CHURCHWATCH NEWSLETTER – December 28, 2003

Welcome to this week's ChurchWatch Version 3 newsletter. This week we are going to talk about tracking attendance using barcodes. This is a new feature to version 3 and one that is requested often.

Entering attendance can be a time consuming chore, no matter how good the software interface is. We think the attendance data-entry interface in ChurchWatch is quite good and the built-in filters can help make you even more productive. We have improved manual attendance data entry even more in version 3 by allowing you to sort the visible detailed list by alphabetical or family order. But even so, manual data entry, especially using a mouse, can be tedious. There is a much better way…namely barcoding.

Barcodes are simply a way to encode a number using vertical lines of differing width. Each specific width represents a number or a character. A barcode scanner can be used to translate the vertical bars into meaningful characters and then to insert these characters into the keyboard buffer of your computer, just as if you had typed the numbers/characters yourself. This simple translation ability becomes extremely powerful for all sorts of applications. You are familiar with barcodes from your local grocery store where all items are now scanned through a laser scanner to automatically enter a price and reduce the store's inventory in their inventory control database.

ChurchWatch Version 3 uses barcodes in several places. For this week's newsletter we are specifically talking about the attendance application. Before we can begin a discussion of barcodes you need to understand that this requires special hardware added to your computer(s). Namely, you need a barcode scanner. The barcode scanner you choose must be of a specific type – it must be a keyboard wedge. A keyboard wedge scanner is a barcode scanner that physically "tees" into the keyboard cable and port on your computer and inserts scanned numbers and characters into your keyboard buffer. In other words, the barcode scanner emulates a keyboard. There are all sorts of scanners available – hand held, pen type, scanning laser, desktop, stand up etc etc. You may choose any scanner you like as long as it can read **Code 3 of 9 barcodes** (almost all do) and as long as it has a keyboard wedge interface. Scanners can be found for as little as $50 to as much as a thousand dollars or more – shop carefully. If you need assistance, contact White Mountain Software and we'll be glad to assist.

OK, so you have barcode scanner. What do you do with it? Refer to the figure below and take note that the Attendance Manager, Details page now has two new barcode related items – the Barcode Report button and the scan field. Before you can use barcodes for tracking attendance, you need to create a barcode report first. First setup the detailed list of people as desired – with or without a filter. Next, click the Barcode Report button. A barcode report will appear on screen with all the people from your current list. In case you are wondering what the barcodes and numbers represent, the numbers are the person id from the Membership Manager. All people in your database have a unique person id assigned by ChurchWatch. Click the printer icon near the top of your screen to print the barcode report to your printer. Now you're all set to begin data entry. First of all click your mouse in the scan field to position your cursor there. Using your barcode scanner, simply scan the barcode for each person in attendance (from the paper barcode report). The cursor will remain in the scan field on the Attendance Manager form. Each person you scan will be marked "present" in the detailed attendance of the current event or class. That's it! You will find that this is a much faster way to enter detailed attendance once you get the hang of it – in fact, its EXTREMELY fast. If you make a mistake simply scan the UNDO barcode that is found at the top of each page of your printed barcode report. You may UNDO as many times as you like and as many times in a row as you like to "step back" and undo your most recent scans. Note that person's to be marked sick or excused will have to be entered manually as before.

Here's another novel idea, although one that will likely be shunned by most churches. The nametags produced in the Mail Manager now have the ability to have a barcode printed on them.

It would be possible, then, to take attendance as people arrive by asking for permission to scan their name tag. You would likely want to do this only at small, manageable events and conferences.

That's it for this week's newsletter. White Mountain Software is open for business December 29 through December 31 to take last minute 2003 orders and upgrades. We will then be closed from late afternoon December 31 through January 4 inclusive. Have a very happy New Years and may God richly bless you in 2004!
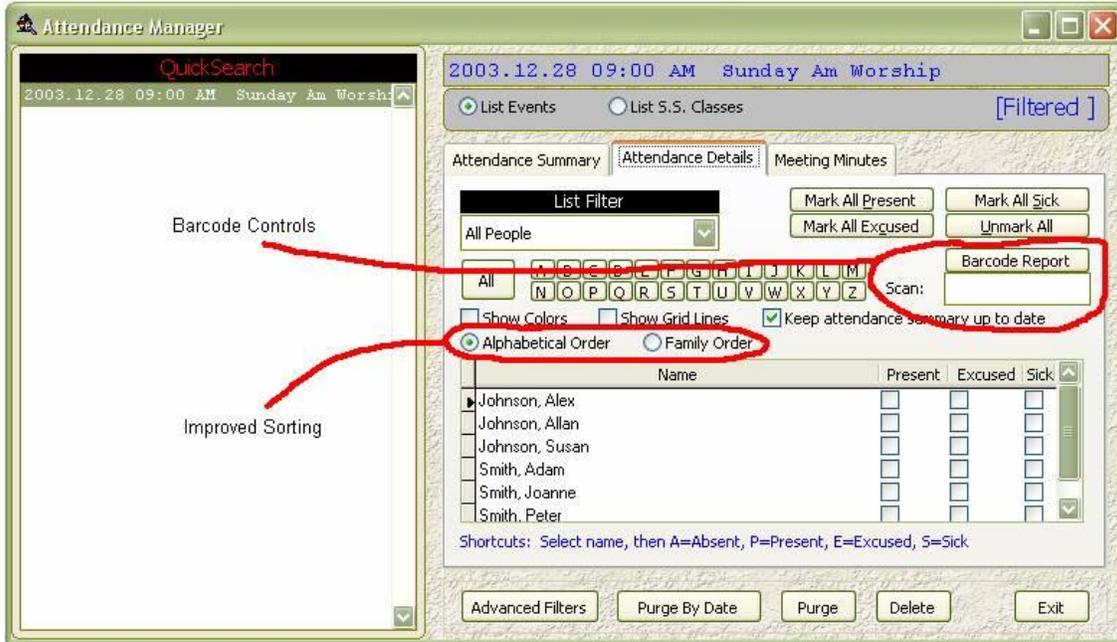
Here is a partial sample of an attendance barcode report…