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CLICK HERE: The knowledge and power of LDS Church Web sites are expanding

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There hasn't always been very much to see or do at LDS.org, the official Web site of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the beginning, said Larry Richman, director of the faith's Internet coordination group, LDS.org was "pretty simple -- just four or five static pages."

Not any more. The amount of church content available online has exploded since 2000, the first year that LDS.org was given a major overhaul. That's why, on Jan. 30, the church rolled out an entirely new home page, the first step in a far-reaching redesign of all church sites that is expected to continue for the rest of 2007 and into 2008.

The old home page design, with site navigation links listed down the left sidebar, couldn't keep up with the rapid proliferation of content categories. "The old site had about 25 different choices in the left nav bar," Richman said. "That was growing at a rate of about two or three a month."

It hasn't always been that way. The first version of LDS.org, Richman's "four or five static pages," went up in 1994, when the World Wide Web was only just beginning to seep into the public consciousness. The site was largely unchanged until 1998, when a number of small, mostly cosmetic tweaks were applied.

The boom began in 1999, when church members had the option of listening to general conference online via streaming audio for the first time. The version of LDS.org familiar (until recently) to most church members and other visitors appeared the following year.

The LDS Web presence, of course, isn't limited to just LDS.org, which is primarily intended as a resource for church members. Mormon.org provides information to people interested in learning more about the church and its doctrines. Other favorite sites are ProvidentLiving.org, created to help church members (and others) improve their approach to food storage and emergency preparedness, and FamilySearch.org, the online nerve center of the church's massive genealogical and family history outreach.

And growth is happening everywhere you turn. FamilySearch.org passed a major milestone earlier this month with the creation of its 150 millionth Personal Resource File. Unlike the site's other searchable databases, the PRF database is entirely driven by user interaction -- volunteers build it a profile at a time by submitting the results of their own research.

The data itself has value, said church publicist Paul Nauta, but searching PRFs has the secondary benefit of bringing together people. "You may find a living relative somewhere in the world who's actively working on your family tree," Nauta said.

Seek and ye shall find

The biggest benefit to users of overhauling LDS.org may not be the first thing that visitors notice, but Richman hopes they'll figure it out quickly. The church's Web developers have made a major effort to beef up the site's search engine.

"The search is much more advanced," Richman said. "It's got a lot of power behind it."

The previous search function only covered materials in the church's Gospel Library -- primarily magazine articles, lesson manuals and general conference addresses (a separate search took in the LDS "standard works," the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price).

The new search finds content on every church site, and presents results with a list of filtering options to instantly narrow down your choices. (For example, if you type Zarahemla, a Book of Mormon place name, into the search, then you get 269 results. If you click the filter options "Scriptures" and "Book of Mormon," however, the list of results is instantly shrunk to 139.)

The site navigation has also been revamped, moved up to the center of the screen and revised to group links into six overall categories: About the Church, Gospel Library, Family History and Temples, Home and Family, Serving in the Church, and News and Events. Mousing over a category heading reveals a "flyout," or text box, that breaks down each category into subcategories.

"With one click, you get right to 54 different places," Richman said.

There's even a third option of quickly getting to wherever you want to go. The new site design includes an A-Z index option at the top of every page that lets you search a lengthy alphabetized list of topics from "Aaronic Priesthood" and "Abortion" to "Zion."

And though visitors won't know it, the new site was made using updated content management software that, Richman said, will enable faster and simpler site maintenance, as well as simplifying the church's ambitious aim of translating content in an ever-increasing variety of languages.

One area of the site where that's especially critical is the Internet edition of the scriptures: the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

The content supervisor for the scriptures, Kai Anderson, said that the Internet edition is now available in four languages besides English: Spanish, German, French and Italian.

The Internet scriptures have an interesting connection to Utah Valley: Pleasant Grove resident David Rosenvall, along with his father, developed the Internet edition and donated it to the church.

After initially creating the project as a labor of love and experimentation, Rosenvall said, he showed it to a friend who worked as director of an LDS Institute of Religion. "He showed it to somebody, who showed it to somebody, who showed it to somebody," Rosenvall said, with the end result being a meeting with the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Make it better

During the final quarter of 2006, there were more than 15 million page views of the scriptures and Anderson expects the number to rise as new translations are added. (The hope, Richman said, is to eventually increase the number of languages at the rate of about one per month.)

Expansion is also afoot at FamilySearch.org, where Nauta said that church genealogists have plans to digitize their vast collection of microfilmed genealogical documents -- approximately 2.5 million rolls of microfilm representing research done in 110 countries.

And there's no worry of running out of things to do anytime soon. "Less than one percent of the world's vital records are available online," Nauta said. (Vital records are documents -- marriage licenses, birth and death certificates, court records -- that match up names to dates, places and events.)

One thing that's not expanding is the church's collection of domain names. Though the church does have a large number of licensed domains -- "hundreds" of them, Richman said, a quantity that's "typical of any large organization that has Web sites" -- there's no active program of evicting domain squatters or searching out and registering possible new domains.

Hence, while LatterDaySaints.org and LatterDaySaints.net redirect to Mormon.org, LatterDaySaints.com is a personal site that offers an archive of quotations from prominent Latter-day Saints. BookofMormon.com redirects to Utah Lighthouse Ministry, a site critical of Mormonism, while MormonChurch.com is presently up for grabs.

Richman said that, in the early days of the Internet, many domains were purchased by Latter-day Saints and donated to the church. Instead of purchasing new domains, however, the church is mostly tying its content to a few of the better-recognized existing ones: The Internet edition of the scriptures, for example, is found at scriptures.lds.org.

There are other big things in the works for LDS.org. One feature of the site is to host official Web sites for wards and stakes that include such information as phone directories and lists of local leaders. That functionality is currently only available to wards and stakes in the United States and Canada (about 13,000 of them altogether), but Richman said that it will eventually be expanded worldwide.

And the content in the Gospel Library section of the site is being presented in a diversity of formats that grows each year. The new site provides easier-than-ever access to audio, video and other formats -- many of them downloadable, and some designed to accommodate users with special needs.

"We actually provide electronic Braille files," said Richman. "People with sight impairment can download them to a Braille reader."

If you don't like what you see when you look at LDS.org, wait a while. Odds are good that you'll be looking at something new, different, or better. Sooner, rather than later.

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SIDEBARS

What Can LDS.org Do For You?

You could spend hours poking around in all of the helpful nooks and crannies of LDS.org and not uncover all of its secrets. There are many different resources to help church members accomplish a variety of tasks. Here's a sampling, a mere five ways that the site can make your life a little easier:

- 1) "Honey, where's our Ensign?" -- Need to find the magazine so that you can do you home or visit teaching? Maybe it's under the couch, or on top of the vanity in the bathroom. You'll always find it in the same place, however, if you look online at LDS.org.
- 2) "Oh no, I didn't get the lesson manual from (fill in the blank)." -- Relax. Whether you're an every-week instructor or last-minute fill-in, LDS.org has all of your church-lesson-preparation materials. You can even save time at the ward library on Sunday by looking up visual aids in the Gospel Art Picture Kit.
- 3) "I'm supposed to figure out how to do tithing settlement." -- Ever get a calling a month after the last person to hold it moved out of the ward? At LDS.org, you can follow the online training courses to figure out all the things about your calling that you don't find out from someone else.
- 4) "I hope they call me on a mission." -- Hey moms and dads, now that the kids have all moved out, find out what mission service opportunities are available. Young men and women in the U.S. and Canada preparing to serve missions will also need to look online -- it's the only way for them to submit their mission papers.
- 5) "I don't know anything about food storage." -- If putting together a one-year supply of grains, legumes, oils, flour and other essentials is baffling to you, you can jump from LDS.org to the church's ProvidentLiving Web site, which has a wealth of information to assist food storage newbies.

Leather Binding Not Available

You can't get your name stamped in gold foil on the Internet edition of the Book of Mormon -- but probably only because David Rosenvall hasn't figured out how to make that happen yet.

Rosenvall, 40, is a father of four (two sets of twins) and chief technology officer of an e-commerce software company. He was born in California and raised in Canada, but currently resides in Pleasant Grove.

"It actually started right after I got home from my mission," Rosenvall said. "My father and I just started playing around with hypertext."

"It" is a project that's ongoing for the Rosenvalls -- the creation and refinement of a searchable Internet edition of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price.

They donated their work to the church in the 1990s and have continued to revise and expand the official Internet edition of the scriptures (scriptures.lds.org) ever since.

Rosenvall wants the Internet edition to have all the functionality that users expect from the old-fashioned, ink-and-paper scriptures. That's why you can do things like mark the text (in red!) of the online edition. Your computer remembers the verses you've marked, and will even cross-reference them for you.

Both the cross-referencing and search functionality of the Internet scriptures have been "hand-crafted," as Rosenvall put it. That is to say, it's not just a script searching for certain words -- it's been coached and finessed by the Rosenvalls and others.

For example, if you search for the word "testimony," and then view your results as a "topic search," the third reference listed is Job 19:25-26. That reference doesn't describe or define testimonies, and doesn't include the word "testimony," but it is one of the most oft-cited examples of testimony in LDS theology.

"There is not another search in the world that will come up with that result when you search on the word testimony," Rosenvall said.

There's still plenty of time to figure out the gold foil thing. Rosenvall's not planning to give up his work any time soon. "This is the love of my life," he said. "Next to my family, this is what I live for."