



Software conversion does not have to be a painful exercise for church leaders

Biting The Bullet

by Ken Hicks

Many churches endure ill-equipped software programs primarily because it's too painful to think about converting to another software package. But this doesn't have to be the case. There are many benefits to switching to a new software vendor in order to best meet your church's needs.

For some churches, they simply outgrow their existing software package; for others, the software they currently are using doesn't have the ability to track the information necessary for running their church successfully.

Having been involved in converting thousands of clients to ACS, we have walked many churches through this process. Whatever the reason for your church's conversion, here are a few guidelines to help you prepare for the work ahead.

Conversion Takes Time

In a perfect world, once you buy new software and stop using the old software, it would instantly install itself onto all your office computers while you sleep, convert all the data, and be ready to use in the morning.

But let's be realistic. The more records a church has, the more time it takes to convert. This said, a small church with few records may not have any problem converting to a new software system in a matter of days. Whereas a larger church with 2,000 to 4,000 records or more might need anywhere from one to three weeks in order to convert all its data to the new system.

Your new software vendor should be able to give you a sense of how long your data conversion should take—and should walk you through each step of the way.

Before transferring all your church's data to the new software system, it is first necessary to clean up existing church data records to make sure that the information is transferred correctly.

First, it's best to minimize post-conversion clean up by making sure your data is consistent in your old

software program. Review all records and make sure the cases are all the same and that you are keeping track of people in similar ways. (i.e. All uppercase letters throughout records; one record per person or one record per family.) Also, getting rid of deactivated records is another helpful way to eliminate confusion during the conversion process.

Different software packages have different fields for all the information you need to store. It's very important to assign data fields properly so that the information on the records you use are transferred to a logical place within the new software package. (i.e. Names, addresses, occupations, cell phone numbers, etc. are all transferred to the same fields within the new software package.) Relocating data fields thoroughly will ensure less clean up time after data has been transferred.

Another way to avoid major time output after converting data is to work with a data conversion specialist supplied by your software vendor to help you with the conversion process. This specialist is someone who regularly works with churches to convert software packages and is aware of typical issues that go along with a data conversion. Also, this person can help bring up important issues that will make the conversion process go as smoothly as possible.

For instance, if your church has any special requirements for the way you track information, let your data conversion specialist know first so they can be of help to you the most.

For example, during one conversion process, an ACS Technologies data conversion specialist found that the church had put asterisks next to member names that signified something, but they were lost in the conversion because the church didn't make this detail known. Let your conversion specialist know everything you want to accomplish ahead of time; this will speed up the process and provide the fewest headaches for you and your church staff.

Lastly, here is a short checklist to go through before purchasing a new church management package to make sure that your data conversion won't be unmanageable:

- ▶ What are your specific informational needs—does the new software package have user-defined fields as well as fields for critical information that your church needs to store?
- ▶ Does the software vendor provide a data conversion specialist to walk you through the conversion process?
- ▶ What support and training options and services does the software company provide for new clients?

- ▶ Is the software company able to give you an idea of how long your data conversion will take? Ask for client references who have converted from the same software package you will be converting from.

Hopefully, these tips, along with answers to the questions above, will help you make a wise decision when looking for a new church management system. By researching the company behind the software package, you can often find out how clients are treated and how conversion issues are handled. This tells you much about how other software issues will be dealt with in time. ❖

Ken Hicks is the advanced client services manager for the Professional Services Department at ACS Technologies. ACS Technologies has been in business for 27 years this year, and currently serves more than 22,000 client partners. For more information on ACS, please visit www.acstechnologies.com. For answers to your conversion questions, e-mail conversions@acstechnologies.com.
