

*More than Just Child Security and Convenience*

## *Making Check-in a Strategic Component of Your Church's Future*



*Jeff Hook  
CEO and President  
Fellowship Technologies LP*



*"...His church  
should not have  
to 'get by' with  
less than the best  
technology has to  
offer."*

### *What's Inside...*

- Security factors
- Convenience factors
- Human care factors
- Strategic factors
  - Extending Check-in beyond children

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*“...many of the stand-alone check-in systems are not integrated with the rest of the church management system...”*

One of the most sought after capabilities within a modern church management system is the ability to provide for rapid children’s check-in. Not only because of the need for security in this era of child custody disputes and not so trustworthy volunteers, but also because of the inconvenience factors primarily around parents’ time involved with a manual process of handing off a child or children to care workers in the church nursery and preschool ministries. And many of the standalone check-in systems are not integrated with the rest of the church management system, thus limiting the functionality to only check-in when in fact a whole set of opportunities can be capitalized on when the capabilities are truly integrated across the membership database.

This article identifies what you should look for in the selection of a children’s check-in system and offers how the leading system on the market, Fellowship One™, addresses the identified requirements. Fellowship One is one of the top children’s check-in systems on the market. It was developed by Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas and is offered to other churches through a recent spin-out company called Fellowship Technologies.



### *The security factors*

First, a children’s check-in system needs to provide security for the child against unauthorized pick-up. There are several aspects that need to be considered in this age of robust home computer systems. If a permanent identification card is issued by the church as a form of authorization, an estranged, computer savvy parent could mock up a forged card that looks valid enough that an unsuspecting volunteer might release a child to him or her especially when the child readily calls out at the sight of this person, “Daddy, daddy!” In this day and age, any method that uses some permanent form of authorization needs to be carefully evaluated to determine whether the format can be easily duplicated using Photoshop or some other computer publishing toolset, and some laminated materials.

The children’s check-in system within Fellowship One has no permanent identification component. Instead, the system automatically generates a three digit alpha numeric code that is unique to that check-in for that church for that day. Thus, a non-custodial parent, or for that matter any adult, could not know what code would be generated in real-time at the point of check-in. The system identifies that code as used and is not used again until the following day. Also, the chances of that same code being generated two Sunday’s in a row for that same child is about the same as a person winning the lottery.

The system needs to be intelligent enough to never print a receipt tag with the same security code. In other words, the system knows that a receipt was printed and should not allow a reprint that could make a child susceptible to being picked up by an estranged father circumventing the system by trying to check a child in a second time.

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Besides unauthorized pickup, a children’s check-in system should also ensure that only volunteers who have a valid background check on file are able to check-in and care for the children. This then assumes that volunteers use the system to identify themselves and check-in to their positions. An integrated system will also then record attendance for the volunteers and help determine the proper ratio of care-workers to children so that over-crowding can be readily identified and dealt with. Having too many children and not enough volunteers can lend itself to the kind of chaos that is conducive to an environment that would allow an unauthorized pickup due to overwhelmed care-workers.

With Fellowship One, each volunteer’s background check, if it is identified as required by that position, is checked at the time that a volunteer checks into the system as ready to work. Also, an administrator has real time access to a view of what staff and students have checked in and can close rooms that are at the threshold of overcrowding and open new rooms that are used as overflow. The full rooms are marked as closed and cannot be checked into and the new rooms appear as open and operational with the toggle of a switch in the system.

Another security feature of a different kind that helps a children’s ministry operate is to have the check-in system track those kids who are affected by some type of allergy or phobia. By having the allergy print discreetly on the label, a teacher can quickly see who is allergic to peanuts or other types of treats, medicines or children who should refrain from certain types of activities.

### *The convenience factors*

A children’s check-in system should provide convenience that will allow parents to drop off their children and get to the worship service or Sunday School as quickly as possible. To accomplish this without compromising security can certainly be a challenge. The challenge becomes greater if multiple children are involved, especially when they are of different ages and attend different classes perhaps in different buildings. Fellowship One uses a “global check-in” that allows a family to check-in all at once. The system needs to be robust enough to know what child belongs in what class on campus and also what adult belongs to what volunteering opportunity so that parents can check-in for all campus activities without standing in multiple lines – and many times the children may need to be checked in to multiple services so that parents can volunteer during one service and attend another.

Once again, a permanent identification card may not be the most convenient all the time for all people. A permanent id card may speed up processing if a bar code is available to scan; however, cards are only good for those people who remember to bring them or who have not lost them. Thus another form of entry must also be readily available so that people who have misplaced their cards are not processed “out of the system.” Card-based systems automatically divide your congregation into “haves” and “have-nots,” a distinction that visitors are automatically a part of! Segregating visitors into “have-nots” quickly sets a tone on how they believe they will be treated from that point forward until they join the church. This should be looked at from their perspective, not a church staffer’s. When was the last time a person on church staff was a visitor and can relate to that perspective?

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*“...but having an inconvenient church will...cause growth to stagnate.”*

Permanent identification cards also become a problem when lost. The process to initially place a card into a member’s hand is somewhat straightforward because everyone is getting one. Thus, economies of scale can be taken into account – simply get every member’s household a new card as the program is rolled out. Simply a matter of cost of the card and mailing! However, replacing cards are not so straightforward. When someone loses their card, do they go to the church office to request a replacement?



Do they call the children’s pastor? Is it more convenient to stand in line week after week or bite the bullet and get a new card? Are decisions that the attendee needs to answer for themselves? Is the exception process readily known? Easily executed? If an attendee is one who frequently loses cards, does this process hamper their attendance record?

Also, a card system can cause confusion around who gets a card. Does every household or every individual receive a card? At what age does a child receive a card for identification? If issued at the household level, when a card is scanned, the question must still be asked as to what household members are being checked in.

Convenience is also a factor when the speed of check-in is considered. A check-in process should take about as long as the conversation flow that helps determine how is being checked into to what and for how many services. The receipting process on the tail-end of that conversation should only take as long as the print time of that unique receipt.

Fellowship One is driven off of a person’s household phone number kept in the system – actually just the last four digits. Although not unique, it is a filter used to narrow down the list to a manageable number of names from which the specific family can be selected. Although the complete phone number would get directly to the household, the key punching error rate goes up tremendously when all 10 numbers are used. The number lexicon is also easier to hear above the noise of playing preschoolers than the spelling of difficult or similar sounding names. From that, a trained volunteer can check-in a regular attendee’s family of four children within 20 seconds. Also, by communicating directly to the printer, Fellowship One eliminates the time-cost associated with formatting through a print driver.



Another convenience factor is determined due to the number of lines a family of four must wait in to check in all of their children. As stated earlier, Fellowship One was designed to allow what is called “global check-in.” In other words, the parent can check into all activities for all children at the same time, and the system uses



*“Operating Fellowship One can be done through a touch screen interface that eases data entry without a keyboard and mouse.”*

Weblink also allows the volunteer to more easily apply for a volunteer position by capturing the necessary application information, including references, through your church’s web site. This application is then processed through a review pipeline that makes processing volunteers easy without the possibility of them “falling through the cracks.”

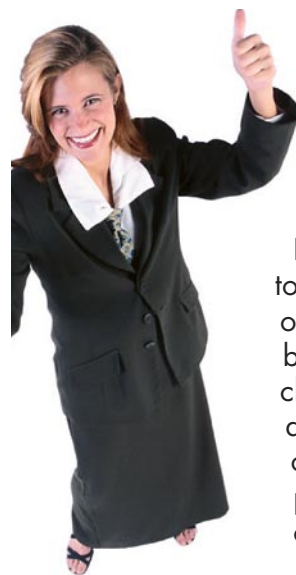


Finally, the system should not be burdensome to the church staff to administer and maintain. In Fellowship One, once an activity and its schedule has been entered, the system somewhat self-administers itself until a room or service schedule changes. Then a simple change in the system causes the attendance buckets to adjust and once again the system wakes up when required and is available for check-in.

### *The Human Care Factors*

A modern children’s check-in system should also provide real-time attendance tracking and reporting. This allows the church staff to quickly assess who was present and who was not. Fellowship Church reaches out to the families of the children who regularly attend services but who have missed three or six Sundays. By following up in a timely manner, parents are amazed that such a large church recognized that they missed and that someone cared that they missed. Also, the church staff has story after story that illustrates the need for that kind of follow-up because some form of dysfunction had penetrated a family in which the church could offer some assistance and care.

No matter how extensive a congregation database is, if the information is not current and accurate, then the information has limited or no value. If it is believed to be accurate and is not, perhaps it is even of “negative” value. With the Fellowship One check-in system, because the person is front and center and the retrieval is based on their household phone number, any change to a person’s phone number can be captured at the check-in kiosk.

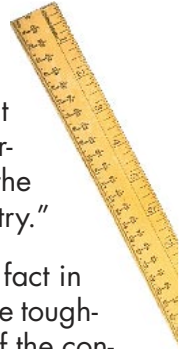


Later, a report can be printed by the membership office to prompt them to proactively call the family to update any other contact information, such as home address to ensure better service when sending out contribution statements or children event announcements. Once again showing proactive concern about the quality of service the church is offering to its congregation is a human touch that many people view as caring. And besides, who wants their contributions statements to go to the wrong address.

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## *The strategic factors - extend Check-in beyond children*

Measurement is a key component of improving anything. Without measuring current performance, attempts to improve performance can be anecdotal, at best. Measurement of participation in ministry, children or adult, is a key determinant of whether a ministry is in fact providing value to the congregation. At Fellowship, we call this "Return on Ministry."



It was important to the shepherd to know that 99 sheep were in fact in the fold. It was only then that he knew one was missing. One of the toughest things within any church is the measurement of assimilation of the congregation. At Fellowship Church, the kiosk-based system is used to check-in all activities except the main worship service. Whether it's adult Bible Study or water baptism or Junior High worship, every person checks into the activity and usually receives a name tag. In a fast growing church, the name tag really enhances fellowship as people converse before, during and after activities.

By checking in all activities, the church can begin to monitor the effectiveness of its assimilation process. What visitors are beginning to start the process of assimilation, what members are moving on to the subsequent classes and what members are moving into volunteerism, etc. This level of information is extremely important when a church needs to make vital decisions about expanding its leadership base, volunteer or staff, as well as when it must identify the right people during an expansion campaign.

And because it's real-time attendance tracking, no administrator is posting attendance during the week. They can be engaged in more meaningful ministry activities and less focused on administration. Also, by using WebLink with other ministries, the administration of collecting monies for camps, church offered child care and other fee-based activities is minimal - the administrative staff is not burden with the addition of more activities that can really enhance the Christian walk of the entire congregation.

In summary, to help stimulate growth in a seeker friendly church, everyone knows that a children's check-in system needs to provide top-notch security and be convenient to the customer. However, it is not WHAT a check-in system does that determines the value to church and its congregation, but rather HOW the system does it. All check-in systems cannot scale up to process the volume associated with a large church. Look closely at the inherent processes of a check-in system before purchasing. Make sure that it is easy to use for your volunteers. Look to see that it is integrated so that attendance reporting and ministry measurement is an integrated component. Also, check to ensure that only the information required for check-in is presented to the volunteer, do not allow other information to be displayed that might infringe on someone's privacy.

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