

Digital Ministry Management

Ryan Barnhart - Originally posted Monday, March 30, 2009



When a visitor attends Faith United Methodist Church in Corinth, TX, and fills out the connection book, he or she is soon manually color coded in Faith's Excel spreadsheet as a one-time visitor. If the visitor comes back and signs the connection book again, the visitor's color code changes to label him or her as a regular visitor. And then, when the regular visitor makes that important leap and becomes a member of Faith, he or she receives another color code.

You get the idea. There are also color codes for inactive and out of town members. And that's just for attendance patterns. When it comes to giving, Faith uses an entirely different system.

Giving is tracked through QuickBooks and imported to an Excel spreadsheet, says Senior Pastor John McLarty. It's not ideal, but it is comparatively inexpensive and we've made it work.

These methods of tracking attendance and giving patterns may seem normal for many churches, especially smaller ones that have not felt the need or had the resources to purchase a church management system (ChMS), but the methods are proving to be archaic. And since Faith is currently in the midst of a capital campaign, they have considered adding a ChMS in order to maintain more accurate records.

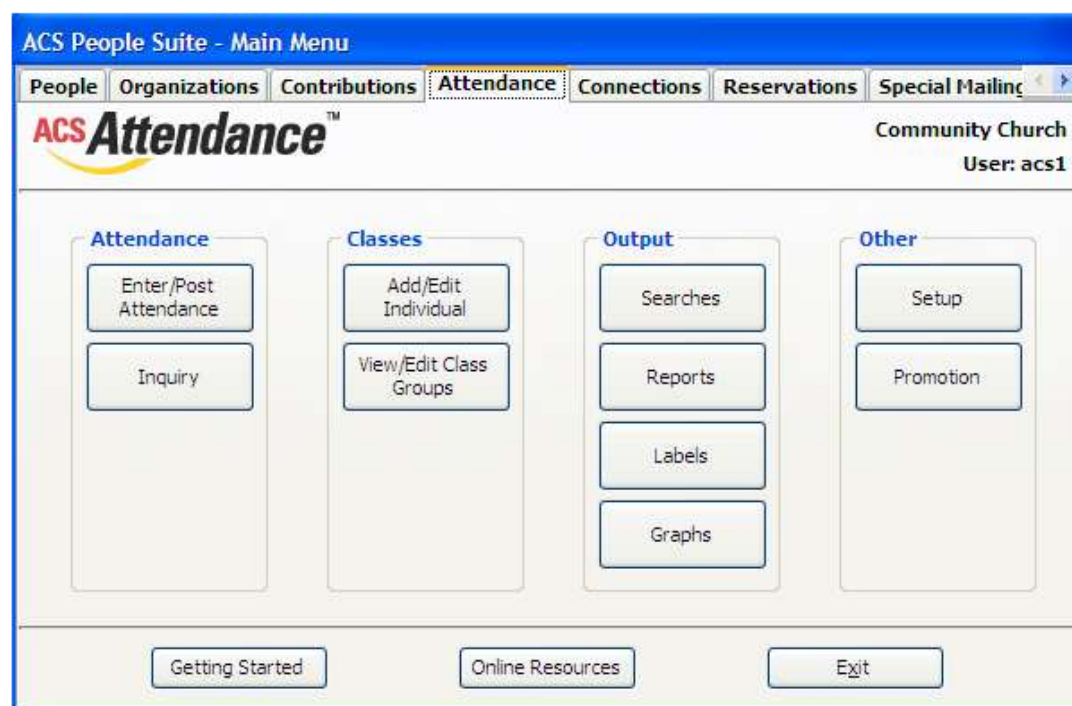
Industry and Options

At the onset of church management systems more than 30 years ago, a common goal emerged: simplify methods for churches and church employees. Simplifying database entry and management internally

links all information regarding an individual or family, which helps avoid confusion and duplication. But it also means less data entry and management, like color coding individuals in an Excel spreadsheet.

There are a lot of options and a great deal of uncertainty when it comes to finding an ideal fit. But each leading software provider will package a system for any church or organization. And although there are a growing number of ChMS providers, three of the industry leaders are **ACS Technologies**, **Fellowship Technologies**, and **Shelby Systems**.

Tom Carringer, the Executive Director of Business Development for ACS Technologies says, "We start with the customer's needs in mind and tailor our solution to their specific ministry need." Carringer mentioned that ACS has different solution sets for smaller membership churches to megachurches, as well as faith-based organizations that support churches, schools, and child care centers. "At ACS our definition of success is when we make life as simple as possible, enabling the customer to focus on their ministry."



Screenshot of ACS Technologies

Jeff Pelletier, the VP of Sales and Marketing at Fellowship Technologies, says, "A key attribute of Fellowship One (one of their many options) is that it minimizes administration and maximizes ministry by offering a number of primary capabilities." Those capabilities include a system that can be accessed anytime, anywhere, uses a common data source, allows the congregation to interact with the church via the church's website, has task management tools, and provides real-time attendance tracking.

Shelby Systems was the first full-service church software provider, and they continue to provide exceptional features for non-profit and faith-based organizations. Rebecca H. Greer, MarCom Manager at Shelby Systems, says, "Our 30+ years of experience have taught us that one size does not fit all. That's why we currently offer three distinct product lines designed around a host of considerations such as budget, membership size, technical acumen, and ministry style."

Benefits

The key components of ChMSs are plentiful, and each feature is important depending upon the needs of an individual church, but there are a few features that are typically important for every church. Scheduling is one. Whether it is scheduling a room for a specific function or scheduling a pastor for an event, a ChMS keeps everyone updated.

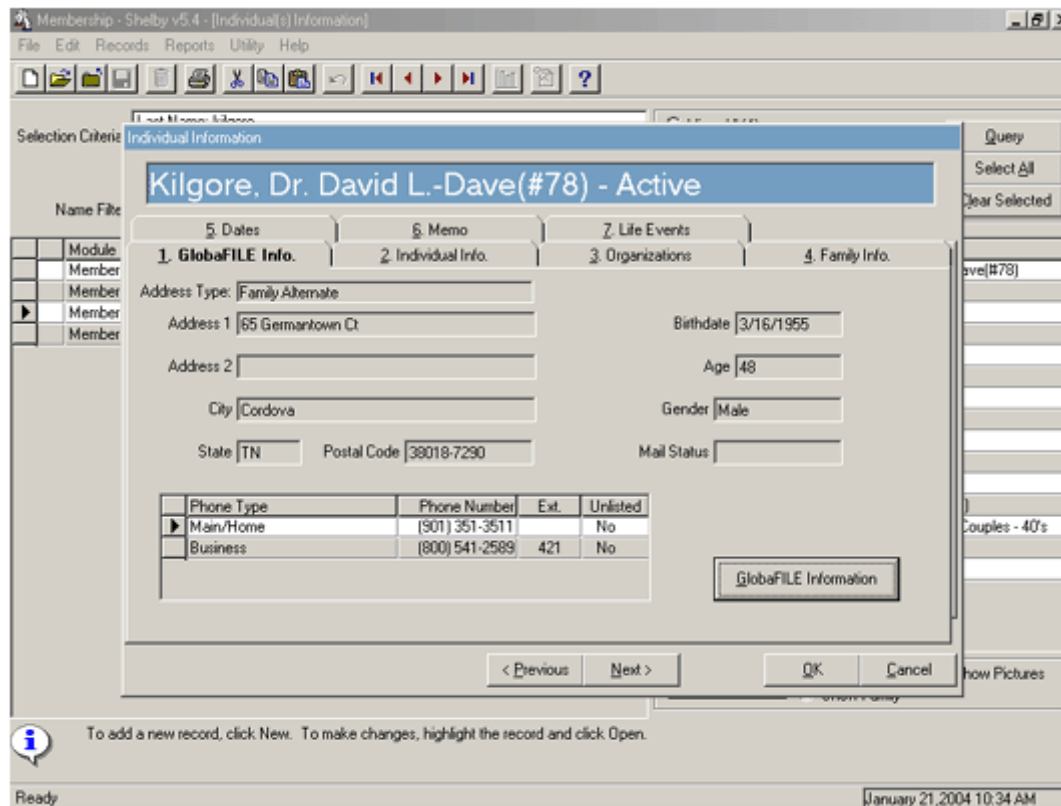
The need to update everyone means communication is vital, no matter the size of a church. Communication maximizes the time and efforts of employees and volunteers. Greer said that with Aspire, a Shelby Systems product designed after working with small to mid-sized churches, "If you add an event (such as a special Easter Service) to your calendar, then that information is automatically updated on your website, your newsletter, and even your church bulletin." Convenience, time and simplicity are the main things we wanted to give the church with Aspire.

Another important function is the accounting modules. When a church outgrows QuickBooks, a ChMS can handle most of the financial aspects, including sorting through tithes, fund contributions, and any other gifts, along with payroll and paying bills. Some modules can even authorize electronic debiting from an account to pay federal taxes and file W-2s with the IRS.

Saving time and energy also requires easy and remote access for church employees. "Clients of all sizes are increasingly taking advantage of our online tools which are great for outreach and connections, small groups management, online giving, events management, and matching volunteers with the right opportunities. Letting members and attendees self-administer their data and view and print their contribution statements with the click of a button is a major timesaver for everyone involved," said Carringer of OnDemand, an ACS Technologies product.

But one of the more important functions of a ChMS may be the interactive functionality, which allows ministry leaders access to those who are available to serve.

Scott Allen, the Technology Manager of **The Village Church** (a Shelby Systems user) in Highland Village, TX, says, "Our current system has the ability to provide surveys to attendees and members to determine their skills and gifts and store these along with their other information. That gives ministries a list of really good fits for service opportunities in and outside the church." Allen also mentioned that other churches provide their attendees with interactive capabilities that resemble a social network such as Facebook.



Screenshot of Shelby Systems

And last, but certainly not least, most are concerned about safety, especially when it comes to children. All ChMSs offer excellent features that enhance and monitor the check-in and checkout process. For a church of 200 attendees, it is easy to know the whereabouts of a child. But for a megachurch that hosts more than 500 children per weekend, keeping tabs on them without software can be nearly impossible. A ChMS can employ the usage of wristbands, coded stickers, monitors to track room attendance, and ratio balancing in an effort to secure the safety of children.

Greer said of Shelby Systems' product capabilities, "Our check-in systems automate much of the security process, like important communications, medical instructions, and food allergies, as well as controls for room ratios or secured area access."

Does the Size of the Church Matter?

Once a church collects an attendee's data it can then be entered into a software system so the church can track the attendee's level of involvement. Is the attendee in a small group? Did the attendee join? How much does the attendee regularly tithe? How far is the attendee's commute? Did someone follow up with the attendee's prayer request? If the attendee is a youth volunteer, has the attendee had a background check?

Then the church can use all of this information for various reasons, but it isn't just about assimilation. Just like businesses keep financial records and habits of consumers, churches and non-profit organizations keep records in order to balance the budget and determine ministry areas that need additional resources or improvement.

Deciding on when a church should add a ChMS can be tricky. McLarty and Faith have gotten by the previous five years without one. But other churches with about 200 weekly attendees have added a ChMS. And even though it seems ChMSs are geared more toward larger churches, that is not necessarily the case.

To answer the concern about the size of a church, Pelletier (Fellowship Technologies) said, "All of the features we offer are extremely beneficial to any church. We refrain from looking at churches simply in terms of size; rather, we consider their disposition regarding the use of technology. If a church embraces the practice of leveraging technology to do ministry more efficiently and effectively, Fellowship One is the ideal system to complement their efforts."

The screenshot displays the Fellowship One software interface. At the top, there is a navigation menu with options: Home, People, Ministry, Visits, Group, Admin. The main header shows "Household View" and "A complete view of a household." The central area is titled "John and Patricia Angel Household" and lists household members:

Member	Notes	Addresses	Groups
John Angel Member (3 mos) 10/21/83 (40 yrs)	Notes: 1 Contact Items: 1	Addresses: 2	Groups: 0
Patricia Angel Member (3 mos) 11/18/69 (38 yrs)	Notes: 1 Contact Items: 2	Addresses: 1	Groups: 0
Jake Angel Child Member (1 mos) 10/21/83 (40 yrs)	Notes: 1 Contact Items: 1	Addresses: 1	Groups: 0
Michael Angel Child Member (2 mos) 4/12/83 (38 yrs)	Notes: 1 Contact Items: 1	Addresses: 1	Groups: 0

Below the member list is an "Involvement" section showing a calendar grid for the week of 10/11 to 10/17. The grid shows participation for John Angel, Patricia Angel, Jake Angel, and Michael Angel. A legend at the bottom indicates "Calling" and "Not called".

On the right side, there are sections for "Phone, Email, Web" (listing household phone and website), "Addresses" (listing primary and household addresses), and "Authorizations" (listing user permissions for John Angel and Patricia Angel).

Screenshot of Fellowship Technologies

Most great ChMS providers, including others not listed, offer flexible packages that can meet the needs of their customer, regardless of size. So if your church or non-profit organization is still color-coding guests and members in an Excel spreadsheet and you are searching for a more effective way to maximize your time and effort as you minister to people, one of these systems may be right for you.

Ryan Barnhart is a freelance writer who lives in Denton, TX. He can be reached at rybarns@yahoo.com.

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