

Are You Prepared

In this article I would like to revisit a topic that was originally covered in this column last fall. The topic is notifying your congregation or groups within your congregation quickly. Its certainly no secret that winter weather in Michigan can create the need to cancel Sunday morning worship on short notice. Perhaps a gas leak in the basement means that weekday activities need to be canceled until it is fixed and the building has been adequately ventilated. Maybe a session meeting needs to be postponed for some reason. There can be a variety of reasons why it may be very helpful to contact a lot of people in a short time. Traditionally a phone tree where one person calls two others each of whom also call two others and so on until everyone is notified has been the method of choice. Obviously there are potential problems with this approach. If one of the people who is to make calls is on vacation or sick perhaps the calling chain is slowed or broken at that point. There is also no convenient method for ensuring that everyone who needed to be contacted actually got the message.

An option other than a phone tree that your church may wish to explore is an automated calling service for use when the church needs to quickly contact people. Now if you are like me when I think of robo-calls I picture some annoying recorded voice telling there is a problem with my credit card or I have just won a free vacation in the Bahamas. But, in fact, robo-calls can be helpful when used in a legal manner to rapidly spread the word to a targeted group of people. There are a number of legitimate services that can place a call or send a text to your entire congregation in a only a matter of minutes at a reasonable cost. Basically what happens is the pastor records a brief message explaining what the situation is and hits a button to send the message by either phone call or text message to a list of phone numbers that had been created earlier. The call may go to the entire congregation or only a group within the congregation. The calling service makes the calls or sends the texts showing the church's phone number as the caller so the recipient's caller ID will know that it is the church contacting them. When they answer the phone or if the call goes to an answering machine or voice mail the recipient will hear the pastor's message in his or her own voice clearly stating details of the emergency or other situation. The church, if they choose, can receive a report of who received the call or text and who did not in case follow up is needed. A number of the services offer a discount for non-profits so that calls can be made for 5-8 cents per call with no subscription service. The church purchases credits and then uses them as necessary.

This article is intended to share an idea with you and not to recommend a specific calling service. There are a number of good options should you wish to investigate this type of service for your church. Google is a good place to start finding a variety of companies that offer an assortment of plans. Here are a few websites to give you some ideas:

www.call-em-all.com

www.onecallnow.com

www.dialmycalls.com

<https://answernet.com/automated.asp>

www.phonevite.com

These websites are not recommendations on which service to use. They are only a starting point if you are interested in exploring what is available. Many websites will offer a free trial period so you can experience how the service works and ensure it provides all the features that your church needs. Ask plenty of questions including about site security, creating groups so that just the choir or the PW can be contacted if necessary. Ask about call documentation reports and cost per call making sure there are no hidden costs Also, be sure to ask if they offer a discount to churches. The free trial period allows your church to do a test with a small portion of your congregation to see if it will work for you.

To be clear, let me state that I'm not selling robo-call services but I am suggesting that this may be a handy tool to have available if your church needs to rapidly and dependably get a message to your congregation or a group within the congregation. If you have questions please contact your Regional Coordinator for Disaster Preparedness or let me know.

Blessings

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