How a Customized App Can Benefit Your Church

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Introduction

Most churches today use e-mail extensively and others have adapted to social media including Facebook and other platforms. It's a big change from five years ago when most communications were in church bulletins and mailed newsletters and other correspondence. While these changes have reduced operating costs and probably increased the effectiveness of communications, there is the potential to do considerably more and establish with every member and family member an "electronic connection" to the Church that can supplement the normal church-member interaction.

Why apps? Over 50% of internet usage today is consumed over mobile devices, primarily smart phones but also increasingly with tablets. Life styles are on the go and over 30% of households no longer have a home phone relying on cell phones instead. Texting is replacing e-mail for many users and 95% of text messages are responded to within 5 minutes (industry estimates) and e-mail is now often cluttered for consumers making it less effective. Traditional calling is dropping as a percentage of total communications: messages can be more efficient and less labor intensive. Caller ID results in many calls going to voice mail.

Video is now commonplace and it remains perhaps the most powerful communications tools---there is a "TV" like quality to video that makes these messages often more highly valued by recipients.

Apps can support these needs better than most traditional web sites. A simple click on an icon is often much simpler than digging through a web site. Apps can also notify the user of new content with a buzz or other alert. And a well-designed app framework can support diverse types of content from simple text to video streaming. Apps can also include helpful content like a web site for users. As a result, most companies and media organizations are investing substantially in mobile apps both to supplement and expand their on line presence.

What to Look for From an App Provider

Like your web site, there are a number of companies that provide app support services allowing you to develop and distribute your own app.   Like a web site, some provide development services for a fee and then allow you to distribute as many copies as you would like.   This is one approach worth considering, however, there are some drawbacks to this approach:

- There are new devices being introduced monthly and on-going changes to operating systems. Your design could be current for a long time or more often not;

- There are requirements for apps and those requirements can be changed by Google (Playstore) and Apple (iTunes) and are not always backwards compatible.

- Making changes to content can be challenging as well as inserting new features.

- It's a significant up-front investment of time by your staff to design, build, and then learn how to support mobile apps.

Another approach, and the one our company provides, is an "app framework" and hosting of the app on behalf of your Church or organization.   While this might be slightly more expensive over a period of years as you pay a monthly fee (many like us start around $50 monthly), it provides the following benefits:

- The get started costs are considerably less and by using helpful templates, your organization can easily introduce a highly functional app within days

- Companies like ours help you manage the requirements of the operating system "stores" like PlayStore and iTunes keeping you current

- Apps can be updated at any time and often do not require the user to change anything

- You benefit from on-going development of the provider with new video formats as one example

- There is no hardware or software to buy and support

- Making changes to content or even features can be easily done even without a technical person on your staff

- The hosted provider (us as an example) is motivated to help you make your app a valuable part of your activities.

What Should Your App Include

Like other providers, we include some staple features that allow our app framework to support a diverse set of users.   We have templates for a calendar, directory, and bulletin boards.   These are valued by all organizations to post content of any type (text, audio, video, documents) and also alert end users of upcoming events or new content to review.

You should consider the ease of updating content and with the "bulletin board" concept, how many different icons are supported (we are unlimited as one example) and what types of data are supported. A "click and replace" function is a bedrock minimum for a solid app framework to consider for your organization.

One approach doesn't work for everyone even within your church. If your app provider supports the concept of members in presenting content, this allows for uncluttered menus and higher satisfaction with apps.   For members with grown children for example, perhaps there interest in the Youth Group activities is considerably less than in prior years and their main menus should present activities more attuned to their interests.

We also recommend that organizations strongly consider apps that include powerful messaging capabilities with these components:

a. List management allows groups to share any type of content and to easily interact on your app driving traffic and engagement.

b. Content management should be part of the message environment. The most powerful content can be group photos or videos as one example.

c. A solid messaging solution should include not only member communications capabilities but also office communications. For example, a solution like ours, allows church administrators to send group text messages of any content type to app users, mobile phones as text messages, or even e-mail. You should require that your app provider support your entire messaging needs and not just to end users that have your app installed. Otherwise you will be coordinating lists of users and non-users and that can be burdensome.

d. Your messaging solution can also support non users of the app if you select the right App Framework as the system can both be used to send messages to the App but in the event it is not installed, directly text or e-mail the end user. This insures this that your organization gets the message out to every member.

e. There should be no per message fees---this increases the usability of the app and also incents the organization to support it with messages from every group.
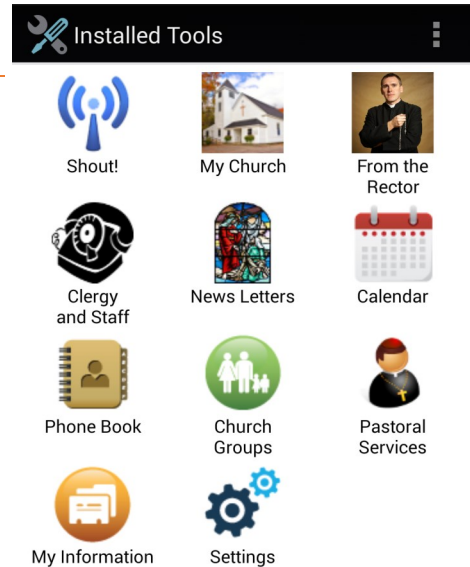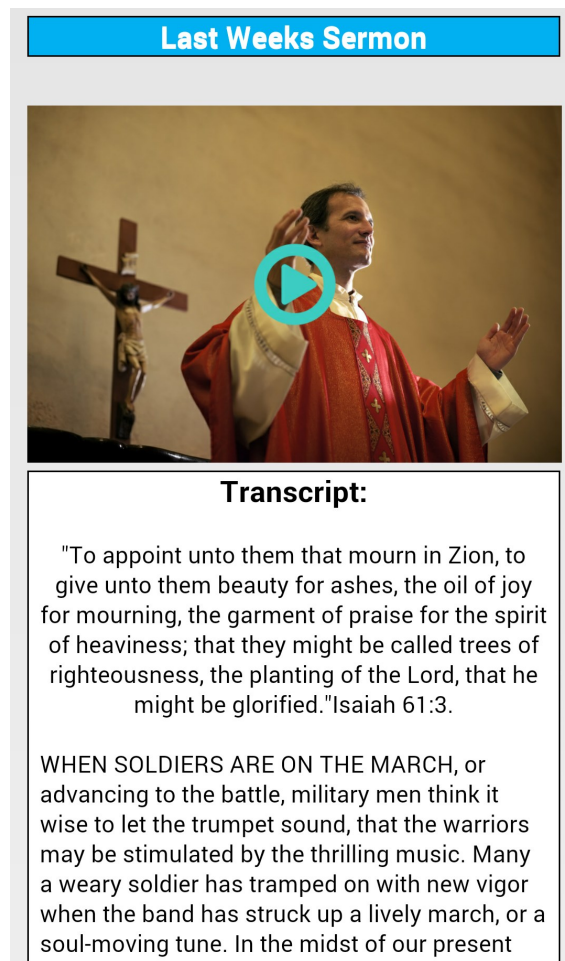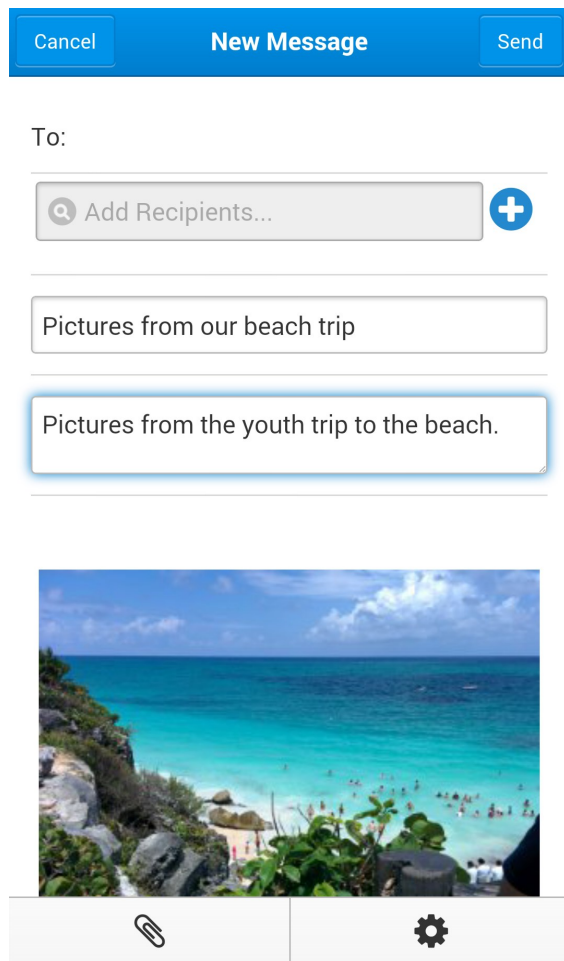
Your App Is Only Limited By Your Imagination

Almost every organization immediately recognizes the benefits that accrue from an App strategy in supporting the Youth Group. Extend your messaging to less active members (attending meetings) but also support college students and military members that cannot easily otherwise do so.

But you can think even more broadly. Capture video of the service and Sunday school classes and make it available instantly on the app. Seniors are the most rapidly growing users of the Internet and tablets are popular. A solid app framework can allow the homebound to share in your organization activities.

Have Thoughts of the Day or even interactive prayer lists. It's a web site plus maybe even your own TV channel.

Innovative app providers can also help you with tools as part of the app to share with non-members for church recruiting. A virtual tour doesn't match up with a physical visit but expanding your reach might turn a maybe visitor into an actual one.

Most apps will provide flexible bulletin boards that support diverse content types and allow a range of users at the Church to post content (with suitable controls). Ask how these work and how they will in the future. Apps are a new framework for communications: it may be less important to get a fully featured app platform than feeling comfortable that your supplier can and will support your on-going needs.

Cancel	New Message	Send

To:

🔍 Add Recipients... ➕

Pictures from our beach trip

Pictures from the youth trip to the beach.

📎 ⚙️

Last Weeks Sermon

▶️

Transcript:

"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified."Isaiah 61:3.

WHEN SOLDIERS ARE ON THE MARCH, or advancing to the battle, military men think it wise to let the trumpet sound, that the warriors may be stimulated by the thrilling music. Many a weary soldier has tramped on with new vigor when the band has struck up a lively march, or a soul-moving tune. In the midst of our present

Conclusion

Most organizations will be implementing a mobile app strategy in the coming years.   Younger members may be the primary initial focus but it is becoming a mainstream tool quickly.   The benefits are substantial and if you select the right provider of an app framework, you can be operational quickly with a platform that can adapt to changing needs and increased capabilities.

Many web sites are thought of as electronically based catalogs.   Some have evolved to do more but almost all suffer from one major drawback: it requires the end user to visit.

Apps can be designed to notify users of new events or content and by mixing content with communications capabilities, the use of mobile apps can be light years more powerful for your organization and members.

Another consideration for many organizations worth considering is that apps are effectively private. While Facebook and other social media sites can be configured to be more private than public, many organizations are hesitant to include more capabilities than a simple posting as part of the site. Mobile apps can be limited to specific users, the app may be findable on the PlayStore or iTunes as an example, but non-members will not be able to enter the app.

Apps will be supplementing many organization web sites and even replacing e-mail as a primary means of electronic communications within groups.   This has both challenges and opportunities for organizations; the good news is that there are a number of companies offering innovative and highly cost effective platforms for you to easily move forward deploying your own app.   Many organizations actually save money and best of all time by using the group messaging capabilities of apps.