better. A rating of 15 will mean that you dominate in most markets. A rating of 30 will work for large metro areas. You build SEO power through acquiring links from other websites.

► *Adjust Your Branding*

Don't worry. You don't need to hire a consultant and graphic designer here. The branding adjustment you need to make is likely just a matter of a few words in the way you present your church online.

The first adjustment you need to make is to include, somehow, the word "church" in your church's name. Many churches use the word "chapel" or "community" or "ministries" to describe themselves. There might be good reasons to do so, but this can lead to a problem with performance in search engines because most people search for queries like "church near *me*:"

not "chapel" or "community near *me*." Not having "church" in your name online will hamper your church's ability to surface for appropriate queries.

The second critical adjustment is to include what I call your top-level locale in your church name. Your top-level locale is the largest commonly referenced population center you serve. Churches often take a parish approach to how they refer to themselves. They refer to themselves as serving the smallest possible locale, many times even referring to their neighborhood. Churches ought to think of themselves more like cathedrals, at least in the way they present themselves online. For example, if your church is called "Faith Lutheran Church" and you are located in Maplewood, Missouri, a suburb of Saint Louis, you should refer to yourself as "Faith Lutheran Church, St. Louis" or "Faith Lutheran Church-St. Louis" instead of "Faith Lutheran Church, Maplewood." Then, wherever your name appears online, whether in your Google Business Profile, your social media profiles, or directory citations, you should use your name, including your top-level locale. This will help your church surface for searches throughout that region.

► *Be Specific*

One strategy many churches employ is to present themselves as generically as possible. The idea seems to be that people may get turned off by details like your theological outlook or denominational affiliation. That commitment gets carried out in their online presentation of themselves, as they will not disclose those kinds of details in their Google Business Profile or their website.

That's a strategy that will backfire when it comes to search engine optimization.

Search engines thrive on specific information-keywords-and they don't like ambiguity. The less a search engine can understand your church, the less confident it becomes in recommending you to its users. Here is the mechanism for why this is the case.

Let's say that you have gotten specific about

your congregation's theological outlook and denominational affiliation. For example, let's say that your website says that you are a "confessional Lutheran congregation affiliated with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod."

If you have gotten specific about your church in such a way, your church will begin to surface as one of the top results for extremely niche queries, like "confessional LCMS congregation

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near me.’ Once you begin surfacing for a hyper-niche query like that, and Google sees that your church has satisfied the intent of those users, they will begin to surface you prominently for broader queries. For example, you may surface prominently for "LCMS church near me.’ That process will repeat for even broader queries such as "Lutheran church near me.’ Through the track record you are developing with Google by rising

to the top of those niche queries, Google will eventually surface you as a top result for the broadest queries, such as "church near me.’

If you want to surface for large, broad queries, you need to be as specific as possible about your church.

► **Keep an Eye on Keywords**

Watch the keywords you are targeting (such as "{your church's location} churches"), either manually or automatically. Semrush is an SEO tool that offers free keyword tracking in its free level. It will even send you email updates when you rise and fall in keyword rankings. That can be just the information you need to be inspired and to make necessary adjustments.

► **Leave No Field Unfilled**

"Leave no field unfilled" is SEO dogma. Whether it is in your Google Business Profile, your social profiles, or your website, ensure that every field has the appropriate information in it. One field on websites that often gets missed is the meta-description. The metadescription is an html tag used to tell search engines what you want your page to be described as in search results. It is editable on the backend of most content management systems. Simply filling out the metadescription will put your church ahead of many others.

► **Build a Broad Online Profile**

The more places your church shows up on the internet, the more search engines will know about your church and the better your performance will be. Having profiles on platforms like X, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, podcast directories and platforms, and as many directories as possible will help your church to perform well in search.

This does not mean that you have to actively manage each of these profiles. Directories are one-time work. Once you build a profile on a directory, your work there is done. Automation can help you keep profiles on social platforms updated. For my church, I have a sermon podcast that I update. When one of those sermons goes live, it will send updates automatically to our church's Facebook page, Google Business Profile, and YouTube channel. One click refreshes most of our profiles on other platforms.

► **Build and Utilize Relationships**

Search engines like Google want to reward real relationships between institutions and individuals. Your SEO will improve if you build good relationships and if you make sure that those relationships are evident to Google.

Relationships like membership in a denomination, the local business association, or para-church ministries can yield SEO benefits. When Google sees your church referenced and linked to the websites of such organizations, it builds trust with them.

Your church likely already has many relationships, for example, with her members, frequent guests, sister churches in the area, funeral homes, etc. Utilize those relationships to help your church stand out in search. Ask members, guests, and fellow pastors-anyone who has a relationship with your church-to review your church on Google. Ask the church in the next town over to add a link to your church on her website. Ask the funeral home to add a link on their website to your church. Put on outreach events in the community and submit a press release announcing them to the local newspaper.

► ***Publish Content***

Google tends to favor surfacing larger websites on the results. This is for several reasons. First, the more pages you have on your site, the better Google can understand who you are. Second, as these pages rank for various queries, they will pass on authority to the rest of the site, especially if you include links from those pages to the most important pages on your site (like your homepage).

There are many ways to get that content. One way is for the church's pastor to focus his online writing efforts on a blog hosted on the church website. Many Christian pastors love discussing theology online on platforms like X or

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Facebook. Instead of posting content on those platforms, he can post it on the platform the church owns: its website. Those posts can then be shared on social media, driving more traffic to the website and enhancing SEO.

Another potential source of content is the pastor's sermons, newsletter articles, and other writings. Chances are the pastor is already producing pages upon pages of content each week for the sake of the church. Reusing that content on its website is a wise use of the church's re-

sources. This will bless those who happen upon the sermons and bless the church in return through better appearance in search engines.

► ***Consistent Effort over Time***

Search engines like Google are constantly shuffling billions of webpages based on the data they have. Because of this, it can take a long time for your SEO efforts to pay off-as long as nine months to see an improvement.

That long feedback loop can make sustaining the effort needed to improve your SEO difficult. However, small improvements made consistently over a long period of time will yield the best results in SEO.

I usually set a goal of doing one thing for my church's SEO a day. Maybe it's asking for a review, optimizing a page, building a backlink from another website, or getting another directory citation. These sorts of small changes will accumulate and make for a better appearance in search engines.

The Whole Point of SEO

We've gotten well into the technical weeds at this point, so it's worth taking a moment to remember what the ultimate goal of our SEO efforts is: increasing opportunities for pastoral care within the body of Christ. Circling back for a moment to Paul's "mediated ministry;" we remember that his use of letters and emissaries was, to his mind, secondary to and supportive of in-person Word and Sacrament ministry.

Funk, cited earlier, helpfully reminds us that Paul generally preferred to be in the presence of those he ministered to:

The letter, the dispatch of an emissary, and Paul's personal presence represent the implementation of the apostolic *Parousia*, and in ascending order of significance. The presence of Paul in person will therefore be the primary medium by which he makes his apostolic authority effective.⁹

Paul thus emphasized and prioritized his per-

sonal presence as the primary means of exercising his ministry. That's a point that bears emphasizing, especially for the majority of *Seelsorger's* audience, for whom good, personal, enfleshed ministry is so important. Paul believed that he could exercise his ministry most effectively in person. In the introduction to his *magnum opus*-that paradigmatic example of mediated ministry-Paul expresses his strong desire to minister personally to the Romans: "Always in my prayers, [I ask] that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you" (Rom 1:10).

Digital media thus is not and should not be a replacement for in-the-flesh pastoral care. Pastors ought to continue preaching from pulpits, administering the Sacraments, and bringing God's care to the homes of those entrusted to them. Our SEO efforts are an aid to, not a substitute for, authentic in-person ministry.

Make a Commitment

Even so, as I conclude this article, my challenge to you is this: make a well-defined commitment to work on your church's SEO, so that you can bless those looking for churches and offer answers to their spiritual questions with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps that commitment would look like this: "I will do one activity per weekday to improve the SEO of my church:"

Likely, the biggest obstacle to working on your church's SEO is that you're not sure what to do. I have prepared a simple but comprehensive checklist to help you improve your church's SEO. Download the checklist here: churchseo.io/checklist.

As one last word of encouragement, let me leave you with a story of some friends I know who have been blessed by a church's SEO efforts. In the mid-2000s, a young man and woman living in Louisville, Kentucky, had some spiritual questions. They conducted a great deal of research online on these questions, and Google recommended articles from Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Lexington, Kentucky. The pastor at the time had been a pioneer in posting theological articles on his church's website.

Through those articles, they became interested in Lutheranism. A few months later, their jobs took them to the Lexington area, and they joined Our Redeemer. Because of this, they have raised their family in that church. Their children have been baptized and confirmed there, and they are solid volunteers to the congregation, serving on various boards and committees.

That's the power of SEO, to bless individuals and bless churches.

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NOTES

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5. Robert W. Funk, "The Apostolic Parousia: Form and Significance," in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. John Knox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 249. Emphasis added.
6. Christopher Dwight Jackson, "The Phenomenon of Social Presence in the Pauline Epistles and Its Implication for Practices of Online Education" (EdD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), ch. 2.
7. Keywords Everywhere, accessed March 25, 2025, keywordseverywhere.com.
8. Keywords Everywhere.
9. Funk, "Apostolic Parousia," 258. *Parousia* is Greek for "presence."