Business Venture

Helping churches to be efficient with their time and information

by JOHN VAN DYK

The church in Scripture is compared to a body, one with many parts, and all the parts when working together, and even when they are not, are for the glory of God and to His praise.

Expertise in technology is one of the ways that people in this important field of work can use their specialized skills to the glory of God and for the furtherance of fellowship in the church.

One such endeavour is via the worldwide web, and it comes to expression in a program that is helping churches connect, share information and enhance fellowship. The software program that is growing in popularity in the Reformed community is called Church Social, and although still in its early years, it seems to be both catching on and providing a platform to do what its maker intended.

Jonathan Reinink, a member of the Canadian Reformed Church, created the platform out of a perceived need that was local, originally.

"In 2009 I was approached by our church records keeper. She was struggling to upgrade some old software our church was using to track membership data," Reinink says. The program "was difficult to use, and it was not accessible to anyone else, such as our pastor or the elders and deacons."

With expertise as a software developer, Reinink wanted to help. He began working on an app that he first called "Kerkapp". When a friend from another local church heard about this project and saw it as useful for his church, Reinink recognized the potential. He realized that he could make something more generic for use by many churches.

The result was Church Social, begun as a ministry of sorts it has led to a business that now also helps support his family.

In 2012 there were 10 churches utilizing the platform Reinink created. He began to devote more time to making the software better by adding new features, fixing bugs, improving the design, providing better security and legal support so that he could more aggressively market it to the churches. He says that 68 churches are using Church Social today.

Although there is a good deal of competition in what he calls "Church Management Systems,"

The Reinink family.

Reinink said he noticed a gap in what was being offered, and he sought to fill it based on meeting four requirements: 1. It had to serve the needs of Reformed congregations. This includes tracking membership records, including baptism and profession of faith information; support for officebearers and pastoral groups; weekly bulletin archives; sermon archives, etc.; 2. It had to be web based to allow multiple members to access the information; 3. It had to be available to all members of the congregation; 4. It had to be extremely easy to use.

Reinink believes his system meets those goals, and the responses of churches using the platform have been positive.

"When we first launched, our features included membership management, the member photo directory, calendar of events, bulletins, schedules, sermon archive, photo galleries, file sharing and a messaging

tool. And while much of our core feature set has remained the same, we've iterated and improved on each of these features extensively."

Jonathan shared a shopping list of new features and improvements:
• a much better reporting layer, allowing church administrators to generate almost any report they want in a variety of different formats.
• added support for PDF documents in the sermon archive, plus the ability to create sermon series, and much better searching of the sermons.
• church groups can have their own files within the app (especially helpful for councils), plus members can target messages to specific groups.
• a map view of the member directory to give churches a quick overview of where everyone lives in relation to one another. "This has been a popular addition!" he adds.
• a library, which is a way to archive your physical church library online.
• improved privacy settings, both on a per member basis, and for the entire congregation.

• a bulk editor to make editing multiple members at a time easier for administrators.
• the ability for churches to toggle the features within Church Social, allowing them to hide features they are not using, keeping the app as simple and straightforward as possible.
• a transfer documents generator, making it much easier for clerks to generate member information sheets to accompany attestations.
• a live stream page to give churches an easy way to embed their live streaming service within the app.

Reinink differentiated his platform from a typical church web site, that is accessible to the general public. Church Social, he said, is a "church management and communication software, serving churches and members, only after they sign in." A church website, he said, "is really their public outreach tool. It shouldn't be geared at their members, but rather their local

community, visitors, and anyone interested in learning more about who they are."

While Reinink has a vested interest in Church Social's success, his main concern is helping churches do their work well.

"As churches that value membership, I encourage churches to look at how they're currently managing this information. Is the data being tracked accurately? Is it being backed up? Can it be shared with office bearers? Is it secure? Church Social allows you to track membership information securely, using an app that's completely tailored for this kind of information."

Programs such as Church Social are another way to help keep the body working together. ◆