



# Big Time

by Lauren Hunger

## Small- to medium-sized churches often fall behind in technology use—but they don't have to

Small churches are the bread and butter of the American spiritual landscape. With the average small church in America having less than 100 people attending each Sunday, and many more falling in the 200 to 1,000 member range, some might question that using church management software (CMS) might not be necessary. But it is precisely these churches that can utilize software to help grow their churches and keep track of current members. Often times, because small churches have more volunteer help and fewer paid staff members to keep accurate records, members aren't communicated with when they stop regularly attending and people fall by the wayside.

### Unify Church Records

Mount Hermon Baptist Church in Pelion, S. C., had been looking for a way to run its office more efficiently.

An interim pastor discovered that each lay leader in the church had a different method of recording membership information—from a spiral notebook to an Excel spreadsheet—and none of them corresponded to one another. The church knew that something would have to change in order for it to grow and flourish beyond its current size of 150. When all the names were added up from the various membership records, there totaled 490 names—all people that hadn't been kept in touch with over the years.

Mount Hermon went on to implement a Web-based church management software system (WebACS) that allowed them to unify its membership information and allow multiple church volunteers to update the information and keep track of people from their home computers.

"With our database, I'm now able to post contributions and run reports from home over the Internet," says Mildred

## Smaller churches might question using church management software—but it is precisely these churches that can utilize software to help grow their churches and keep track of current members.

Poole, Mount Hermon's church treasurer. "It's great to be able to have access to keep track of records and do everything I need to right from home."

This is just one example of a smaller church using software to its advantage. For other churches, they purchase a software package and install it on their church office computers only to let it sit for months—and even years—without being used. Usually training is the biggest obstacle to achieving success with church management software.

### Get Training

Take the Catholic Diocese of Raleigh, N.C. Upon taking the position of accounting supervisor for the Diocese, John Pearce did a review of all the 90 parishes that make up the Diocese to find out what software accounting system they were using. During his review, he found that many parishes had purchased ACS or other fairly substantial software products, but couldn't afford to purchase training, and so the software sat unused. Other parishes didn't know where to start and were confused about what software they needed.

A big proponent of in-depth software training, Pearce developed a program whereby each quarter he puts on a training session on a different topic in a new location so that all parishes have the opportunity to participate at one time or another.

"If you take time out to train your people, it really pays off," says Pearce.

### Accounting Accuracy

Another major issue for churches of every size is keeping accurate and compliant accounting records. Many churches use off-the-shelf accounting software programs that are not designed to effectively handle the needs of nonprofit church finances. All church accounting programs must be compliant with GAAP (Generally Accepted

Accounting Principles) and FASB 116 and 117 requirements. That's where specialized CMS comes into great use. Whether a church has 10 members or 10,000, the standards are the same. Financial accountability is extremely important for every church.

Also, for small churches that anticipate growing and needing a bigger facility, providing accurate accounting records to banks when applying for building loans is imperative. In order for a bank to approve a sizeable loan to grow a church, the financial reporting needs to be first rate, or the loan will not be approved.

### Anticipate Growth

Although most churches start out small, they don't usually mean to stay small. Many organizations hope to grow to incorporate as many people in their communities as possible. That's why flexibility is such an important issue for small and mid-size churches to consider before they purchase a software package. Also, many churches that already have a CMS package don't realize that they're sitting on powerful tools that can help them grow.

For Holy Cross Catholic Church in Wagoner, Okla., they wanted to have the benefits of running their small church office like a large cathedral, but with the ability to grow and add solutions when they need to in the future.

"We found ourselves realizing more and more benefits from the use of software in our church office," notes Parish Life Coordinator, Libby Phillips. "As our needs grew, we purchased additional solutions in order to meet our specific parish's needs for church office management. It also is important to know that our software can grow as our church grows—whether we have 300 members or 3,000."

Many software products also offer specific solutions to help grow a church. By managing church volunteers, schedules and bulk mailings, software can make it easy to market your church more effectively and encourage new people to attend. Find out if your software package offers growth tools and begin implementing them to help your organization begin to grow. By working with the pastoral staff to determine a growth plan and specific goals, you can better use software to spread the Gospel to more people.

### Use The Web

Another area that small- to medium-sized churches often overlook is using the Internet to evangelize and tout their church. With the overwhelming majority of people looking to the Internet for information—from where to send their kids to Christian preschool to what church to visit on Sunday—having a church Website is no longer optional—it's imperative.

Summerville Baptist Church in Summerville, S.C., a mid-sized church with around 1,500 members, has had

a vision to build and use its Website to minister to the community. Since building its site less than a year ago, the church has been able to register children online for Vacation Bible School, attract new visitors who searching for a church to attend on the Internet and encourage current members to take part in more activities.

Summerville's vision is to include its Website as a part of its overall church growth and ministry plans. "Website is ministry," remarks Atkinson, Summerville's minister of education. "We think it's a strategic part of our ministry to have an interactive Website for our congregation and for the community."

A recent report by the Barna Research Organization<sup>1</sup> states that "small churches play an important and valuable role in the religious landscape of America. They reach millions of young adults who have no interest in a larger church setting. They have tremendous potential for building strong community, as well as spiritual foundations. And small churches often grow into larger churches once they develop significant internal leadership and creatively overcome their resource limitations."

Your church has the potential to impact people in a very tangible way. Technology tools available to churches of all sizes extend ministry beyond the doors of the church and make evangelizing possible and realistic. By simply better using the software you have, or purchasing software and Website building solutions to improve your church, your church will soon be on its way to living up to its fullest potential. ❖

### Reference

1. "Small Churches Struggle to Grow Because of the People They Attract," September 2, 2003

---

*Lauren Hunter is a trade writer and public relations consultant specializing in the faith-based and nonprofit technology markets. She currently consults to ACS as public relations manager. ACS Technologies serves more than 12,000 churches, schools and other faith-based organizations with its software solutions. For more information on ACS visit [www.acstechnologies.com](http://www.acstechnologies.com) or e-mail [lauren.hunter@acstechnologies.com](mailto:lauren.hunter@acstechnologies.com).*

---