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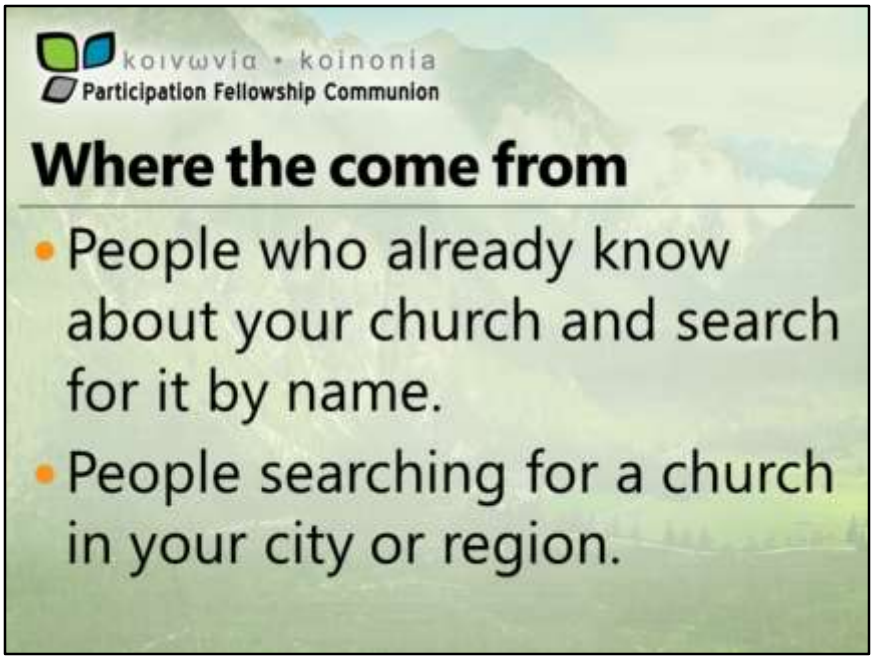
Building an Effective Website
It's all about the message

Why people visit a website comes down to 2 basic needs: (1) They are looking for something. People might look for a church if they are frustrated with the church they currently attend, or have been "driven out" for one reason or another. Or they might be new to your area, or new to the faith, and are now looking to see which church might be a good fit for them. Or (2), because you have a product they want. In the case of a church, that might be something you've written or recorded that inspires them.

People are unlikely to just "stumble upon" your website. It's not likely your website will ever break into the top 20 pages for "who is Jesus". When it comes down to it, a local church website is highly unlikely to attract people who aren't already "church people". That is, your audience is either looking for a church, or looking for resources.

What you provide on your website really comes down to how much time and commitment you or your volunteer(s) are willing to put into it. If you have low commitment, then you want to focus on telling people who you are, because that will be your largest audience. If you have more commitment, you can provide resources like articles, sermons, devotionals, or other resources that help people in their relationship and life with Jesus.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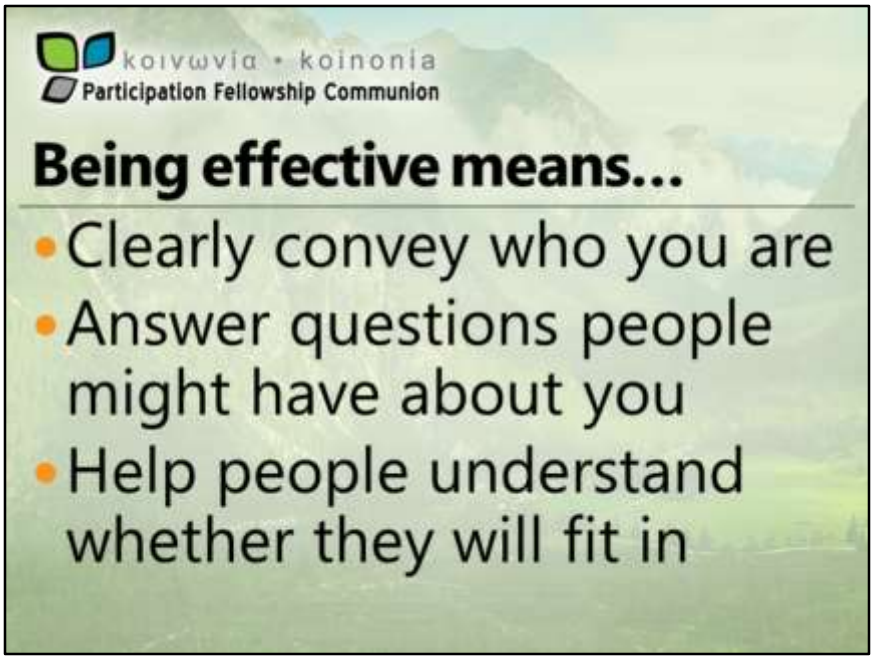
Where the come from
People who already know about your church and search for it by name.
People searching for a church in your city or region.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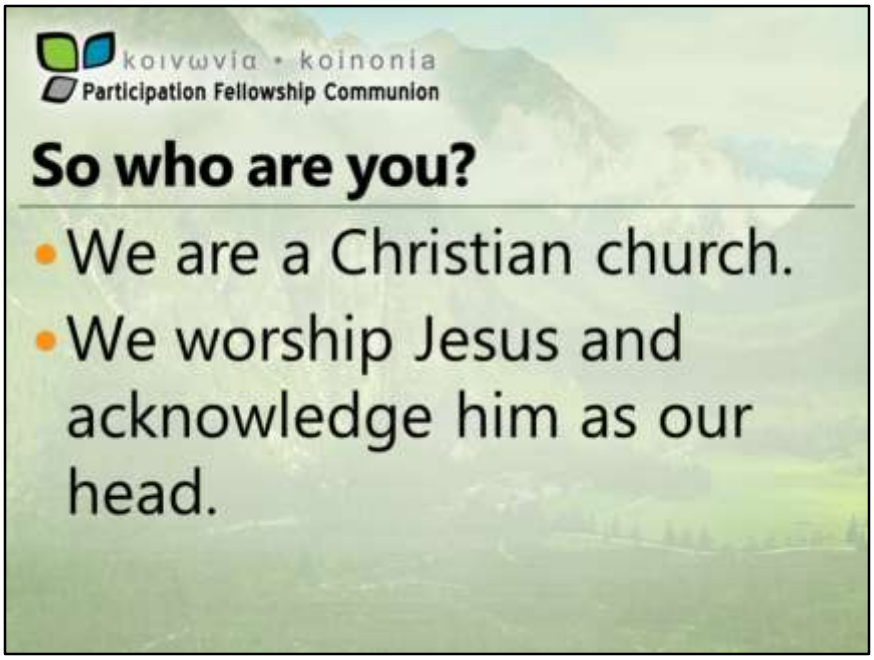
Being effective means...
• Clearly convey who you are
• Answer questions people might have about you
• Help people understand whether they will fit in

Read the screen

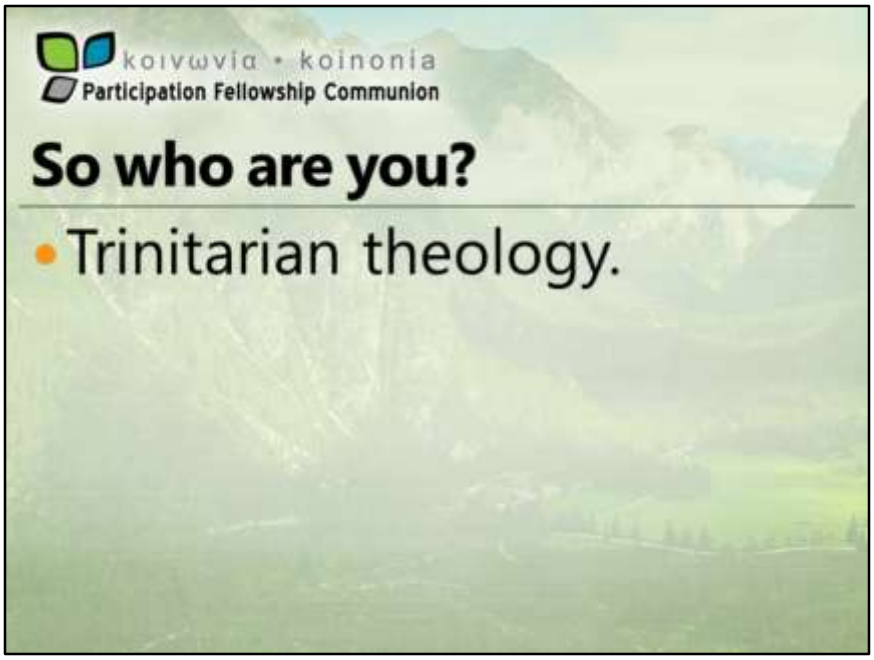
I've visited three churches besides my regular church in the last year. All of them claim on their websites to be "friendly". Yet at all three, the only person who greeted me was the greeter at the door. And the only people who talked to me were the ones I went up to and introduced myself to. Not being an extrovert, this made me very uncomfortable and I felt ignored. Were I looking for a church, none of the ones I visited would get a second visit, because I simply didn't belong. And that's why the message has to be real. Saying your church is friendly doesn't make it friendly. So your identity as a church has to be "owned" by the majority in it.

It's a big question. You shouldn't take it lightly. You and your church leaders should spend some time praying, thinking and figuring it out. Because that's THE question people want to know.

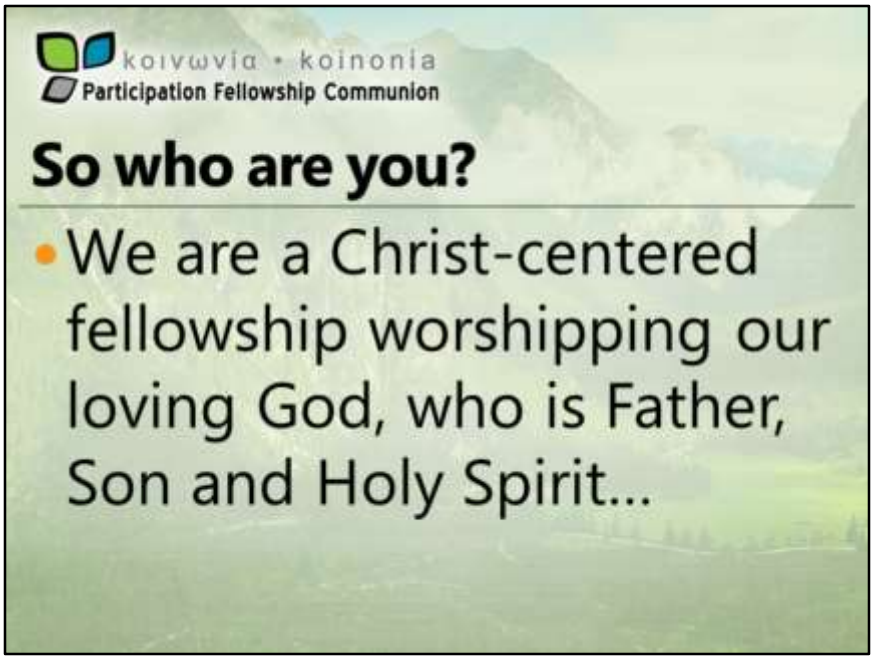
Do you mind if I pick on some of our better church websites? Let's look at some examples… bad and good.



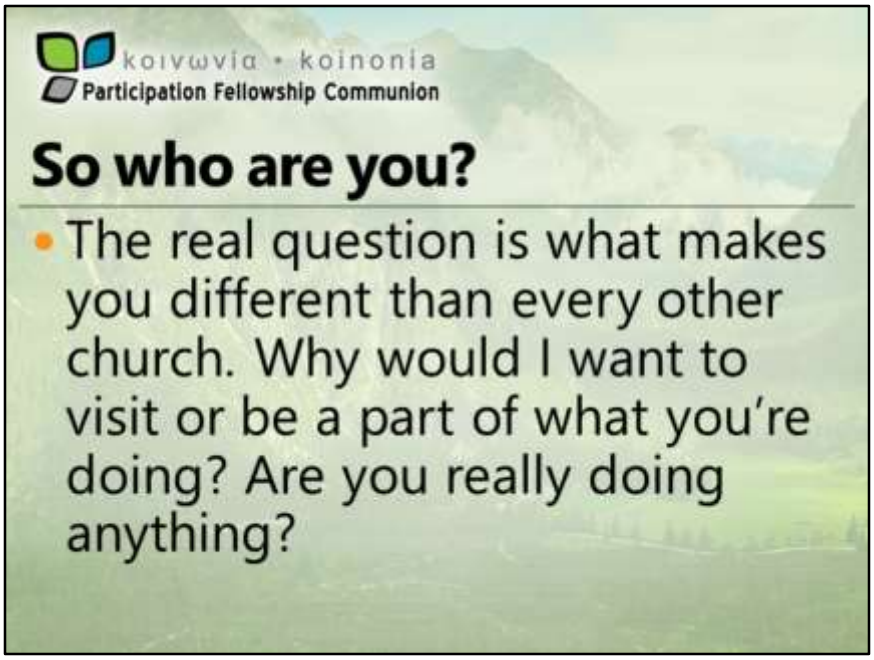
So does the church across the street. Do we need to say this? Absolutely. It's something people will want to know. But it is only who you are in a very general sense. It's not specific enough to warrant my interest in your church.



Yawn! Is it important? Absolutely. And it might actually attract some intellectual types who think that your sermons might be studies in Trinitarian theology. But at the core, it says “God is the center of everything we are and do.” And most churches would think they believe that too. And most Christians wouldn’t see what makes you any different than the mega-church down the street.



The page goes on and on quoting almost verbatim the denomination's goals, mission, and ministries page. Lots of words, but very generalized and it really still tells me nothing about your church that sets it apart.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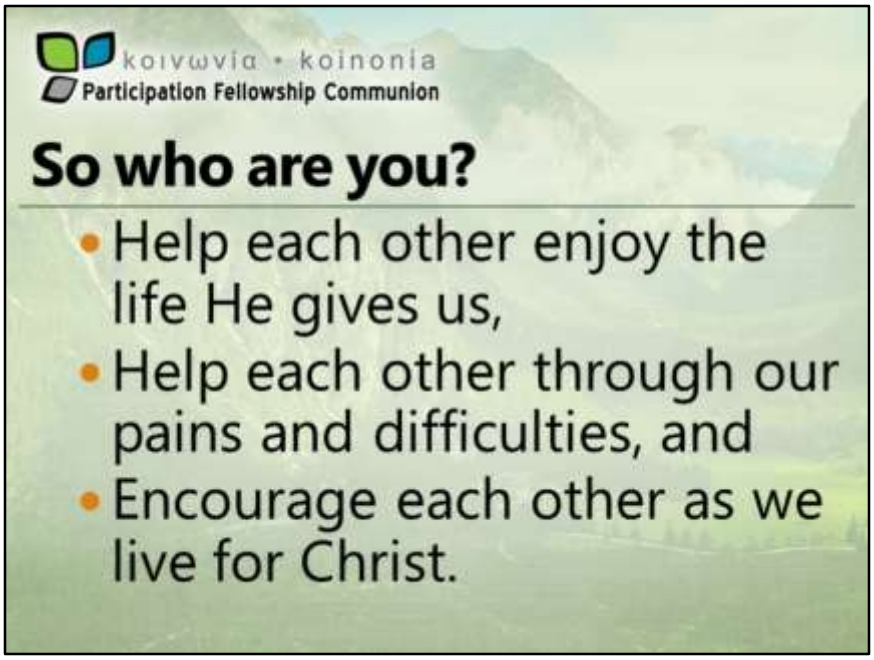
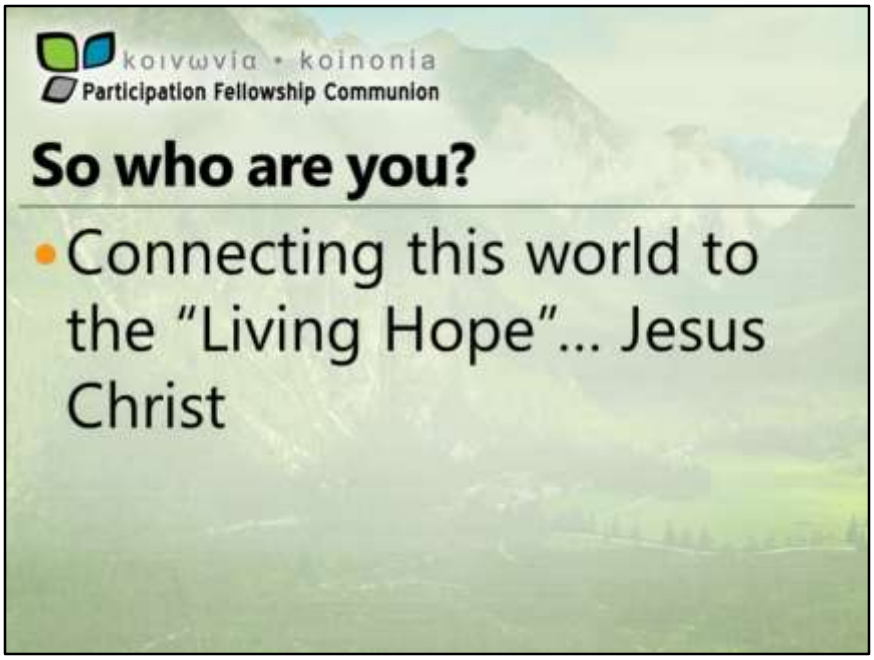
So who are you?
The real question is what makes you different than every other church. Why would I want to visit or be a part of what you're doing? Are you really doing anything?

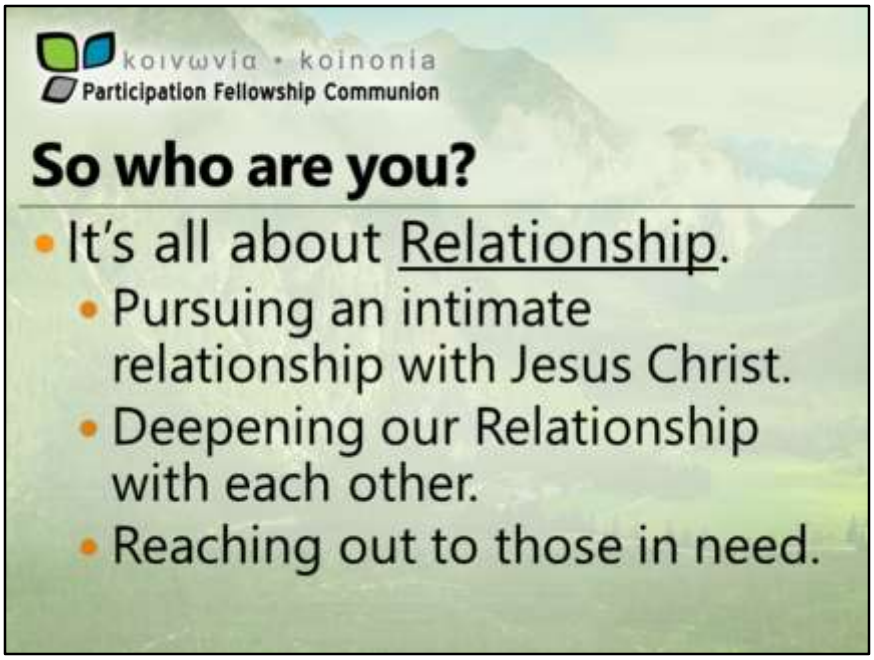
Example: www.newlife3.org



Example: www.newlife3.org



Example: www.reliance-cc.org



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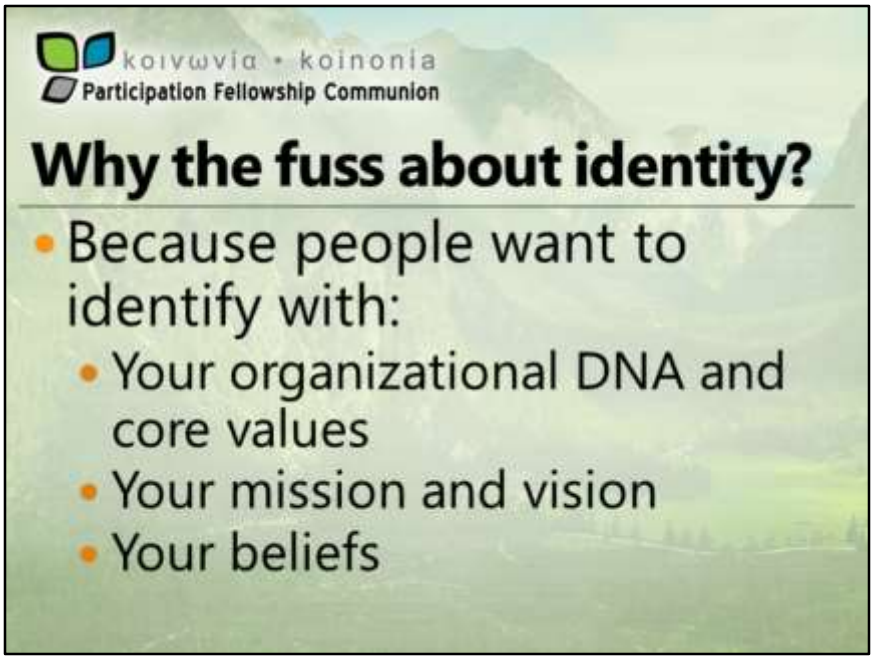
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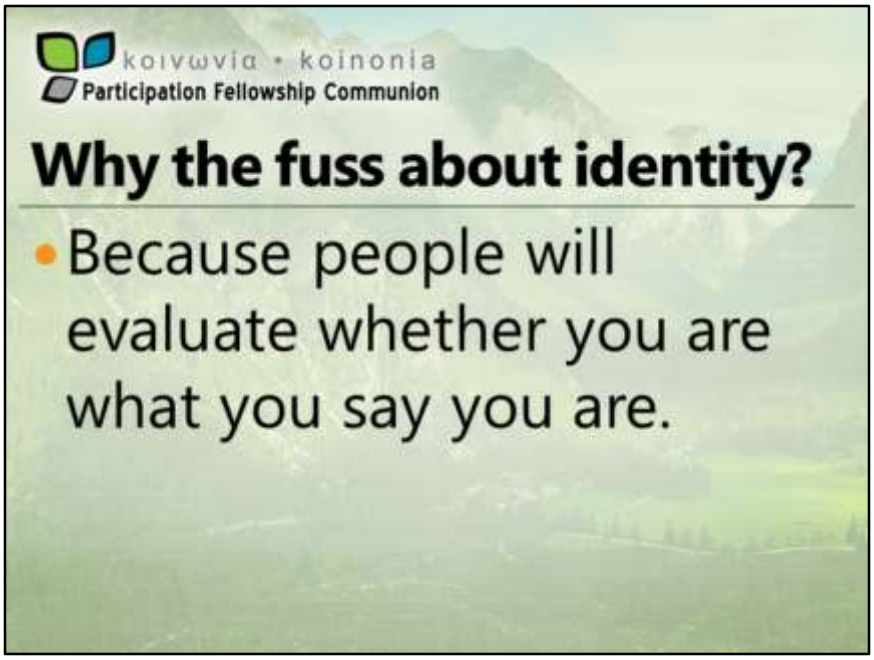
Why the fuss about identity?
Because people want to identify with:
Your organizational DNA and core values
Your mission and vision
Your beliefs

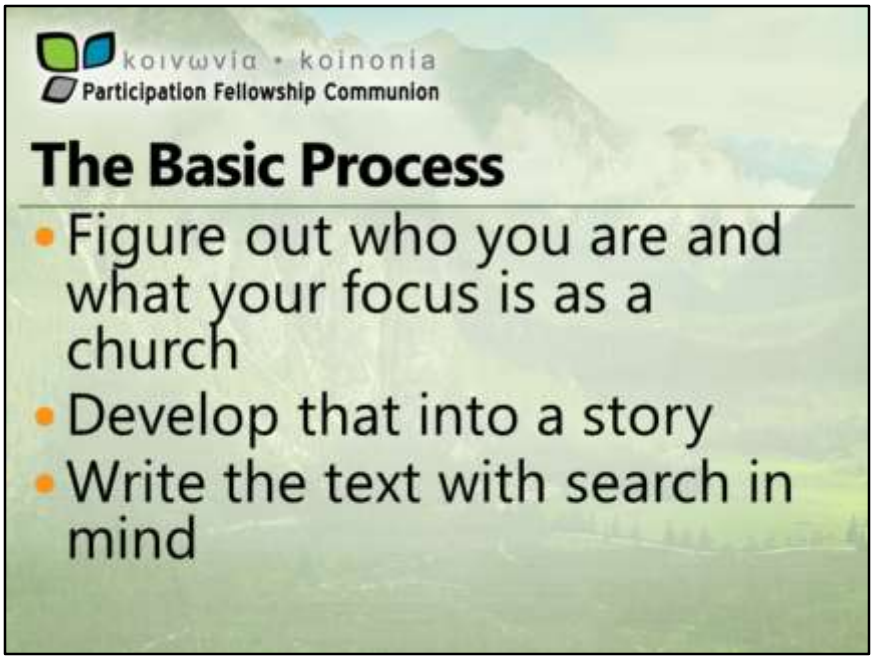


I've spend a lot of time on "who we are" because it's the most important message of an effective website. Who you are must be genuine because when people visit your church, they will see who you really are. And who you are must be attractive because people won't visit your church unless they can identify with who you are and your focus as a church. We can't compete in the number of ministries with a mega-church. Most of the time, we can't even compete on quality of the few ministries we have. Generally, we can't even compete with their music or preaching. Where we can compete is with our purpose and sense of belonging.

Take children's ministry—if you have 50 people with 7 kids, you just can't provide the same opportunities in children's ministry as a church of 1000 with 200 kids. It's just reality. But if I like your message, and I come visit anyway and my little boy (if I had one) hit it off and was instant best friends with Bob's little boy, and everyone seems so friendly, introduces themselves, and seems to really care about me and my family, the chances are much better than I'll stick around. But your message about who you are needs to be real.

So at my home church, "it all about relationship". So extrovert or not (and I'm not), I make it a point to talk to people I know and people I don't know every week. I try

very hard to remember the names of new people and other things I've learned about them so it really is about relationship. It's harder for me than a lot of our extroverts, but I'm part of the church and I own the identity as much as they do.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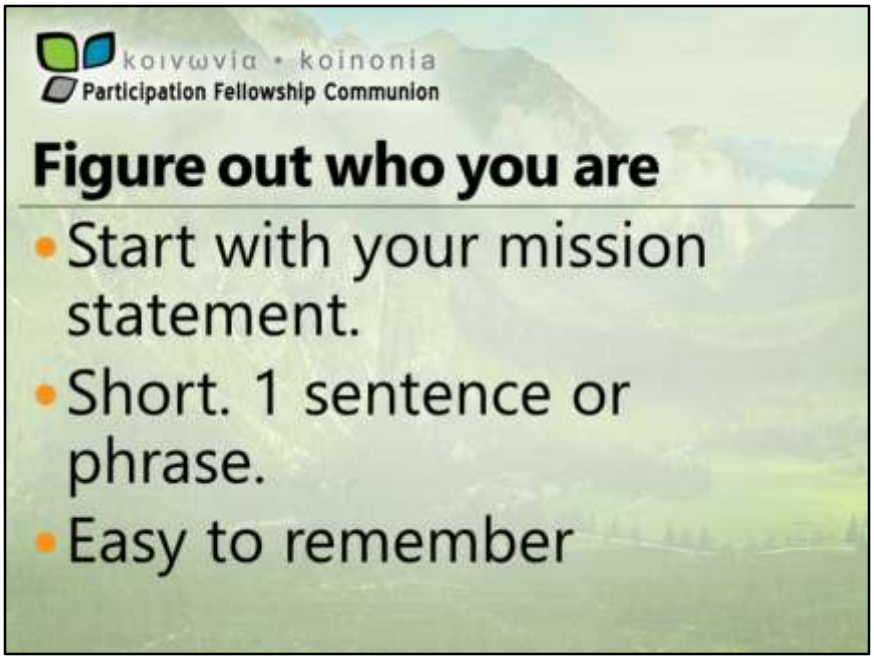
The Basic Process
Figure out who you are and what your focus is as a church
Develop that into a story
Write the text with search in mind



This starts with you as the pastor, but also needs to include your church leadership. And when I say “leadership”, you may want to include your “faithful servants” in that group at least for this purpose. They’ll feel valued and appreciate being able to give feedback in the process. Plus, they really need to own the identity that comes out the process.

You need to be able to quote your mission readily without looking it up to anyone who’s interested. This is something that needs to be common knowledge. It needs to be looked at regularly and thought about. Are you really living up to your mission?

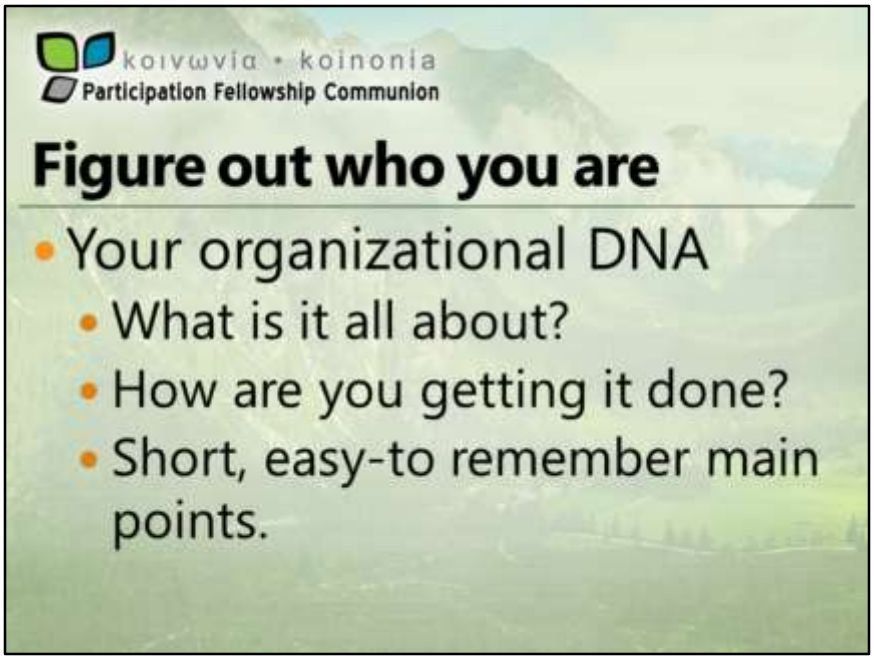

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Figure out who you are
• Your organizational DNA
• What is it all about?
• How are you getting it done?
• Short, easy-to remember main points.

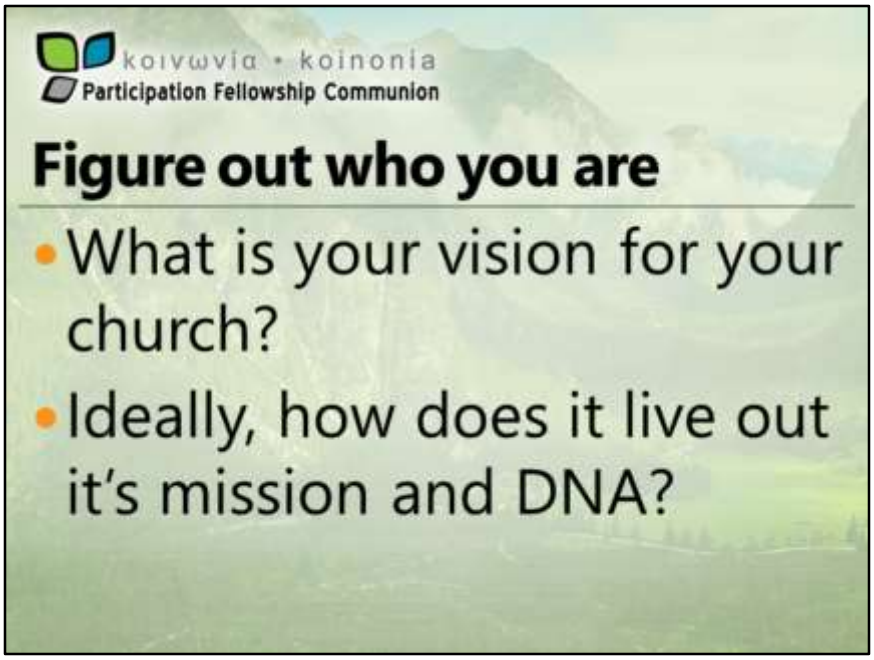
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Figure out who you are
• What is your vision for your church?
• Ideally, how does it live out it's mission and DNA?

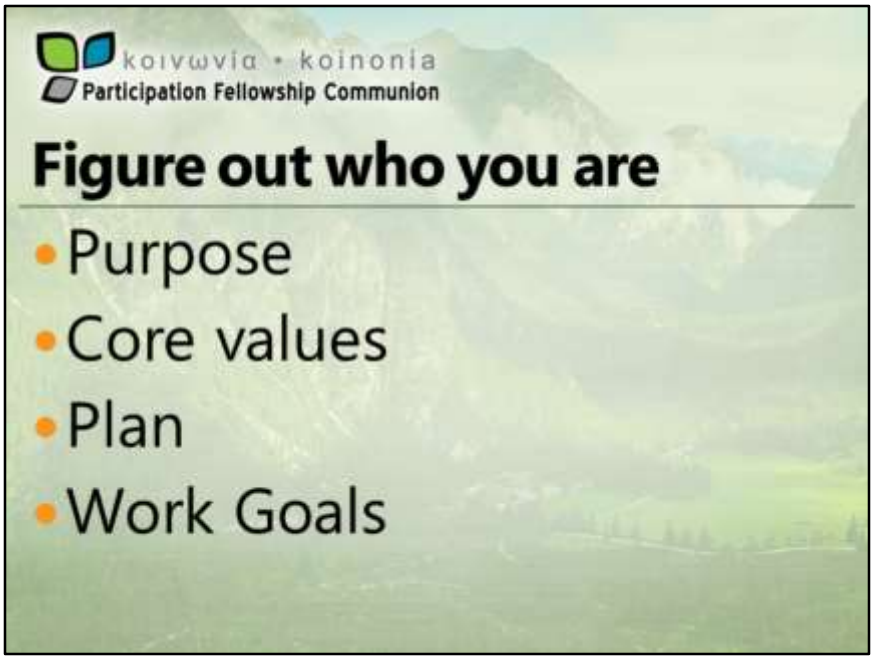
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Figure out who you are
Purpose
Core values
Plan
Work Goals

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Developing your story
The story you create needs to be compelling. It should generate interest in your church.
It should be consistent.
It needs to be authentic.

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Writing the content
Your home page is your most important page for attracting new people.

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Writing the content
Your home page needs to tell a clear story about your church.
It doesn't need to tell ALL about your church

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Writing the content
The story on your home page needs to take into account how people will find your website.

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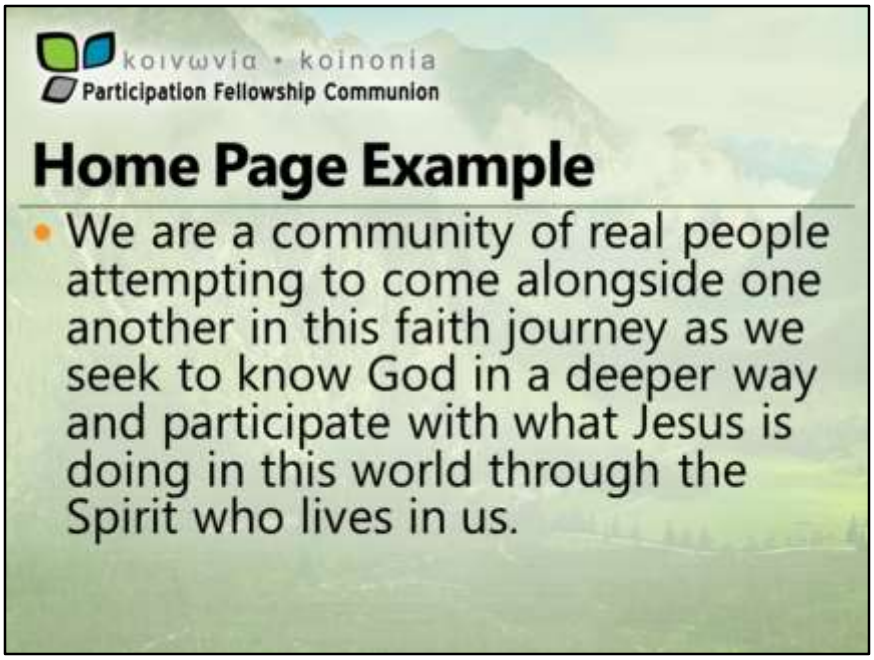
Key home page info
Your church name
What kind of church you are—"Christian church", "community church"
Your location



Example: www.cornerstonecommunityonline.net

Good? No. What's it missing? Type of church and location. Why is that important? Because while the church name and city are at the very top, it's not enough to get this church on page 1. It's on page 3 for "Christian church in Lemon Grove, CA" and 80% of people will probably never see it.

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Making it better...
Add a sentence to the top:
Cornerstone Community Church is a Christian church in Lemon Grove, California serving the eastern San Diego area.

What's missing? "Church". People don't search for "fellowship"—they search for "church". It's missing the common search terms and the location and people just simply won't ever find your church website in a search.

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Making it better...
• Hope Community Fellowship is a Christian church in The Colony, Texas serving the northern Dallas area. We are a Spirit-led community that welcomes new members...

So this one uses the right words and goes on to tell a pretty decent story. I'd love to say the site is successful, but it doesn't show up in searches like it should. There are other factors that affect search engines. In this case, I know the site is indexed because searching for the church name brings it up. BUT, it appears Google has penalized it for some reason—perhaps it thinks it is "keyword stuffing" to try to get more exposure than it deserves. It's hard to tell for sure without spending some time in Google webmaster tools.

When you make an effective website that makes a clear statement about who you and what your focus is, you expect the website to be a place where people first come in contact with your church. Besides wanting to know who you and your focus, they will want to know what to expect from your services. This is what you give them under that link for new people.

Where and when you meet is very important because some people will want to visit your church. At our church we found that displaying that on the home page and having links to it other places wasn't enough. Our pastor was still getting comments from people that they couldn't figure out where we met from our website. Eventually, we made it a block that appears on virtually every page so no matter where you are on the website, you can see where and when we meet and click a link to get a map and directions.

We don't have a welcome from the pastor on our website. A good welcome message shares the pastor's passion and invites people to experience for themselves what makes your church different.

Some people will want to know what qualifies your pastor and/or staff for what they do. Sharing a short bio and picture of the pastor and key staff helps people connect with them so the fell less out-of-place when they visit.

There are "Sunday" church people who just want to come worship with you one day a week when it's convenient for them. And there are those who want to be more involved in the church community. Those people will want to know what opportunities your church offers to connect with others besides just sitting in the main worship service. In this section, it's good to share your ministries, service opportunities, small groups or Bible studies and other regular activities you have. I realize this varies greatly from church to church and if you really don't have much else going on, then leave the section out.

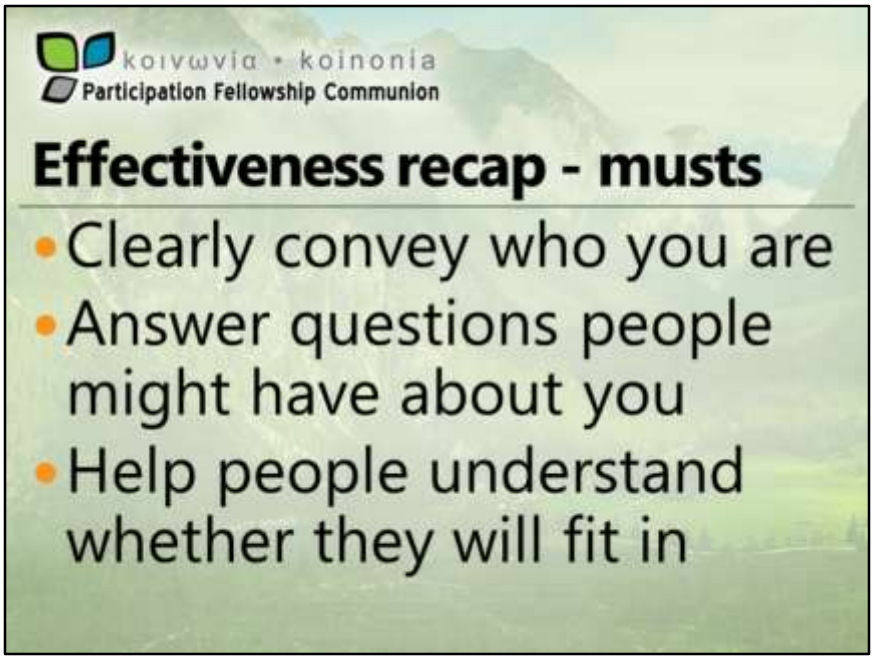
New people will sometimes want to talk to a real person before they visit the church. At the very least you should have a contact form or an email address listed. You may

also want to list a phone number. Will you get spam and sales calls? Very likely. But you will also get real people with real needs—people who may be interested in your church who may never come if they can't contact you to start with. So what do you do? Well, you can easily create a new email address for the church at a free email provider, or even using your own domain name if you have one. That way the spam and sales stuff isn't clogging up your personal email. But if you do that, someone needs to check it at least daily.

What about phone? Our church uses Google Voice. If you use Gmail for that free email account, you can use the same account to set up a Google Voice phone number, record a nice greeting message and people can leave messages for the church there. It will email you when there's a voice message. You can ignore the sales calls and return the calls from real people, perhaps even giving them a real phone number to call if you have to leave them a message.

While these types of things can help website visitors get a sense of “there’s more going on here than just church”, it’s a commitment. If you’re going to post ANY event announcements, please keep it updated. Nothing says “stale” like the announcement about your “coming anniversary celebration” that happened in 2010.

These again take commitment. Our church does weekly audio, and most of the time I get it posted within a week of the service. These types of content are really for people who are already connected to your church or pastor, so if they aren't updated regularly, they just get stale and no one reads, listens or watches them. If kept updated, they can be valuable resources for shut-ins, people who are connected to your pastor that aren't in the local area, members who miss a service or just really want to hear that message again. But don't do it if you can't keep up with it.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Effectiveness recap - musts
Clearly convey who you are
Answer questions people might have about you
Help people understand whether they will fit in

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Effectiveness recap - mights
Give details on current events
Provide resources to help people in their Christian walk
Help people connect to your church community

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