

WALK TO
EMMAUS
THE UPPER ROOM®

Emmaus Online Community Database

*Case Study: Digital
Transformation of the
Community Through Custom
Database Solutions*

Executive Summary

This case study examines how the Walk to Emmaus Community, a faith-based organization with multiple regional chapters across Australia, transformed its administrative operations through the implementation of a custom database solution. Led by Paul Mulroney, a long-time community member and professional database developer, the Emmaus Online Community Database has revolutionized how the organization manages its core functions, including membership tracking, event planning, team selection, and communication.



The implementation has resulted in significant time savings, reduced administrative burden, improved data accuracy, and enhanced community engagement. What began as a solution to address spreadsheet limitations has evolved into a comprehensive platform now used by multiple Emmaus communities throughout Australia.

Background

The Organization

The Walk to Emmaus (or Emmaus Walk) is a spiritual retreat program developed by The Upper Room. It emerged from the Catholic Cursillo Movement in the 1960s and 1970s when Episcopalians and Lutherans began offering Cursillo. In 1978, The Upper Room of the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church trademarked Emmaus and adapted it into a primarily Protestant version.

The program operates through local communities across Australia, including Perth Emmaus, Great Southern Emmaus, and Perth Chrysalis. These communities organize spiritual retreats called "walks" (for adults) or "flights" (for youth in the Chrysalis program) that require extensive planning, coordination, and administrative support.

The Challenge

Prior to 2015, all Emmaus communities relied on Excel spreadsheets to manage:

- Community member information
- Team selection for retreats
- Email and postal communication lists

- Prayer vigil coordination
- Registration for events

This approach created several critical problems:

- Version control issues when multiple people updated the same spreadsheet
- Limited search functionality for complex queries (e.g., identifying qualified team members)
- Risk of accidental data deletion or corruption
- Difficulty tracking historical participation and roles
- Manual and error-prone communication processes
- Time-intensive administrative tasks
- Inconsistent data entry and validation
- Complex time zone calculations for prayer vigil coordination

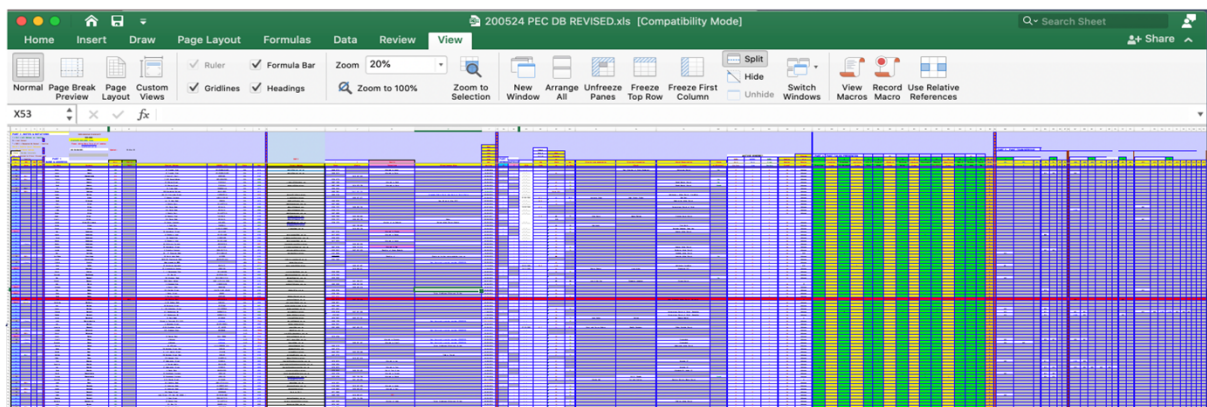


Figure 1 - A typical Excel "Database"

As one article notes, "Excel is not a database!" The limitations of spreadsheets were becoming increasingly apparent as the communities grew and their administrative needs became more complex.




Solution Development



In 2015, Paul Mulroney, who serves as a development manager for Logical Developments, began developing a prototype online database system specifically designed for Emmaus communities. After presenting the concept at National conferences in 2018 and 2019, interest grew among other Emmaus communities facing similar challenges.






Figure 2 - Community Database Prototype








Key Features and Benefits

Features:





- 



ID: 14
 Post: Muhonyi







Context	Index	Gatherings	Team	Issue	News	Analysis
First Name	Paul					Last Name: Muhonyi
Gender	<input type="radio"/> Male	<input type="radio"/> Female				DOB: 20 OCT 1969
<input type="checkbox"/> Do Not Contact <input type="checkbox"/> Inactive <input type="checkbox"/> Deceased						Year: 2000
Address	16 Gargentile Street					
Suburb	BENTLEY		State	WA		
Postcode	6102					
Prof Name	9458 3889		Other Phone	9429 681 615		
Badge Name	Badge Name		Contact by Email	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Email	pmuhonyi@theobaltpublishments.com.au					
Occupation	Self employed					
In case of emergency						
Contact	Caroline Muhonyi		Phone	9458 209 932		

Benefits:

- ## 2. Team Selection Assistance

Features:

- 
North Ennals

[Home](#)
[Administration](#)
[Community](#)
[Users](#)
[Registers](#)
[Reviews](#)
[Health](#)
[Gatherings](#)
[7213](#)
[Team Selection](#)
[Candidates](#)
[Search](#)

[7](#)
[There is no entry](#)
[4](#)
[Include Clergy](#)

Gender: [Male](#) [Female](#) [All](#)

☒ [Asked](#)
☒ [declined](#)
☒ [Now served](#)
☒ [Never served](#)
☒ [Times served](#)
☒ [Pines served](#)

☒ [Search](#)

☒ [Analyse Results](#)

		Email	Work	Last Served	Times Served	Pines Served	Miss Given
4119	2019	14	ALD(2), ASD(2), BM(1), LD(1)				
3396	2019	11	ATJ(2), LD(1), MD(8)				
7213	2019	10	ALD(1), LD(1), LD(1), PD(1)				
6673	2019	8	ASD(5), PD(3)				
1902	2019	8	ASD(8)				
9167	2021	6	ASD(3), MD(3)				
2111	2019	6	ALD(1), LD(1), LD(1), LD(2)				
4706	2019	6	ALD(2), PD(1), LD(3)				
3766	2018	6	ALD(1), LD(1), LD(2), LD(2)				
2641	2019	6	ALD(1), LD(1), LD(1), LD(3)				
291	2019	5	ALD(1), LD(1), LD(1), LD(2)	15	2019	4	
9112	2019	3	ALD(1), LD(1), LD(1)				
2793	2019	3	ATJ(1), MD(1), LD(1)				
949	2028	2	ASD(2)				
1046	2019	2	MD(2)				
3777	2019	2	MD(2)				
1440	2018	2	ALD(1), LD(1)				
218	2020	2	MD(2)				
901	2019	1	ATJ(1)				
791	2019	1	ATJ(1)				
758	2019	1	ATJ(1)				

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Benefits:

- More informed decision-making for team selection committees
- Ability to balance teams with appropriate experience levels
- Reduced time spent reviewing candidate qualifications
- Ensures appropriate rotation of roles and responsibilities

3. Prayer Vigil Management

Features:

- One-click vigil creation
- Automatic time zone conversion
- Email confirmations with calendar reminders
- Printable signup sheets for offline use
- Formatted display sheets for events

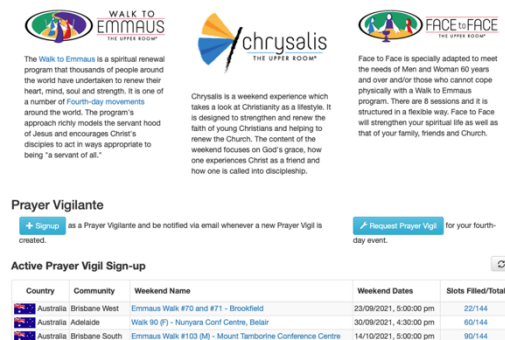


Figure 5 - Integrated Vigil Site

Benefits:

- Eliminates complex time zone calculations
- Improves participation through automated reminders
- Accommodates both online and offline community members
- Creates professional materials for event display

4. Registration Streamlining

Features:

- Integration with existing member profiles
- Automatic data validation
- Real-time access for walk/flight leadership teams

Benefits:

- Eliminates manual data entry
- Reduces communication errors
- Provides up-to-date information to all stakeholders
- Centralizes dietary and special requirements

5. Newsletter Distribution

Features:

- Integrated mailing list management
- Automated email distribution

- CSV export for postal mailings
- Delivery status tracking

Benefits:

- Significant time savings for newsletter coordinators
- Improved delivery rates
- Enhanced ability to reach all community members
- Reduced manual sorting and processing

Implementation Results

Since its introduction in 2019, the Emmaus Online Community Database has achieved significant adoption:

- 6 communities now use the full online database system
- 18 communities utilize the online prayer vigil system

The primary outcomes include:

1. **Reduced Administrative Burden:** Community leaders report spending significantly less time on administrative tasks and more time focusing on spiritual and community-building activities.
2. **Improved Data Accuracy:** The system's data validation features have virtually eliminated common errors like incorrect email addresses that previously led to communication failures.
3. **Enhanced Community Engagement:** Better communication tools have strengthened connections between community members, particularly for those less active on social media.
4. **Seamless Collaboration:** Multiple stakeholders can now access and update information simultaneously without version control issues.
5. **Future-Ready Platform:** The system continues to evolve with planned enhancements including "read status" tracking, "bounce handling," and enhanced security features.

Lessons Learned

1. **Specialized Solutions for Specialized Needs:** While general-purpose tools like spreadsheets offer flexibility, organizations with specific workflows benefit greatly from purpose-built solutions.
2. **Balance Digital and Traditional Approaches:** The system accommodates both tech-savvy users and those who prefer traditional methods (e.g., printable signup sheets for prayer vigils), ensuring no one is left behind.
3. **Incremental Adoption:** Starting with specific features (like the prayer vigil system) allowed communities to experience benefits before committing to full implementation.
4. **Domain Expertise Matters:** Development led by someone who deeply understood the organization's processes resulted in a solution that precisely addressed real-world needs.

Future Direction

The Emmaus Online Community Database continues to evolve with several key initiatives planned:

System Enhancements

- Read status tracking for emails
- Automated bounce handling
- Enhanced security with Google authentication

Support for New Programs

The database is being expanded to accommodate new Emmaus programs including:

- **Face to Face:** A program designed for older adults, this adaptation of the Walk to Emmaus experience requires modifications to the database structure to handle its unique event format and participant management needs.
- **Village Encounter:** This emerging program will require new modules within the database to facilitate its distinctive approach to community building and spiritual formation.

These new programs present different administrative challenges compared to traditional walks and flights, necessitating system adjustments to:

- Support different role structures
- Manage varied event timelines
- Track new types of participant journeys
- Accommodate program-specific documentation and workflows

Expansion Plans

As adoption grows, the system is positioned to become the standard administrative platform for Walk to Emmaus communities throughout Australia, potentially expanding to international communities in the future.

Conclusion

The Emmaus Online Community Database represents a successful digital transformation for a faith-based organization. By replacing ad-hoc spreadsheets with a purpose-built database system, the Walk to Emmaus communities have significantly reduced administrative burdens, improved data quality, and enhanced community engagement.

This case study demonstrates how specialized technical solutions, when properly aligned with organizational needs, can free up valuable human resources to focus on mission-critical activities rather than administrative tasks. For the Walk to Emmaus, this means more energy devoted to their spiritual mission and less time spent on spreadsheet management.

Want to know more? Contact us!

P: 08 9458 3889

E: sales@logicaldevelopments.com.au