

LET'S HEAR IT FOR A DATA PROCESSING DIRECTOR

By Dick Webber

CHURCH STAFFS TODAY perform a great deal of the work of the church through the use of data processing. Too often, they are not supported with direction in the same way that other operations of the church are. Without someone coordinating the work of those using computers, inefficiency, waste, and a general malaise are usually the result. The benefits of large modern applications with relational data are lost unless staff members have support to coordinate their work. These powerful church management systems provide efficiency, integrity of data, and a common benefit for all when they are used as intended.

It helps to think of church management software systems as a set of tools. We use modern tools to build structures, perform surgery, manufacture goods, produce food, and more. Today's comprehensive computer systems provide tools to support most, if not all, of the ministries and management of the church.

Tools are of no benefit without skilled users. Think of taking a jet trip without

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a trained pilot. Is your church expecting the staff to make the best use of these advanced tools without good training? Just as a pilot is required to take regular updated training, do you provide your staff with the opportunity to learn new skills and use new applications your vendor provides?

Churches who make the best use of computer technology appoint a person to supervise those using applications and to help manage computer software and maintenance.

In medium and large churches with extended staffs, there is a compelling need for coordination. In some churches the business administrator is the data processing (information technology) director. In others, this responsibility is assigned to another person who has strong computer and people skills, who is organized, and who works to assist other staff members in their use of computers and applications. Depending upon the size of the church, this director may be one of the staff also doing other work. In very large churches full-time software, hardware, and network specialists may have these responsibilities. In either case the supervisor must have the authority to enforce the decisions made by the church for its use of computer technologies.

Some of the responsibilities that can be assigned to a data processing director include the following:

- Assistance for those using computers and coordination of the use of the database
- Maintenance of security access to applications and data
- Assignment of data processing duties
- Development of procedures and practices
- Backup and safekeeping of data, including virus protection and data security
- Software licensing and upgrading
- On-going training of users
- Network and hardware functions and upgrades
- Control over use of any third party applications
- Control of Internet and e-mail use and un-authorized software and downloads
- Liaison with software vendors

All of these functions are important, but most important is the general support for each staff person. This help does not preclude each person using vendor support, but it is the on-premise, internal support that tailors and unifies the church's unique ways of implementing applications. The direc-

tor/coordinator should emphasize constant training and re-training and help expand the use of applications beyond an initial "comfort" zone.

It is not unusual for a church to install a new church management system and use it well until there is a substantial staff turnover. Without a data processing director, as trained users are lost new staff members are not provided with competent training and supervision, the system will fall into disuse, and each user will resort to individual methods of performing tasks. The result can be a mish-mash of software applications, databases, inefficiency, and staff complaints.

When this happens, sometimes the church attempts to "solve" this oversight by purchasing a new system in the belief that the present one is inadequate. However, it soon finds itself in the same state as before. The problem is not the application, but the lack of good

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supervision and staff support. Although there are times when upgrading to a more powerful and comprehensive church management system is needed and justified, the church needs to be certain that the problem is software rather than lack of support and direction for the staff which a data processing director would provide.

The relatively small cost of providing staff with continued training and supervision is a better choice than a large investment in software (new training), and data conversion.

In spite of steady advances in computer hardware, network, Internet, e-mail, and software technologies, the integra-

tion and use of these components is not free from problems. While a problem may be simply a user's lack of understanding, the frustration and loss of time are real. Good vendor support, and most of all, someone on the job to keep things rolling are invaluable.

After the church building, your largest investment and expense is in computers, software, and people. Maximize the benefit and limit the cost by utilizing good supervision and support by hiring or appointing a skilled individual to serve as a data processing director.

Let's hear it for a data processing director! 

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