

Chapter 16: Computerized Systems (or) Technology

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Introduction

The church has changed in the last 2,000 years, and so has technology. In the past, information was kept in journals and ledgers. Today, many congregations use computerized applications for things like:

- Member and visitor data
- Gift and offering tracking
- Content creation tools for weekly church bulletins
- Desktop publishing for newsletters and brochures
- Accounting and check printing
- Employee records
- Reporting for boards and organizations
- Calendars for event planning and participation
- E-mail and distribution lists
- Internet presence on the World Wide Web
- Virtualize meetings
- Document retention and sharing

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Analyzing Needs and Wants

When deciding on changing existing manual procedures to a computer system, the congregation should first analyze its needs and wants. There are many options available on the market and choosing the best solution of software and hardware may differ depending on the size of the congregation. Points to consider when evaluating include available technology.

■ Accessibility and Reliability

A typical system might only be available during business hours while hosted on a desktop PC. This may suit most congregations for their pastor or office secretary's use; however, other congregation officers may also need access off-hours. There may be a need for network setup with remote or Internet access. Perhaps online information should be available to the congregation members and inquiring visitors. If so, expectations may require 24/7 access with 99.9 percent uptime.

■ Security

Maintaining data access rights and privileges should be flexible as officers change positions or new candidates need access to the system. The data should be safe from corruption and viewing by unauthorized users.

■ Scalability

A system that may work well with one user may not perform well with additional users or processes running. Data information may need to be shared among system modules or across a network requiring connectivity to multiple workstations. Consider processing speed, disk memory, disk space and hardware capability, thereby avoiding a "slow system" and providing for future expansion and software upgrades.

■ Affordability

Every congregation is restricted to some degree by budgets, so costs will also affect purchasing new systems

and optional add-ons. Although greatly appreciated, donated used equipment may eventually cost more to maintain due to age and compatibility. In addition, donated used software may cause issues if not registered properly.

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Software Applications

In searching the market for software, many applications can be found, but they may not all be the "right one" for fulfilling the congregation's needs. There are single user, network or Internet-accessed applications. Factors to consider in choosing the best solution include:

■ Features

If the new system does not provide many of the necessary capabilities desired, then it likely will not be used at all. To prevent this, define the application requirements of the processes to be routinely performed. Using these requirements as a checklist will help determine if one application choice may be better suited over another.

■ Training

A good application will have a text manual complete with procedural steps giving examples for data entry and processing. A better application may provide an optional training session; for free or at an additional cost. The training is usually beneficial depending on the complexity of the application system. Ideally, the software system intuitively leads the user through the processes with on-line help available at the touch of a button.

■ Standard Operating Procedures

There should be documented steps for performing the routine duties of the system user. Best practice for the congregation's policies, standards and guidelines may also include procedures used by the pastor, church officers and office staff. These should be reviewed regularly and modified as processes change.

■ Technical Help

The software vendor provides technical support should there be a need for help with the application. Check for extra costs and hours available.

■ Application Security

Most congregation information is confidential. Only elected or designated members and staff should be authorized to enter or view this information. The software application should have restricted security access requiring passwords. If different software modules are integrated with the system, verify that unauthorized users cannot obtain financial or personal data. Security access should be reviewed yearly.

■ System Backups

Saving a copy of the system files should be performed routinely for the potential need of data recovery. The disk backups may be stored on a choice of media such as on a CD or external disk drive or with a trusted online backup service. The backup media should then be stored

at another location should a disaster strike. Be sure to test recovery procedures to verify that the data will be retrievable.

■ **Compliance**

Software licensing compliance is required by law. Purchase the correct type and number of licenses based on the number of computers or number of users. See the software's end user license agreement for details.

16.400: Computer Hardware

The computer systems found in today's congregations may be of any of these configurations:

- A single desktop computer or laptop in a central office location.
- The pastor's and office secretary's PC linked together for file sharing (aka peer-to-peer network).
- A network hosting several PCs throughout the church building.
- Applications hosted on the Internet accessible from anywhere there is internet access.

Congregations, large or small, have the capability to use modern technology and effectively manage their church for Christ's ministry to their community or to the world!

Things to consider if purchasing and maintaining computer equipment:

■ **Space Planning:**

Decide where the hardware will be placed and if the environment is suitable. Considerations include available electricity, maintained room temperature, internet access, printer setup, future expansion, etc. Offsite hosting may be a better alternative.

■ **System Security:**

Locate the system in a safe and secure environment that is not readily available to outsiders, and secure the operating system and files from vandalism, hackers and Internet thieves. Software solutions include:

- Anti-virus software to routinely check and treat any system infections
- Spyware protection from Internet thieves
- Content filtering which shields inappropriate Web sites
- E-mail spam filters to rid junk mail
- Firewall to protect the network from outsiders via the internet or remote access

■ **Patch Management:**

Malware can cause havoc with your computer system and may expose sensitive data to theft. Routinely installing new release updates of operating system applications is essential in warding off these attacks.

■ **Hardware Replacement:**

Eventually, the system hardware becomes obsolete due to age, limitations or damage. Computer equipment is constantly improving. Switching to new equipment may be better than upgrading old, so consider both options. Be wary of donated equipment that is often outdated. Knowledgeable members are a great resource when updating your system.

■ **Network or Internet Hosting:**

A standalone desktop computer or laptop may be a suitable solution for limited work tasks, but is only accessible by one user at a time. Connecting PCs together will allow files to be shared for tasks such as proofreading or gathering items together for newsletters, annual reports, etc. Internet providers allow disk space for hosting Web sites for sharing information and are identified by a unique domain name for the congregation. There are also certain software applications for congregations that are hosted on the Internet which may reduce the need for expensive equipment.

16.700: CTS Church Management Software

Concordia Technology Solutions (CTS), the church administration division of Concordia Publishing House (CPH), has provided ministry-enhancing software for over 25 years. CTS provides both PC-based and web-based Church Management Software options which can help track membership, event attendance, contributions, and finance.

Shepherd's Staff is a PC-based program that has been used by thousands of churches for 20 years. Church360° is a web-based software suite that includes Church360° Members, Church360° Unite, and Church360° Ledger. All three Church360° products allow access to your church information from anywhere.

Nearly all denominations are represented in CTS's customer base, even though their products are developed for the purpose of assisting LCMS congregations.

To start a free trial or request a live demo, visit concordiatechnology.org or contact CTS Software Sales at 800-325-2399 or softwaresales@cts.cph.org.

16.705: Shepherd's Staff

Shepherd's Staff is a complete church management system that contains five modules — Membership, Attendance, Contributions, Finances and Calendar, as well as technical support and upgrades.

The Membership module provides complete membership management including:

- Tracks contact information, including multiple emails, addresses, and phone numbers
- Stores confidential notes securely
- Generates mail merges, labels, mail barcodes

The Attendance module allows for:

- Entering attendance quickly and accurately
- Identifying absent members in need of a pastoral visit
- Categorizing events and track attendance patterns using lists, graphs, and reports
- An optional check-in feature to manage event attendance and visitor information securely

The Contributions module allows you to:

- Create an IRS compliant giving statement with an unlimited number of contributor and offering categories
- Analyze pledges and contributions with reports and graphs

In the Finance module the authorized person can:

- Track an unlimited number of funds, accounts, and vendors
- Set up checks, deposits, and journal entries to process automatically
- Prepare and print checks
- Generate invoices, track payments by multiple payees, and perform additional accounts receivable functions

The Calendar module is used to:

- Set your church schedule and produce calendars
- Schedule rooms, rentals, services, cleaning, and meetings
- Track equipment usage and inventory

To download a working trial or request a live demo, visit shepherdsstaff.org or contact CTS Software Sales at 800-325-2399 or softwaresales@cts.cph.org.

16.710:

Church360°

Church360° is a complete suite of web-based church management software that provides ministry leaders and church administrators with the tools they need and the flexibility they desire to manage their congregational information, website, and finances.

Church360° Members is web-based software that helps pastors and ministry leaders get to know their people better and understand the trends of their congregation. With Church360° Members, you can build an extensive member directory, record contributions and attendance, and track congregational trends.

Church360° Unite is an easy website builder software that helps you build the church website you've always envisioned—regardless of your technical experience. Develop a fully functional and professional-looking website that includes blogs, calendars, and user groups. Church members can even log in, update information, join groups, listen to past sermons, and interact with each other.

Church360° Ledger is finance software designed exclusively for churches. It streamlines the accounting process so balancing budgets and managing accounts are simple and intuitive. It allows you to track dollars coming in and out of your church, make and record deposits, pay bills, create custom reports, and share financial statements with church leaders.

These three great web-based applications work together to provide a complete church management solution. To start a free trial or request a live demo of any or all of the Church360° products, please visit us at church360.org or contact CTS Software Sales at 800-325-2399 or softwaresales@cts.cph.org.