Save time and effort with innovative managerial solutions

Church management software helps leadership and staff administer more effectively.

Managing today's churches requires dynamic software that is easy to use and adaptable to the changing needs of ministries. Church management software (ChMS) can save churches countless hours of entering data and reports. Often, church staff members are duplicating the same work by inputting information needed in various departments. ChMS can enable churches to operate more effectively.

"The reason for using good church management software (ChMS) is to integrate data,"

Innovative sample member profile (background) and sample Web page (foreground) from Arena by Shelby Systems Inc.

says Maureen Wygant, director of marketing, Computer Helper Publishing, producers of Church Windows, Columbus, OH. "Besides all of the necessary information tracking, a good ChMS package provides you with additional tools to help lead the church — attendance graphs, contribution trends and budgeting," Wygant says. It's important to look for a software package that has many modules and features to choose from. Typical features include membership, contributions, payroll and event scheduling.

According to Wygant, membership features should have a quick and accessible layout. A membership module should accommodate traditional and non-traditional family structures effortlessly and customize fields to meet data needs of a specific church. It is essential for church staff to easily e-mail a group of people or a committee, or track personal attendance of events and worship services.
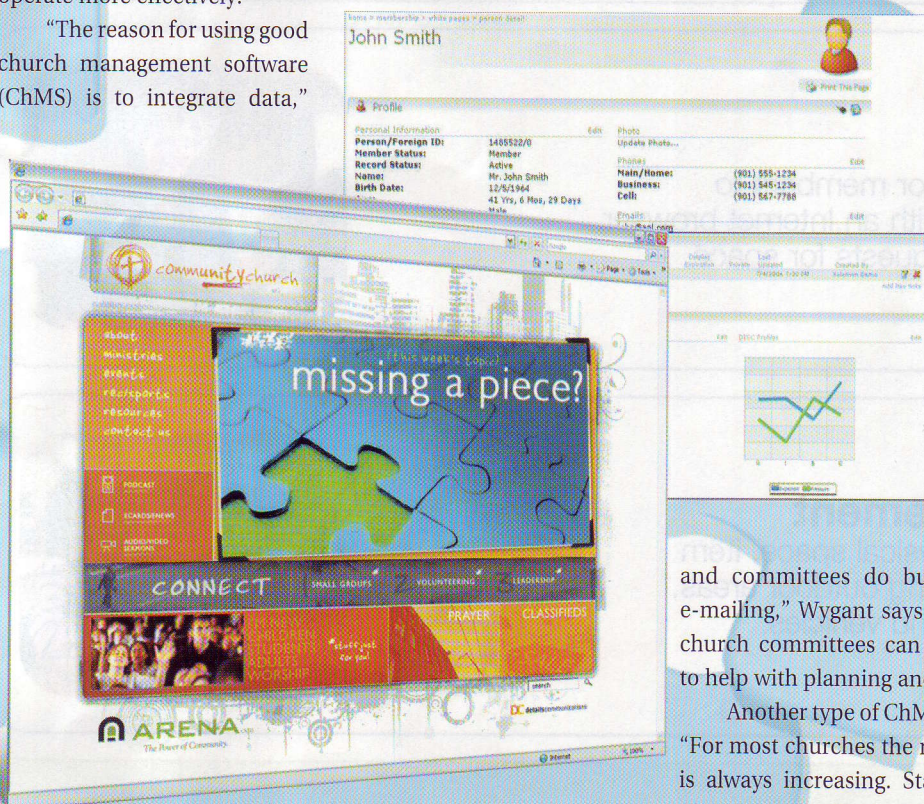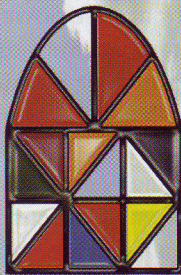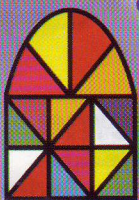
Create custom reports

A good ChMS suite will allow church staff to create custom reports based on criteria of their choice. "Churches should be able to export information for viewing in spreadsheet program or merging with a word processor and also print a church directory in multiple and flexible formats," Wygant says.

"One of the advancements which literally changes how the church office and governing boards and committees do business has been the extensive use of e-mailing," Wygant says. Using ChMS such as Church Windows, church committees can meet online and view reports and data to help with planning and decision making.

Another type of ChMS is specific event management software. "For most churches the number of meetings and events they host is always increasing. Staff and volunteers need better tools to effectively handle the higher volume," says Tom Schek, communications coordinator, Dean Evans & Associates Inc., Greenwood Village, CO, a company that provides event management software.

A high-quality ChMS suite will help define and implement a reservations process that is easy for staff, volunteers and attendees to understand. When dealing with event management the software should be able to accommodate changes to reservations that can be tracked by users in order to resolve any issues that arise.

>>

By Raj Dayal

"Among the most important features an event management suite should provide is intelligent search capability, powerful browsing options, a Web-based calendar, and a method for submitting reservation requests via the Internet," Schek says. An event management program such as EMS (Event Management Systems), will help prevent double-bookings, which are frustrating to attendees and embarrassing to the church.

Ease of use

A notable aspect with ChMS pertaining to event management functions is the ease of use it offers staff. "This software simplifies the management of resources and services and maximizes their availability. Churches find they can do 'more with less' because resources and services can go further," Schek says.

EMS software from Dean Evans & Associates Inc. is an effective event management tool.

"Recently, there has been a move towards more sophisticated interfaces that offer greater functionality and a more intuitive process flow," says Schek. "Integration with other Web applications such as RSS feeds along with calendar and event subscription capability, so that interested parties are notified when new events are created or existing events are being changed, are all recent advancements."

Looking towards the future of ChMS, Web functionality will play a large role. "Church leaders can expect to see more graphics capability such as interactive maps and floor plans, as well as tighter integration with other programs and improved data sharing," Schek says. "The features that church leaders ask about or request the most are products that are even easier to use, a more intuitive interface, and greater reporting capabilities."

Specific to ministry

Businesses have been using management software for years, specifically contact management applications. Churches now realize that this type of software can be applied to church management, if the features are specific to ministry.
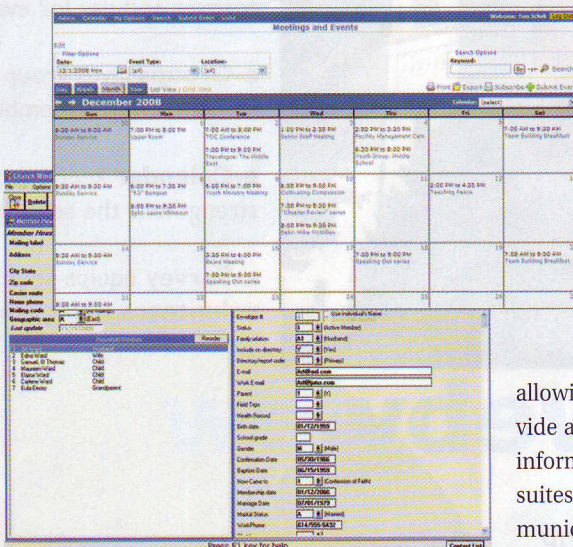
There is an important distinction between ChMS suites and software that is used solely for contact management. "The purpose of most contact management tools, for example, is closing sales. Closing a sale does not equate to saving a life, building a friendship, or meeting ongoing material or spiritual needs," says Rebecca Greer, marketing and communications coordinator, Shelby Systems Inc., Cordova, TN. "Ministry is a much more fluid, detailed, ongoing process."

ChMS can offer a better use of resources by allowing staff to save time and provide a higher level of accuracy with information. Also there are some suites that help support open communication. "There are now systems that create an environment that encourages communication and communal, creative thinking. This is the future of ChMS and one of the greatest advantages," says Greer.

According to Alfred Johnson, director of business development for Shelby Systems Inc., ministries are most effectively built on relationships. It's important that a ChMS suite enhance this process of relationship building. What separates this software from other management suites is the ability for church leadership to use it to interact with staff and congregants. "On average, a pastor can keep up with about 120 people's information. Most churches do not have a 1 to 100 ratio. That's when

people start slipping through the cracks, are forgotten, or overlooked" Greer says.
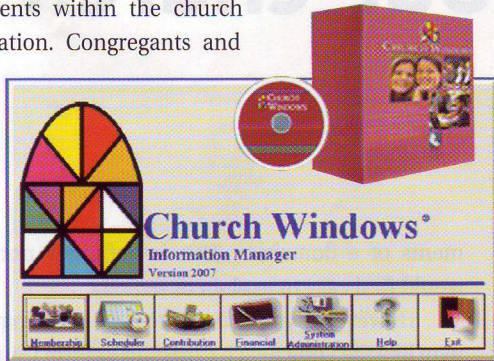
Share vital information

There is a change in the way people use technology to interact with each other and this is also true within churches. It is necessary that departments within the church share vital information. Congregants and seekers should also have the opportunity to interact in an open environment with the church. This advancement points to the future of ChMS.

"A ChMS must provide a compelling and interactive extension of your church's front door. Statistics now prove that a church's homepage has now replaced what used to be known as the drive-by experience, curb-appeal or the visitor's desk," says Johnson. "Your ChMS should provide

an immersive, interactive experience for potential members or seekers."

Over the last couple of years there has been a movement towards Web integration of management tools for more effective communication. ChMS suites such as Arena, from Shelby Systems Inc., have begun to adapt to this changing environment. "Web products with flexible processes and the ability to collaborate have led to advancements with this software," Greer says.

"Just as Paul took advantage of public places of debate, church leaders that embrace the opportunities provided by the Internet will reach more people, speak more effectively, and participate in active conversations that will meet more needs and build better relationships," says Greer. CE