

Equipping the saints with Web-based tools

Bogged down by numerous administrative tasks? Here's how your church can put the Web to work to build teamwork, empower laity and communicate vision — all day and all night

More than 128 million people — that's two-thirds of adults in the United States — are Internet users, and more than three-fourths of teenagers have Internet connection. The Pew Internet & American Life Project discovered in a 2004 survey that nearly two-thirds of all Internet users in the U.S. have gone online for faith-related matters. A full 17 percent have searched the Internet for information about where to attend religious services.

How then can our churches faithfully use the Internet for the sake of the Gospel? I suggest there are two ways: to equip and empower ministries with administrative and communication tools, and to teach and evangelize.

Power to the users

The greatest benefit of a Web-based system is its incredible reach. It can be used by more people, more often and from more places. It is common knowledge that Web sites are great for publishing information, but many people are not aware that the Web is ideal for getting large numbers of people to share information with one another. With Web-based software, the church can enable staff and volunteer leaders with 24/7 access, from anywhere in the world, to the database so they can continually add events, ministry information, and discipleship and assimilation notes. A members' login area can be created on the Web site to permit members to update their own personal contact information should they move or change phone numbers, for example. With many people contributing updated information into the system, the database becomes a

valuable diagnostic tool. Wearing the manager's hat, a pastor can, at any time, evaluate whether the church is too busy, check how many families attend, and monitor individuals' spiritual growth.

Here is a sampling of what a church can do with a Web-based system:

- Equip pastors and leaders with 24/7 access to a member directory.
- Give volunteers the convenience of doing data entry from home.
- Send e-newsletters to your entire congregation.
- Internet evangelism can be done through the publishing of sermons, pastors' blogs, devotionals and Bible studies.
- Database-driven pages allow small group directories, calendars of events and photo galleries to be easily searched and utilized.
- Allow members to log in and download their own tax-deductible gift statements.
- Allow for online donations.

Essentially, with Web-based systems, churches can fulfill the maxim that "every member is a minister" by equipping the saints with administrative tools.

Switching to Web-based software

If you see the value in harnessing the Internet for the Gospel, then you will probably need to change your software. Most churches use desktop church management software, which is installed either on a stand-alone PC or on a local area network (LAN) within the church office. Web-based software is accessed through the Internet using a Web browser. Consult the chart on page 26 for the key differences between the two types of software.

Changing software in an organization is never easy. Yet long-term benefits far outweigh temporary growing pains.

Transitioning to the Web

In 2003, Hope Chapel Kaneohe Bay, a church of 1,600 in weekly attendance in Ewa Beach, Hawaii, made the switch from PC-based software to Web-based software. Custom-developed FoxPro and Microsoft Access databases, as well as a commercial church management software program, failed to meet their needs and philosophy.

"The tail was wagging the dog," recalls Connie Haskell, operations manager. "The programmer made us >>

By Truman Leung

conform to them as opposed to them conforming to us. Because we were a growing church, there were so many changes happening in the way that we kept and processed data that it really confined us. It caused the staff to create their own databases. At one point we had maybe 10 different databases ... Duplicates were all over the place, with people getting five pieces of the same mailing piece.”

By switching to a Web-based system, Hope Chapel was

a comprehensive CMS for Web publishing and a complete member management system.

Communicating the Word

Finally, consider what can be done with a volunteer team for outreach and evangelism using Web-based solutions.

Every week pastors invest hours of prayer and preparation to craft sermons that minister to their congregations.

Key Difference	Desktop Software	Hosted Web-Based Software
Ease of access	Limited to certain terminals in the church office.	Available to users anytime, anywhere, 24/7. If Internet access is down in one location, there are many alternative places to access the Internet (home, office, Wi-Fi hotspot, etc.)
Hardware requirements	If installed on a LAN, may require an in-house computer technician to install and maintain network hardware.	IT staffing and hardware expenses are eliminated.
Response time during use	Very fast.	Broadband Internet connection recommended.
Software upgrades and bug fixes (e.g., software errors)	May have to wait for the next version to be released for some bug fixes. May need to purchase and install upgrade.	Upgrades are normally included and available without you having to install anything. Many bugs are fixed in a matter of few hours or days.
Data security and backup	Data is only as secure as the physical security of your church office. If there was a break-in and the computers were stolen, sensitive data would be lost and exposed to be used by identity thieves.	Data centers have 24/7 security guards. Data is protected with encryption technologies similar to those that banks use. Backups performed daily.
Content Management System (CMS)	Most church management programs do not have Web publishing capabilities.	May contain a full-fledged CMS for easy integration with your Web site.

able to consolidate into a single database, one that all staff could access. Haskell says the Web-based system brought significant labor cost savings due to increased employee productivity.

Finding a Web-based system

A years ago Web-based applications for churches were not commercially available. And if a church wanted one, they went through an expensive and lengthy process. Today this is unnecessary as several systems are now available at far less cost. What would have been at least a five-figure price tag can now be acquired (on subscription basis) for not much more than a high-end cell phone plan. It's easier to attain, yet more compellingly needed than ever.

When shopping for a Web-based system for your church, look for feature sets that solidly enable your team to manage both your Web site and membership data. Whatever the Web-based solution you pick should contain

These messages can be published on the Web so they can reach far beyond the local church and have lasting impact.

But go a step beyond and consider putting together an Internet evangelism team consisting of volunteer writers, graphic artists and marketing professionals. Its task is to make sure your church Web site always has updated sermons and good articles on Christian living. In order to streamline the process of publishing content to your Web site, equip your Web team with a content management system (CMS). This software allows writers who lack technical skills to publish Web pages. It's as simple as using a Word processor. **CE**

Truman Leung is president of Ascribe Data Systems in Hawaii (www.ascribedata.com), an application service provider of Web-based church membership and Web site management software. He can be reached at truman.leung@ascribedata.com.