



Churches have many different and competing demands for funding. In the corporate world, a simple return on investment calculation of Internal Rate of Return (IRR) is used to determine what projects continue to receive funding. During the life of the project actual experience is used to see if the goals of the project are met. Because the goals of the church are faith-based in nature, using internal rate of return is not a valid metric.

However, are there other calculations that could be used to help determine an apples-to-apples comparison between projects or across ministries? Could a Return on Ministry calculation be devised to help justify where money is spent and evaluate the impact on people's lives? In order to calculate the Return on Ministry we must first consider what would be measured and how technology can help measure it.

Using Technology in the Business of Church

Church management systems originated from the need to automate a church's financials and back office functions, i.e., general ledger, accounts payable, contributions and mailing labels. Typical back office systems focus on the administrative side of a church operation - tracking what money should be in what accounts, keeping track of who is owed what and when, printing the checks at the appropriate time, tracking payroll, what taxes are due, etc. - not necessarily the "real business" of the church.

This is no different than the experience of corporate America as it embraced computer technology. At first, companies brought computers into the accounting department to automate the general ledger, accounts payable and accounts receivable: the basic bookkeeping functions. But today, computer systems are used in all parts of a corporation. The best companies are using computer systems to improve their "core competencies" - the primary thing they do well. Progressive companies are able to grab a

competitive advantage by using information-based systems to improve customer service or get closer to the needs of the customers.

If your church has not done so already, isn't it time for your church to take technology from being solely a back office function and use it for the core competencies of the church - serving the customer - your congregation? From that premise then, how can a church accurately measure the effectiveness of ministry?

Beyond the Back Office - Measuring Ministry

By incorporating computers beyond the back office, a church can improve its ministries (core competencies) and provide value to propel its mission. At Fellowship Technologies, we believe that better customer service, or more appro-

privately, better congregational service, can enhance members' and visitors' worship, discipleship, experiences, etc. This may include providing a better overall experience for the attendee through added convenience or better follow-up to an inquiry, or providing tools that help take the administration out of conducting ministry-based activities. Let's examine just a few of these opportunities.

Children's check-in: In this modern world the security of children is a major concern for children's ministries. It has become a necessity to have a check-in system that ensures that the guardian who picks up a child from the room is the same guardian who dropped them off. However, far too often, churches are using a simple system that prints common information such as parents' name or member number that can easily be duplicated by a parent involved in a custody battle or a stranger. To ensure that the person who dropped them off is the same one who picks them up requires a unique identifier to be generated at the time of drop-off. By having a computer system generate a unique identifier - one that is only valid for that day and that service - prohibits even computer savvy parents from reproducing something that is not known until the time of check-in.

Another important benefit of such a system should be the speed at which parents, whether long time members or first-time visitors, are able to check-in their children and move onto their own worship or Sunday school time. The ability to check-in all the children from the same family at one time provides a significant value to families with multiple children - the more children in a family, the more value. By improving the speed of check-in, the parents' worship experience is improved by allowing them to get settled in the sanctuary sooner, rather than ten minutes after the music starts.

Are parents comfortable with the security of their children when they are left in your care? Is your church tracking how long it takes to get first-time guests with children to their seats? What value do both of these add to the worship experience of those parents?

Global check-in: Some churches are finding that check-in can provide benefits beyond just the children's ministry. One of the hardest things to facilitate in a rapidly growing church is the assimilation of new attendees,

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making them feel comfortable and welcome. More and more churches are using check-in for all activities so that attendance is automatically tracked. Just as importantly, professional looking name tags can be printed so that everyone has a better chance of getting to know each other. With real-time attendance tracking and timely reporting, the staff can improve follow up with people who missed a function that they commonly attend to see if any of their needs can be cared for.

Additionally, volunteers can be tracked to measure their overall adherence to the planned schedule. This can help ensure that the right people are at the right places at the right time to minister to the needs of the members and guests.

If attendance is not tracked for each activity, how can a church track the effectiveness of that ministry? Is customer service (congregational care) improved when absence is followed-up on? Are volunteers being properly motivated and managed if volunteer service is not tracked and reacted to?

Inquiry follow-up: Similar to dealing with a consumer product or service, churches need to be responsive to inquiries made by members and guests. With a web-based system, the documentation and resolution of each contact can be performed by the person making that follow-up call or e-mail, whether that person is at the church office or a volunteer at home. With an integrated system, assuming the proper security, any member on staff can see what issues arise and that follow-up has been provided to a person based on their membership records. This information can then be transformed into knowledge about that person that continues the cycle of better customer service. In the corporate world, this is referred to as customer relationship management, or CRM, and is one of the hottest areas of the computer application market.

Another factor in congregational care is the follow-up rate of inquiries. Are requests for information and volunteer opportunities conducted in a timely manner? Is congregational care improved because staff is informed of past involvement that people have had in the church?

Actively Managing the Assimilation Process: The assimilation process is, on a spiritual level, about helping a person become a better disciple of Christ. Many churches now focus on an active approach to assimilation; these churches have determined that actively promoting a series of steps toward spiritual growth helps their members to become stronger Christ followers.

Studies have shown that people are more likely to give their time and money to a ministry that they believe in and are actively involved with. An active assimilation process is one way to establish and reinforce that connection to a particular ministry. To that end, the steps toward active involvement in ministry need to be defined and measured to track and promote progress. Many back office systems do not adequately track the various steps that a church may identify. If the studies are correct, then the more a church helps its people to get engaged, the more funds will be generated to grow a church's ministry.

What is the "stickiness factor" of the different outreach activities? How long does it take for a first-time visitor to join the church? Are there enough low risk volunteer opportunities? What percentage of members and guests attend some form of Bible study or small group? The assimilation process is full of measurement opportunities.

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Self-service applications via the church's website: The ultimate extension of church systems beyond the back office is the connection of the church ministry system to the church's website. With the proper systems, members of the congregation can bypass the church office and conduct "business" when and where they want simply by accessing easy-to-use applications via the church website. This not only provides convenience to the congregation member, but also drives traffic to the church website and automates previously manual processes. Examples of these "business" transactions include scheduled contributions, intra-communications among small group members, mentor and discipleship communications, prayer requests, volunteer applications and more.

One of the most advantageous applications available over the web is activity registration. Coupled with global check-in, activity registration via the web can provide an end-to-end process where the member can logon to the church website, register for an event and then check-in at the church without anyone having to administer that registration transaction, even if money is needed to be collected. Indicative information can also be gathered at that time so that any food, clothing or break-out preferences can be captured and properly planned for. This frees up the staff and volunteers who are in charge of the event to focus on the quality of the event, not the administration of the event. Higher quality events encourage repeat attendance as well as repeat volunteers.

So what is Return on MinistrySM?

Return on MinistrySM is a concept promoted by Fellowship Technologies to help churches measure the impact of ministry on peoples' lives. Because churches are not profit motivated, the IRR calculation is not really relevant. To help churches decide what projects or ministries to invest in, a common calculation is needed; one that can be used across all projects to help church leadership compare one against another to determine where resources should be best utilized. When considering church projects, operational ministries, or events, the concept of Return on MinistrySM is based on two concepts: External Redemption Rate (ERR – to measure outreach and evangelism) and Internal Rate of Involvement (IRI – to measure assimilation and discipleship).

A good question to ask is whether the financial cost in dollars produces a "return" based on the business of the ministry – are more lives being positively impacted? At what depth are they being impacted? The former is a quantitative factor; the latter is qualitative. When using the Return on MinistrySM calculation to consider a new project, activity or perhaps a new computer system, the church should take into consideration how lives will be positively impacted by that investment.

Fellowship One was introduced to the market a little over two years ago by Fellowship Technologies. Fellowship One was originally developed by Fellowship Church in the Dallas area. Since then, Fellowship One has been purchased by over 340 churches including a significant number of mega-churches throughout the US. One of the goals of Fellowship One is measuring impact to improve a church's overall Return on MinistrySM. You can learn more about Fellowship One at www.fellowshiptech.com.