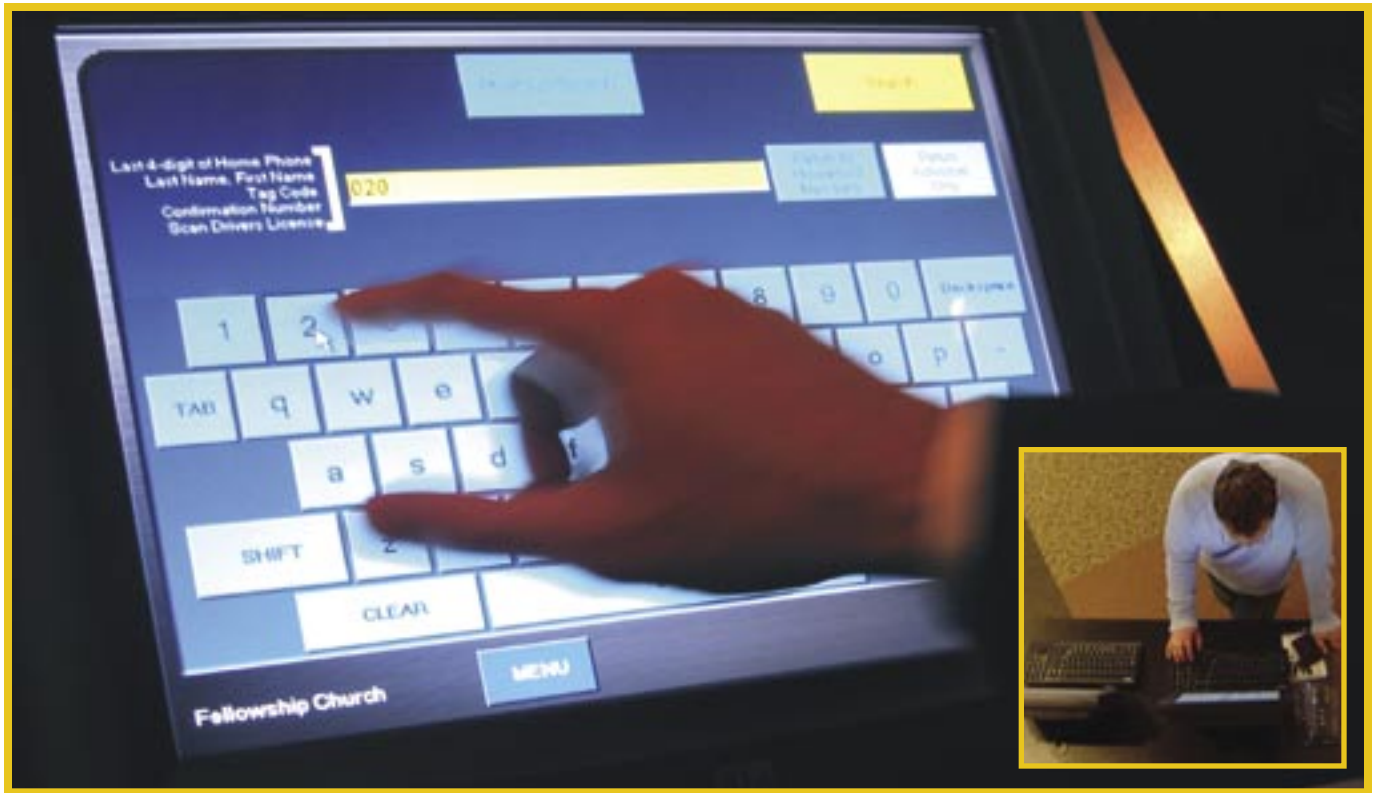


re-thinking your approach to church technology

Now is the Time for the Post-modern Church to Leverage the Best Technology Available



Jeff Hook

We all know the technology revolution has made a significant impact on our lives, bringing businesses and individuals tremendous productivity and capability. Most churches have at least one computer; some have a more sophisticated church management system (CMS). Unfortunately, the post-modern church – except for a few very large churches – has not been able to truly take advantage of the many innovations that technology offers to make day-to-day operations more efficient and effective.

Most often, a church management system (CMS) is used like an electronic file cabinet for membership and contribution records – sometimes ignored because the average staff person cannot use it. Thus, church technology appears to be more of an afterthought for storing data than a well-integrated tool for ministry.

the impact of the internet

Many churches are starting to incorporate web sites as an outreach to tap into their communities, or more appropriately, let their communities tap into them.

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Some churches are working with internet software providers and consulting firms or with members that have expertise to help build a dynamic web site that can be considered part of the church's "brand." Too often

a church web site is only a static page of information about the church, detailing times of worship services, directions to the church and the beliefs associated with church doctrine.

As the internet-savvy seeker begins to look for a church, an effective web site presence may become just as important as the senior pastor's style and the overall experience of the worship service. However, this can require significant resources for maintenance and often results in more manual work for somebody in the church. Sometimes, pastors feel that the operational nightmares and expense are almost not worth the convenience provided to the congregation. All too often, the activities and transactions being conducted on the web site have no integration with what is going on in the church's administrative system, resulting in duplication of work and additional manual efforts.

more to manage

To overcome this challenge in a church "business" environment, staff and volunteers typically push paper around from here to there to get their work done. In

most cases these transactions are done in a not-so-timely fashion. One piece of paper is touched many times in various sorting and processing steps, and a tremendous amount of time and energy is wasted. In the business world, this lack of integration is often referred to as **"islands of automation."** Churches also have "islands of automation" that are not tied together in an integrated fashion. Imagine that each individual system in the church – the internet server, the administrative system, each staff person's computer, the internal network – is an "island" and the paper or computer files are like little boats ferrying information from one island to another. This results in some of the following problems:

- Someone calls the church to make an address change, which is done in the central database; however, that same address may be kept in six other places on spreadsheets on various computers where it is not updated;
- Another person registers for a Bible study on the web, and a staff person has to print out the e-mail sent from the registration service and transcribe that person to the registration rolls;
- Someone asks to volunteer in a ministry of the

Fellowship Church developed Fellowship One to meet the needs of their growing ministry. This system enables them to:

- Speed up childcare check-in... they process about 6,000 children per week!
- Take attendance at events almost instantly.
- Facilitate online contributions and registration for events.
- Provide real-time records for contributions and events.
- Automatically distribute requests for prayer and information to the proper staff.
- Eliminate all paper records by accepting scanned forms and even checks.
- Assign a security level to each volunteer once background checks are done, eliminating the need to review it each time the volunteer takes a new position. This also protects the volunteer's privacy.
- Access information from anywhere, since the system is web-based.

how technology end



Technology at Fellowship Church is used strategically to help empower personal, "one-on-one" ministry, not to replace it. There are several ways that technology is helping Fellowship make the personal connection:

Greeting visitors

The first time someone comes to Fellowship Church, they are likely to be met by a greeter in the entryway, a helper at the main information kiosk or a children's ministry volunteer. This volunteer makes a personal contact with the visitor and enters their contact information into one of the many portable data ports linked to their Fellowship One system. If someone slips into the service without meeting a volunteer, they have an opportunity to respond with the Guest Registry insert in their worship guide. The goal is to capture a tangible record of their visit.

church where a background check is required and conducted. The same person volunteers again in another ministry, and a second background check is conducted because the first is inconveniently “lost” in someone’s file cabinet;

- A member contacts the church asking for several items, ranging from information on different ministries to prayer for an ailment, etc. As the paper message is routed around the staff, it is lost or misplaced;

The list of operational inefficiencies goes on and on. Because volunteers often do this extra work, many churches do not see this manual effort as really costing the church anything. In reality, however, anyone’s time – volunteer or not – expended unnecessarily costs the church in one way or another. Wasting a volunteer’s time is not good stewardship of the commitment of your volunteer.

make the most of technology

With the improvements in technology that have come about in recent years, it is past time for the post-modern

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church to begin harnessing the power that technology has made available. The other team (not God’s team) has surely figured this out. The time has come for God’s team (and I am not talking about the Dallas Cowboys) to start using the best capabilities that technology has to offer. There are many things that a church management system (CMS) needs to address.

One of the most critical issues facing churches today is **growth and how to manage it properly**. The Great Commission says that we are to reach out and spread the good news. A church that is not growing, seeking others or keeping its youth involved will die eventually. Because the congregation is aging, this is an eventual fact. A CMS should provide all sorts of capabilities to help a church grow, including:

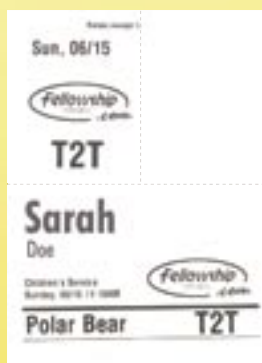
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bles ministry at Fellowship Church

Childcare check-in

Most churches are set up for parents to check their children in one central location or at each individual room. This can create a backlog at the central location or cause parents with more than one child to have to wait in multiple lines. As a result, parents with small children either have to come 20 to 30 minutes early (a daunting task when children don’t cooperate in the morning) or miss the first part of the service. Fellowship Church wanted their process to be less stressful and more user-friendly.

Fellowship One decentralizes the check-in process to improve traffic flow, assists the staff in making room assignments based on availability, and provides better security all at the same time. Parents with small children can check in at any of the kiosks in the building. As they enter their information, Fellowship One assigns the children to a room, based on availability. For each child, the data port prints off a nametag that includes the classroom name and a unique ID number. The

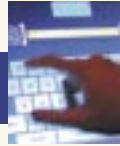


parent gets a matching sticker with this same number. While the parents are walking their children to the room, childcare coordinators get a real-time notice of where those children have been assigned. If there aren’t enough volunteers for 3-year-olds, for example, the coordinators can move volunteers from the 4-year-old rooms before the children even get there. When the service is over, children are only released to the parent who has the matching sticker.

Coordinating volunteers

Discover Your Design, Fellowship’s gifts analysis course designed to fit people with their passions, yields data about the gifts of each person who completes the course. Fellowship One takes this raw data and matches it to the ministries which fit the individual. Within minutes, they can print a report of matching ministry opportunities for new volunteers. The system also takes input from background checks, if needed, and determines if volunteers have the security clearance to work the positions they match.

Fellowship has found that technology is essential to enable them to do more ministry and less administration, helping them to focus on their mission: Reach Up, Reach Out, Reach In.



- An integrated contact management system that does not allow requests for information, prayer, etc., to slip through the cracks;
- Near real-time attendance reporting allows teachers and volunteers to know when regular attenders are not present. An alert within minutes of the service starting can help equip the church to reach out and check up on that household, giving the church an opportunity to help if there is a need;
- Convenience to the parishioner to avoid lines that may be caused due to check-in activities, such as volunteer meetings, child-care, Bible studies, etc.;
- Convenience of allowing people to register and pay for activities via the web site.

Another critical issue facing churches today is **security for their children**. Each church is a trusted institution that can have that trust easily shattered if just one child is harmed. In his book *The Guardian System*, David Middlebrook identifies three things that can happen if there is a security lapse – all of which are significant in and of themselves:

- The minister and church lose positive influence in the community and become the subjects of suspicion and distrust;
- Massive legal judgments may financially cripple both the pastor and church for years to come;
- Most distressing of all, the life of at least one child may be devastated – and the effects can last a lifetime.

The two primary things that a CMS should provide to address child care are:

1. Real-time security, where parents or guardians check in and receive a receipt that they use to pick up their child.
2. Background checks to ensure that the volunteers or staff who care for the children are qualified to do so.

A third critical issue facing churches is the **efficiency of their staff and volunteers**. Every church has a finite amount of financial and human resources. If those resources are not being utilized doing the right things the right way, the wasted time will eventually suck the life out of the staff. A good CMS should help a church eliminate

administrative tasks so that more time and money can be spent on actual ministry.

The 99th issue to consider should be **technology**. If a church has to sacrifice certain things because its technology limits their ability to excel and grow, then that church has the wrong technology. The technology that a church uses should be the same as you use in everyday life. It should be:

• **Web-based**

This gives the ability to access information you need from anywhere; can become the primary information exchange for small groups, event registrations, volunteer groups and more.

• **Easy to use**

Just look at sites like Amazon.com and other popular sites. What is your favorite website? Chances are, it is organized well and is easy to navigate to the information you want.

• **Integration**

Integration with other forms of new technology is key so that the “islands of automation” can become a cohesive continent, all connected to the same base information. In other words, if you want to make a change or update in one place, the information is updated everywhere so you are always working with the most current information.

There are many other functions that you should look for in a church management system, many of them having to do with outreach and convenience. The two go hand in hand. In this post-modern world where time is so valuable, having a convenient church does not ensure growth, but having an inconvenient church will at some point cause stagnation.

what is your outlook today?

God created everything relating to technology many years ago - we are just now discovering it. Just like other things God created, technology can be used for good or bad purposes. That does not make technology something we should avoid. The fact is just the opposite. The church needs to embrace new technology and take advantage of what it has to offer to complete the task God has given us.

God deserves the best we can give Him in all things, whether it's our devotional time, our worship time, etc. In the same way, His church should not have to “get by” with less than the best that technology has to offer. 