

Is Your Church Ready for \$5 to \$6 per Gallon Gas Prices?

By Steve Hewitt

It finally happened, \$4 a gallon gas at many gas stations across the nation. What impact will rising gas prices have on church attendance in metro areas? Does your church have a plan to continue their present ministry if gas continues to go up as some predict? There are things you can do to help your congregation stay connected and combat the financial drain of rising gas prices. Remember, as gasoline prices go up, it not only affects our pocketbook when we get in our cars to drive, but it will have caused the price of everything else to go up as well,

since everything sold is impacted by the cost of transporting it to market.

The automobile has had a tremendous impact on the local church in the last 70 years. Many metro churches have had the ability to grow far beyond the congregational limits of five miles that we saw before 1940. Now, it is not uncommon for people to drive 15 miles, 20 miles, and even farther, to attend the church of their choice. In my case, I drive a little over 20 miles to church, and between my wife and I, we make at least four trips to our church each week. We both help with a divorce recovery group on Tuesday nights, my wife attends a woman's Bible study on Thursday nights, I lead a book study that meets at the church on Friday night, and of course, we attend services on Sunday morning. Let's say I have a car that gets 20 mpg (in looking over our church parking lot, I see a lot of vehicles and pick-up trucks that get a lot less than 20 mpg.) At \$4 a gallon, that means we are spending around \$32 a week to attend church and participate the way we do presently. That means we are spending a little over \$138 a month to attend church. Imagine my cost if I drive a car that only gets 15 mpg. That would mean I would be spending \$43 a week, \$186 a month, \$2,232 a

year. Now imagine if the price of gas goes up to \$5 or \$6! It could easily cost people more than \$60 a week, \$260 a month, or \$3,000 a year just to drive to church and attend as much as I do presently. Of course I know people that drive much farther than I do, and who get much worse mpg than 15. The impact should be obvious.

Many metro churches have events going on in their buildings every day. That is one of the advantages of attending a large metro church, they are able to offer many ministries centered on specific needs, age groups, and interests. People like to be connected to others, and churches have designed active programs to help meet their ministry goals, such as; helping disciple their members, provide needed ministries, increase fellowship and connection, etc. However, we are going to have to ask ourselves if we can expect a family attending our church to drive to the building several times a week to drop off the young people for youth events, the children to attend Awanas, have Dad help out on a Saturday morning with the "singles mother car clinic", Mom to meet during the week for choir or praise team practice, drama practice, and a host of discipleship meetings that take place throughout the week in support of men, singles, seniors,

moms, etc.

The good news is there are several solutions a church can use to continue their vital ministries with the growing gas price crises. We can actually become part of the solution, explore some exciting new ways to minister, and expand our ministries at a time when our nation is struggling with higher gas prices. Here are a few solutions:

Carpooling

Let's bring back an idea that has been around for a long time, carpooling. Most agree it is a great idea, but hard to implement. After all, how can you help members from specific neighborhood connect to work out the details to carpool? Well now there is an exciting new service to which your church can subscribe that will allow members of your church connect to carpool. The service comes from Upper Room Technologies (the creators of Groups Interactive) and is called ChurchRides (www.ChurchRides.com.) With ChurchRides, you simply set up their service and link it from your web page. ChurchRides is completely hosted by UpperRoom. Their service helps your members who are interested in carpooling to easily connect and communicate. Members can see a map of your city with flags noting where other members interested in carpooling are located. They can quickly spot fellow carpoolers and connect, allowing them to work out the details of their carpooling arrangements. In some cases members may take turns driving their car, while others may agree to have one family always drive while the others help cover the cost of gas. ChurchRides doesn't stipulate carpooling arrangements, but simply provides a safe way for your members who are interested in carpooling to make it happen.

The good news is that it is easy to get started and you can easily and quickly provide the services of ChurchRides to your members.

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to continue to attend your church, you accomplish much more. Most metro churches are plagued by over-crowded parking lots. With ChurchRides, you will have more people and fewer cars in the parking lot. In addition, the experts tell us that nothing is going to help bring down the cost of gasoline except our ability to decrease demand. By setting up a carpooling service with ChurchRides, you are helping your members to conserve gas, a patriotic thing to do! And, finally, I think a service as simple as carpooling gives members a chance to minister to each other. Imagine the connection and fellowship that will come from members of your church connecting together, especially from the same neighborhoods!

Small Groups

Many churches have already started to see the advantages of small groups meeting away from the church building. As it turns out, this has helped to become an important part of ministry for larger churches. It can be easy to get lost in a large church setting. Yet, we know that it is important for people to be intimately connected to a small group of Christian friends where they can ask personal questions during times of study, as well as share personal needs when it is time to pray. Many churches have seen the value of starting small groups in homes across their town, in addition to the traditional "Sunday School" concept of meeting in small groups at the church building. And some entire churches have moved small groups meeting in homes, instead of meeting at the church.

When you visit the Church Management Software online feature chart that Christian Computing Magazine hosts (www.digical.com/ccmag) you will see that most CMS programs note that they offer small group management tools. However, many of these consist of the ability to track which members of their congregation belong to which specific groups. With the growth of the use of small groups meeting outside of the church building, there needs to be the ability for these sites to be mapped, allowing members the ability to pick groups within their neighborhood. In addition, small groups need an Internet presence allowing them to communicate their group needs, events, and membership information. One product that does all of this and more is Groups Interactive from UpperRoom Technologies (http://www.uroomtech.com/product_gi.html). See a complete review in the June 2008 issue of Christian Computing (www.ccmag.com).

Websites for Members/Social Networking

If you visit many church websites, you will see that they are designed to help potential visitors instead of actually being designed for the congregation. It is certainly important for a church website to contain vital information for those seeking to know more about their church. Maps with location, information about ministry opportunities and even podcasting or streaming worship services are all great items to include. However, if you were to check with your members and ask them the last time they visited their own church's website, you would find that sites like these do not get traffic from members. This needs to change. Website tools and applications are available to help accomplish many of the church mission and ministry needs for their members, helping them stay connected to their church staff as well as to each other. Churches need to invest in one of the many great service companies available that can help create a website that can be easily updated by a variety of church staff and volunteer leaders, leaving the church



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site with live information, new prayer requests, events that are current, and the ability to access the information they need as members.

There is a reason why social networking sites have grown in popularity. Some churches and/or small groups, youth groups, singles, etc., have set up private networks on sites such as FaceBook or MySpace. Others have sought to use one of several Christian social networking sites such as MyChurch.org. And MyFlock.com has a service that can be set up for your church to have their own private social networking with security, instant messaging and many exciting tools to help keep a scattered congregation connected. I know that several Church Management Software companies are working to include social networking services into their web based system. With the announcement that both MySpace and Facebook's willingness to export user data to fit with other social networking sites, the door is open for there to be a large variety of social networks that can be set up unique to individual churches!

Online Giving

During peak gas crunch times, members may not always be able to attend services at the main campus, yet they might be very active in their small group meeting in their neighborhood, or even in attendance at discipleship and ministry meetings held at the church during the week. They need the ability to make their financial offering if they are not also able to attend during a Sunday service. Many churches have made the move to providing online giving, and have been pleased with the results. However, I still run across churches that have not made the decision because of stiff opposition. This is going to have to change. Research now shows that people of all ages prefer to avoid carrying cash. They purchase everything using their debit card, and do most of their entire bill paying online. They want to have the ability to make their contributions online, allowing them the ability to set up their giving on a weekly schedule so they can budge their commitment to support their church.

There are many ways to establish a system for online giving, not only allowing your members the opportunity to log on and make a contribution, but to set up automatic debit deductions establishing a pattern of giving.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the rising gas prices have impacted each and every one of us in some way. As prices threaten to continue to rise, churches need to be prepared. The good news is that technology and the Internet can now be a vital tool for churches. Setting up small groups, using a carpool services, providing an online giving service, and using the Internet to help a church stay connected are all available to help during the economic crisis. Churches have always adapted to emerging technologies, and now new tools can help us adapt to the present and future problems of rising gas prices. Isn't it wonderful that when a national economic crisis hit, such as the rising price of gas, the church has tools available to help to provide solutions to continue their ministry in exciting new ways!



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