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With all the marketing hype around [church management software \(free trial\)](#), churches have to wade through what seems to be an endless sea of marketing terms boasting various church management software features. We can understand why church leaders feel overwhelmed about making a decision about church management software when reading blogs, websites, and press releases that often use confusing and sometimes even misleading church management software marketing jargon. How do the church leaders weed through the church management software companies that have the wrong feature sets for the church? How can you get to the end result?

Choosing the right church software for your organization that best fits your needs!

- **What does the client need for their new Church Management Software? ([ChMS](#))?**

As churches and technology change, church software vendors have to ensure they are producing a church software solution that helps churches with changes in personal communication, government compliance, small group needs, security, and much more. Having an in-depth understanding of the needs of the church is essential for churches that are beginning the journey that ultimately decides which software vendor they use. Along the same lines, an audit list of what the church desires in their software solution is one of the first steps to selecting the right one.

One area that is often overlooked when reviewing requirements, but is the most important and potentially detrimental is church management software compliance. Like any nonprofit organization, churches have specific government regulations that they must follow for the contribution and accounting processes within the church. There is never a shortage of churches that have sent a contribution statement that were wrong and the donor was denied the tax deduction from the IRS.

- **Can any software work in a church environment?**

The short answer is - No. While there are many good software companies for different sectors of industry (e.g. retail sales, telecommunication, or banking software), most will not understand the unique processes and compliance issues that churches have that set them apart. In other words, every niche sector has its own software that serves the sector better and churches are no different.

Using an example, would you hire a car mechanic to fix the furnace or AC in your house which is typically handled by an HVAC technician? Probably not. The car mechanic may understand some of the general concepts of the furnace or AC but assuming the car mechanic knows temperature control circuit boards, gas lines, the proper AC freon amount, and other unique characteristics that an HVAC technician would understand could end in a disaster. The same thing can happen with church software when using a retrofitted solution which appears to work in general but has short comings. Why? The software was initially designed for other intentions which don't follow compliance or natural flow of data within the organization and makes it harder to use and worst of all is out of compliance - (e.g. for-profit accounting retrofitted for use in the non-profit industry).

- **Would the same Church Software that works for a large church work for my church?**



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The short answer is - probably not. There are two major considerations. One is that a church that has 10,000 members has different church software needs than a church that has 500 members. Secondly, the church software in the larger church more than likely has many components that a smaller church will not need. Most of the time these extra components increases the software solution's price, making it cost prohibitive to a smaller church. The cost for some of the church software systems that are currently on the market for larger churches can range between \$5,000 - \$10,000 dollars or more annually.

These reasons are why churches should seek out similar size organizations in their area that have similar types of ministries and find out which church software solution those organizations use and how satisfied they are. One word of caution - every church is dynamic and their needs vary greatly. The church should have reasonable expectations of the feature set, which may not satisfy every single need in the church but come very close. This process should give you a handful of church software vendors to choose from.

- **Do you prefer the flexibility of web-based Church Software, or is a PC/server sufficient?**

The architecture of the church software is very important to understand and facilitates the church's direction in their church software selection. A majority of churches are moving to a true web-based solution as church leaders are warming up to the idea of having the church's data in the cloud. Some church solutions are truly web-based meaning they work and function within the Internet browser, whereas others may look like they are web-based and aren't.

Many times churches that are looking for a true web-based system settle for a hybrid church software solution, where part of the system is on the Internet or it works through a 3rd party interface to display the information to the user. A common way to tell the difference is if the church software provider charges you more as concurrent users are increased. It is an important question to ask when evaluating church software prices and adding more users (e.g. two users verses ten). **Why does it cost more?** Because the church software provider must pay a licensing fee to companies like Citrix for the number of people that are accessing the interface at the same time, which increases the price for the church. Another way to find out if the church software is a true Internet based solution is that it should work on any Operating System (Linux, Windows, Mac, Unix, etc).

- **Who should be on the team that evaluates and presents the options to the church board?**

The team's characteristics are an important consideration to ensure that the software will work for the entire church operation. Additionally, the team needs to come to a consensus on one church software solution that they all feel will do the job and that the church board will approve. While this sounds easy, it's anything but.

There are certain characteristics to look for, like strong bonds, conflict resolution, and problem solving characteristics to name a few, when considering who should be on the team. Church politics and past personal feelings need to be checked at the door, so that



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the team can make a decision that increases the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire church and not a few selected areas. Along with this there are certain technical skills that should be represented. For example, a CPA for church fund accounting is essential to ensure everything is in compliance. An IT (Information Technology) person is important to understand and explain various different technologies to the team as a whole and what additional cost there will be above the software (e.g. possible server installation). One or more pastors can explain the current ministry difficulties and how best to solve them, and a representative for the donation and church member data entry can offer insight into the day-to-day operations.

- **What security considerations should be in place for the Church Software solution?**

A church can't make a decision on a church software solution without discussing the security of each solution. There are many truths and myths in this area that are popularized in the media or other venues. This is where an IT person on the team can help a lot because they understand many of the differences and what should or shouldn't be considered within the realm of security. Part of security should be a recovery plan in which the client knows what happens when there is a power outage in the cloud, the Internet goes down or another type of disaster. There are methods to mitigate any of these but the question is whether the church software company deploys these or not.

- **Should data conversion cost be considered in the decision?**

Short answer - Absolutely! Data conversion costs should always be noted when comparing one church software to another. Why? If you take two similar products with a similar feature set and one church software vendor charges \$1,000.00 for a data conversion and the other charges \$300.00, all other things for the data conversion being equal, which one would you choose? Another reason is that data conversions are what they call a sunk cost in the software industry. It means the church doesn't get this money back if they don't like the software and change at a later date - even if it is only a day later. A church's resources are very valuable to them in the economic times that we face, so church leaders need to justify paying for something that is a sunk cost.

More information - we have written many blogs on this topic that cover specific areas and they can be found on the following [webpage](#).