



Real Help for Real Issues: The Congregational Resource Guide

It's 9:30 at night. You've just returned from a congregational committee meeting. Your head is swimming with ideas, questions, and concerns. And while you'd like to call the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and talk to one of our resource consultants, you know you'll only get a voice mail system at this hour. But you want help now. Where do you go? Why not try the Congregational Resource Guide (CRG), the updated and improved web-based resource developed by the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and the Alban Institute through a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc.?

"In developing this tool, we have spent a lot of time listening to the needs of congregations," said John Wimmer, Director of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations. "The CRG matches those needs with the resources that help."

This ad will appear nationally, announcing the improvements in the online Congregational Resource Guide.

The Congregational Resource Guide is designed to assist ordained and lay leaders find and select the materials they need to address the broad range of challenges they face. It does this by connecting people to the most up-to-date collection of helpful books and periodicals, web sites, organizations and other resources on a wide range of important congregational topics. The CRG contains descriptions of more than 500

reviewed resources. This includes books, journals/magazines, articles, web sites, organizations, videos, audiotapes, and case studies. More than 110 publishers of religious materials are represented on the site and the CRG offers more than 300 links to online book pages from publishers worldwide.

The reviews coming in from test users have been positive and exciting. One person said, "I found no glitches where it didn't work. It is straightforward and simple, and the artwork is good."

Another user reported that he "was pleased at how much info I could glean in a short period of time."

The CRG (located at www.congregationalresources.org) is organized into ten main categories: Administration, Building Issues, Congregational Vitality, Leadership, Miscellaneous, Public Ministry, Religion in America, Specialized Ministry, Spirituality and Worship. Each category is further divided into subcategories, some of which are further subdivided. This scheme was designed to allow the user to easily browse through the resources listed on a particular subject area. Resources addressing more than one subject area are listed in both places, but this kind of crossover is kept to a minimum.

When users enter one of the ten main categories, a menu of subcategory topics appears on the left side of their browser screen. They can click on one of the subcategories to find the resources for that topic. If a selected subcategory has any further divisions, these will appear in a drop-down list. Each category or subcategory is limited to four or five "favorite" resources—those that have been shown to be particularly useful. The remaining resources are classified as "in-depth" resources: they have proved particularly helpful in certain circumstances but may not have the broad appeal or effectiveness of the favorite resources. This judgment is, of course, somewhat subjective; all of the resources in the guide are thought to be of very high quality.

In addition to browsing the main categories, users can search for particular terms. The search box is located on the home page. Users can enter words that they want to locate and the guide will search the resource titles, annotations, and hidden index terms for matches. The search engine uses an implied "AND," so by adding more words, users will be limit-

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Nancy's Church Management Software Picks

In our previous issues I've featured Logos Church Management and Servant Keeper 5 -- two of our top three picks for Church Management Software (CMS). This edition focuses on our final recommended CMS package -- Automated Church System (ACS).

"From large church to small, ACS has it all" could be a marketing slogan for the producers of ACS. ACS offers a complete line of components for managing all aspects of congregational life. It does an excellent job at almost all of them. The software is powerful, user-friendly, and congregations don't have to worry about growing too large for the system. That's because modules may be individually purchased. Since ACS has discount pricing for smaller congregations, this software can fit the needs and budgets of congregations of all shapes and sizes.

The People, Attendance and Contributions modules form the cornerstone of a basic ACS configuration. The software is easy to navigate and intuitive. Personal and family information are complete. There are plenty of user-defined fields available at both the family and individual levels. A highlight of the People module is the Activities section. It lets a congregation determine both the structure and information needed to keep track of ways in which people are connected to it. You have to see it in action to appreciate its value.

The Contributions module has the most complete inquiry screen of any product we've reviewed. Envelope numbers may be used, but aren't required. Pledges and gifts to a number of funds over various time periods may be set up and tracked.

The Attendance module keeps personal attendance for any worship service,

class or congregational activity. Class rosters can include bar coding for faster recording of those present.

Another great feature is ACS's Search/Output function. Just about any information stored in these (and other) sections may be used to query the database and then select a subset of people based upon certain criteria. Once a search is complete, many output options are available -- reports, labels, mail merge, email and Phonetree. Data export to Microsoft Word, Excel, Access and Outlook (as well as other data formats) is included, with either single or multiple file options.

Other modules offered in this suite are Organizations, Reservations, Visitation, Special Mailings, and a newly released Volunteer Manager. These modules are not essential for many congregations, but can be very helpful for churches whose culture emphasizes these ministry areas. Specialty modules also available include Church Growth Tools, Church Report, Report Writer, CASS It and MAX It Mail Modules, and a resource calendar called "The Ministry Scheduler." For those congregations using bulk mail, CASS It and Max It can help lower mailing costs. Unlike the other modules, though, we find the Report Writer and The Ministry Scheduler hard to use. Future releases should contain improvements to both.

ACS's Financial Suite includes standard fund accounting modules: General Ledger, Accounts Payable, Accounts Receivable, Fixed Assets, Purchase Orders and Payroll. They are similar in character and scope to the People suite. A good understanding of accounting principles is needed to use any part of this suite effectively. That makes training a must.

New offerings on the ACS horizon include an internet-based product called WEBACS. It has many of the features of the People and Contributions modules and limited Attendance information. It's available by monthly subscription and you only need a web browser software to use it. VIEWACS lets a congregation post some of its People information to an ACS-hosted website to be seen via secure connection by members only.



Automated Church System (Computer Dimensions, Inc., 180 North Dunbarton Drive, Florence, SC 29501, 800-736-7425, www.acshome.com) isn't inexpensive. It ranges from \$700 to more than \$5,000, depending on modules chosen. But, ACS is an outstanding product in a field of many mediocre ones. The initial cost may be higher to your congregation than other CMS packages, but with proper installation, training and support this is a system you will be using for years to come. Whether you have one computer or a large network, fewer than one hundred members or several thousands, ACS has something for just about everyone.

Nancy Armstrong is Congregational Resource Consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations. She has helped many congregations find the best technology for their use and, with Aaron Spiegel, directs the Center's Computers and Ministry Grants Initiative.



Upcoming Education Events

It's always the right time to learn something new. That's why the Indianapolis Center for Congregations has a year round slate of educational events to help you meet the ever-changing challenges of ministry.

July features Session 3 of the Pastor's Peer Study Group. Meeting on July 25, this session's topic is "Size Transitions in Congregations" based on the book edited by Beth Ann Gaede. The group, led by Brent Bill



(Associate Director of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations) meets once a quarter to discuss some of congregations' most pressing practical problems. The group offers a chance to meet in a peer learning setting with other pastors who are working with some of the same congregational issues you're facing. Books addressing these

critical issues serve as the jumping off point for the discussion. We also look at congregational case studies and brainstorm and share solutions. The emphasis is on the practical — not the theoretical. The meetings convene at 9:30 a.m. and conclude by 3:30 p.m. The registration fee is \$25 per session. Registrations for Session 3 must be received by June 20 (that's so we can get a copy of the book to you well ahead of the meeting). Lunch and a copy of the book under discussion are included in the registration fee.

Our first fall event is "Spirituality and the Business of the Congregation." It's set for October 19 and will be led by Karen-Marie Yust. Karen-Marie is the author of *Attentive to God: Spirituality in the Church*



Committee. She is an assistant professor of Christian education and director of the M.A. program in Christian Education at Christian Theological Seminary, as well. We've all been to congregational committees, boards and project teams that operate like businesses and give little or no attention to the

spiritual aspects of their mission. But Karen-Marie sees committees as places for spiritual nurture. She

thinks they are good places for doing important work and for doing ministry. With field-tested resources and thoughtful theological reflection, Karen-Marie will offer ways that God can become more than an ex-officio member of your congregation's work.

Then on November 7-8, Rodger Nishioka will address the theme, "Young Adults: Missing in Action." Only about one-third of young adults attend a place of worship on any given weekend. If congregations are going to be successful in attract-



ing and assimilating this generation, fresh approaches are needed that address their unique needs and expectations. Rodger will assist lay and clergy leaders to better understand the young adult/GenX mindset and provide practical strategies and resources for shaping effective young adult

programs. Rodger is an author (*Sowing the Seeds* and *Rooted in Love: 52 Meditations and Stories for Youth Ministry Leaders* – both from the "Roots of Youth Ministry Series"), a former director of youth and young adult ministry for the Presbyterian Church (PC-USA), and associate professor of Christian education at Columbia Theological Seminary specializing in ministry with youth and young adults.

The registration fee for these workshops is \$40 per person and includes all materials and lunches both days. They are geared to both clergy and lay leaders. Group registrations are encouraged. Churches sending learning teams of 5 or more can register for \$35 per person. Scholarships are also available.

For more information on any of these programs, contact Tim Beuthin at 317-237-7799 or tbeuthin@centerforcongregations.org or visit our website at www.centerforcongregations.org



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A Newsletter from the Indianapolis Center for Congregations

Our Mission

The mission of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations is to assist Greater Indianapolis area congregations in finding and using the very best resources to address the practical challenges they face. The Center also provides educational events and workshops, all focused on important practical issues confronting congregations.

Our Staff

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ing their searches to resources that contain all of the words in their search.

Search results include the full resource listing, as well as the annotation. The results contain clickable links to the categories that contain the resources. Users can click on a link to explore resources that address topics similar to those returned by their search.

The CRG is also designed as a place where users can connect with each other. One way this is done is by posting comments about the resources listed or about other resources they have found helpful. Each resource has a link to a form where users can discuss their experiences with the resource or recommend other resources on the subject for inclusion in the Guide. These comments are posted with the resource after the CRG staff has reviewed them and prepared for posting.

And that's not all. New features are being added all the time. Soon the CRG will offer discussion groups on congregational issues. New resources will be continually added to keep the CRG as up-to-date as possible. While constant changes in both available resources and Internet technology will keep this site a work in progress, users will find the guide helpful in their work and life.

So, if you've got a question late at night, look at the CRG. And then call the Center for additional help.

