

# Determining **YOUR CHURCH** Software Needs

## A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

By Lauren Hunter

**M**ost organizations rely heavily on technology these days to help accomplish daily tasks and manage their offices, and churches are no exception. Now more than ever, churches have a wide selection of software products to choose from to manage membership and people records, track contributions, and handle financial matters such as payroll and check writing, handle church volunteers, and even keep track of attendance and church growth. In order to select a software package to best fit your needs, below is a list of the top eight considerations to keep in mind when reviewing management software solutions for your church or nonprofit organization.

### Flexibility

Any good administrative software program will offer a selection of module applications, that is, a-la-carte solutions that can be assimilated based on need. Typically, some smaller institutions will start out with one or two basic applications and add others as its needs become more complicated. A successful software company should always offer stand-alone software modules that can be easily integrated with other modules, but that can also function independently for maximum administrative control. Software flexibility ensures that the company has thought ahead to prepare for the special needs of the organizations it serves.

### Administrative Functions

The first and foremost module should be an administrator module with the ability to handle all data typically used by churches. Functionality to manage church members and guests, organizations, contributions, attendance and special mailings should be some of the most important things you look for. A good administrative module should provide a seamless way to access church member records, review their contributions and register them for classes or Bible studies. This module is usually where churches begin when purchasing administrative software; it will become the most used piece of software a church will ever use.

### Financial Functions

The second most important module for churches is the financial software module. A good financial program should include a general ledger function as well as accounts receivable, since churches require a detailed way to accept charitable contributions and provide tax records. Many of these programs are based on the needs of most nonprofit organizations, but churches should check to make sure the financial program can handle its specific concerns. Additionally, all financial software programs should be compliant with FASB and FAS 117 standards (Financial Accounting Standards Board).

### Customization

One software package never entirely meets the needs of every organization. One of the most valuable features that software manufacturers can build into their systems is the ability to be customized in order to work with many different types of church denominations. Each module should have a large number of user-defined fields so that organizations can name their own fields to be filled in. This feature truly separates the wheat from the chaff. If a software company has unlimited user-defined fields, even better. These are especially helpful in managing financial data and church information. With a customizable program, churches will have the ability to organize their proprietary information and provide better services to the families it serves.

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### Usability

Not all software programs are created equal when it comes to usability. A good software company will offer a free modified version of the software so that organizations can manipulate the program and get a feel for how easy it is to use. It is important to take advantage of this because it can greatly help with the overall decision-making process. The first thing to note is the operating system—does it run on Windows®? Does the program function like other programs your staff is used to working with? The program should make logical sense and have an easy-to-understand format that doesn't leave you baffled by the simplest of tasks. Also, some programs offer the ability to export data to work with other software programs. This may not be the No. 1 item on your list, but it can come in handy in many situations.

### Scalability

Some churches start out small with merely a handful of members and grow steadily over a period of years; other churches grow very rapidly within a relatively short amount of time. Either way, a church's software program needs to be able to scale up, or down, according to its individual growth. Choosing a program that will work with a small number of church members and expand in function to store and manage data for a church of 20,000 or more is invaluable. The last thing an organization should do is implement one program that meets their needs today, then in several years, have to switch programs because the first one wasn't capable of expanding as the church expanded. Even if a church thinks in a million years they will never have more than 2,000 churchgoers in attendance, prepare for the growth now—just in case.

### Client Support

Many administrators soon become very friendly with the client support hotline at the software company they've chosen. Check this aspect out before you make any final decisions. Talk to other clients and ask them how the client service measures up. Find out the hours of availability—is there a 24/7 hotline? See if there is a client support representative in your area that can provide onsite training to staff members. Does the software company offer annual training conferences on their software? Do they offer updates to fix bugs in the program? How does client support handle issues such as this? Ask lots of questions and weigh the answers carefully before making any decision. Remember, a church isn't just buying the software; it is purchasing the client support services too.

### Cost

Lastly, the financial output should be weighed after carefully measuring all other features of a software package. Many of the administrative software packages are priced competitively, so price should not be the main objective. Over the long run, making sure the software a church has selected meets all its needs is much more valuable than saving a few dollars a year. The benefits of purchasing a product that you are truly happy with and that helps your organization reach its goals is the most important factor of all. ❖

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