

# REPORT TO GENERAL SYNOD CHATHAM 2004 from the COMMITTEE FOR OFFICIAL WEB-SITE

Esteemed brothers in the Lord,

With fraternal greetings in the name of our Saviour, we hereby submit our report to General Synod Chatham 2004, as mandated by General Synod Neerlandia 2001.

## 1. COMMITTEE MANDATE

### 1.1 Mandate

Synod Neerlandia 2001 gave the committee the following mandate:

1. To maintain the website, including its associated technical functions and its existing content, revising this content whenever necessary.
2. To purchase suitable hardware that will meet the needs of the website.
3. To complete the online publication of the entire *Book of Praise*, using the text most recently adopted and revised by General Synod.
4. To explore what type of content should be added to the website and to make a recommendation to the next Synod.
5. To serve Synod 2004 with a report to be sent to the churches at least six months prior to the beginning of Synod.
6. To include a financial statement and proposed budget in this report.

### 1.2 Understanding the mandate

The committee understood this mandate to have the following implications:

#### 1.2.1 A change in direction

The new mandate is a substantial change from the previous mandate, which had allowed the incorporation of official and semi-official materials at the discretion of the committee. New material must now first be proposed to Synod, and be added only after the involvement of the churches in this way.

#### 1.2.2 Hardware

Hardware to meet the needs of the web-site, as proposed to General Synod Neerlandia, could now be purchased.

#### 1.2.3 Content

1. *Existing content.* The current content must be maintained and revised to keep it updated.

2. *Incomplete content.* Completing the online publication of the *Book of Praise* is a priority.
3. *New content.* New content must be proposed to General Synod before incorporating it in the site.

## **2. COMMITTEE FUNCTIONING**

### **2.1 Communication**

#### **2.1.1 Meetings**

Despite the geographic distances between committee members, the committee has not found it necessary to meet with all members in person in order to fulfil our mandate. Three meetings were held in Fergus with the three committee members from Ontario present, the other two members from Western Canada participating in these meetings by means of a telephone conference call.

#### **2.1.2 Email**

Most of the committee discussions have – fittingly - been via email.

#### **2.1.3 Assessment**

The above two means of communication have proven to be sufficient in enabling the committee to function effectively. The geographical proximity of the three committee members in Ontario has certainly assisted in making meetings possible as described above.

### **2.2 Distribution of tasks**

Three of the committee members possess a high level of technical expertise, and internally our committee agreed that these members would focus on the technical aspects, whereas the other two members of the committee (convenor & secretary) would focus more on the administrative and content aspects. The demands on the technical personnel were not as heavy as in the past, in part because the mandate focused more on maintaining the existing web-site, rather than developing the web-site from nothing.

## **3. COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES**

### **3.1 Hardware and technical set up**

#### **3.1.1 Internet Service Provider**

The services of a local Internet Service Provider (ISP) called "BBS42" in Guelph continue to be used, and have proven to be reasonably priced and reliable.

#### **3.1.2 Hardware**

A server and switched power supply were purchased at a significantly lower cost than the estimates presented to Synod Neerlandia 2001. These were installed with an email-server and a web-server, and are operating as an independent server on the

premises of our internet service provider under a co-location service agreement. A second server was obtained at no cost, and is operating as a secondary server alongside the primary server, to ensure complete independence and continuity of email even if the primary server goes down. Aside from a small glitch with a network card that needed to be replaced, the server has functioned well since its implementation.

### **3.1.3 Domain name**

The domain name [www.canrc.org](http://www.canrc.org) continues to be actively registered for the web-site and email services.

### **3.1.4 Email**

The committee continues to offer "permanent" email addresses to all ministers in our federation, of the type: [ministername@canrc.org](mailto:ministername@canrc.org) (which redirects email to their existing personal email account), as well as host a mailing list to facilitate discussion and correspondence between the ministers.

## **3.2 Existing content**

The following existing content continues to be maintained on the web-site, and updated regularly where necessary:

### **3.2.1 Introduction to the Canadian and American Reformed Churches**

This provides basic information about our federation, such as our basis in Scripture and the Reformed confessions, Reformed church government, church history, mission work, and church life.

### **3.2.2 Online resources**

#### a) *The Book of Praise*

The creeds and confession, church order and psalms have been online for some time, and more recently the hymns. By the time General Synod is convened, the committee hopes to have finalized the addition of all the liturgical forms and prayers. This will complete the mandate of publishing the current *Book of Praise* electronically online.

#### b) *The Acts of Synod*

In addition to the existing Acts of Synod Fergus 1998, the Acts of General Synod Neerlandia 2001 were finalized and posted online. The active publishing of the Acts resulted in a great amount of traffic to the web-site, particularly throughout the duration of General Synod.

### **3.2.3 Church directory**

All the churches are listed by geographical location, with the location and times of worship, name and email address of the minister, and a link to the local church web-site where appropriate.

### **3.2.4 Church news**

Church news and events are listed as soon as they become available. Generally these items are limited to matters of interest to the entire federation, such as the news items published in *Clarion*: ministerial calls, classical exams, and special lectures at the Theological College.

### **3.2.5 Theological College**

This material was updated to reflect the content of the newest official handbook for the Theological College, and includes information about the history and operation of the Theological College, the Senate, programs of study, admissions information, as well as contact information for staff and students.

### **3.2.6 Search engine**

The search engine enables site visitors to search the entire web-site by key words.

## **3.3 Incomplete content**

### **3.3.1 Existing parts of the Book of Praise**

General Synod Neerlandia 2001 did not make any major revisions to the *Book of Praise*, so we were able to retain the existing parts of the *Book of Praise* online unchanged: the Creeds and Confessions, and a PDF file of the Psalms.

### **3.3.2 Completing the Book of Praise**

The text of the liturgical forms and prayers needed to be edited and formatted into HTML before they could be posted online. An electronic version of the hymns was only made available to the committee in the new overleaf format, so this is the version that has been published online. Should General Synod adopt further revisions of the *Book of Praise*, it will be necessary to update the online version to ensure that the text of the *Book of Praise* is the same as that most recently adopted and revised by General Synod.

## **3.4 New content**

### **3.4.1 Determining new content: the need for a survey**

By not leaving the addition of new content to the discretion of the committee, General Synod Neerlandia has given a mandate that reflects the fact that the content of the web-site should be decided by the churches rather than by a committee. The committee concluded that rather than have the churches address Synod with all kinds of suggestions for the web-site, it would be proper for our committee to solicit such suggestions from the churches, interact with them, and so give a meaningful recommendation to General Synod that accurately reflects what the local churches want to see on the web site.

### **3.4.2 Soliciting input about new content: the use of a survey**

The committee solicited the input of local churches regarding the content, functionality and format of the web-site by means of a survey, sent to all the churches in November 2002 (see appendix 2 for the survey and tabulated results). The churches were encouraged to familiarize themselves with the existing web-site before completing the questionnaire. By the end of January, altogether 41 completed survey responses were received from 36 churches and 1 missionary. Two churches sent three separate responses to the survey completed by different office-bearers, which were counted as separate responses in tallying the results. Some of the survey responses were completed by individual office-bearers delegated to do so on behalf of the consistory, and thus do not always reflect the opinion of a consistory as a whole. Even so, the committee is confident that the results give a relatively accurate indication of what lives in the churches.

### **3.4.3 Recommendations about new content: the results of the survey**

*Local web-sites.* Several of the letters received from churches along with the survey expressed the concern that some of the web-sites of local churches are very outdated and do not contain current information.

*Future surveys.* Based on the feedback received, the churches appreciated the survey, and so assisted our committee in fulfilling our mandate. Future committees for the web-site could benefit by using a survey as an effective means of obtaining input from the churches when such input is necessary.

*Clear direction.* On most points the input from the churches pointed to a clear consensus and direction, on the basis of which the committee was able to articulate recommendations for adding new content to the web-site. These recommendations have been enumerated in the following section of the report (section 4).

*Overall impressions.* The overall direction of the results and comments received reflected the two foundational principles of Reformed church polity:

1. Co-operation of local churches within a federation. The churches expressed the desire to use the web-site as a central resource that would serve the churches in common by pooling common information about our church federation, as well as providing some basic information about local churches, and directing visitors to these local churches and their web-sites.
2. Autonomy of the local church within a federation. The churches expressed the concern that the web-site should

not detract from the autonomy of the local church, by replacing web-sites of local churches. Some forms of content should remain the responsibility of the local church.

The committee has always endeavoured to keep these two principles in mind, and is convinced that they should be considered when making decisions about new content.

### **3.5 Costs and Expenses**

Since the existing content consists of only text and graphics, the cost for developing and maintaining the web-site has been minimal (for details, see Appendix 1 with Financial Statement). In the six year period from Synod 1998 to Synod 2004, the total operating and capital costs have averaged just under \$700 per year. The actual costs of the additional suitable hardware that was purchased recently were substantially less than the estimates presented to Synod Neerlandia 2001, and as yet there have been no significant hardware failures requiring the replacement of equipment. Considering that the web-site serves a federation with over 50 churches, this has effectively cost each local church an average of just over \$1 a month. The ongoing expenses associated with maintaining the web-site have been more than outweighed by the benefits of the web-site for our church community and for those interested in learning about our federation.

### **3.6 Feedback**

#### **3.6.1 Site statistics**

The total number of web pages viewed per month peaked during the last General Synod, at that time averaging just under 50,000 page views per month.

#### **3.6.2 Existing content**

Feedback from other sources aside from the surveys has been generally positive, both from members in our churches, as well as from others visiting the web-site. Results from the survey (question 13 & 14) indicate that the web-site is well used by members of our churches, with the following items being most used (in order): 1. church news; 2. resources; 3. contact information for local churches. The regular church news, online church directory, Acts of General Synod, and various parts of the *Book of Praise* are the most popular aspects of the existing content. In this way the existing web-site has continued to be of benefit for members of our own churches, members of other Reformed churches, and people unfamiliar with our churches.

#### **3.6.3 Existing functionality**

The overall appearance and format of the web-site has been left unchanged since the web-site was developed. Results from the survey (question 21) indicate a clear consensus that the current web-site is easy to use and navigate. However the committee has entertained the possibility of improving the look and design

of the existing web-site, to improve it further and bring it in line with the latest web technology and programming.

### **3.6.4 Questions**

The committee has regularly received email with questions about our churches or aspects of our church life from sources both within and outside our church federation. An internal procedure has been developed to ensure that such questions were dealt with promptly, either by a committee member or by being redirected to another committee or qualified individual within our churches. A significant number of these inquiries have concerned the *Book of Praise*.

## **4. RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT NEW CONTENT**

Based on the input from the churches (see Appendix 2 with Survey Results), the committee makes the following recommendations to General Synod regarding new content for the web-site and its associated technical functions:

### **4.1 Site content**

#### **4.1.1 More information regarding each local church (question 1 & 2 & 19)**

*Recommendation:* Yes, but limited.

*Explanation:* A clear desire was expressed by the churches for more basic information about each local church, in particular more contact information for each local church. The committee recommends that some of the basic information from the annual yearbook be incorporated on the web-site, such as church contact information, church address, and directions. The committee could annually send a form to each church electronically with the following items to be filled in for inclusion on the web site: contact name, contact phone number, mailing address, email address, church building address, directions, worship times, link to local web site. Each church would have the option to leave any of these categories blank. By limiting this information to these categories, we avoid replacing local church web sites, and at the same time ensure that there is helpful information for visitors to the site, in particular about those churches which may have no local web-site.

#### **4.1.2 Links to other web sites (question 3 & 4)**

*Recommendation:* Yes, but limited.

*Explanation:* It is very clear that the churches only want links to web-sites from organizations and churches with a clear and official relationship to our churches. This avoids having to deal with a flood of requests for all kinds of links, and leaves open the possibility for local churches to have more links on their own web-sites. It should be noted that some of the churches that responded negatively to the inclusion of links, observed that they

were not opposed to incorporating links to web-sites of organizations with an official relationship to our churches. This is the current policy of our committee, and can continue to be implemented in the manner it is currently done, by means of links on the information pages. The committee recommends continuing the current practice in this regard.

#### **4.1.3 Sermons** (question 5 & 6 & 19)

*Recommendation:* Yes.

*Explanation:* From the responses in question 19 it is evident that there is a clear desire in the churches to see some sermons on the web-site. The committee recommends that the web-site host a repository of sermons, to be submitted voluntarily by ministers or churches. This repository could be publicly accessible, or if desired could be limited in some way by implementing some form of security. A condition for submission should be that the sermon was preached in one of our churches by one of our ministers, and thus under the supervision of a local consistory. Stifling initiatives to place sermons on web-sites of local churches should be avoided, but at the same time a repository allows for submission of sermons for those who do not have local sites, and ensures that visitors to our site are able to have access to some sermons. Because sermons function as the highlight of church life in our federation, they should also receive some place on our web-site.

The clear preference of the churches is that sermons should be published electronically in print, and not in audio or video at this time. Broadcasting sermons in audio or video format would significantly add to the cost of maintaining the web-site.

#### **4.1.4 Speeches and articles** (question 7-11 & 19)

*Recommendation:* No.

*Explanation:* Concerns were expressed by the churches about issues regarding accountability and selection criteria. The committee recommends not to publish speeches and articles on the web-site. These can be placed on local church web-sites if desired.

#### **4.1.5 Information about local church meetings and events** (question 12)

*Recommendation:* No.

*Explanation:* Such material belongs on local church web-sites.

#### **4.1.6 Press releases of broader assemblies** (question 15 & 19)

*Recommendation:* Yes.

*Explanation:* Press releases serve the purpose of informing members of our churches and others of the decisions of the broader assemblies, and by nature are intended to be published.



There is no good reason not to publish them electronically as well. By virtue of the fact that these broader assemblies concern the work of the churches together within a federation, they are appropriate for the web-site of our federation as well. The committee recommends that press releases for General Synods, Regional Synods and Classes be published electronically on the web-site, just as they appear in our church periodicals and magazines. A desire to see these press releases be published on the web-site was also clearly expressed by the churches in the survey. This can only foster a growing awareness and appreciation of the work of the broader assemblies within the church federation.

#### **4.1.7 Acts of broader assemblies** (question 16-17 & 19)

*Recommendation:* Yes, but only the Acts of General Synod.

*Explanation:* Although the churches expressed a clear desire to see the Acts of General Synod online, this was not the case with Acts of Classes and Regional Synods. Several reasons could be adduced why it is not necessary to publish the Acts of Classes and Regional Synods online:

- (a) these concern a limited number of churches, and not the entire federation;
- (b) these are generally not publicly available;
- (c) these could contain sensitive matters regarding appeals which should remain localized;
- (d) the publication of the press releases of these broader assemblies is already sufficient.

General Synod, however, deals with matters in common to all the churches and concerns all the churches, and so having these Acts available electronically can only be of benefit to the churches. Currently the Acts from Synod 1998 & Synod 2001 are online. The response of the churches suggests that it would be beneficial to include the older Acts online where possible, perhaps indexed by topic. To our knowledge no official English translation of the early Acts exists. The committee could be mandated by the next Synod to investigate further the feasibility of publishing all the Acts, and to pursue their publication to what extent it is possible.

## **4.2 Web and email services**

### **4.2.1 Similar domain names for local church web-sites** (question 25)

*Recommendation:* Yes, if technically feasible.

*Explanation:* Most of the churches expressed the desire to be able to implement domain names for local churches in a standard format, e.g. www.london.canrc.org. Further investigation by the committee has determined that this may not

be technically possible. The committee recommends that if it is possible, this service could be offered to the churches for their use if desired, as a pointer to their local church web-site. Such common domain names reflect what we have in common as churches, and could make it easier for users to find local church web-sites, without detracting from the actual content and responsibilities of these local church web-sites.

#### **4.2.2 Net-meetings** (question 26)

*Recommendation:* No.

*Explanation:* The churches did not express a clear desire to make use of this technology at this time.

#### **4.2.3 Mailing list for consistory clerks** (question 28)

*Recommendation:* Yes.

*Explanation:* This would function as a mailing list for all the clerks (e.g. clerks@canrc.org). Most of the churches expressed the conviction that such a list could be helpful. To avoid abuse, this could function as a closed mailing list.

#### **4.2.4 Mailing lists for synodical committees** (question 28)

*Recommendation:* Yes.

*Explanation:* This would function as a mailing list for committees appointed by the churches through the broader assemblies (e.g. committee-bibletranslation@canrc.org). This would be of use to the local churches by fostering good communication with the committees that serve the churches. The churches expressed a strong preference to see such mailing lists implemented.

#### **4.2.5 Other mailing lists** (question 28 & 29)

*Recommendation:* No

*Explanation:* There was no clear desire expressed by the churches to implement the other mailing lists mentioned in the survey.

## **5. OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Future direction**

The noticeable benefits of the web-site as reported to General Synod Neerlandia 2001 (Report, section 3-H) continue to be valid. Ongoing work will be necessary to maintain and regularly update the existing web-site and its associated technical functions, to improve its functionality, and to add the recommended new content. The internet is a powerful and popular medium of communication in our world, and our web-site serves to enhance the dispensing of material relating to what the churches have in common, as well as to point visitors to the web-sites of local churches. The committee recommends that the web-site continue to serve this purpose, and so be of benefit for our own church community and others world-wide.

## 5.2 Committee composition

The committee currently consists of five members: three members with advanced technical abilities, as well as the librarian of the Theological College, and one minister. This has proven to facilitate good communication with the local churches, the ministers, the Theological College, and other committees, and ensures that there are sufficient members on the committee to maintain the technical aspects of the web-site. The committee recommends that a similar composition of the committee be maintained, with several members in reasonable geographical proximity if possible.

## 5.3 Hardware and technical set-up

It was reported to General Synod Neerlandia 2001 that we could reasonably expect the hardware to last 2-3 years. The current hardware continues to be sufficient for the immediate needs of web-site in the foreseeable future, but may need to be replaced at some time, so allowances should be made for the possible replacement of hardware in the event of a failure. The capital cost for replacing the server in the event of a hardware failure would not exceed \$1500, and based on a three year replacement period gives an estimated capital cost of about \$42 a month. The committee recommends a repair and capital replacement budgetary allowance of approximately \$500 per year. The estimated operating costs are \$56 per month, so the total projected cost is under \$100 a month (for details, see Appendix 1 with Budget).

## 5.4 Mandate

The committee recommends that General Synod Chatham 2004 give the committee the following mandate:

1. To maintain the existing hardware and associated technical functions of the web-site, purchasing new hardware only if necessary to meet the ongoing needs of the web-site and if financially responsible.
2. To maintain the existing content of the web-site, revising this content whenever necessary, in particular ensuring that the text of the *Book of Praise* is the same as that most recently adopted and revised by General Synod.
3. To add new content to the web-site as recommended by the committee in section 4.1 of this report, including the text of sermons, press releases of broader assemblies, and the Acts of past General Synods where feasible.
4. To provide web-services and email-services to the churches such as those recommended by the committee in section 4.2 of this report.
5. To serve Synod 2007 with a report to be sent to the churches at least six months prior to the beginning of Synod, including a financial statement and proposed

budget, and any recommendations regarding new content to be added to the web-site.

Respectfully submitted by your committee:

T.J. Flach (Fergus ON)

J.M. Hoogerdijk (Calgary AB)

R.E. Pot (Orangeville ON)- secretary

A. VandenHoven (Cloverdale BC)

M. VanderVelde (Hamilton ON) - convenor

## Appendix 1 FINANCIAL STATEMENT & BUDGET

Invoice Date	Product / Service Purchased	Payable To	CDN Cost	USD Cost
19/11/1998	1 year web site hosting - 1999	BBS42 Internet	\$321.00	
24/11/1998	2 year renewal of domain name - canrc.org	Network Solutions *	\$105.00	\$70.00
15/11/1999	1 year web site hosting - 2000	BBS42 Internet	\$321.00	
20/10/2000	1 year renewal of domain name - canrc.org	Network Solutions *	\$52.50	\$35.00
01/11/2000	1 year web site hosting - 2001	BBS42 Internet	\$321.00	
<b>Total 1998-2000 Expenses</b>			<b>\$1,120.50</b>	
06/09/2001	Web server computer	System Resale Solutions IV	\$777.25	
22/10/2001	2 year renewal of domain name - canrc.org	Network Solutions *	\$105.00	\$70.00
01/11/2001	1 year web site hosting - 2002	BBS42 Internet	\$321.00	
04/12/2001	Power supply backup for Web Server	Business Depot	\$229.95	
04/11/2002	1 year web site co-location hosting - 2003	BBS42 Internet	\$642.00	
14/11/2002	Survey distribution costs	Various c/o M.Vanderveelde	\$45.18	
21/12/2002	Replacement Network Card	Dorotech Canada	\$44.85	
<b>Projected Costs (not invoiced at report time)</b>				
20/10/2003	5 year renewal of domain name - canrc.org	Network Solutions *	\$142.50	\$95.00
01/11/2003	1 year web site co-location hosting - 2004	BBS42 Internet	\$642.00	
<b>Total 2001-2003 Expenses</b>			<b>\$2,949.73</b>	
<b>Notes</b>				
*	Payment made directly by General Fund, CDN amount shown at conversion factor of 1.5. All amounts include applicable taxes.			
<b>Projected Annual Budget</b>				
<b>Average Annual Operating Expenses</b>				
Domain name registration			\$28.50	
Web site co-location hosting			\$650.00	
<b>Average Annual Capital Costs</b>				
Repair & capital replacement allowance			\$500.00	
<b>Total Annual Expenses</b>			<b>\$1,178.50</b>	

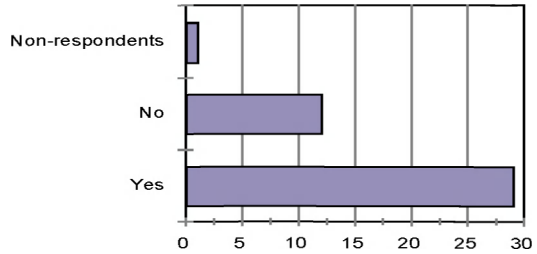
## Appendix 2 SURVEY AND RESULTS

### SITE CONTENT

1. Would you like to see more information regarding your local congregation in the directory?

29\_ Yes

12\_ No (If no, skip #2)



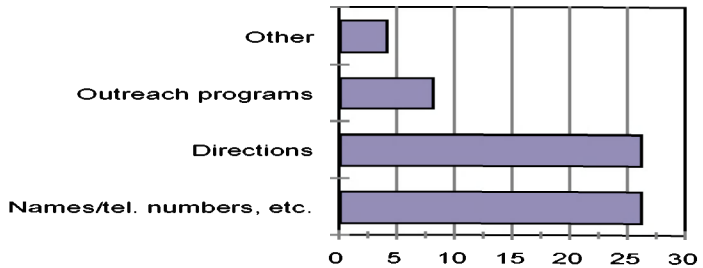
2. Please check what type of information you would like to see included.

26\_ names/telephone numbers/email addresses for contacts

26\_ directions to the church

8\_ outreach programs offered by the church

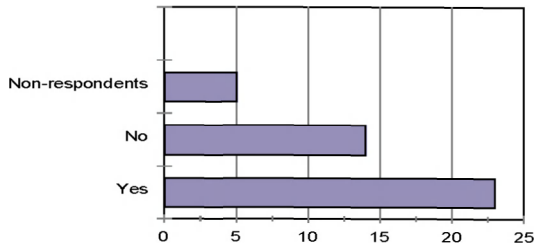
\_ other (please list):



3. Would you like to see the site link to other sites?

23\_ Yes

14\_ No (If no, skip #4)



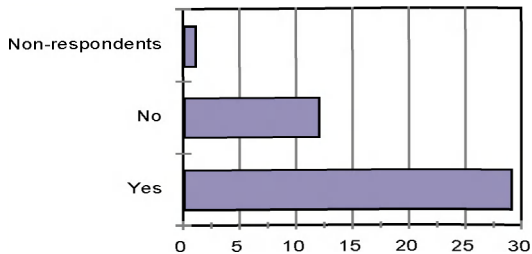
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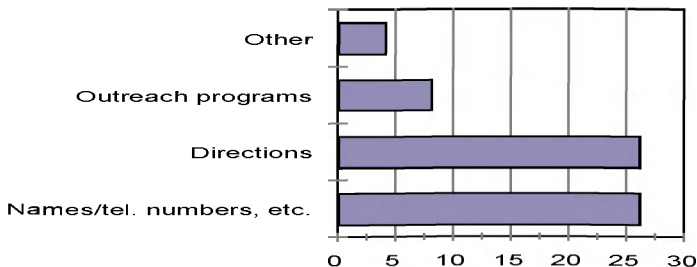
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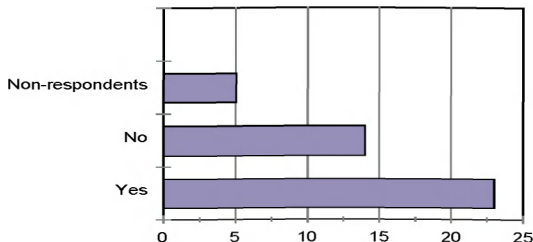
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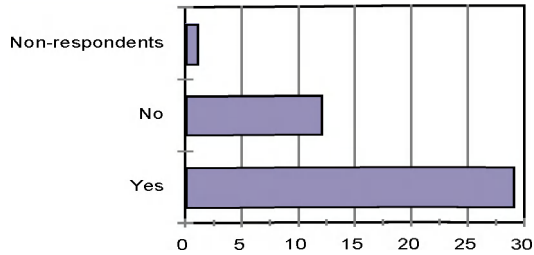
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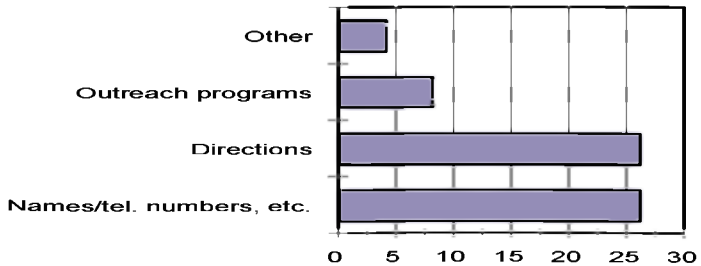
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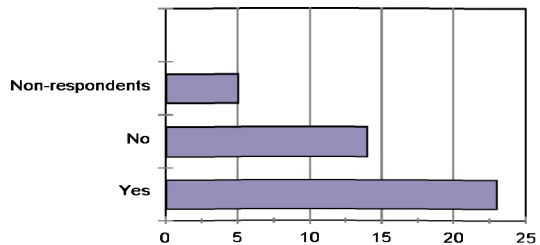
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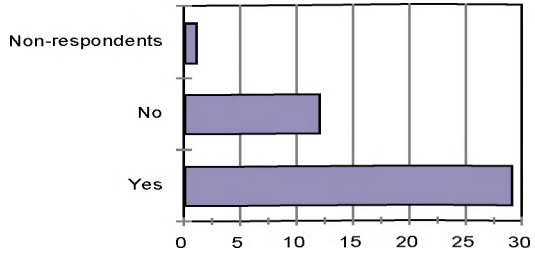
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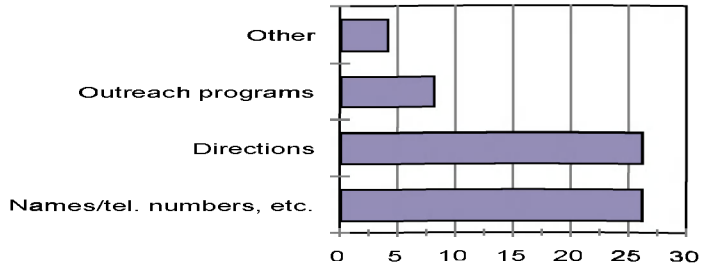
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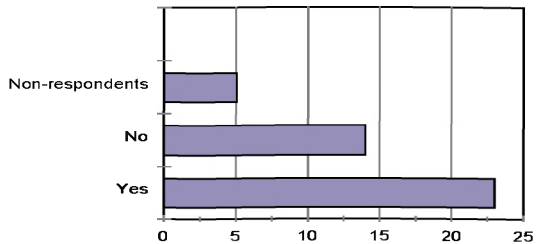
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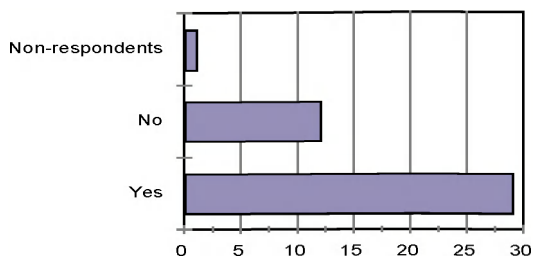
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29 \_ Yes

12 \_ No (If no, skip #2)



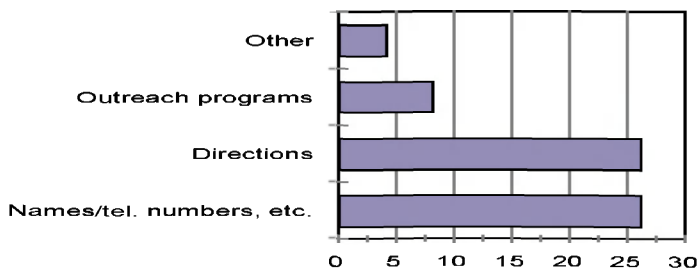
2. Please check what type of information you would like to see included.

26 \_ names/telephone numbers/email addresses for contacts

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8 \_ outreach programs offered by the church

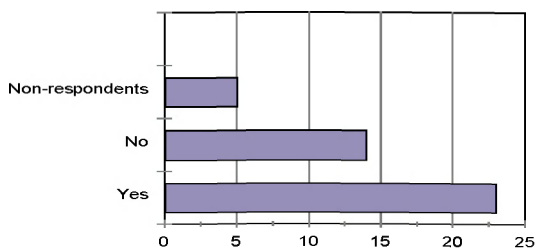
\_ other (please list):



3. Would you like to see the site link to other sites?

23 \_ Yes

14 \_ No (If no, skip #4)



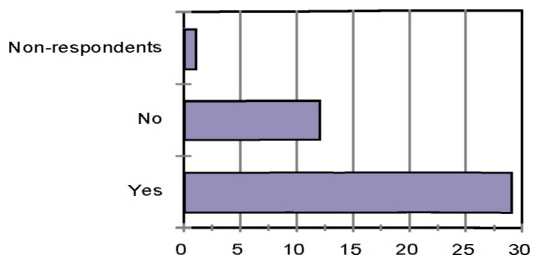
## Appendix 2 SURVEY AND RESULTS

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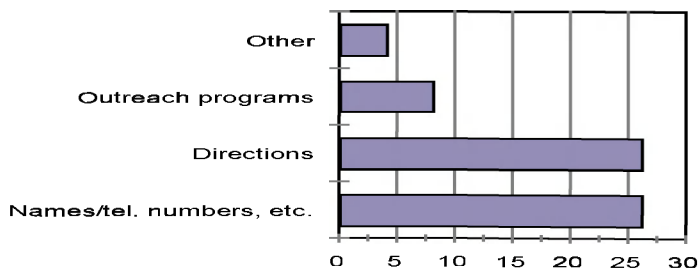
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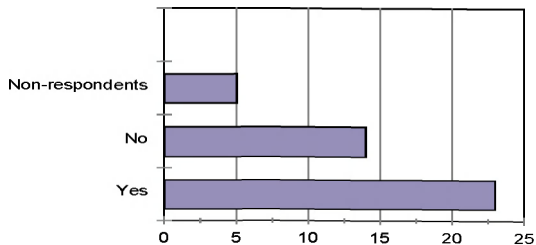
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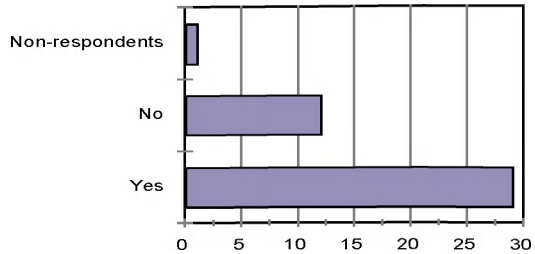
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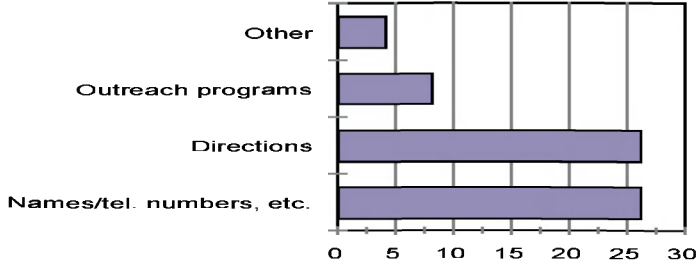
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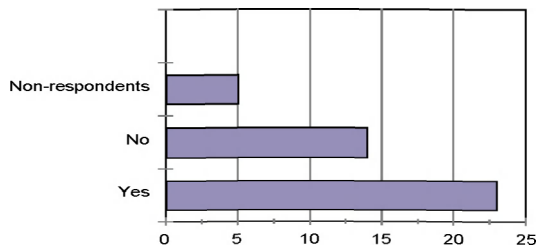
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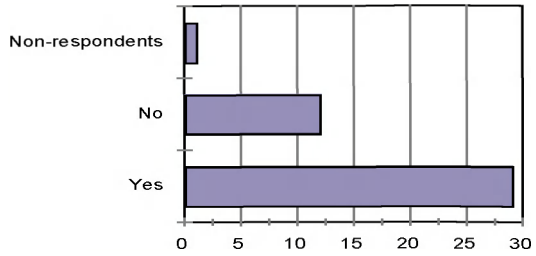
14 \_ No (If no, skip #4)



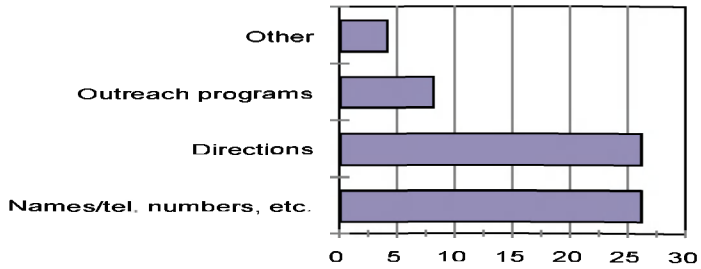
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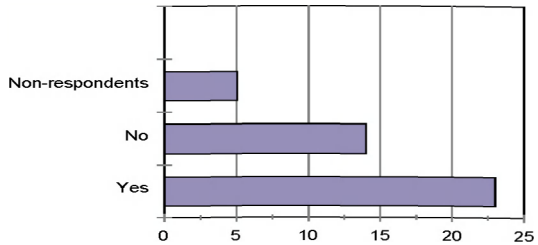
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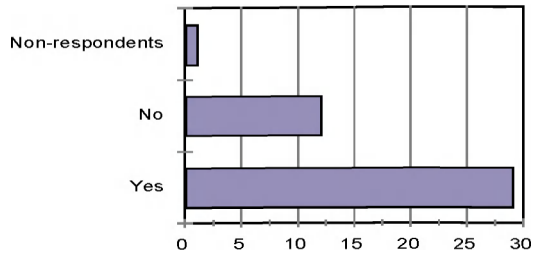


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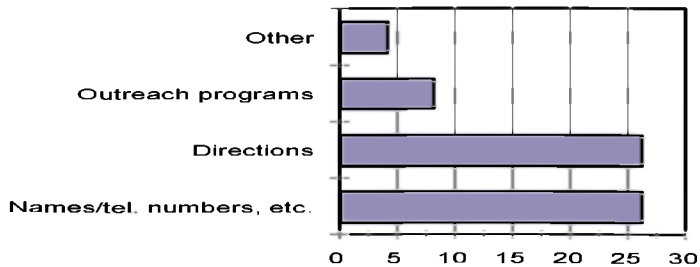
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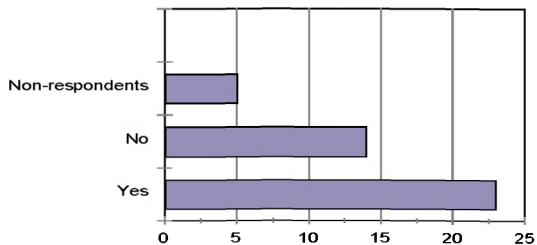
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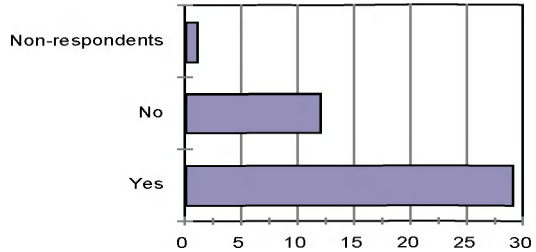
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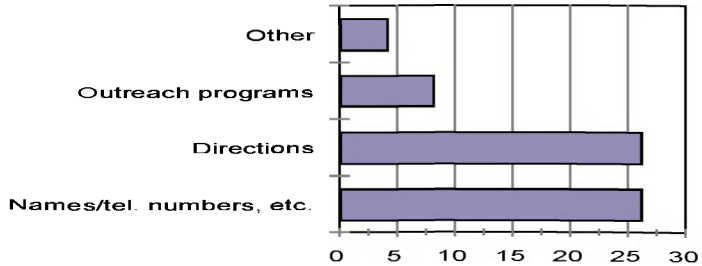
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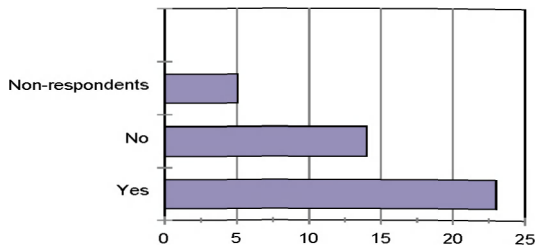
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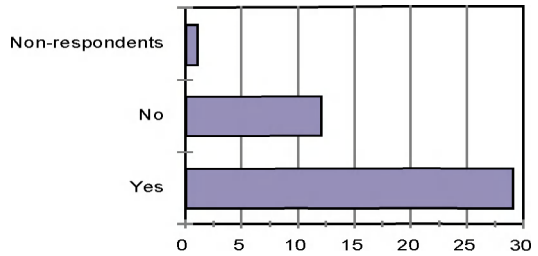
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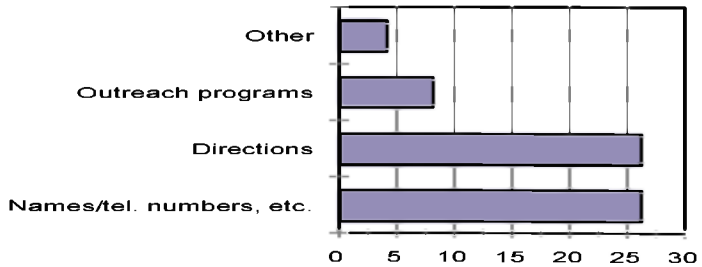
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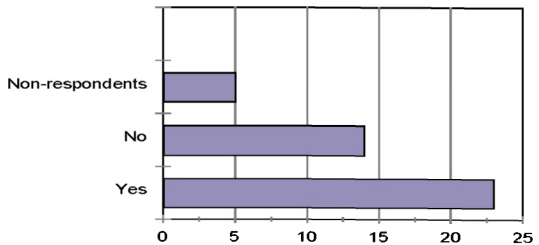
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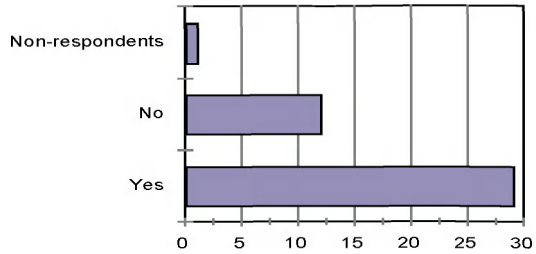
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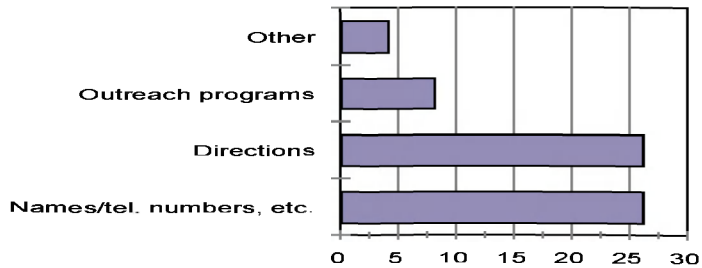
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