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An Introduction to SaaS from ACS Technologies

Software as a Service is a relatively new trend among software providers in which an application is designed to be accessed on the Web rather than installed on the user's workstation. Though the software is Web-based, it is not browser-based.

Instead, the software provider develops a thin client application that the user can download one time to their workstation. Once the application is installed, the user's workstation maintains constant communication with the software provider's server whenever the application is in use.

The application is called a thin client because it provides a considerably smaller download than locally housed applications, or fat clients, while maintaining the same robust functionality. The hosted server houses all of the user's data; none is stored on the user's computer.

There are many benefits to using hosted software. Namely, since SaaS is Web-based, users can work in their church management system (CMS) anywhere there is an Internet connection. With ministers continuously on the go, it's a big advantage to be able to access church records and enter updates immediately so that the church staff always has the most current data, no matter where they happen to be.

In addition, many churches cannot afford full-time IT personnel, yet they still need a properly maintained network. Hosted solutions include network hardware and software maintenance as part of the service, eliminating the need for on-staff technicians at the church.

Thus, all hardware repairs, upgrades, and re-

placements to the server are responsibilities of the service provider, as are server operating system upgrades, patches, and fixes. The church software should also be up to date at all times because the service provider applies upgrades and service packs automatically.

A good service provider has 24-hour network support to ensure the church never loses its connection to the server. A good provider also backs up the data it stores, so the church has an automatic disaster recovery plan in place. In most cases, these backups are stored in an off-site fire-proof vault so that if the service provider experiences an emergency, there are still good backups of client data.

SaaS is also secure. As with most other Web-based applications, users are protected by logins. Only clients with authenticated usernames and passwords can access the service. In addition, server security patches are constantly updated by the service provider, and a firewall prevents unauthorized intrusion.

There may be some disadvantages, however, to using SaaS. One potential drawback of using a hosted solution rather than an on-premise solution is that, since it is a service, there is a monthly fee as opposed to a one-time product fee for locally housed applications. Churches need to plan ahead to budget for the monthly cost.

Another drawback can be converting current church data to the new service. If the church's current CMS is written on a different platform than the hosted application, it could take a few days for the service provider to convert the data to the new platform. This means that during that time, the church would not be able to enter any data.

One other factor to consider is that, in the event that the service provider experiences downtime, whether planned or unplanned, the church cannot access its data until the service is restored. While it's rare that this will happen, it's still a possibility the church should be aware of.

Selecting an SaaS is a bold step for a church, so it's imperative to shop around and find a solution that fits the church's needs. Don't be afraid to ask plenty of questions. If your church does not have an on-staff IT technician, ask a technosavvy member of the congregation to help research and communicate with potential service providers. When weighing the advantages and disadvantages, always keep the church's best interest in mind.

Good luck, and if you're looking for a place to start, feel free to visit www.acstechnologies.com/ondemand, where you can discover the ACS Technologies hosted service and download a free ACS OnDemand service brief.

As manager of client services at ACS Technologies, Mark Williams works personally with hundreds of churches across America to implement and maintain their Web-based ministry. If you're considering a hosted solution, feel free to e-mail him at mark.williams@acstechnologies.com.

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