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Communication as a Practice of Community Building at Sandy Springs United
Methodist Church
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Abstract

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Methodist Church
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The communication practices of Sandy Springs United Methodist Church have largely been reactionary. Without plans or procedures to control information within the church, it has led to ministries and being poorly planned and executed. Good communication, and how that communication is shared within the congregation, is important to building community. The information that the church shares must be shared intentionally and with a point. By shifting the mindset from sharing information to inspiring the congregation, the communication, and subsequent community, of Sandy Springs United Methodist Church can be improved.

Communication as a Practice of Community Building at Sandy Springs United
Methodist Church

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The truth is elusive. No one knows the whole truth about anything. We certainly don't know the truth about the things we buy and recommend and use.

What we do know (and what we talk about) is our story. Our story about why we use, recommend or are loyal to you and your products. Our story about the origin and the impact and the utility of what we buy.

Marketing is storytelling.

The story of your product, built into your product. The ad might be part of it, the copy might be part of it, but mostly, your product and your service and your people are all part of the story.

Tell it on purpose.¹

Introduction

Intentional communication is essential to build community. The practices of marketing help refine information that is essential for organizations and their constituents. Sandy Springs United Methodist Church is a faith community in Sandy Springs, Georgia, a suburb of metro Atlanta. Because the community demographics are changing, the church is also. However, the way the church communicates as a congregation has not changed in recent years. Although the congregation shares information in various ways, these ways are outdated or no longer appropriate to the needs of the congregation. The ways in which Sandy Springs UMC has communicated have never been planned in an intentional way to build community or strengthen ministry. At best they have been reactionary. Until recently, thought had not been given to the purpose of communication in the church. This paper outlines changes to the communication systems of Sandy Springs United Methodist

¹ Seth Godin, "Not Lies, Storytellers," *All Marketers are Liars* (blog), October 4, 2012, http://sethgodin.typepad.com/all_marketers_are_liars/2012/10/not-liars-storytellers.html

Church based upon the evolution of the congregation, community, and ministry.

Communication must change and adapt because communication is the foundation for the community of Sandy Springs UMC.

This paper will address these aforementioned changes by first identifying the challenges of communicating to different age groups in the congregation and the way in which that information is processed. Second, this will be followed by an examination of practices at Sandy Springs that work well. Analysis of survey results taken by the congregation online, paper surveys distributed to the church, and informal interviews with the church's constituents will help identify those practices. Third, the paper will then take into account the fact that this church is a community of faith and therefore has a theological mandate to share information that is important to the life of the congregation. Thus, the marketing of communication will engage the theological mandate to share the Good News.²

Fourth, after changes to the modes of communication are made, a customized communication plan will be designed. The plan will allow the leadership of the congregation—clergy, staff, and laity—to better plan, prepare, and equip members for leadership and ownership within the ministries of the church. The plan is proposed because for a church, even more importantly for people, communication is more than just words, whether on a page, in an email, on a website, or shared through social media. The conclusion will identify the benefits of the changes to the

² Dan Wunderlich, "015: The Ethics of Church Marketing," December 10, 2017, in *MyCom Church Marketing*, podcast, MP3 audio, 22:29, accessed December 17, 2017, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/mycom-church-marketing-podcast-find-your-audience-tell/id1212480603?mt=2&i=1000396983589>. In this episode, the host uses scriptural evidence to suggest that marketing not be viewed as something to be feared for churches. Instead, it is inviting all churches to see themselves as marketers in some shape or form.

systems of communication at Sandy Springs UMC. Communication is vital to the wellbeing and growth of a church because all communication, either implicitly or explicitly, invites others into some form of relationship.³ The communication practices of Sandy Springs United Methodist Church have never been intentional. Establishing new practices over time demonstrates that improving intentional communication will have a positive impact on the church.

The Sandy Springs United Methodist Church: Difference in Ages

The congregation of Sandy Springs United Methodist Church (SSUMC) is made up of people of various ages and cultures. Most members regularly present and involved in leadership roles are those in the Greatest Generation. There is a subset of the Greatest Generation also known as a Silent Generation. Those members of the Silent Generation were born in a later time frame of the Greatest Generation's cohort. Those in the Silent Generation were born at a time in which they were not old enough to serve their country in World War II, but they were old enough to understand what was going on during that time period. Those in the Silent Generation subset are characterized, like others in the Greatest Generation, as loyal to institutions and country. One of the characteristics of this demographic is that they are averse to embracing change.⁴

However, a substantial number of worship participants were younger than those active members in the Silent Generation. While an identifiable majority of members at the church were in a particular age group, communicating at the church

³ John Sullivan, *Communicating Faith*, ed. John Sullivan (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2011). 359.

⁴ Max Nison, "How to Know If You're Too Old to Call Yourself a Millennial," *Business Insider*, May 25, 2013, 6:28am. <http://www.businessinsider.com/definition-of-generational-cohorts-2013-5>.

presented challenges. Communication needed to be improved across the difference in ages. Did this particular congregation in have a history of misinformation or bad communication? Taking into account the different age groups, could communication be enhanced in such a way that members of the congregation felt more ownership whether they fit inside a particular demographic or not?

What originated as a series of internal questions began a process of questioning and planning to think through the ways that the pastoral leadership and staff of the church communicated with members of the congregation. How do regular attenders at SSUMC events expect to hear information? How do they receive information? What do they do with the information presented to them? These questions led to the formulation of a survey to distribute to the congregation to see how they felt about the communication structure in place at SSUMC.

The Communications Survey

Using the survey tools and questions provided through United Methodist Communications, the SSUMC survey was formulated using the online tool, Survey Monkey. A hard copy of that survey was distributed to the worshipping congregation on Sunday, December 10th, 2017, and was available online to all constituents of the congregation through an email link that same day.⁵ Out of over 1000 possible responses, to the survey, only fifty-five responses were collected. Fifty-two of those responses were collected electronically. Three were collected manually for a total of 55 responses.

⁵ SSUMC, at the time, was using an email distribution tool that was outdated. The email addresses used were all those emails that were on file from all church programs affiliated with SSUMC. Later in this paper, I will address this issue as one of the needs for change. A copy of the printed survey is available in the Appendix.

Through the email tool that SSUMC was using at the time, Constant Contact, we were able to see that out of all the emails sent, 766 were delivered successfully. Out of those 766, 498 did not open the email that contained the survey link. Only eighty-two recipients clicked on the survey link. Of those eighty-two, only fifty-two completed the online survey. In it were questions about respondents' ages. Results showed that thirty-one percent of responders were over the age of seventy-five, twenty-two percent of respondents were ages 65-74, and seventeen percent of people ages 55-64. Seventy percent of the responses were from people over the age of 55.

Fifty-three percent of the survey respondents were over the age of 65. When taken into account that seventy percent of survey responders are over fifty-five years old, those numbers do not reflect the different age groups present at worship on Sunday mornings. There was a drop-off in the surveys within a younger demographic. Those in age groups younger than fifty-five did not respond at the same rate as those older than fifty-five. Based upon the responses from the surveys the click rate of the surveys, there was a large group of people who did not participate in the survey.

While those who responded to the survey are representative of those ages sixty-five and older on Sunday morning, that does not reflect the entire picture of the activities and involvement at SSUMC. For example, through the Activity Center located on the south side of the campus, there are sports and recreational programs, after school care, summer day camps, and a preschool. During any given week, approximately 500 people come in and out of the Center. While across the street, on

the north side of the campus, the side that houses the sanctuary, the average number of people attending worship on Sunday mornings is 230.⁶ The results of the survey indicate that non-members participating only in recreational and academic activities did not fill out the survey at all.⁷

This lack of response prompted me to go over to the Activity Center on Friday night, January 20th, 2018. That night, there were eight teams of five and six year olds playing basketball from 5:30pm-7:00pm. Very few of those families are regular attenders of worship at SSUMC, and even fewer are members. I sought out people I knew at these activities and asked them if they had seen the survey, taken the survey, and ask “Why?” or “Why not?” Some of the responses I received were “I didn’t see it.” “I don’t get church emails.” “I didn’t think it was worth my time.” “I deleted it.” “If it was important enough someone would have told me.” Not one person said she filled out the survey online or on hard copy.

The results of the interviews illustrate the ways that SSUMC constituents consume information. When it comes to communication at SSUMC, there are differences between what people expect to know and what people want to know. The interview was helpful in seeing this as a need for change. It raised a concern as

⁶ Vital Signs. *Sandy Springs UMC*. Retrieved from: <http://vitalsigns.trendsendapp.com/reports/25/overview/daterange/2015-08-01-2018-03-22/filter/27583>. The average worship attendance records for Sandy Springs UMC are maintained through an online tool provided by the North Georgia Annual Conference called, VitalSigns. The average worship attendance of 230 is the average from August 2nd, 2015 to December 31st, 2017. The average number of individuals involved at the Activity Center number (500) is determined by combining the Preschool (124 children, 37 staff), After-School care (42 children, 5 staff), Dance Studio (30 children, 3 staff), and various pick-up games of basketball, youth leagues, and outside rental groups. For each child, multiply by 1.2 and add. $X + X \times 1.2 = \text{child plus parent involvement}$ because 1/5 parenting units share responsibilities in picking up children.

⁷ When a person fills out any form at the church, that person’s email address is entered into the church’s communication database.

well. Is the information that we share worth sharing, and are the methods that we use to share it worth using?

To return for a moment to the results of the survey, ninety-two percent of respondents answered “Agree” to the question, “Overall, do you agree or disagree that the church does a good job of keeping you informed about what's going on?” For those who responded to the survey, keeping in mind that seventy percent are over the age of fifty-five, the church is efficient at communicating what is going on in the life of the congregation. So the methods that are in place—email, website, Facebook, monthly newsletters, weekly bulletins—are meeting a particular need to a particular group. That is to be celebrated. However, the challenge remains for SSUMC to better communicate, not just what is going on, but where the places of excitement, the stories of inspiration, or the opportunities to share hope are located. This is the information that younger generations want to hear. How are these moments being captured and shared, not just within the life of the congregation, but so people will want to know what is happening at SSUMC?

Church Marketing vs. Church Advertising

As members of a consumerist society, we see advertising all around us. Churches buy space in papers to advertise special worship services. In the budget of SSUMC in 2015, there was \$7000 for an advertising line-item. Marketing, on the other hand, was not even listed. In the life of the church, as in the life of other organizations, there is a difference between what is marketed and what is advertised.

Advertising is the final presentation. Advertising assumes that the consumer knows the history, backstory, and importance of why information is shared. Marketing creates the chance for those producing and creating information to shape the story, invite participants, and connect the information being shared to the story.⁸ Marketing does not assume that those receiving the information know the history of the institution, its backstory, or the importance of why they are receiving this information.

Havens cautions about thinking that advertising is the same thing as marketing. Consumers see marketing in the form of advertising. Advertising is the result of marketing. Advertising is emphasizing the product that people are told to own. Havens says that for churches to not know the difference between advertising and marketing is dangerous. To think that advertising is the starting point of sharing information is like deciding how to build a house based upon paint and wallpaper.⁹

Too often the communication models of SSUMC were based upon practices of communication at other churches. There was no contextualization for how SSUMC communicated and no prioritization for what was communicated. There was no communication or marketing plan. The sharing of information was nothing but advertising. Because the church was in the advertising business and not marketing, thought was not being given to the target audiences. This created a problem of communication not just to the constituents of the church, but to the leadership and staff as well. Communication has to be contextualized to its community.

⁸ Andy Havens, "What is Marketing?," Church Marketing Sucks, November 16, 2004, <http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/2004/11/what-is-marketing/>.

⁹ Ibid.

In his book, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, John Kavanaugh inserts a very long excerpt from the Book of Revelation, chapters two and three. In this selection, there are very specific instructions given to the seven, individual congregations on what to say. Each community has a clear, but unique message that reflects the context of that community. The author of Revelation could have sealed the fates of the communities at once with a blanket warning. However, that person knew that each individual community was unique. Each community of faith was put into context. There was not a one size fits all instruction manual in these chapters. By Sandy Springs UMC using the practices of other churches or other organizations, it was refusing to maintain an identity within its own community. Drawing upon the use of the second and third chapter of Revelation, Kavanaugh illustrates the difficulty facing communities that seek to communicate effectively while maintaining their identity. "The problem, then, is how to maintain one's identity while at the same time immersing oneself in the world by living in and through a culture."¹⁰

SSUMC, through ineffective practices of communication, advertised to its members and community. This did not address the needs of its community. A communication plan needed to be developed, including changes to the modes of communication for members and visitors. In addition, clearer communication within the leadership of the church was necessary. The church needed to change from advertising information to sharing information through a marketing approach. When shared information becomes advertising, churches assimilate to the

¹⁰ John Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*. 25th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2006), 133.

surrounding culture and its practices. Like in the book of Revelation, however, there are specific instructions for unique communities of faith. If a form of marketing works in other contexts, but it does not apply directly to the context in which it is situated, it is ineffective. It becomes advertising. There is not one size fits all in church marketing.

Marketing as Storytelling

Communication at SSUMC can be anything from announcements to reports. The important reminder of all church communication is that it tells a story. All news that is shared is part of the narrative of the Good News. That is evangelism. In order to share the story, we must know the story, both in the context of the local community of faith (SSUMC) and within the greater Christian Tradition. Moving forward, knowing this will allow what is shared to help direct the ministries of the congregation.

Sharing the church's story is made possible by knowing how to share information through marketing. Marketing helps connect the content to the story that is being shared. Congregations must know their story as a people of faith and how that connects them to the Good News. They must know their own voice as a local congregation within the larger narrative as well. Because the universal church's story is so intricate, to contextualize the work of a particular church requires effort and attention to the way it communicates the story. The relationship of the universal church's story to the local church itself and to its institutional forms

and practices is neither simple nor straightforward.¹¹ As changes are made in marketing and communication, the question that must be asked of all information that is shared must be, “Does this align with the mission of Sandy Springs UMC which is, “To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”” Too often, however, the mission is hindered by the means of communication.

As the church began to address that question of mission and identity, the response to the importance of communication was because it was expected. A response to that expectation was that the church communicated based upon deadlines when information was due to be shared in through modes of communication. Deadlines were the driving force behind the church communications. The church was advertising to anyone who would listen rather than marketing to the members of the community. Deadlines were forcing the church into the practice of advertising.

At SSUMC, announcements for the Sunday printed bulletin and the weekly email (eBlast) must be turned in by Wednesday in order to be prepared. The monthly newsletter deadline must be submitted by the third Thursday of the month before the next month (the deadline for May’s monthly newsletter will be the third Thursday in April). Bulletin boards must be changed out regularly and seasonally, but not on any real schedule. Under the old systems, the communications that went

¹¹ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2007), 172. Stone emphasizes throughout his book the notion of narratives and the challenges that face Christian culture as people of faith constantly struggle with other stories. From this quote in his book, he is moving from the work in the first three parts of the book to look at how particular practices of people of faith differentiate from other social practices. While my project does not get into the specifics of practices of faith, it is important to be reminded throughout that changing systems of communication in the context of this local church are only made important by the continued practices of the congregation which help connect our story we are sharing to that story God has shared with us.

out to members, visitors, and strangers were the results of advertising, not marketing.

Deadlines became the reason the staff produced content and communication materials. When deadlines became the driving factor, frustrations became evident and the story that connects the church to the community is lost. Upon realizing this disconnect, the church leadership started to ask, "Why must this be the way we do things?" The response that was too often given was, "Because we've always done it that way."¹² It became clear that the church had to be given permission to change the way things had always been done in order for the church's information to shift from advertising to telling a story.

Changes to Systems and Staff

Shifting to a system of marketing required not only changes to the systems of communication, but changes to the staff as well. In the midst of the transition of systems the staff became confused as to who was now responsible for the content, layout, and format of the communications for the church. During this time, the Director of Communications also served as the Music Director. She had been at the church for six years serving in both roles which involved handling the choir, music, and other duties as well as maintaining and updating the church's website. While this person had no formal training in either arena, her job performance was adequate. In July of 2017, Rev. Amber Lea Gray was appointed to SSUMC. She

¹² Frederick Gonnerman, *Getting the Word out: The Alban Guide to Church Communications* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003), 16. While Gonnerman is referencing a traditional monthly newsletter, he is drawing attention to the fact that in many congregations, there is a letter from the pastor. He will go on to say that part of this desire is to edify the congregation, but too often because of deadlines this portion of sharing information is watered down and fails to say anything at all.

possessed an undergraduate degree in marketing and communication. Upon her appointment to the church, a new skill set was brought to the table in the staff and in the life of the congregation.

Conflict arose within the staff. The Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC)—the group responsible for hiring and firing personnel—got involved in the conflict in order to find a solution. In September of 2017, SPRC decided that it was in the best interest of the church to part ways with the individual who had done both Music and Communication. It was further determined that Rev. Gray would use her skills to accomplish the tasks related to communication. With no one left on the staff in a position of authority to say, “We’ve always done it that way,” the leadership of the church was now in a position to make the transition from advertising to marketing.

Over the last eighteen months, big and small changes have been made in order to help the church shift from advertising to sharing a story with a marketing strategy. Changes in staff, organization, and technology made room for changes in communication practices. Changes occurred at the presence of conflict. The changes that happened as a result of conflict were necessary. However, changes still had to be made. This created an opportunity for changes to be looked at with thoughtfulness and intentional change.

Specific Modes of Communication at SSUMC: 2015-2017

At the beginning of 2017, SSUMC communicated in seven official ways to the congregation: announcements printed in the weekly worship bulletin, weekly announcements made prior to the worship service, a weekly eBlast (email) that is

distributed to the congregation, a monthly newsletter called *The Dipper*,¹³ occasional updates to the church's Facebook page, updates to the church's website, and seasonally changing bulletin boards. The majority of the announcements shared in the weekly communications are events that are important to the life of the congregation—special services, updates from committees, and notes from the staff.

The monthly information shared through “*The Dipper*” contains more in-depth articles from staff or clergy members about upcoming events. Occasionally, there will be financial reports or updates from the Trustees (the group of church members who are responsible for the upkeep of the facilities). It also includes updates from the pastoral staff, some kind of devotional article, and a list of donations made to the memorial fund of the church given in memory of members, family, or friends who have passed away.

In addition to these avenues of communication, in the fall of 2016, a new intentional mode of communication was begun: “*Brown Bag with the Minister.*” These quarterly meetings are designed around a Wednesday at 12:00pm. People are invited to bring their own lunch as clergy and staff share what is going on in the life of the congregation in their ministry areas. This has been well received by the demographic of the congregation mentioned earlier in the paper, the Silent Generation or the Greatest Generation. The meetings are organized in an hour format with “presentations” for the first forty minutes then twenty minutes for questions and answers.

¹³ It is called *The Dipper* because according to the church history, the church was founded by a natural spring and people would come to the spring to get water and use red handled dippers to drink. The shared common space where “dippers” were used carries onto this day with the sharing of information.

One result of this new mode of communication is that a particular age group shows up for the event and feels more informed. Another result of this increased sharing of information in this format is that giving—particularly directed giving to areas of need—has gone up.¹⁴ While the increased giving was not a direct expected result of this mode of communication, it does show the value of transparency, naming a need, and sharing the information at hand. Borrowing the language of Ruth and McClintock, these Brown Bag events are “open information events.” Changing the way the church communicated involved changing the information that was shared and the way it was shared. Creating the open forums for communication gives participants the opportunity to interact with the presenters and the information simultaneously.

Open information events help create transparency. Transparency builds trust, helps the leaders govern more effectively, and encourages clearer communication.¹⁵ Transparency is a key value for our any system of communication. In sharing more information, the church became more transparent. The question then became, “How might the church change the tools we already use to communicate more openly?”

There are at least three formalized modes of communication on Sunday morning: the church bulletin that contains written announcements, the

¹⁴At the second ever “Brown Bag with a Minister,” I shared with the congregation the church’s need for a new roof and HVAC system. The roof is the original roof from the 1960’s and the HVAC was wearing out. The next day, one member had given \$25,000 and other members had pooled resources to come up with another \$13,000. Still other members would later direct giving for a deceased loved one to this project in memory of their spouse.

¹⁵ Kibbe Ruth and Karen McClintock, *Healthy Disclosure: Solving Communication Quandaries in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007), 108.

announcements made before the service, and the bulletin boards located in the building. In the spring of 2017, the staff began to look at possible changes to the most tangible object for communication on Sunday morning: the church bulletin. It can be argued that the Sunday morning bulletin is the most frequent and consistent piece of tangible communication to which members have access.

Changes in Modes of Communication at SSUMC: The Church Bulletin

From approximately 2013 until 2017, the SSUMC bulletin was a legal size piece of paper, folded over once, with an image on the front that related (or did not) to the theme of the sermon that day. Inside the bulletin was the order of service. On the back was the calendar of events for the week with various meetings places and times. Inserted into the bulletin was a minimum of two handouts. One contained the announcements for the week. The other contained the lyrics for the hymns that were being sung that day. On the occasion of special events or offerings, other inserts were included. It required a staff person to come up with an image, title, and theme (assigned to whoever was preaching that week), the administrative assistant to compile everything, find the words to the hymns, and print everything. Then on Friday, other staff members would join in to help stuff the bulletins.

When the staff looked at other church bulletins, there were some features that would translate well to what was already being done. Most had a static cover, usually of an image or a silhouette of the church's building. Others were also arranged on a legal size piece of paper like ours, but in a tri-fold. The bulletins of other churches were compared and contrasted to the one of SSUMC. Comparisons were made to the ministries of other churches as well.

Most of the information was helpful when it came to announcing events and meetings, but only if one knew what the abbreviations were for the various buildings, committees, and events. Feedback we received from a “mystery worshipper” on February 26, 2017, included the comment that there was a lot of “insider language” for all of our events.¹⁶

In July of 2017, the format of the bulletin was changed from a bi-folding paper with at least two inserts and insider language to a tri-folding paper with no inserts, no insider language and no weekly calendar filled with “insider” events. This provided expanded space for a word of welcome about the Sunday service, added more room for congregational announcements, and increased font size. The front graphic became something that did not change every week. Instead, the front graphic image became a stenciled drawing of the church building.

The leadership also recognized that the congregation already had access to the words sung in worship through the hymnals present in the pews. The printed words in the bulletin did not include the musical notations included with those in a hymnal. Removing the insert with the words for the hymns, the congregation now had both words and music at its disposal.

Looking back at the bulletin change, there were too many inserts. Too many sheets of paper made the bulletin cumbersome. Some of the papers were unnecessary. The announcements were crammed and cluttered and sometimes included clip-art that didn’t always match what the announcement was written to

¹⁶ The Mystery Worshipper program, offered as a service to United Methodist Congregations in the North Georgia Annual Conference, sends Mystery Worshipers to the congregation and in order to give an unbiased assessment of the church, the worship service, facilities, and hospitality.

convey. It was important to share information in a way that was clear, concise, and helpful to members and others who might read it, and to do so in an effective and efficient format. “Readability is central to understanding and action. If the material is readable—full of facts and unencumbered by subjectivity—it will also be remembered...and the more information is remembered, the more likely it will motivate people to act.”¹⁷

By making the bulletin more readable, worship became more accessible as well. In addition, the free space created allowed the staff to come up with new information to share. Various ministries were highlighted during the worship service. “Mission Moments” were selected with the staff’s help and intentionally scheduled on Sundays closest to the event. These opportunities were created to share in what is going on in particular activities in the life of the congregation and tell stories of ministry. Members of the congregation, not members of the staff, were given a voice to share what these programs and events, and more broadly what this congregation of faith, means to them.

With the church’s Sunday bulletin changed, there was more room for information to fill that space. However, just because space was available did not mean that space had to be used for information’s sake. Stories of ministry are more effective than event listings or church calendar changes. With many different ministry areas, highlighting various ministries of the church became a focus. Not only was that space becoming useful to promote opportunities for service, but we also began highlighting individual programs and gave voice to members of the

¹⁷ Gonnerman, *Getting the Word Out*, 57.

community who participated in those areas of ministry. The goal of a readable bulletin was accomplished. The goal of information being remembered was more effective and impactful.

Changes in Modes of Communication at SSUMC: Email

Earlier in this paper, the use of email communication was mentioned as it related to the survey. Part of the problem identified was that the email program used to send communication to the congregation, Constant Contact, did not interface well with the other software programs that were in place. For example, it did not link effectively or efficiently with our web-hosting service. If someone wanted to receive updates and communication from the congregation, they had to go onto the church's website and enter their information. The church administrative assistant would then have to send an email to the director of communication who would then have to input the new email address into the system. Part of the problem is that this, of course, was not instantaneous. Some email addresses never made it into the Constant Contact database. Another issue was that if one selected "unsubscribe" at the bottom of the email, the person's email address could never be added back in. Once a person was out, she was out for good.

All of those problems were addressed and improved with an upgrade to a new mail service, Mail Chimp. In addition, the subscription level with Mail Chimp was free, as opposed to a fee for Constant Contact. The new perspective gained with this tool also prompted the conversation about other means of communication.

The challenges moving forward after the email service switch led to a review of how information was actually received. Part of the review involved employing

techniques for email communication that were tested for congregations and businesses. As previously stated, different generations receive information differently. While older generations are more concerned with consistency than content, younger generations tend to delete emails if it is from the same sender, a generic email address, or the old tagline that was the header of all of our church communications, "Exciting things happening at SSUMC."¹⁸

As the bulletin was made more readable and accessible, the challenge was to do the same for emails. A desired outcome of the email changes was to enable emails to be simpler not just for the communications director, but for other staff members to operate as well. Other staff members could now send email on behalf of the church because the new system was easier to learn and apply. A second goal was to change the formatting so that the email could not only be readable, but remembered. This changed the purpose and function of staff meetings. The staff began to come up with the top five events or items that were important for the congregation to know in the coming weeks. Sometimes, one announcement would carry over for multiple weeks, hopefully making it memorable. Other times, it would be a one-time event. The staff's involvement in choosing those top five things to share helped not only the internal communication within the staff, but the consistent messaging in the life of the congregation.

In addition, new tools were added with the email software to allow people the chance to respond. Using tools such as sign-up genius, people were able to link

¹⁸ Karen Shay-Kubiak, "Church Email Newsletters: Specific Strategy Tips," Church Marketing Sucks, March 7, 2016, <http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/2016/03/church-email-newsletter-tips>.

to event registrations. This allows for better planning for ministries of service to others and with others. Moving forward, it also allows the opportunity to share content in different ways. Thus, we made the email more readable and relatable with the hope of being able to generate more of a response.

Changes in Modes of Communication at SSUMC: Church Website

Members of a tech savvy generation upon hearing of a new restaurant will often go online to find out more information about that restaurant. If that person ends up on the restaurant's website, that person will try to glean as much information as possible. Is this restaurant casual or formal? Is it kid friendly? He might even take a look at the menu to see if there is something that he might be interested in or a dish that has been getting good reviews. In a way, a church's website is a lot like a website for a restaurant. It is the first stop that people of a technologically fluent generation make in order to gather information. Therefore, the appearance and function of the church website can make a lasting impression.

The website of SSUMC needed to be intentionally changed so that it could help shape the church's story. When the email tools were changed, it benefited the update of the website. Since Mail Chimp was a new platform, it worked very well with the new website design that Rev. Gray utilized. Using the previous platform, the information required action from three different people before it made its way back to the originator, if it made it at all. Mail Chimp integrated well with the new website; all a person had to do was input his or her information, and she would automatically be added into the system without ever having to go through a person in the middle.

While Rev. Gray did the work of building a website and designing it, content became a looming issue. Before the website redesign, which went live January 1, 2018, the staff had to give thought as to who would be using the website. Would the website be used primarily as a communication tool for members frequenting the website or would it be a place where visitors came for a “first impression” of the church? The fact that on the “visitor” page the only information available was past sermons presented a problem.

For a church located on thirteen acres, with parking that is hidden from the main road and two separate facilities on two different sides of the street, hearing about Mark’s account of the transfiguration was not going to help people navigate around the campus on a first visit. It was not going to tell them about the mission or purpose of the church. Even if they wanted to play basketball through one of the leagues in the church, listening to a sermon was not going to get them signed up. It was important to look at what people first saw, and consider who would be looking for information and what information they would be looking for.

The change decided upon was to create two portals so that people who were specifically looking for church activities could find them, and people specifically looking for sports and recreation activities could find them. Visitors in search of more information on the church were taken to a webpage designed with frequently asked questions about Sunday worship. The intentional flow of the website led to the deletion of the insider language of church such as meetings for the administrative purposes of the congregation. The intended viewer of the website

and online content is not an established member. It is a person who is interested or curious to find out more about the church without having to first visit in person. Knowing that people go online to inspect any organization before they ever set foot in the door demands that a clear, informative, and attractive website be part of the marketing strategy of a church.

Changes in Modes of Communication at SSUMC: Church Facebook Page

While looking at our communication tools of the church, it was taken into account that many people spend time on social media. Studies have shown that the typical social media user consumes 285 pieces of content daily, which equates to an eye-opening 54,000 words, and, for the truly active, as many as 1,000 clickable links.¹⁹ While many responses from the survey did not indicate that they received a lot of information from the Church's Facebook site, it was identified as a place where information could be shaped and shared in an efficient and inexpensive platform.

Until 2017, the content on the church's Facebook page was consistent with most organizations with a social media presence. Information about space, time, location, and service times was present. It had a place where anyone could submit a request or a form. It had pictures, videos, and stories. It also automatically updated the "Newsfeed" whenever an email communication was sent out. The weekly e-blasts would be posted in a very generic way. With no new content being added, there were stretches of time when it looked like the church was stuck posting the same information. This was not the best use of this resource.

¹⁹ Shea Bennet, "Social Media Overload—How Much Information Do we Process Each Day?" AdWeek, July 31, 2013, <http://www.adweek.com/digital/social-media-overload/>.

The staff looked at ways to improve the church's use of Facebook. Time was spent trying to identify what information would be most compelling. The answer was "inspiration, not information."²⁰ A second response to improve the use of Facebook was to acknowledge that there was a need to communicate clearly and concisely. United Methodist Communications offered some very practical reminders to those who work in churches and deploy Facebook as a tool.²¹ Some of the helpful reminders were to fill the media space with pictures, videos, and inspirational quotes or scriptures. Churches should be sharing the stories from people with videos or synopsis from live events. In order to be parts of the community, churches should share information that would be useful to the community. That cross promotion is an advertisement in itself showing potential online "visitors" that you care about the community.

Facebook was one of the most tangible areas identified for the church in determining the difference between advertising and marketing. The church's Facebook page was probably the most misused tool for marketing. It was being treated as a place the church went to advertise. There was no thought given to what was being shared, who was sharing it, or the purposes of the information that was present on the Facebook page. Through the analysis of the church's use of Facebook, it became most evident that the leadership had not given thought to any clear lines of difference between advertising and marketing. Once that realization was made,

²⁰ This would be a theme that would come up throughout staff discussions of best use of social media.

²¹ Dan Wunderluch, "How to use social media to restore trust in the church?" United Methodist Communications, <http://www.umcom.org/learn/how-to-use-social-media-to-restore-trust-in-the-church>.

the staff began to see themselves as marketers for the church, rather than advertisers for their particular events.

The staff encouraged the use of the Facebook live video tool, which allows the organization to post video straight to the church's Facebook page. This tool became used to broadcast the "Ask a minister anything" segments. The purpose of those segments is to acknowledge the insider language and behaviors of the congregation. New members, and sometimes-frequent visitors, would ask one of the other members of the staff a question. Often, they would prompt the question with "I know I should know this but..." or "This is a stupid question but..." In order to share and communicate with authenticity, churches should not use social media primarily as a place in which to share announcements, but to tell a deeper story and to show the community what you are doing and the impact that it is having. Making the changes in our Facebook presence and adding more content that inspires rather than informs is a change that has been made for the better in our church communications plan. It has been where the most radical shift from advertising to marketing is most palpably felt.

Changes in Modes of Communication at SSUMC: Monthly Newsletter

Up until the end of 2017 the monthly newsletter, called "The Dipper," included announcements about programming, articles from the ministers and staff, clip art, contributions given in honor or memory of others, and the occasional advertisement from members looking to sell their burial plots at the cemetery bordering our property. While it did contain information important to the life of the congregation, the content was lacking. It did not tell stories. It did not highlight

ministries. It was announcements and information that was already shared on Sunday mornings.

Furthermore, the process for compiling and receiving information for “The Dipper” centered on expectations for ministry areas to produce something. When the deadline was announced in staff meeting, it became burdensome for staff members. All of a sudden in addition to planning events, worship, music, or activities for children and families, someone on staff also had to find images and two sentences to describe an event. Staff felt pressured to do something just so they could have the appearance of being a part of the team. Yet, in talking to some members of the church, it was one of the most treasured pieces of mail they received. Those statements seemed exaggerated, yet demanded further investigation.

The church has several homebound members who are unable to make it to church because of age, ability, or access to transportation. Yet they still feel connected to this congregation through relationships. Receiving “The Dipper” helped that connection. It may be an artifact of the church, but it is not a relic. While ready to lead the charge to end the monthly mailing all together, it was observed that this met a felt need of members of the congregation. The first impulse was to do away with the publications of the monthly newsletter all-together. However, this was the place that members expected information about the church whether it was a note about what was going on or an acknowledgment of a gift given or received. It became clear that while the content and frequency of “The Dipper” could change, a

monthly letter from the pastor updating members on the state of the church could fill a need that members of the congregation have.

With the January edition of the updated “Dipper,” the graphics and images were consistent throughout. The articles written were clear, concise, and to the point. The areas for advertisements were gone. There would be no more members advertising to sell burial plots. Like the use of email and Facebook, the changes made were using the ideas of marketing than advertising by simply sharing information. Simple tools and reminders from outside sources reminded us to consider the “who” that craves this information and be reminded that the content shared should be content worth sharing.²²

Information not shared thoughtfully, simply added to the barrage of information that the church was publishing. Print adds legitimacy to the message.²³ This serves as a reminder that just because an event is happening, not everyone will need to know. If the wrong things are legitimized, it sends a message as well. It was noted by a new member that when one sees more announcements advertising the sale of burial plots than announcements about events for live people, it sends a message that may not be very enticing.

With the quarterly system now in place, the letter sent out from the pastor in the months in which there is no “Dipper” can focus on one message. The letter that went out in February 2018 focused on church finances. The letter that went out in

²² Brad Abare, “Lessons in Not Sucking: Communications in Print,” Church Marketing Sucks, November 5, 2007, <http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/2007/11/lessons-in-not-sucking-communication-in-print/>.

²³ Ibid.

March 2018 focused on Missions. Then in April, The Dipper returns. The communication from the church is still monthly. The content, function, and form has changed. This has not only enhanced the ability to strategically share information, it allows for more transparency. With just one letter, one can address needs more concisely without getting lost in a large newsletter.

In addition to the benefit of controlling the message for the sake of the mission of the church, moving to the quarterly system has been beneficial to the staff. The events are planned better with more staff and laity involvement. Because planning happens now months in advance rather than weeks in advance, details of events that would have otherwise been missed or put together at the last minutes are now being addressed and volunteers are more readily available to help with advance notice. The burden of planning is still present, but it is no longer done in response to deadlines. In fact, since switching to the quarterly system of sending out “The Dipper,” the staff has come up with plans to have quarterly themes that will be repeated in worship, studies, and other forms of communication. Changing the form but not the function of “The Dipper” has been well received by the staff and congregation.

Development of a Communications Plan for Sandy Springs UMC

Throughout 2017, small changes were made based upon best practices and the needs of the congregation. Most of the changes were done as a result of the addition of Rev. Amber Lea Gray, who brought a new set of eyes and a different skill set to the staff, showed the church different possibilities. What was still lacking was a system of communication and a plan. Just because anyone on staff can post on

Facebook, send out an email blast, or type up letters on letterhead and mail them out does not mean that everyone needs to be doing that at the same time. A schedule needed to be put in place. Content filters of what is and is not appropriate needed to be put in place. With the former communication director leaving the staff and Rev. Amber Lea Gray defaulting into that role, she was in need of support and authority to make changes and be the primary sharer of information on behalf of the church to the community of faith and surrounding community. In other words, she needed to be named the new Director of Communications.

Once that was established as her role, the staff was informed of her responsibility surrounding church communications, maintaining a marketing plan, and keeping the church out of the advertising business. Having heard about a communications tool used at various organizations, churches, and conferences called Basecamp, the staff decided to give that a try. It is a tool where information can be easily shared and stored.

Having a central location for information was helpful. It allowed all the staff to have access to notes from staff meetings. It allowed all the staff to see a project, start to finish. It allows the person controlling the event to assign tasks to others to help them. Basecamp became the starting place for sharing communication and recording information that was important for everyone to have. Using an easily accessed system of sharing, allowed for efficiency and clear expectations.

The use of Basecamp changed the way the staff and leadership of the church worked and shared information together. Because of the size of the campus, the size of the facility, and the increased activities at the church, there are a lot of moving

parts and a lot of people invested in what is going on. The whole team needed to be on the same page as to what was the most important thing that week, but also to look ahead and see where and how best to use resources of space, time, and people.

A new practice began at the end of every staff meeting, usually held at 10:30am on Monday. The focus became the top five things that are important that week or in the coming weeks. By closing the meeting time together as a staff in creating the “Top Five,” a clear purpose, vision, and priority gave the staff a unified voice, even when working on different projects.

The Communication Plan of SSUMC

With internal communication for the staff solidified, the focus became how the staff markets our events and ministries to the congregation. From the Monday meeting and using the “Top Five,” the staff approaches the week first through the modes of communication used on Sundays: the printed bulletin and spoken announcements before the service begins. Those “Top Five” are also shared in the weekly email blast that goes out to the church’s database. The “Top Five” are not deployed on Facebook without the use of stories or images to help tell the story and inspire.

On Monday afternoon, a Facebook post is created to capture a key concept from worship on the previous day. The purpose is to inspire and engage. On Tuesdays, the Ministry Moment shared during the worship is posted on the church’s Facebook page and information on who to contact if there is an opportunity for service. On Wednesdays, “Ask a Minister Anything” is shared using the Facebook Live tool.

For now, Thursday is an off day for communication and posting on Facebook. Friday is when the email blast goes out to the congregation. The reformatted design by Rev. Gray allows for uniformity in all of the shared material. Whether it is a letter, an email, or a graphic, she maintains consistency so that the recipient of the information can have a consistent image, even though the marketing and target audience may be different. Saturday is also an off day for communication, with Sunday being the day where people will gather once again at Sandy Springs UMC.

Sometimes events will happen in the world or in the community and the quickest way to respond is through Facebook or social media. During those times, it might be appropriate to share scripture or a prayer for the certain situation. These unprompted or off-script posts should be done with care, but also with communication within the staff. If a pastor feels inclined to post, he should let the other staff know so that efforts are not being doubled. Too much information could indicate a reality that there is not clear communication within the staff. That is not good marketing, that is bad advertising.

It is important to note that not everything that happens is worth sharing. Before these systems were in place, a staff member made the mistake one day of posting on the church's Facebook page that a pine straw truck had overturned at the intersection by the preschool. Even though it was more of a trailer and not a truck, because the words people saw were "truck," "overturned," and "preschool," parents began to call both the church and the preschool demanding answers. The debris was cleared before any of the parent had to come and pick up their children. The lesson is that just because one can share on Social Media, does not mean that you should. It

is the responsibility of the ministers at SSUMC to maintain the marketing and communications plan, and determine which information is worth sharing, and which information is simply bad advertising.

There are suggested guidelines as to the content of Social Media that are an adaptation of John Wesley's three simple rules.²⁴ Historically, the three rules are do good, do no harm, and stay in love with God. For posts that are not scheduled or written, these rules with explanation from United Methodist Communications allow those posting on the church's behalf to have a framework for what to share.

Conclusion

The changes made to the modes of communication at SSUMC have been minor adjustments along the way. However, changing the frame of mind was of most importance. The project was not to change information, but to change the way information was communicated. In the past, the church has relied upon a mentality of advertising: share the information and that is good enough. However, the changes in culture, community, and communication demand that the church's approach shift from advertising to marketing, and must also be adaptable moving forward.

Communication in the church is going to happen, one way or another. "Successful communication occurs where there is some kind of match between sender and recipient and between purpose and method."²⁵ Creating avenues for communication are creating places for community. The goal is no longer to keep members informed or promote events. The shared goal and task for this

²⁴ Eric Seiberling, "3 Simple Rules of Social Media," United Methodist Communications, <http://www.umcom.org/learn/3-simple-rules-of-social-media>.

²⁵ Sullivan, *Communicating Faith*, 361.

congregation moving forward is to invite others to join us and share our stories together.

When people communicate, emotions and needs are expressed. People establish identity, build community, seek meaning, interpret behavior, celebrate key moments, and reach out to others.²⁶ Therefore, how we communicate matters. The story we tell matters. Change to the systems of communication either tells a story (marketing) or shares information (advertising). Both are necessary.

Advertising shares the events in the life of a church. Marketing makes the events part of the church's story. The story is ongoing and evolving. The church is ongoing and evolving. How SSUMC communicates must constantly evolve.

The history of communication is transmitted in a living tradition and is continuously being structured anew by God. Therefore, the church is either a community of communication or it is no church at all.²⁷

As people continue to change the way they communicate, the church must be willing to enter into the new modes and changes to communication. Shifting the emphasis from advertising to marketing has proven effective in creating community. Using tools of online communication have been helpful. However, using the strategic implementation of staff working together, laity being informed, and the community being involved confirms the belief that the community is shaped by the information it shares. The difference is the awareness that as a church, Sandy Springs UMC is not simply sharing information. It is not in the advertisement business. Sandy Springs UMC is a community that shares an intentional story for a purpose. Sandy Springs

²⁶ Ibid, 359.

²⁷ Matthias Scharer and Bernd Jochen Hilberath, *The Practice of Communicative Theology: Introduction to a New Theological Culture* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 2008), 80.

UMC is intentionally marketing for the sake of building community when communication is shared.

Appendix

* 1. Which of the church communications listed below do you regularly use to learn about church-related activities or general information?

	Always	Sometimes	Seldom	Never	I never read this
Dipper (monthly newsletter)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Worship Bulletins	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Church Website	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Church Facebook page	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Weekly E-blast	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Announcements in Church	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Bulletin Boards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

In a sentence or two, please write in any suggestions you have for improving each method of communication

* 2. Overall, do you agree or disagree that the church does a good job of keeping you informed about what's going on?

Agree

Disagree

If you answer, "Disagree," please explain why or offer a way for us to make it better

* 3. How often do you use your smart phone to receive information from the church?

Always

Sometimes

Never

* 4. Do you use your phone for devotional purposes?

Always

Sometimes

Never

* 5. How many hours a day do you spend in front of any screen?

- 0-1 hour
 1-3 hrs
 3-6 hrs
 7-10 hrs

* 6. How would you describe your involvement in the congregation?

- I don't know why I'm getting this email
 I'm at the church at least once a week
 I'm affiliated with a ministry of the church, but don't attend on Sundays
 I'm there and I serve on committees
 I attend worship occasionally
 I can't get enough of this place

Other (please specify)

* 7. What type of information would you like to see more of? (check all that apply)

- Event listings
 Ministry opportunities
 Extension Ministries of The United Methodist Church
 Stories from the Pastors
 Inspirational Stories
 Bible Study information
 Outreach opportunities

8. Are there any additional tools that you would like for use to share information?

9. In which of the categories do you fall?

- 16-24
 25-34
 35-44
 45-54
 55-64
 65-74
 75+

10. What is your gender?

- Female
 Male

11. What is your marital status?

- Single
 Married

* 12. How are you connected to Sandy Springs UMC?

- Preschool Member
 ASPIRE Occasional worshipper
 Basketball

Other (please specify)

13. Do you have any children under the age of 18 living at home?

- Yes
 No

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