

# Effective Technology Solutions For Churches

by Joe McKnight

**By failing to ensure that some basic principles are correctly implemented at your church, they can quickly become ineffective**

Imagine for a moment that you are John Q. Public, and that you are the central character in the following scenario: You are searching for a church to join. On several occasions, you have passed a church that has just constructed an impressive facility on a beautiful piece of property situated near a major highway.

You make the decision to attend worship services on the next Sunday. When the time arrives, you are standing in the door. Upon entering, you observe that things aren't exactly what you expected. A beautiful auditorium, with state-of-the-art audio/visual equipment and luxurious

furnishings, is being used for the nursery, with cartoons showing where a compelling PowerPoint® presentation should have been.

After some searching, you discover that the main worship service is being held in a hallway along the back of the building. The custodian who is responsible for the immaculate condition of the campus has been given the additional duty of playing the piano.

After a few discordant notes, it becomes evident that his talents aren't being properly utilized. You observe that the senior minister, with years of education and

experience, is attempting to manage the myriad of buttons and switches on a portable sound system. Again, the cacophony of squeaks and squeals confirms that he is out of his area of expertise.

These, and other pertinent observations, lead you to conclude that this church has excellent potential, but that the elements need to be put in their proper places. Now, take the framework of this scenario, and apply it to the use of church management software, and you may begin to understand one of the major challenges facing today's churches.

Many churches invest significant funds in the hardware and software technologies needed to effectively manage the modern information management demands of the ecclesiastical community. But, by failing to ensure that some basic principles are correctly implemented, they can quickly become as ineffective and inefficient as the hypothetical church in the opening scenario. Consider the following four principles that will help avoid that type of situation.

### **Many churches invest largely in hardware and software technology, but fail to use them correctly and quickly become inefficient.**

#### **Hardware/Software Compatibility**

One of the unfortunate facts of life is that computer hardware does become outdated. A level of storage capacity or operating speed that was sufficient when the unit(s) were purchased years ago may simply not be sufficient to handle the complexity of emerging software applications.

It isn't necessary that a church have a super-computer capable of running the operations of a small country. But, a hardware/software compatibility gap can be costly in terms of continual service calls by technicians, and in replacing software that is corrupted.

A more ominous outcome is the dreaded "crash," when data is lost because church leadership didn't see the prudence in periodic reviews of the adequacy of the computer network.

#### **Minimal Staff Proficiency**

No hardware/software configuration can overcome the negatives introduced by staff members who don't

have some minimal proficiency in their assigned areas of responsibility. This is not a criticism of staff members who are not computer-savvy, nor a condemnation of churches that do not have the financial resources to hire a full-time staff with college degrees and professional designations. It is simply recognition of the fact that those who are assigned duties involving information management technology should be adequately trained for the task.

Anyone operating a computer without basic skills needs training, whether it is an on-site software trainer, a Web seminar, or a couple of classes in a local community college or adult education center. A financial secretary should be acquainted with fundamental principles of accounting.

No church would hire a minister of music who doesn't understand music theory, nor should they charge a staff member who doesn't understand debits and credits to be responsible for the financial operations. These tools are no less essential to the successful performances of their jobs than a seminary degree is to the pastor.

The reporting formats in the software applications are more complex than ever. Churches are now having audits performed by professional auditors. It is vital that information be recorded and reported in a thorough and complete manner.

Often, a church will change software every few years, when the underlying problem is that their staff members have never been adequately trained to function within the demands of the software applications that are being abandoned.

#### **Conformity To Design**

Any software application worth using is the end product of long and arduous process of programming skills and testing. Compliance to professional and industry standards is vital. The software, from a concept on a sketch pad to the finished product, has been designed to accomplish specific goals by performing specific procedures.

In other words, use the software, within some degree of tolerance, in the manner that it was intended to be used. Resist the temptation to modify, customize or entirely abandon the design of the software.

Certain functions of the software applications are designed to perform certain tasks. For example, a general ledger module is not really the proper place to issue payroll checks, if the intent is to manage withholding taxes and to issue W-2 forms. Accounts receivable is likely not the best tool to manage contributions.

It may be made to work, but the risks of errors of omission and commission are great. When errors do occur, the "cure is often worse than the disease." There are few things more frustrating than to attempt correction of errors created when software is used in a manner that it was not designed to be used.

### **Periodic Updates & Revisions**

The leading church management software providers constantly are improving their products. Any time a new version or revision is rolled out, there are bugs that need correcting. The nature of programming all but prohibits perfection in such a complex and demanding undertaking. But there is more to updates and revisions than corrections.

A competent process of review and evaluation will constantly produce new and improved ways of doing things. Feedback from clients is a fertile source of new functions, techniques and procedures. The laws and regulations that must be obeyed change on a regular basis, and the software application must be up to date with those changes.

If you are satisfied with the performance and efficiency of your current information management system, don't worry about updating. But it must also be understood that the end product of that system is not going to change.

In other words, if you keep doing what you've been doing, you're going to keep getting what you've been getting. If that's sufficient, then you are fortunate. At some point in time, however, it will likely become evident that the demands for information management have outstripped your capacity, because you're so far behind the mainstream of available technology.

The only solution, at that point, is a costly, and sometimes traumatic, leap through the technological time tunnel. In the end, gradual change and progress is the best path.

Return for a moment to the scenario presented in the introduction. It cannot be said that the church was not functioning, for it was. It cannot be said that the church was not fruitful, for it may well have been. But it can certainly be said that the church was not operating to its level of potential.

The concept of "just getting by" is no longer acceptable. Why should it be acceptable to a church to "just get by" when it comes to information management?

Perhaps it is time for an analysis of your hardware/software/technology resources. Are you equipped to meet the ever-changing technology demands of the 21st century church? Or are you operating at less than full capacity, and using yesterday's tools to meet today's challenges?

Maybe now is a good time to consider a new information management partner—one that can address these and other concerns and move you and your church into the 21st century with ease. ❖

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