

Church Office Automation

Managing Church Information With Database Software

About databases in general

You've been using "databases" for years but probably not referring to them with that terminology. A "database" is any collection of related information consisting of known facts that have meaning. So when you've used a phone book, a Rolodex or a written list of household valuables, you've used a database.

Databases can contain information such as names, addresses, telephone numbers, church officer classes, cooking recipes or any other desired data. The powerful computer programs that enable us to manage information on our homes, business or church are called "database management programs." The three largest PC software corporations provide database programs because management of information is critical in every business or organization. It is said we're living in "the information age." We now have more information available to us than was previously accessible to any individual or culture in history. Because the information constantly increases and continually changes, however, it is certain that you will need to be familiar with database software sometime in your life.

If you are a professional or volunteer in a church, this article is written to help you review the basics of databases for church use.

How a database is structured

Databases are set up a lot like cooking recipes stored on 3 x 5 inch cards in a box. For an example, we'll imagine an extremely organized recipe box kept by a perfectionist.



In our box, each recipe is on a separate card. Each card in the recipe box is laid out in exactly the same manner, so that if you picked up any card in the collection, the same kind of information appears in the same place on every card. (*Surprisingly there is also no frosting or cake dough smeared on any of the cards.*)

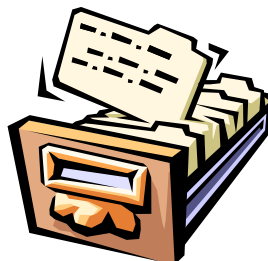
On every card, the title of the recipe appears centered on the top on the first line. On the next line and to the left is the category of the recipe (such as dessert, entrée, salads, etc.). The ingredients appear in the next part and further down are instructions for mixing and baking the ingredients. The remaining space toward the bottom of the card has the overall preparation time, the author of the recipe and the date the item was last served. (Yea right! If you kept track of that much

information, you'd have to hire an Administrative Assistant to maintain your recipe card box. But not if you had them in a database program on a computer.)

One more thing about your recipe card file. The card box has tabbed separator cards to organize the recipe cards by food categories.

A database file, on a computer, is organized and laid out exactly like this box of recipes. Just as the recipe box has a **card** for every food item, a database has a **record** for every household (in a church database) or every customer (in a business database). As with the recipes, a database can store any kind of desired information. In a database file, different kinds of information are kept in various **fields**, just as different kinds of information appear in **specific places** on the recipe card.

Lastly, a database *could* contain a **field** to keep track of a category (such as Elder, Deacon or some other committee) *or* it could store the committee information on members in a separate **table** — similar to the **tabbed dividers** separating the recipe cards by food category.



The up-front work of setting up a database

What are the fields likely to appear in a church database? It depends on what information your church wants to maintain. Most church databases are designed to store the first and last name of each person as well as other household detail such as street, city, state, zip and phone number. Other personal information typical to congregational databases include membership numbers, birthdays, anniversary dates, e-mail addresses and committee or organization memberships.

Determining the type of fields for a church database takes the most time. You can always add more fields to your database later, but as you tend to gather all your suitcases in the driveway *before* you begin loading your car trunk for your vacation, you're better off making the decisions on the kinds of information you want to maintain in your database at the very start.

Kevin Guest House, a ministry of hospitality for families with a member undergoing surgery or medical treatments, wanted to create a database to keep information on their guests. They also decided they wanted to record their guests' donations and dates of stay. To their surprise, it took them four hours to make all the decisions on the kind of information they needed to manage before they could begin creating their database. Once they accomplished this planning, setting up their database took only minutes and they were soon using Microsoft *Access* database software to manage their operations.

Planning the type of information to manage for a church is more complex and may take several meetings of your staff.



Here is the first fork in the road.

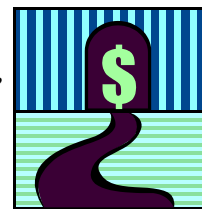
❶ If you want to create your own custom church database, using off-the-shelf computer software, like Microsoft *Access*, you need to know how to use the software and be aware of the kinds of information your church office needs to manage. If you don't have someone on staff or in the church to help with this initial



stage of planning the database, you'll have to hire a con\$ultant.

Once the database is setup, your church staff will need to be trained to input and manage the data and generate reports in the *Access* program. They will also need to learn Microsoft *Word* to create mail merge letters, labels and other forms which can easily use the membership information from the *Access* database file. The free Avery® Wizard (available to *Word* users) is truly magic as it automatically sets up label formats for any of the standard Avery mailing labels. (See the list of resources at the end of this article for a free already created *Access* church database that one of our congregations uses for everything except financial tracking.)

❷ The other path to take is to leave it to the professionals and purchase a ready-made church database management software with the fields already in place. If you already know and own the *Access* program, you can get an excellent church database file for \$150. (See the "Pastor's Helper" database listed in the resources below.) Other proprietary software packages listed in the resources cost between \$150 to \$7,000 depending on the extent you want to manage church finances and investments as well as maintain membership records.



Is computerizing your membership records worth it?

Yes, and here's why. In the 1970s, Deerhurst Presbyterian Church in Kenmore was using the Address-O-Graph plates for mailing their newsletters. Each time there was an address change, (an average of two a week), it took one month to receive new plates for labels and they were costly. At any point in time, the addresses were somewhat incorrect and never seemed to be caught up with where people actually lived.

There was a constant trickle of incorrectly addressed mail being returned to the church office.

In 1980, that congregation's member information was placed in a database in a matter of weeks. Since then, their church information has always been accurate and member

communication has been fast — its high quality indicative of the rest of its ministry.

So whatever it takes, manage your congregation's information in a database. It saves a lot of time and guarantees accuracy because you'll have the best of our culture's technology in service for your ministry.

Resources

① If you already know and own Microsoft *Access* and *Word* (or plan to be trained at New Horizons, Executrain or CompUSA on this software), you may be interested in receiving a free copy of the "members.mdb" relational database file used by a few congregations with in-house knowledge of Microsoft *Access*. In addition to the database file, a one page paper entitled "Decisions that must be made before a Microsoft *Access* database can be created" can also be obtained by selecting either of these two links:

Microsoft *Word*:

<http://connectedness.org/PDF/DatabaseDecisions.doc>

Adobe *Acrobat* PDF:

<http://connectedness.org/PDF/DatabaseDecisions.pdf>

This database will track membership information and can be used for mail merges and labels (but not financial management). Other than standard Microsoft technical phone support, there is no technical support available in the use of this database file.

Microsoft *Excel* can be used for recording contributions and *Word* for the quarterly or annual reports through merge functions accessing the *Excel* spreadsheet or some other financial management software package.

② Alternatively, if you know and own Microsoft *Access* and *Word* you may wish to try the *Pastor's Assistant* database — available for a free trial from (Pinnacle Production's web site at:

<http://members.aol.com/PinnaclePr/Helpmate/>

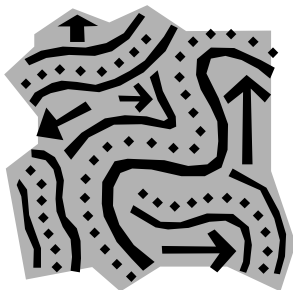
If you find that this database file serves your congregation's needs, you can purchase it for \$150. At that web site are two reviews from national magazines.

③ If you would prefer to manage your church data with an already created database program, there is a five page article citing 36 companies providing church database software and another report containing 13 similar companies — available from the Presbytery office.

The Servant PC Resources product: *Servant Keeper® CMS for Windows* was demonstrated in the Spring in our area and was impressive. You can purchase a full trial copy for tryout for just \$10. Visit their web site at

<http://www.servantpc.com/>

for all their information.



This article was written on a Phenom Ultra H-120CW Handheld computer (by LG Electronics) while my wife, Linda, was taking her turn driving on our vacation. The Phenom uses the Windows CE 2.0 operating system and the copy was created using the Microsoft *Pocket Word* program. (Yes, the keys are large enough to do touch typing and the batteries last about 8 hours.) Pictures for article layout were obtained from Microsoft's free online clipart library at



<http://www.microsoft.com/clipgallerylive/default.asp>.

If you would like to contribute an article or lead a "how-to" demonstration of an aspect of using computers for church office automation, drop an email to:

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Thank you,

Philip Siddons