

St. Brigid of Kildare, Dublin, Ohio

Touring the grounds of St. Brigid of Kildare in Dublin, Ohio, one is almost surprised not to hear an Irish brogue escape from the lips of the first person who smiles to greet you. Though the church itself is modeled only loosely after Kildare's thirteenth century Church of Ireland Cathedral, artifacts and furnishings throughout transport heart and spirit to early Gaelic times. Such a setting within Dublin, a city of rich Irish and agricultural heritage, connects the St. Brigid parish community to their patron saint and to her concerns for the poor and hungry. The parish staff and ministry leaders exemplify the same innovative spirit seen in St. Brigid when she founded and developed monasteries and schools in the late 400s A.D. Today, we call such well-managed programs *best practices*, and St. Brigid parish has much to teach us about making the most of technology to organize, manage, and propel their ministries to new heights.

Managing the Parish Schedule with ParishSOFT Web Solutions

Karen Cremeans, office manager at St. Brigid, has seen the parish's online calendar evolve from a list of a few key events to become the comprehensive, master calendar that parishioners enjoy today. As the online calendar grew in popularity among the staff and parishioners, Cremeans recognized the need for more detail within the calendar and implemented consistent use of the event descriptions popup screens. Now, online calendar visitors can click on almost any event description to get detailed information about the associated ministry group, sacrament, or meeting, as well as a contact name, phone number and meeting location. Cremeans has even added a great color-coding system that groups events by topic and lets the viewer's eye easily recognize similar group events. For example, all religious education events are displayed in red. Green indicates school events, yellow for weddings, teal for baptisms, etc.

St. Brigid promotes weekly the use of the online calendar in each St. Brigid bulletin, which lists just the weekly calendar with event names, dates, and times. Parishioners are continually reminded to visit the website for the complete, detailed schedule. Are they doing so? Cremeans believes that the congregation is online savvy, and the near absence of phone calls to the parish office asking for calendar information and event details has been her indication that the two to three hours per month spent posting events have been well worth her time.

ParishSOFT's recurring event capability lets Cremeans schedule an ongoing event, like St. Brigid's Thursday night Family Rosary, for the entire year. She enters the event's short description, popup screen detail, and meeting time only once into the calendar, then specifies the duration, meeting day, and time. The event populates into the appropriate calendar dates on the online calendar. Updates to previously scheduled events are just as simple, and Cremeans is pleased to be able to instantly update her master calendar with just a few clicks.

Unlike the impersonal nature of many technological tools (e.g., voicemail instructions like, "please enter your social security number and PIN"), such a high level of organization allows this large parish to exude a friendly, small parish feel. For example, meeting signs are placed at strategic locations throughout the parish compound to make it easy for people to find their way. And the historical data provided by the online calendar allows the staff to backtrack quickly when someone asks, "When was our last prayer chain reception?"

Combining the St. Brigid Tapestry Program with ParishSOFT Tools

Another stellar example of St. Brigid's best practices shines brightly in the stewardship program that Msgr. Joseph Hendricks' designed and named *Tapestry*. Of the 2,600 families registered at St. Brigid, only twenty percent were financially supporting the parish. With more than 2,000 families either not involved or participating without lending their financial support, Monsignor Hendricks mobilized his troops. Ministries were restructured and expanded from a handful to more than 50. The staff designed a packet that includes a personalized ParishSOFT mail merge letter (with, of course, address labels) to each family, a ministry card for volunteer commitment opportunities, and an offertory card for planned, annual contributions. The response from the St. Brigid families was phenomenal. Volunteerism has soared to

heights that would make St. Brigid herself smile. More than 1,500 families returned their annual pledge cards. While some families chose the option of contributing through weekly envelopes or pledge reminders, over 700 families opted to make electronic financial contributions via authorized, automatic payments from their bank or credit card accounts. St. Brigid now has a guaranteed monthly income of \$30,000 to \$50,000 in electronic fund transfers alone.

Implementing ParishSOFT's ACH Electronic Banking module will be a great enhancement to the Tapestry program management. Currently, those 700 payments need to be posted in the Offering & Tuition module to credit payments appropriately to the contributing families. Joseph Burger, St. Brigid business manager, is preparing to add the ACH module to their suite of ParishSOFT software applications. ACH will automatically post each transaction to the proper accounts, saving hours of data entry per month. Cremeans adds, "We make it a point to thank our electronic funds contributors during Masses to spread the message that if someone isn't putting an envelope into the basket on Sunday, it probably means they're giving electronically. These parishioners give us not just a more stable budget, they save us the cost of envelopes, postage, and administration."

Parishioners receive thanks and a year-end giving summary but are spared continued requests for donations throughout the year. After the two to three week offertory pledge campaign ends in September, the subject of financial support for St. Brigid is considered a closed matter until the following year. Contributions are tracked and compared to the actual amount pledged only for internal budget projections. Parishioners are never asked to explain any differences between pledges and actual payments.

At the campaign's end, St. Brigid has two telephone soliciting weekends when volunteers call each family who did not return a card. The volunteers delicately ask each family about their parish membership situation and whether they have any other issues or concerns. This last question often reveals pastoral issues of which the parish had been previously unaware, such as illness, job loss, or separation. It is not uncommon for people to retreat during times of trouble, rather than reach out for support; but this personal contact delivers proactive pastoral care to parish families and reconnects the church to its members. For those who have withdrawn themselves from parish life intentionally, the telephone follow-up determines and records the family's wishes and allows parish staff to designate the family as unregistered in their Family Directory database. Cremeans recommends adding notes to the family record to document when and why the registration status was changed and which member of the family gave the instructions—this information has come in handy when someone in a family later wants to arrange a marriage or baptism in the church or doesn't recall withdrawing membership. Using the unregistered status keeps the family information in the database but out of census reports; a family can become registered again with a single mouse click.

St. Brigid of Kildare Catholic Church is located at 7179 Avery Road, Dublin, Ohio, 43017. Msgr. Joseph M. Hendricks is pastor. Visit www.stbrigidofkildare.org for a virtual tour and Mass times. Click on *Calendar* to view the terrific online calendar and event details. To contact Karen Cremeans, email kcremeans@columbus.rr.com.