

selecting church financial computer systems

Churches today face the challenging and sometimes daunting task of upgrading their computer hardware and software systems, and in some cases setting up their first system. Years ago few choices existed. Now the options are endless, yet deciding what will work best is not any easier for users.

However, sources of information listing potential software packages and general guidelines for helping churches meet their needs effectively are available.

Christian Computing Magazine includes regular church management software reviews. The magazine's Web site, www.CCMag.com, provides a comprehensive list of available software packages, with Web links and contact information.

www.everlastingbusiness.com provides lists of available software.

Softura.com is an online software services site.

UMC.org/umstore/software provides MicroSoft Office Management software at a discounted price. Apple and Dell products are also available.

Price is often the determining factor for choosing software. Ask for a list of existing customers of the system you are considering and visit sites that are using prospective systems. Access to the site is needed long enough to know that the software and the software provider perform as promised. A software provider need not be local but the availability of ongoing user support is critical.

Investigate what other churches in your area use,

and focus on those of similar size and needs. Ask your annual conference and district office for the names of churches and the software providers that have been successfully used by others.

Set realistic timelines for decisions and implementations. Allow time to investigate and evaluate. Include all the people who will work with the new system in the decision-making process. People do not have to be computer experts to know what they need.

Look for a hardware supplier who can help with software installation and setup and fix possible hardware problems.

Draft a comprehensive list of expectations. Identify all users for the new system and others in the church who will need access to the system. If users require remote access, the hardware and software need to be compatible with that use.

Clearly define church policy about using the system, particularly Internet use. Will personal access by employees or church members be allowed? If so, what restrictions on Internet use will apply?

If this project involves replacing an existing system, be careful. If the current ledger and member-giving accounting functions are replaced or upgraded, how will other software applications be affected? Many old systems have been modified for special use—what happens to those modifications following software changes? Make sure they will be able to perform their essential functions in your new system.

—Peter McGorry, General Council
on Finance and Administration

