

Congregational software

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Having worked with dozens of congregations and compared many software packages, the Indianapolis Center for Congregations can offer the following suggestions:

- **Locate software:** Look at what other congregations similar to yours are doing. Consult magazines such as *Church Business* or *Christian Computing*. Contact chapters of organizations like the National Association of Church Business Administration (NACBA) or the Christian Management Association (CMA). Check out Internet search engines. Talk to neighboring parishes. Some vendors will provide lists of local users, who you can ask about the quality of the program, ease of use, technical support and training.
- **Match software features to your congregation's practice:** Have you recently eliminated the use of numbered offering envelopes? Some software requires envelope numbers to record a pledge or contribution. When recording attendance, do you wish to keep track of who received communion? Some software offers this added feature. Is your congregation large enough to have multiple persons with the same first and last names (do you have more than one Joseph Jones)? Much of the software currently on the market does a poor job of making distinctions in such cases, especially when recording contribution or attendance figures. There is no such thing as a perfect CMS for your congregation's particular practices, but some products will match your needs better than others.
- **Consider converting (data, that is):** Determine how the information you currently have will be entered into the new software: Some products provide data-importing tools and instructions that allow you to convert data, some require the software vendor to convert the data from your current database for you (usually at an additional cost), and others make no provisions for entering

data electronically.

- Capitalize on compatibility: Use the same software package for membership, attendance and contributions. The compatibility and integration of these functions are the chief reasons why CMS packages are so helpful.
- Do not undervalue training and support: Many of the helpful features of CMS remain unused or underutilized in many congregations because those who use them have not had enough training. Ask the software provider what training is available, and take his or her advice. Some providers sponsor regional user groups, which can be a great help to both new and experienced users. We also recommend that congregations always purchase and maintain the technical support (sometimes called maintenance support) offered by the vendor. The most common form of this support provides unlimited telephone calls and free or deeply discounted updates to the software for a flat annual fee. We have also learned that volunteer support provided by a member of your congregation who is a technology professional, while inexpensive, more often than not becomes problematic. While well meaning and competent in their own areas, these volunteers usually do not know the ins and outs of CMS and always seem to get transferred to another state just when you have learned to rely on them.

Recommended software: Here are three CMS packages we regularly recommend to local congregations, based upon a combination of features, quality and price:

- Servant Keeper (www.servantpc.com) includes membership, attendance and contribution registers, with automatic links to Quicken or Quickbooks accounting software. It offers a rich array of features often found in more expensive products, such as complete name fields, data tables designed specifically for recording an individual's gifts and service to the congregation, and multiple formats for contribution statements. Servant Keeper is very easy to use, and its technical support staff receives high marks for responsiveness.
- LOGOS (www.logoslbe.com) offers comprehensive Church Management, Financial Management and Scheduling modules as basic options. The Church Management module contains displays and features useful to medium- and large-sized congregations. The data tables for gifts and service provide a nice

balance of flexibility (to reduce the number of data entries) and ease of use. Financial Management is written specifically for congregations that need fund accounting and reporting, and the Scheduling component is the best we've seen. Any one or combination of these three modules may be used.

- ACS (Automated Church Systems) ([www. acshome.com](http://www.acshome.com)) provides a complete array of functions potentially needed by congregations of different sizes and faith traditions. It has many modules that can be combined to suit individual requirements. The contributions module is outstanding, offering the best pledge-gifts information screens and entry process that we have evaluated. Membership (called "People") has an extensive set of personal and family data fields, and a very powerful Activities section (for skills/service/participation). The financial modules, several in number, can accommodate even the largest congregation's accounting needs. The scheduling module is new and adequate, but not particularly easy to understand or use. Because of the higher level of power and sophistication of some features, particularly in finance, more training hours may be required for ACS than with most other software. Purchase price, training and technical support can make this software one of the most expensive to use, but ACS has reduced pricing for smaller congregations.