Service Builder: Cost, Value, and Benefit

Is *Service Builder* expensive?

As leaders consider the cost of *Service Builder*, focus on the difference between VALUE and COST and the likelihood that the software pays for itself in time saved. Most WELS congregations have less than 200 people in worship on a weekend. The discounted annual subscription (with minimum qualifying purchase of hymnals and/or psalters) is $400/year or $7.69 per week – or $5.97 per service (for 67 services, including midweek, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve/Day, New Year's Eve, etc).

Even if it saves an average of only one hour to create a worship folder (including copyright compliance license reporting), think of the time savings! At least a full work week per year just for the pastor! And the savings only increase with the complexity of the service and the number of people involved in planning. For example, cloud-based collaboration allows a choir director to quickly and easily insert the text of a choral selection and to deal with copyright issues.

It would be nice if some products were less expensive, but they aren't. Some parish leaders are likely familiar from their professions with "software as a service." They might be able to help others to understand pricing realities. Consider some comparisons:

> InDesign is available only by subscription to Adobe Creative Cloud, either as a single app, for $20.99 per **month**, or as part of the entire design suite, for $52.99 per **month**. (This is the software used for laying out the hymnal.)

> The PDF software, Acrobat: Standard is $13/**month**, Pro is $15.

And for both of these examples there are "economies of scale" – a far higher customer base than the number of WELS churches!

Here's another way to think about the rationale for the cost: NPH did a careful feasibility study of what pricing would make it viable for them to produce the various new hymnal products. The determination of pricing is dependent on the anticipated market. If the WELS market were ten times as large, the pricing might be different. A Q&A at christianworship.com puts it this way:

> The different pricings were carefully calculated to assure that production of *Christian Worship: Service Builder* was viable in a small denomination with a limited market share. While one might find a similar products for larger denominations, small market realities cannot be ignored. By way of comparison, consider what a popular application like TurboTax would cost if developed and sold to only 1000 users.

> Nevertheless, *Christian Worship: Service Builder* is not overly costly. For just a few dollars per week, congregations gain access to a powerful and valuable tool that will quickly pay for itself in time saved for pastor and church office. It will also save time in long-range worship planning, collaborative planning, and through automated copyright compliance reporting.

Is the *Playlist* module available as a standalone replacement for *Hymnsoft*?

The *Playlist* module isn't available or even functional separately. Those who want playlist capability need to purchase *Service Builder* as well. (As a point of comparison, CPH offers a auto-playlist add-on for a similar program for their hymnal priced at $225/year.)

Cost of *Service Builder* with the *Playlist* module vs *Hymnsoft*

The short answer to this cost comparison is that churches will receive far greater value from *Service Builder* with the *Playlist* module than from *Hymnsoft*.

Here's a longer answer: The *Service Builder Playlist* module is an annual subscription of $225. A fair comparison to *Hymnsoft* would not be merely to the basic package (Player 3.2) but also the m4a option: https://online.nph.net/hymnsoft-player-m4a-sound-recordings-set.html. Total of $425.

But even that is not a fair comparison when you consider the total integration of several elements in *Service Builder*:

- Worship planning, including cloud-based collaboration with others: musicians, church office.
- Worship variety. Drag and drop flexibility; access to far more than hymns and liturgies, including:
  - A wider variety of liturgy and accompaniment options
  - *CW: Psalter*
  - Gospel Acclamations – formerly called Verses of the Day (hundreds of graphic and audio files)
- Worship folder production
- Automatic playlist generation. With cloud-based collaboration someone other than the pastor can manage the playlists.
- Copyright compliance through automated background license reporting.
- All of these points offer significant time savings for each functionality: planning, worship folders, playlists, copyright compliance. Time saved makes the product cost-effective for many churches.

Finally, here is a Q&A from the hymnal website.

> Why is the pricing for the *Christian Worship: Playlist* so different than *HymnSoft*?
>
> Both the underlying technology and the market for copyrighted works has changed significantly. The technology has improved. *HymnSoft* development was stagnant, but *Christian Worship: Service Builder* development will be ongoing. The copyright situation is not so improved. Copyright holders are reluctant to grant permission for digital use. Copyright holders typically require higher royalty payments for digital use. These are costs outside the control of WELS or NPH.

The priority of excellent worship

A significant and dramatic shift has happened in my lifetime – from worship simply "by the book" with not much variety to a creative and curated variety, one that varies from congregation to congregation according to its culture and resources. The emerging priority given to worship (in partnership with outreach and discipleship) is evident in "The Foundation" – a set of resources from Congregational Services. (In October of 2021 this site is still under development.)

Even in a very small congregation whose budget covers little more than the pastor's salary and benefits plus utilities and mission offerings, one can make the case for prioritizing excellent worship. (Excellent does not mean difficult music or elitist standards but only what is achievable with local resources.)

Consider a hypothetical small congregation with an annual budget of $85,000. *Service Builder* with the *Playlist* module is $625/year. That is less than 1% of the budget (.74%).

See *Worship the Lord* #39 and #39c on variety. The article makes the case that variety is a stewardship issue. And offering our best in worship benefits every other aspect of a congregation's vitality and ministry.