Computer savvy: Information technology in congregations

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Has the advent of the Internet and computer technology led congregations toward the "virtual church," undermining the face-to-face relationships that have long characterized congregational life? Two recent studies, one supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the other by the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, suggest not. The vast majority of congregations using and experimenting with computer technology and the Internet are not promoting aberrations of Christian or congregational life. Rather, they are using computer technologies to enhance and promote traditional ministries: worship, fellowship, pastoral care, education, mission and community outreach, evangelism and communications.

Congregations are using computer technology primarily in these areas: administration and finance, communications, learning labs, and multimedia presentations for worship and education.

- **Administration and finance**. Congregations have been using Congregational Management Software (CMS) since the early 1980s. A host of companies market CMS packages designed to aid churches in budgeting and accounting, tracking members and constituents, cataloging volunteer interests and gifts, recording attendance and scheduling activities. Thousands of congregations are functioning more efficiently and effectively because they use CMS technology.

  We have worked with scores of churches that had, for instance, until recently kept a typewritten list of members in the church office, financial records in a software format on the volunteer treasurer's home computer, and correspondence on the church secretary's PC, with no effective way to share or integrate the information each cache contained. (And the person most often left in the dark was the pastor.) Any of the major CMS packages can help

consolidate and integrate such information.

These databases can do much more than provide mailing labels for the church newsletter. One church, for example, keeps on its database significant dates in the lives of its members and families. This reminds the pastoral staff of important occasions that might be forgotten if left to faulty human memory. By tracking the date of the death of a spouse, for instance, CMS can remind pastors to call or to send a letter or card to the widow or widower on the anniversary of the loss. CMS is also widely used to track members' financial stewardship, and the database provides an easy way to document members' contributions at tax time.

Database and management software also assists churches as they engage in outreach and mission. A Missionary Baptist church in Indianapolis has for years been giving away thousands of pairs of shoes to children in need with the help of a network of retail stores that donate surplus inventory. But because the church had no effective way of tracking the names, addresses and circumstances of the children from year to year, families had to take the initiative to find the program. The church is now using a sophisticated database system, installed on laptop computers, to keep track of donors and recipients. It now can keep inventory information about the shoes, track information about each child in the program from year to year, and take the initiative in ministering to the families. The church is also considering ways to use this information to provide other ministries to these families.

- **Communications**. Desktop publishing has allowed churches to improve the quality and appearance of worship bulletins, newsletters, correspondence, flyers, posters, sermons and other educational or devotional materials. But the most important computer technology for congregational communications is e-mail and other Internet-related modes of communication. A whopping 91 percent of the respondents in the Pew report "Wired Churches and Wired Temples" said that e-mail has helped clergy and church members to promote fellowship and community-building communication and is used for such typical parish activities as sharing prayer concerns, coordinating committee meetings and providing spiritual advice and support.

When the pastor of a United Methodist church in Indianapolis asked during a worship service if anyone would be interested in receiving a weekly devotional e-mail, he was flooded with e-mail addresses from members who wanted to take part in the ministry. These members began to forward the devotions to their friends, neighbors and co-workers, launching an unexpected ministry that has grown into a significant outreach for the church. This ministry has opened many opportunities for witness, counseling and inviting people to take part in the church's fellowship life.

The influence of e-mail on internal communications, particularly among church staff, is also significant. (Again, in the Pew study an overwhelming 97 percent of respondents from churches with "high access" to Internet communications said that e-mail "helped congregational staff and members stay in touch.")

A large Baptist church had seven staff members, all with computers and printers on their desks—but each computer had its own modem and phone line, requiring each staff person to access his or her own personal America Online account to use e-mail. Because of schedules, the mixture of part-time and full-time staff, and the scattering of staff offices all over the vast church building, communication between and among staff was entirely ad hoc, ineffective and inefficient. Their computers were incompatible, and the staff members thought that they were incompatible with each other as well. When the church installed new computers connected to a local area network and to an Internet service provider, the staff was astonished at how much its internal communications improved. Moreover, the monthly fee to connect the church as a whole to the Internet was much less than the individual AOL accounts had been.

Other Internet technologies are affecting congregational communication dramatically. But most churches that maintain congregational Web sites tend to use them for communicating with members about fellowship and upcoming events rather than as outreach tools. One church sent its youth group on a mission trip to South America and wanted to keep the congregation informed about the group's activities. The group's leaders sent daily digital pictures from the mission site, accompanied by e-mails that summarized the group's activities, described their feelings and experiences, introduced village children to the folks back home and asked for prayers. The messages were posted on the church's Web site each day of the trip. Back home a spontaneous gathering began to take place. Daily, the parents of the youth and others gathered in the church to learn the latest news and to pray

for the youth and for the people of the village they were serving.

- **Learning Labs**. To our surprise, a quarter of the congregations that applied to the Indianapolis Center's computer grants program wanted either to establish or to improve a learning lab. Many of them wanted to use the lab both as an outreach program for the surrounding community and as a tool for Christian education within the congregation. African-American churches that serve impoverished urban areas argue compellingly that many kids in their neighborhoods are left out of the "digital revolution" because they do not have home computers. Labs in these churches, available for after-school and other programs for youth, can help close this digital divide.

  But many parishes and synagogues recognize that the digital divide is generational as well as economic. Some churches are establishing labs for senior citizens as well as for seniors in high school. It is not uncommon for a church computer lab to be used in the mornings by elderly people who are learning to e-mail their grandchildren and in the evenings by a youth group playing Bible software games. In one church's computer lab, the youth group serves as the teachers and the senior citizens are the students. While worship issues often divide churches along generational lines, many congregations are finding ways for computer technology to bridge generational divides.

  Parishes and churches that run parochial schools are working especially hard at using computer labs. One large Catholic parish in Indianapolis is designing a new library featuring a computer lab to serve both parish and school. The church envisions it as a place where young and old, parishioner and student are all engaged in the common task of growing in knowledge and in faith.

- **Multimedia presentations for worship and education**. This is the glitziest application of computer technology, one that even very traditional congregations are seeking to use. Software such as Powerpoint, coupled with projectors or large-screen televisions, are increasingly being used to replace worship bulletins, provide visual sermon outlines, display songs and music, and show illustrative video clips (now cataloged and available through several companies that provide video illustrations online). Similar multimedia applications—assisted by ever-expanding numbers of software programs—are being used more and more in congregational education programs. Awkward

(and often outdated) pull-down maps for Sunday school classes, for example, are being replaced by software-generated images of the ancient Near East, whereby Bibles students can trace the missionary journeys of Paul or follow the exodus route of the Israelites. Classrooms of children can take part in an interactive encounter within Noah's Ark, face down lions with Daniel, or take part in a host of other games that enhance biblical literacy. As one church in Indianapolis advertises, "This is not the church you grew up in!"

Presentation technology may be costly not only in money but in time, in energy and in the conflict it ignites in many churches. Yet most churches are motivated to use this technology not by its entertainment value but by its strategic effectiveness. One very traditional Baptist church in Indianapolis, for instance, decided that it was not effectively bringing the message of Christ to younger people and that its worship practices would need to be changed. The church's decision to use multimedia technology in a new alternative worship service was driven not by the desire to appear relevant or up-to-date, but "to find the most effective ways of communicating the gospel." "Using these technologies was one way to do that," the pastor explained.

Though some of the splashier and more publicized experiments of the "wired church" attract the most attention and concern, most congregations that use computer technology are simply trying to make the ministries in which they are already engaged more effective, attractive and applicable to the lives of the people