Report of Deputies Internet to the Synod Mamelodi 2024

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Summary

The Internet deputyship did not function optimally. The current FRC/VGK-website was kept running and updated where necessary, whilst mostly Jaco played around with a couple of ideas to revitalize the federation website. Overall we struggled to find the resources to execute the redesign in time for the 2024 synod.

Mandate
Synod 2021 Belhar formulated the mandate as follows:

1. To redesign the website and make it more attractive and modern.
2. To keep the website updated and current with all publications and encourage churches, deputies and editors of publications to upload all their latest information on the website and keep it up to date
3. To ensure that all pages are in both Afrikaans and English.
4. To approve the budget of R5 000 per year.
5. To submit an interim report for discussion during an Indaba to be held more or less halfway between Synod 2021 and the next Synod.
6. To report to the next Synod and formulate recommendations according to Art 10 and 11 of the Synod Rules.

A) Operational aspects of the VGK/FRC website (#2, #3 and #4)

The website has been running without any significant downtime or issues for the past couple of years.   There are a very limited number of active contributors on the VGK/FRC website – some loading sermons; some keeping the federation-level info up to date, etc.   There are some congregations that are busy thinking about setting up a more detailed congregation level-website or internet presence, which requested inputs from us.

But there is still lots of room for improvement. It does pose the question: what is the main purpose of the FRC website? Is this all about providing information about the FRC congregations, the church structures, etc?   Most of this information is static and does not change often.   Or does the goal of the FRC website extend beyond claiming to be a scripturally sound church, but also demonstrating this in various ways, by for exampling publishing the sermons that are preached on Sundays, so that visitors can get an online taste of the FRC-church life?

The current part of the website that attracts the largest number of visitors, is the historic sermon database that is very often used for bible study purposes.   Appending new sermons to the database has been neglected in the past years and should therefore be one of the higher priorities.

The website will also benefit from doing an annual audit of information with a reminder email to the various content owners asking them to confirm the details, and/or update the information to ensure that we don't end up having a wrong worship-service time on the website, and the guest-preacher arriving an hour late because the time on the website was wrong…

B) Redesign the website and make it more attractive and modern. (#1)

We have discussed and decided to approach the redesign in various steps.
The first step would be to change the website theme and landing page to something more modern, without changing too much of the current content that we have.

A next step will be to identify which additional content we need to add that is not covered adequately right now; or new content that would be easy to add, and valuable to both internal and external users of the VGK/FRC website.

This work is currently in progress, and at the time of writing this report, we are still optimistic that we should be able to show something by the time the synod starts. Anyone interested in the progress up to now, can have a look at the following public (but temporary and under construction) website: https://divi.kandelaar.co.za/

We will be getting feedback from a selection of people across the federation to fine-tune the final design. This remains a massive undertaking, and anyone that feels that he/she can make a valuable contribution is welcome to contact either one of us.

C) Budget (#4)

There is an approved annual budget that covers the annual hosting of the website. Over the past two decades this has mostly been sponsored by anonymous donors.

We have also registered at TechSoup as a non-profit organization (under the umbrella of FRC Pretoria), to receive discounted and free offerings from various IT companies. This Techsoup-registration process was forced upon us after Google changed their service offerings terms and conditions, for which we had to start paying about R30,000.00 per year for the services that we have previously received for free.

Synod Belhar 2021 approved the requested budget, but the budget did not include any major redesign which the synod added on top of the previous mandate. Should the synod consider the redesign of the FRC website be an important priority, we could try finding a commercial provider that would speed things up. But this won't be for free. Given the complexity of the current website this won't be cheap either.

D) Recommendations

Current deputies:

- Rev Jaco de Beer has accepted the call to Wesbank, on top of his daytime job. His spare time is extremely limited, and he is not available for reappointment as a deputy. Given his experience with building church websites over the years, he would be able to assist in an advisory capacity.
- Gerhard Bijker have registered and maintained the FRC website for the past 23 years (the first years informally, and the later years formally as part of the various synods). Maybe the time has come to step back, and let someone else take this over? He prefers to function in the background as the webmaster / technical advisor.
- The deputy-rules allow for pulling in additional people. But finding individuals that can help is not easy. Maybe this is best explained by comparing the FRC website against that of one of the Reformational Study Centre's websites. Yes, the goals of the two websites are quite different, but the argument is simple: In the light of the parable of the pounds (Luk 19): when I have one hour of time left, do I spend this working on the RSC or FRC website, with the RSC website reaching 100x more visitors compared to that of the FRC website?

Structure:
The final item that the Synod might want to consider, is the structure of the current Internet Deputies. Having a dedicated Internet Deputies is one way of structuring this, but it might not be the optimal structure.

The synod could structure this different by combining (as an example) the Stated Clark's mandate to include that of Federation-level website.

Or alternatively: appoint a specific church (with a strong admin office) to keep the Federation level information up to date on the Federation website – maybe on a rotating basis, similar to appointing the convening church for the next synod or appointing the archive church.