eBooks Update: Summer 2013
by Glenn McEowen

At the time of our last eBook Update six churches in Texas had just begun checking out eBooks ("eBooks" includes audio books and other downloadable media.) to their congregations. At least four other churches have added the service, by joining an existing consortium or creating "stand-alone" collections.

The churches all use the services of OverDrive*, a company that provides access to titles, authentication, and downloads directly to church members' reader devices. OverDrive now has experience with church libraries, and no longer considers us an "unknown market."

The PROCESS of eBooks
The eBooks service has proven to be more work than we had anticipated. Once an agreement is completed with OverDrive, the service will "go live" in about two months. We "hit the ground running" with staff training, deciding a myriad of details (how many check outs, length of check out, the web graphics, etc.) and building a collection for opening day. And don't forget about promotion!

Starting a digital collection from scratch takes time and lots of it! Navigating through Overdrive's million-plus titles, some not so Christian, is daunting. Ordering titles is time-consuming especially for consortia members since each title must be reconciled with the other church orders to avoid duplicates.

Cataloging eBooks into the library's regular collection (not required but advantageous) is much like cataloging a traditional book…it takes time even though some of the data are available from OverDrive.

We found that some church members needed assistance in setting up their readers and tablets. While succeeding in the first eBook check out can be tedious, this setup is only required once. The check out procedure is much easier after that.

We discovered that 'promotion' is just as important for eBooks as it is with traditional materials, perhaps more so. Since eBooks are not visible on the shelves, we have had to find other ways to highlight both the eBook service and individual eBook titles.

The MINISTRY of eBooks
We were pleased with the initial response of our members. We heard comments like a businessman who said, "I travel a lot and use my Nook constantly. It will be nice to have access to good, Christian material while I'm on the road." Or a senior adult, "You don't have large-print books, but finally, I can use the library again since my iPad lets me set the text large enough to read…Thank you." Or a full-time caregiver who said, "I have lots of time to read now, but cannot leave my patient to come to the library. EBooks are my salvation!"

Our senior adults have become a large portion of our users and surprisingly, youth are one of the smaller. (That may be a 'promotion' issue.) Missionary families have discovered eBooks as a great resource, one accessible to them anywhere in the world. We were surprised to find that eBooks serve an almost completely different group of readers than our traditional library.

After nearly a year we see the eBook ministry growing at a steady, active pace. Our church members have come to depend on eBooks being accessible whenever and wherever they are needed.

What's Next for Your Church?
In previous Updates we have encouraged church libraries to form consortia to keep the costs lower and to have access to shared (therefore, larger) collections of titles. But consortia are difficult to organize. And now OverDrive appears to be downplaying the consortium option in favor of the "stand-alone" where a single church has its own collection. There are pros and cons for stand-alones, but for certain the cost is much higher. Based on church (resident) membership the annual costs are being quoted at:

        Less than 2000: $ 4,000/yr
        2,000 – 3,999: $ 6,000/yr
        4,000 – 5,999: $10,000/yr

Will OverDrive still consider a consortium? Yes, but it has gotten harder. They will expect a group to generate at least $20,000 in annual fees. (Use the chart in [eBooks: A Good Value? Part 2](#) for an approximate, per-church cost.) It is a good idea to have a group structured and financially committed before contacting OverDrive.

Providing eBooks for libraries, a service that has been around for several years, is still a chaotic industry. News reports highlight publisher-vendor-library conflicts as the markets and technologies figure out how to make it work. Thankfully, the church library now has a "seat at that table." OverDrive is now considering better ways to serve the church library market. Prayerfully consider how your church library can become a part of that conversation. Keep in mind, your church members want the service, even the ones who have never been to your library.

* We still think OverDrive is the best choice for church libraries based on their large selection of quality Christian materials, their capability of authenticating check outs for the smaller library software systems most churches use and their ability to serve the popular Kindle readers.

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