1997

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Recommended Citation
COMPUTERS: THE ADVERSARY OF EFFECTIVE CHURCH ADMINISTRATION

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Without question, computers and associated technologies have opened a vast new world to American society. Through internet access, e-mail, CD Roms, and other electronic sources, people now possess access to new worlds of information which a few years ago appeared impossible to conceive.

Pastors stand to benefit from this new world of data. Web sites, database searches, and e-mail are but a few examples of ways pastors can tap into this emerging technological world. While computers are a large benefit for pastoral ministry, they pose a significant danger relative to exercising principles of good church administration. This article is written from the perspective of one who is “pro-computers” for pastoral ministry. The author proposes that, while pastors should possess basic computer knowledge and literacy skills, they should not be using computers on a regular day-to-day basis.

IMPORTANCE OF GOOD CHURCH ADMINISTRATION

Successful pastors must exercise principles of good church administration. A pastor’s time is valuable, and the work to do in the average church is endless. Setting priorities for daily activities, scheduling efficiently, delegating responsibilities, and overseeing project implementations are but a few examples of regular administrative responsibilities exercised by successful pastors.
Furthermore, pastors need to utilize their time so that they engage in daily activities which will result in the greatest quantity and quality of service in our Lord's behalf. To accomplish this, pastors must spend their time engaging in activities which only they, as pastors, can do. Other activities should be delegated whenever possible. The enemy of a day's best time expenditure is not bad things, but good things. That is, good activities completed in a day crowd out time for the best activities.

LETTING SUPPORT STAFF DO SUPPORT WORK

Every church should have a secretary. In fact, after the hiring of a pastor, a church secretary ought to be the next highest priority in relation to church staff. If a church cannot afford to pay a secretary, then the congregation might seek a volunteer to fulfill clerical responsibilities until a person can be hired. Since people "volunteer" (even in small churches) for ministries such as Sunday school teachers, VBS workers, and nursery workers, it is probable that most churches can find secretarial assistance for their pastors (there will always be a few exceptions).

It is mostly a matter of setting priorities. That is, if a church is firmly committed to the need of clerical assistance for its pastor, then it will be an extremely rare instance for help not to be found.

Assuming now that a given church has a secretary, then the pastor should delegate all clerical activities, including computer work, to this person. Other than rare instances of extremely confidential matters, the secretary should be doing all of the pastor's typing, filing, data storage and retrieval, and other clerical responsibilities. To the degree that a pastor personally engages in any clerical activities beyond emergencies
and extremely confidential matters, he violates the aforementioned principles of good administration.

This responsibility is cogent for pastors. They need to be performing responsibilities such as prayer for their parishioners, hospital visitations, pastoral counseling, sermon preparations, evangelization, greeting church visitors and new community people in their homes, and other such duties. Every minute spent typing on a keyboard is a minute not spent engaging in crucial pastoral responsibilities. The church secretary cannot prepare sermons; she cannot do pastoral counseling; she cannot (vicariously for the pastor) visit the sick in the hospital. The secretary can, however, enter data into a computer, surf the internet for the pastor, check and print e-mail, conduct data base searches for the pastor, and complete a variety of computer-related activities.

Essentially, pastors are functioning as secretaries when they spend their day at the computer. This is not meant to demean the secretarial position. Just as a secretary is trained and hired to be a secretary, a pastor is trained and hired to be a pastor.

Remember the days of typewriters and carbon copies? Who would ever advocate that pastors should be sitting at their typewriters laboring with messy typewriter ribbons? In essence, however, this is precisely what occurs with pastors today. But because the machinery is considered a "higher technology" than the old manual typewriters, pastors somehow feel justified in doing what secretaries should be doing for them.

Not only does this principle hold true on a level of spiritual responsibility, but it is also relevant to church finances. If a church secretary makes around $13,000 per year (or about $6 an hour) and the pastor makes around $28,000 per year (or about $13 an hour), it is not good stewardship of the Lord's money for the pastor (at $13 an hour) to do what the secretary (at $6 an hour)
could be doing. Some deacon boards are more concerned with how their pastors spend 32-cent stamps than with how they misuse thousands of dollars by doing their own clerical duties on their computers.

A mega-church in the South recently hired a management consultant to evaluate its entire administrative structure. After the first day of observing office procedures in action, the consultant asked a poignant question of the senior pastor. Specifically, "Why do I walk around the offices and see people at photocopy machines, sending faxes, typing letters (on computers), performing standard office routines, and being paid $20 an hour as Associate Pastors to do so?" His recommendation to the senior pastor was for the church either to hire additional clerical staff or to require that the pastoral staff better utilize the people they had for these duties. According to the consultant, an $8-9 an-hour-secretary was a "good deal" financially compared to paying the pastoral staff to perform clerical duties. Also, at the consultant's recommendation, each member of the pastoral staff received a dictating machine.

In summary, then, pastors need to let secretarial staff do office jobs so that pastors can devote all their time and energies to their unique responsibilities. This, of course, should never be done with an attitude of "I am too good to stoop so low." Rather, it is simply a matter of pastors exercising the qualities of good church administration—including wise use of time and the Lord's resources.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PASTORS AND THEIR COMPUTERS

Purchase a computer and learn to use it.

Because technology does have value for the pastor, however, he should have a computer and access to the international data it provides (e.g., e-mail and internet).

Further, pastors should know how to use a computer and understand its basic technology. Although clerical staff should do the bulk of the day-to-day computer operations, there may be occasions when the pastor will need to complete the tasks himself (e.g., the secretary takes time off, the pastor works after normal office hours, a letter is so confidential that the secretary should not have access to it). Basic knowledge of a word processing system, e-mail usage, internet information retrieval, utilization of CD ROM data, and printing functions constitute skills that all pastors should possess.

Keep time spent on the computer down to a bare minimum.

The computer can be a temptation. Many pastors, while working, are frequently tempted to utilize the computer when they, in fact, should not. Therefore, like other temptations, it should be removed. If having a powerful Pentium at one’s fingertips is simply too tempting, the PC should be moved from the office desk. Using it would then require physically rising and walking over to a different part of the office—a reminder to oneself to check the necessity and wisdom of using the computer at that point.

Initially this may cause some pastors to experience withdrawal symptoms. However, once the delirium tremens pass, they will find that the increased work productivity
will more than compensate for the pleasure lost in supporting the computer habit.

Some readers will argue, “But I enjoy doing my work on the computer.” Pastors may also enjoy playing golf or doing a number of other “fun” things during their work days. Just because people enjoy something does not make it right to do. The object of a pastor’s day is to glorify God by utilizing his time in ways which allow him to accomplish the broadest and deepest ministry possible in Christ’s behalf. Typing on computers seriously detracts from that daily mission.

Delegate to the secretary every piece of work possible.

Exercise principles of good administration as a pastor. Every item coming across a pastor’s desk must be quickly but carefully assessed. If it does not require ordination, seminary education, or pastoral experience to complete, then delegate it to somebody else. The pastor, of course, is responsible for all church work—and should supervise quality control—but he should not be doing all the work himself.

A good secretary can hold the pastor accountable in this area. When she sees him typing or clicking on the computer, she can offer her assistance.

Technology is wonderful, and it should save time for its users. Unfortunately, there appears to be a productivity paradox since the widespread utilization of computers began. It is doubtful that most pastors today accomplish more in an average day than they did in the days before computer technology. Without question, things look much nicer (i.e., graphics)—but, is more actually accomplished?

A cogent reason for this productivity paradox is that pastors now spend time with non-essential details in
computer utilization. For example, to produce a letter on church letterhead, the pastor must take precious time to manipulate margins, determine font size, run spell checks, adjust printer set-ups, and refine the document's appearance. Multiply the time it takes to do these activities by the number of letters, memos, and other documents a pastor generates over the course of a year—and it equates to a large segment of wasted pastoral time!

Learn to utilize a dictating machine.

For readers who are visual learners, this will be a most painful recommendation. But it must be considered. Remember, pastors are in ministry to do what they do best—pastor. Most people can talk faster than they can type. Thus, undeniably pastors can be much more efficient with their time if they dictate their documents rather than type them.

A dictating machine can go anywhere, allowing the busy pastor the freedom to dictate while sitting at his desk, riding in the car, waiting in lines, spending time at home, going for walks—just about any place and time which lends itself to talking into a machine. Again, doing this does not promote tingles, good feelings, or neurotic pleasure. It does, however, allow for the best use of the Lord's time over which He has given the pastor stewardship.

It takes time and practice to become proficient in using a dictating machine well. It may be hard and require some learning and effort—but isn't this a part of ministry?

Some will argue that they invest so much time on their computers because they can type faster than they can write. While this may be the case, does it still hold true when the actual time spent setting up the document,
spell-checking, proofing, revising, and printing is tallied? The learning time that such persons invest into becoming proficient typists is not bad—it simply is not the best use of their time. And again, the enemy of the best usage of time is not bad things; it is good things. Good things crowd out time and energy for the best things.

 Resist urges to seek information on the computer simply out of curiosity.

 The internet can be a nightmare relative to effective church administration. Specifically, it is easy for pastors to sit down at a computer with the intention of finding information on a given topic. Then one and one-half hours later, they are still at the computer “surfing the net.” Intrigued by a variety of words, pictures, charts, articles, and information, the pastor diverts his attention and focus from the issues of importance. Although this is fun, it is not good administration.

 There will be some occasions, of course, when pastors must do their own internet searches. But whenever possible, they should have their secretaries do this for them. Again, every hour spent web-browsing, as interesting as it can be, is an hour a pastor is not spending in prayer, counseling parishioners, visiting the sick, and fulfilling a host of other vital responsibilities. Net-surfing for the fun of it should be done at home. Pastors should not be using significant portions of church work time indiscriminately.

 CONCLUSION

 Time is a stewardship for which God will hold us accountable. At the Judgment Seat of Christ, God will call us to a reckoning of how we spent every minute of
every day. And how we use our ministry time is an awesomely awesome responsibility!

This article is designed as a wake-up call for pastors not to misuse time and energy. Many may never have thought about computer use in this way before. Some, for sure, will go through withdrawal symptoms at the thought of having to give up computer time. However, at the very least, all readers should seriously assess the amount of time they spend on computers and adjust their usage accordingly.

Conduct a study on yourself. Clock the actual time you spend performing clerical functions. Weigh this amount of time against your other pressing ministry demands. Above all, implement changes where they are needed. Be doers of the Word!