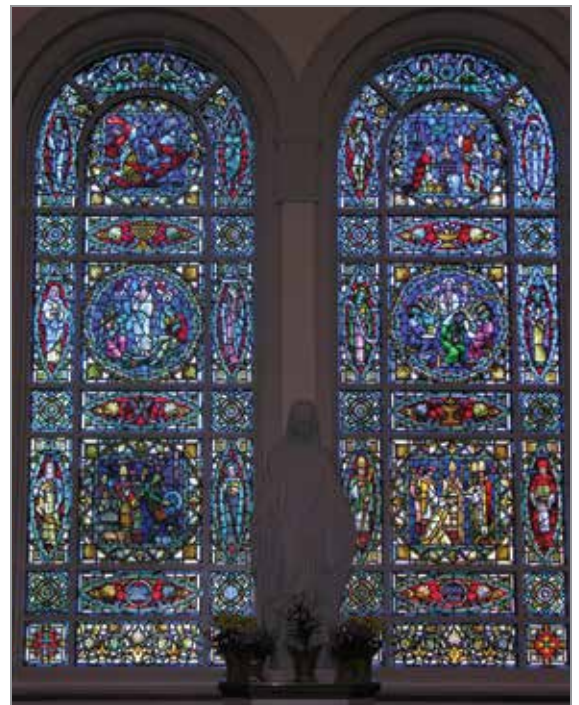# Cemetery Management

A church's cemetery represents the history of the community. In most cemeteries, gravestones can be found that date back decades. In some parishes, gravestones date back to the mid-19th century or even earlier. Cemeteries were often established surrounding the original church structure, providing a tangible link between the then-current parishioners and their ancestors. When the church community expands, new lands are acquired and facilities are built. However, the original cemeteries are often still active, with additional plots being established and burials taking place. In large church communities or parishes with an older population, burials may be taking place several times a week. In newer or younger communities, burials may only occur a couple of times each year. Eventually a cemetery is filled to capacity, and a new cemetery needs to be established if the church community is still vibrant.

Church cemeteries serve as a link to the community's history, a final resting place for family members, and yes, a source of revenue for the church itself. Normally individual plots are sold with the understanding that the sale price comes with a promise of perpetual care. The church takes responsibility for maintaining the grounds—cutting and trimming the grass, caring for the grave markers, maintaining whatever road or other infrastructure is associated with the cemetery, and perhaps operating and maintaining an on-site chapel or other structures. These maintenance functions require at least some expenditure of funds, even if the cemetery itself is full. A portion of the sale price of the plot therefore needs to be set aside in trust for use to pay these maintenance expenses. As time goes by and costs increase due to inflation, these maintenance costs will also rise. The funds held in trust need to generate sufficient income to cover today's maintenance costs while growing in value with inflation to be able to generate future income to cover future maintenance costs.

Representing the church's history, the records of the cemetery should also be maintained. Historical information about the individuals interred and perhaps even some information about their lives and contributions provide the legacy of the church community. As an active business, records regarding the location of individual plots, whether or not the plot has been sold, who is the current owner, whether or not an individual has been interred in the plot, and when the interment took place becomes an information system that can be automated. When this information system establishes a link between the data and a physical location in the cemetery, the need for use of a mapping system, or Geographic Information System (GIS), becomes evident.
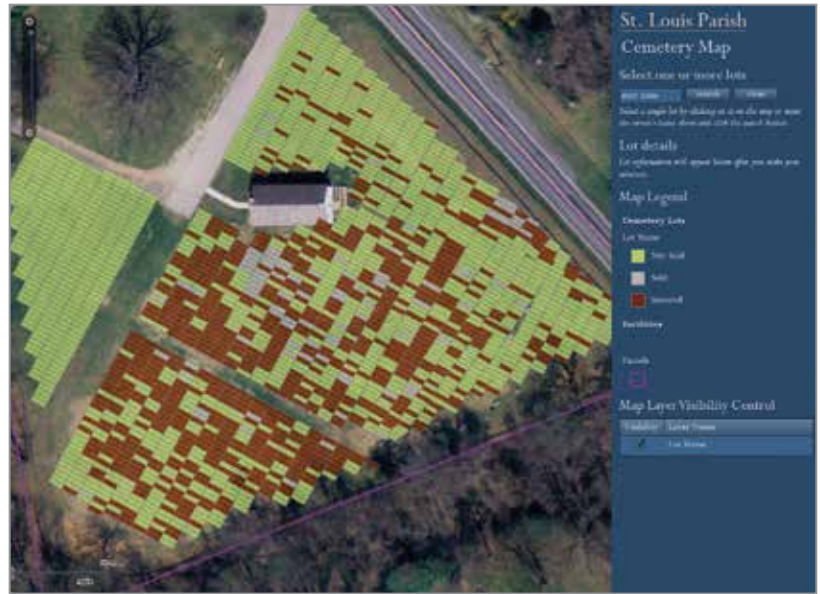
Spatial Systems Associates, Inc. (SSA), a Columbia, MD-based GIS and Facilities Management Information System (FMIS) firm, has developed an application to assist in cemetery management. The Cemetery Management Application utilizes the internet to create a web-based viewer designed with the end user in mind. There are a variety of intended users for this application:

- **The cemetery management personnel »** the application maps the locations of individual plots within the cemetery. These plots are represented by polygons that are overlaid on a map of the cemetery grounds. Individual plots are linked to records in a database. The database contains information about the status of the plot (available, sold, occupied), the owner of the plot, if a burial has taken place who has been interred along with information about the individual. The application also provides

reports regarding the acreage of the cemetery (for mowing and fertilizing purposes), the number of interred plots (for estimating trimming requirements), the number of unsold plots, etc. Graphically, the application provides the ability to visually understand the locations within the cemetery where plots are available for sale or where resale of plots may be an opportunity.

- **Family members or interested parties** » the application provides the ability to locate individual names within the cemetery utilizing an internet interface. A user can enter the last name of an individual they believe is buried in the cemetery and the application will identify all plots with an interment by that name. The application will also display the current location of the requesting device along with the location of the selected interred individual, thus assisting in locating a particular plot that the user would like to visit. The cemetery application also provides the opportunity for a family member to store information about the individual interred—biographical data, ancestry, pictures, and other records. This information is then available over the internet for any individual who may be visiting the cemetery

and is interested in finding out about the life of someone whose grave they are in front of.

A cemetery is an often overlooked part of the business of the church, however it is both a source of revenue and an ongoing obligation. SSA's web-based cemetery management application provides a tool to organize this information utilizing current technology while providing an additional service to families. SSA also provides services to get the information necessary for the use of the application into an acceptable form, and to assist the church if necessary in its maintenance. If a parish is already utilizing a database of information regarding their cemetery, but that system does not include a mapping or an internet component, SSA can facilitate integration of the existing data system into a web-based and map-based system such as the one described herein.

Please contact Spatial Systems for more information or for a demonstration of this functionality, along with other church management automation tools.

A computerized cemetery system can provide a rich repository of information about the people who have been interred. Information from a database, scanned records, perhaps an obituary or pictures of the individual's grave marker or pictures of the individual themselves can be maintained in the system.

Cemetery Management