

The Technologization of a Parish

How the Internet helped us survive the pandemic

St. Anthony's Ukrainian Orthodox parish is a relative newcomer located in the western part of Edmonton. The church building was completed in 1991, although planning for it had began many years earlier. Over the last decade, the parish was active, membership was stable, and revenues met expenses.

In addition to regular and special church services, the parish has a committed group of volunteers involved in St. Anna's branch, Ukrainian Women's Association of Canada. This affiliated group manages and hosts numerous social and fund-raising events. This includes seven pyrohy dinners throughout the year; a Christmas and Easter bake sale; and fellowship meals after Sunday services (suspended during the pandemic). St. Anna's makes significant donations to St. Anthony's and other charities.



Like many other parishes, financial transactions such as donations and sales were mostly handled the old-fashioned way – cash and cheques. This seemed to work fine. There was little incentive to change to electronic funds.

Then the Covid-19 pandemic appeared in March of 2020! Restrictions put into place to control the spread of Covid-19 virus, had profound negative effects on religious organizations, and businesses in general. Church attendance was severely restricted and thus affected ongoing donations. Bake sales, pyrohy dinners and other fund-raising events could not be held in the traditional ways. Unfortunately, fixed operating and maintenance expenses for the parish continued during the pandemic.

So, what's a parish to do to survive? Fortunately, St. Anthony's had members who were resilient and had some expertise with the Internet and technology. Here is what they did, and the results they achieved.

Fulfilling spiritual needs of members

Once church attendance was strictly restricted, the parish knew that it needed to provide easy and convenient access to the church services to its members and others. Fortunately, livestreaming technology was well established and being used by other organizations.

With the help of some knowledgeable members, the parish quickly set up a livestream system for its church services. Initially, this included one video camera, a computer connected to the Internet to send the livestream video to Youtube and Facebook. Over the next few months, this system was upgraded. A couple of PTZ cameras were installed; a video switcher and audio mixer were acquired and configured; the wireless microphones were upgraded; and a LAN (local area network) was used to link and integrate these components. At the same time, Telus installed a fibre link to the church, thus providing high-speed access to the Internet. This permitted the parish to livestream its services in high-definition (HD) video. Additional cameras are often brought in to livestreams and/or record special events such as funerals, weddings, baptisms and festive services. Volunteers were trained and take turns livestreaming the church services.

Donations

When members could no longer attend church services, it became more challenging to make their donations to the parish. To make it easier to donate, the following systems were implemented.

- *Interac e-Transfer* account was made available to allow individuals to use their banking app to make donations (this was set up six months prior to the pandemic).
- Created an account with *Canada Helps* to provide an option to donate using credit cards or Paypal account.
- Installed a *Donations Plugin* on the parish website. The plugin is integrated with a Stripe Canada account to process credit and debit card donations.
- Acquired a *POS Terminal* for financial transactions with Square Canada. This allows people to donate at the church by tapping or using their credit or debit card as well as Apple Pay and Google Pay.

Nearly all donations to St. Anthony's parish are now done electronically.

Sales and fundraising

The pandemic restrictions had a profound effect on the fundraising activities of the St. Anna's Branch. Revenues from the bake sales and pyrohy dinners significantly contribute to meeting the parish's operating expenses.

The parish had just recently updated their website. The webmaster suggested that they install an eStore to continue their sales activities online along with curb-side pickups. The first test of the online store was the 2020 Christmas Bake Sale. Surprisingly, the results were better than expected. Instead of packing some 150 people into the church basement during a 4-hour period, "customers" were able to order online, pay with credit card, and pick up their orders at the parish at their convenience during designated times.

The same approach was used for the pyrohy dinners. People could place their order up to the day before, and then pick up the food during the designated times. Not as many pyrohy dinners were sold as when they were offered in-person dining, but the sales were still acceptable. People could pay online, or upon pickup by credit / debit card, cheque or cash. One of the side benefits of using this approach is that people frequently order other items (frozen pyrohy, pies, sausage) for pickup at the same time. This has increased the revenues from these sales.

Lessons learned

So, what has the parish learned from their experiences that they can share with others? Here are some thoughts about the benefits.

- Going with electronic payments was a big plus. Most of the parish's donations and payments for sales are now done electronically.
- Accepting credit / debit cards increases sales. People order what they want and are not limited by the amount of cash they have on hand
- Electronic payments make record keeping easier and safer. We still accept cash and cheques for donations and payments. But the total amount of cash and cheques taken to the bank is less than previously. There are choices for payments processors such as Stripe, Square and others. These are easier to deal with than with the banks.
- Having an electronic store makes it easier for the customers. They can order any time and any place they find convenient, and easily pay for their orders.
- The electronic store also has benefits for the parish. Statistics and records are kept by the store, so that inventory and the demand for various products can be monitored and better predicted.

- Another benefit of an online store is that customers can register for an account. This allows them to easily make additional orders, and keeps track of what they have already purchased. A benefit to the parish is a mailing list that they can use (not spam) to let registered customers know of upcoming bake sales or pyrohy dinners. These reminders work really well.

However, as expected, there are challenges as well.

- Setting up an online store requires that you have a secure website, preferably with a dedicated IP address. Websites built with WordPress, Joomla or other similar software offer several advantages. They are designed to be easily managed / changed by users. They typically have inexpensive eStore or donations plugin software that can be installed.
- Although the software itself is relatively inexpensive, considerable technical expertise is required to install, configure and operate the eStore. Hiring local web companies will be expensive. A better alternative is to find someone within your parish that can do it.
- Beware of success. When your sales increase, does your parish have the volunteers and resources to keep up with the demand? Making food for the bakes sales and pyrohy dinners requires work bees and volunteers. Do you have enough reliable people that you can count on?
- A couple of advantages of going to a pyrohy dinner in the church basement is the food is served hot, and you get a chance to visit with friends! Take-out has always been possible in the past, but clearly online ordering and curb-side pickup alone do not meet the social needs of many people.

Conclusions

Here are some final thoughts and suggestions. It is inevitable that sooner or later a parish must implement some form of electronic transactions system. Cash and cheques are no longer the predominant currency, especially for the younger generations.

A good place to start would be to set up an Interac e-Transfer account with your bank. You can also create an account with Stripe or Square, and acquire a POS terminal. That way, it is easier for members and other donors to support your parish financially. Overall, we receive more money through e-Transfers than we do from credit/debit cards. Interestingly, e-Transfers are used more often for donations, and credit/debit cards are used more often for purchases from the online store.

If your parish has a current and up-to-date website, then installing a donations plugin should be considered. This will allow members to easily make donations, pay for memberships and special events. An online store should only be considered if your parish has a secure website, access to technical expertise, and the resources to provide adequate inventory to meet potential demand.

Every parish is unique. You need to do what works for you. Hopefully, our experiences will help you make informed decisions and choices regarding possible technological solutions.

Russell Sawchuk

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Parish links:

[St. Anthony's Parish](#) | [St. Anthony's Store](#)