

# Best Practices for Using Computers in Congregations

by Nancy Armstrong, Brent Bill, and Aaron Spiegel

Technology is part of congregational reality. In 1998, as part of our work with congregations, the Indianapolis Center for Congregations began its innovative Computers and Ministry Grants Initiative (CMGI). This program helped congregations address the challenges in using computer technology for ministries with their members and constituencies. CMGI worked with 102 congregations and awarded almost \$2 million in matching grants for hardware, software, training, service, and support. Since its inception, the Center has worked with over 500 congregations in the area of technology.

Our work with congregations and technology over the last seven years has taught us that regardless of size, denomination, socio-economic status, or budget, congregations have realized that technology is an indispensable tool for ministry. Having and using these tools are no longer optional if a congregation wants to be an effective faith community in the 21st century.

While we could write volumes about how congregations use technology (and we have written one – *40 Days and 40 Bytes: Making Computers Work for Your Congregation*, The Alban Institute, 2004), there are some best practices that have emerged. We offer here seven practices toward planning for technology that every congregation needs to implement to make their technology use successful.

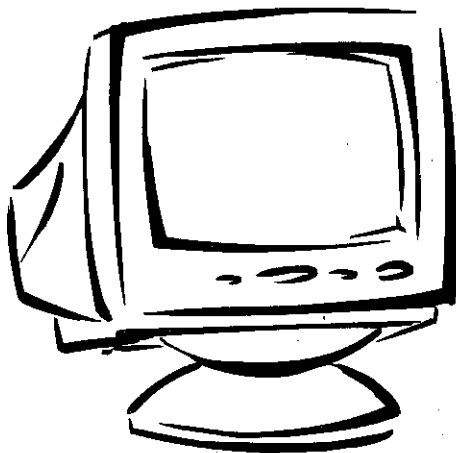
## 1. Create a Technology Team

What is a technology team? Well, it is not a committee of techno-geeks. Rather, it is a group of people charged with:

- Determining what your congregation wants to do with technology
- Prioritizing and shaping these wants into needs
- Creating a specific plan and timeline
- Following through with the purchase, installation, and training needed to make the plan a reality
- Monitoring and evaluating the newly-acquired technology as it is put into use
- Doing it all over again

Each of these steps is necessary in a successful technology implementation.

Why create a technology team? Because there is a lot to do if a congregation is to use technology wisely. Our experience shows that using the technology team approach works! It enlists the ideas and support of all aspects of a congregation as it



plans how to use new technology tools. A technology team also builds wide congregational support, and creates new opportunities for volunteer involvement, especially among younger members. It gets many stakeholders involved. Working in this way ensures that your plan is not just one person's idea.

Make sure that this team represents all major ministry areas of your congregation; include all who have a stake in what happens in your congregation. The technology team should have representatives from the administrative and pastoral staff, and ministry leaders – both paid staff and

volunteers. Don't forget to include financial secretaries, youth program leaders, and committee leaders from your governing board.

## 2. Use Professional Help

Our experience has confirmed the anecdotal belief that volunteers aren't always the best implementers when it comes to technology. Professionals used judiciously will actually save a congregation money. Professionals can quickly assess your current usage and then make implementation recommendations. Consultants can suggest vendors for both hardware and software. Some professionals can even manage your installation project. Enlisting this kind of help on the front side always saves money – it keeps a congregation from making mistakes, which are most often errors of omission. This is not to say there isn't a place for volunteers. Indeed, volunteers working in conjunction with professional integrators is the most effective way of handling a congregation's technology needs.

## 3. Train, Train, Train

Budget money and time for more training than you think you will need. A common and disheartening scenario for congregations is that they budget only for necessary hardware and software. Then, after it's installed they discover that no one knows how to use it to its potential. Make sure staff and volunteers have adequate access to initial and ongoing training.

## 4. Talk with Other Congregations

There is no better resource than the church or synagogue down the street that's already done what you are planning to do. Find out how successful they are at using hardware, software, consultants, and training venues. Be sure to talk with more than one person. We say that because we've found that many

times the pastor's perspective is much different from the administrator's or secretary's! Make sure you talk with the people who actually use the technology.

### 5. Buy Just What You Need

Don't worry about technology advancing past you. It will. But if you purchase current hardware and software, it's likely that you can still be using the same equipment 3-5 years from now. Some upgrading will be necessary along the way, especially with software. The personal computer industry is in large measure governed by the consumer who plays high-tech games. Unless your staff is going to be playing games in the office, today's technology will work just fine for several years!

Be careful not to budget just for equipment; make sure you budget for maintenance and upgrades as well. Studies have shown that just 20-30 percent of the total cost of owning a computer is attributed to the purchase cost. The remaining 70-80 percent comes from operational costs like maintenance, administration, and support.

The cost of ownership rises as a computer ages. After four years, the primary issues contributing to a PC's operating costs are hardware failures, driver issues and updates, virus and security problems, application conflicts, and multiple generations of support personnel. These usually become problems after the warranty has expired. Technology professionals look at TCO – Total Cost of Ownership. When they factor in the various scenarios and statistics, they find it is always cheaper to replace computers regularly – at least every three to five years or so.

### 6. Put All Your Records on a Computer and Back Up Your Data

It is more safe and secure to store things on a computer than on paper – if you back up your data, that is. Congregation Management Software (CMS) is a vital tool in tracking people, money, skills, and programs. CMS allows congregations to have more effective communications with members, more consistency with regard to reaching members and visitors, and better insights in the goings-on of the congregation.

But accidents do happen and data can be corrupted or lost. If you have a systematic program for backing up data and storing it offsite (not in another room in the church), you'll be back in business in a matter of hours, rather than days.

### 7. Make Technology Planning an Ongoing Part of Your Congregation's Culture

Technology team planning is not a one-time event. For technology to work as a ministry tool it requires ongoing planning and budgeting. And speaking of budgeting, make technology a line item in your yearly budget. Stop taking funds from maintenance or another ministry area to cover the cost of repairs or a consultant's fee. Computers have a finite life. You will replace them. Tools – even computers – break, and accidents happen. Be ready for these incidents and proactive about technology spending. An annual review of your needs will allow your congregation to use technology as a ministry tool.

When you follow these technology best practices, you'll find that your congregation will be more effective and efficient in doing the ministries to which it has been called. For more information on congregations and technology, including assessment tools and reviews, visit our center's website: <http://www.centerforcongregations.org/default.aspx>.

– Nancy Armstrong, Brent Bill, and Aaron Spiegel are staff members at the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, a supporting organization of The Alban Institute. They are authors of *40 Days and 40 Bytes: Making Computers Work for Your Congregation* (The Alban Institute, 2004). ❖

### What We're Seeing: Trends in the World of Congregation Management Software (CMS)

- New web-based products. People within congregations have become more comfortable using the Internet for a variety of services, and it's beginning to show in the CMS market. A few new companies offer completely web-based solutions for congregation management software. Services include software upgrades and maintenance, as well as the ability to access and use congregational data from any location with an Internet connection. The only software needed by users is an up-to-date web browser. Congregations generally pay an initial setup charge and a monthly access fee.
- Web-based services for traditional products. Current providers are adding services such as hosting (their CMS product kept on their network, accessed by your congregation using the Internet and programs such as Terminal Services or Citrix), viewing of some membership data online, interaction between the CMS and a congregation's website, and online contributions.
- Security for people, particularly children, and for information. Congregations are concerned about the safety and security of children left within their care, and they are turning to their CMS to help provide a check-in/check-out system for children using church computers. Information security is being addressed by offsite data backup offered by new web-based products and several of the traditional product vendors.

For more information and reviews of specific CMS products, visit our website at: <http://www.centerforcongregations.org/Default.aspx?tabid=73>.

To see the results of a recent CMS survey of Indianapolis-area congregations, go to: [http://www.zoomerang.com/reports/public\\_report.cgi?ID=L22B2VP9HDLV](http://www.zoomerang.com/reports/public_report.cgi?ID=L22B2VP9HDLV).