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Churches Report Increase In Online Giving With CCB

A Giving Case Study
By Ben Stroup

Summary

Three churches documented a measurable increase in online giving participation and--as a result--an overall increase in total contributions after implementing Church Community Builder as their primary tool for membership engagement.

Participating Churches



Heartland Community Church (Olathe, KS)

www.heartlandchurch.org

25% *Current Percentage of Online Gifts to Total Contributions*



Pantano Christian Church (Tucson, AZ)

www.pccwired.org

14% *Current Percentage of Online Gifts to Total Contributions*



Autumn Ridge Church (Rochester, MN)

www.aridge.org

30% *Current Percentage of Online Gifts to Total Contributions*

Online giving has moved to center stage as the habits of the people in the proverbial pews have changed. The Federal Reserve Payment Study (2011) reports the amount of non-cash payments made in the United States exceeded 75% in 2010. Unfortunately, many churches have been slow to respond. LifeWay Research recently published the alarming news that only 14% of protestant churches currently offer online giving. The contrast is stark and may contain reason for concern.

If the demand for electronic transactions is becoming normal for Americans yet the church is not adjusting to new forms of monetary exchange, could it be that churches are unintentionally creating barriers to congregants who wish to financially support the work of their church in non-traditional ways? Why are churches slow to adopt new methods of giving? What affect does a church management system have on the use or adoption of online giving?

The purpose of this case study is not to address the philosophical or theological arguments that surround more modern methods of giving but to highlight three churches who have documented and reported a measurable increase in overall contributions after adopting online giving. This change first appeared after the implementation of Church Community Builder (CCB). For the purpose of this case study, online giving includes automated clearing house (ACH) or bank drafts, credit cards, and debit card transactions. Non-cash gifts such as appreciable assets are not included as well as any contributions made via cash or check.

Online Giving Before CCB

Heartland Community Church was using a legacy system prior to adopting Church Community Builder in 2008. Their previous church management system was client-server based instead of Web-based which limited the use of the system to those who had access to the protected network, only a few key staff members. Thus, each staff member created their own habits about gathering and tracking data which limited the church's ability to see data in aggregate and understand trends such as giving habits without having to go through a single administrator.

Another significant limitation prior to making the switch to CCB was the ability to offer online giving. Heartland did not offer online giving outside of ACH transactions (i.e. bank drafts). Jim Gum, executive pastor, explained, "We wanted to build a church for the unchurched. Online giving allowed our people to give in ways that were already familiar to them."

Phil Cain, web technology director at Pantano Christian Church in Tucson, AZ, shared the limitations of Heartland when it came to online giving. Making the switch between two different systems within a short period of time left him feeling frustrated and disappointed. Prior to CCB, Pantano was utilizing a base giving option that facilitated a transaction but did not directly connect the giving habits of online givers with their membership record. This presented obstacles related to contribution management.

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In April 2010, Pantano made the switch to CCB and discovered the latent potential this new avenue for giving provided for an upper middle class, professional, white collar community. A majority of the church consists of young families with parents who are likely to have a college education, a prime demographic for online giving activity.

Similar to Pantano and Heartland, Autumn Ridge offered ACH transactions as the exclusive way for members to give outside traditional giving methods before moving to CCB late 2008. This accounted for approximately five percent of total contributions. With such a dependence on cash and onsite giving during the weekend Worship experience, Autumn Ridge was subject to the natural shifts in attendance which occur

because of holidays, weather-related issues, and the often sporadic attendance habits of many members and regular attenders.

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“Since online giving was part of the core functionality of CCB, we knew we were already at an advantage over our previous system,” said TJ Shultz, technology specialist primarily responsible for overseeing CCB adoption and database management. “With one central database that would connect giving as well

as attendance, volunteering, and small group participation, we had a much clearer picture of a members’ involvement in our church.”

Steps Taken To Promote Use Of Online Giving

Heartland does not pass an offering plate during their corporate Worship gatherings. Instead, they provide boxes in the back of the Worship center. Gum observed, “This works as long as people carry their checkbooks or cash. When we recognized people were changing their habits, we knew we had to respond.”

Using a simple, secure online form, Heartland offers online giving for registered and non-registered CCB users. They’ve always tried to be intentional about talking about money, stewardship, and generosity. Given the people they were reaching, online giving was generally accepted from the beginning. CCB’s ability to support online

giving for non-registered users also removes a huge initial barrier for those who are not yet fully engaged in the church but still want to express their generosity.

“At Pantano,” Cain said, “our previous systems weren’t intuitive or easy to access. This made online giving impossible.” After implementing CCB, Pantano was intentional about moving its membership to obtain a log in within weeks. Since online giving was part of the registration process, many choose to opt in at that time.

The most significant steps Pantano has taken, Cain believes, have come in the form of making online giving easy to access from the dedicated CCB log in screen or from the home page of the church’s Web site. The pastor also mentions online giving regularly from the pulpit and almost all electronic communication such as newsletters and blog posts contain a link for those who wish to give online.

Autumn Ridge decided to take a completely different approach to promoting the use of online giving in their church. Very little mass communication is sent regarding online giving. Instead, they invested in a series of direct mail letters that explained the benefits of online giving, especially highlighting the convenience of recurring gifts. This seemingly unconventional approach also offered the opportunity to highlight the other benefits of CCB to the membership. The primary goal was to answer: How will CCB make it easier to stay involved and up to date at Autumn Ridge?

“Every direct mail letter resulted in more people switching to online giving,” TJ recalled.

Changes In Online Giving Behavior

Gum reported that 25 percent of Heartland’s budget giving and 60 percent of their campaign giving is given online. Prior to 2008, only two percent of all giving came from non-traditional methods. “One of the unexpected surprises that online giving has brought about is a much smoother summer giving period. Once people have their recurring gifts set up, they are able to give even when they aren’t physically present,” Gum said. This is significant as studies have shown people do not typically “catch up” on their giving after missing time due to vacation, sickness, or other times when “life happens.”

Pantano is ecstatic about the increase in giving coming through online giving channels. Cain reported an upward trend over the previous 12 months. Total contributions coming through online giving is currently 14 percent. That's up significantly from six percent in the previous year.

Autumns Ridge's decision to take a more conventional approach to promoting online giving has also paid off. Today, approximately 30 percent of total contributions are received through online giving. Members are actively managing their membership and giving profiles. TJ remarked, "People are checking and verifying their information because a few do call from time to time. However, the time between the question and the resolution of any discrepancy -- which is rare -- has been greatly reduced."

TJ continued, "The financial impact of online giving is similar to Autumn Ridge adding an additional service. It is either even with -- or outpaces -- our onsite giving for each of our three weekend services."

Conclusion

Steve Caton, vice president for sales and marketing at CCB, is pleased with the increase in giving experienced by these three churches. He said, "We celebrate with Heartland, Pantano, and Autumn Ridge in the increased generosity of their congregation and rapid adoption of online giving. They are clearly doing a lot of things right, not the least of which is casting a strong vision for their congregations as to why online giving matters. We want this for all the churches we serve."

The fact that CCB is cloud based, includes online giving as core functionality, is central to the communication habits of the church, and provides a clear path for church leaders to measure the level of engagement it has with its membership and regular attenders lends itself to be a conduit for change in giving methods. In the case of the churches profiled in this study, their increase in online giving also reflects a larger group of people more connected and committed to the church itself through service, participation, and generosity.

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Online giving must always be seen through two lenses. The first is cultivating the generous habits of individuals and families through teaching, discipleship, community, service, and example; the second is through offering a variety of giving methods. Offering online giving does not make someone generous but diversifying available giving options does remove barriers for people who prefer to give using more modern methods of giving. CCB allows churches to manage both.

These three churches were purposeful and consistent in their use of CCB. The design, expectations, and promotion of online giving led to a channel shift that ultimately created a more sustainable revenue stream for each church. Online giving has many benefits for the church and the giver.

Caton concludes, “When churches are fully funded, the Kingdom can be advanced in significant ways. Online giving is certainly a meaningful part of the equation.”



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