

# TENTMAKERS

Financial Counsel for Pastors, Deacons, and Seminarians

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## THE COMPUTER

by Gary North

You have heard a lot about the computer revolution. Adam Osborne's little paperback, *Running Wild*, describes how it took place in the last five years. You may be thinking about what it can do for your church. If you have not thought about it, now is the time to begin.

The processing of data is imperative. We need greater speed, reduced cost, and simple-to-use equipment. At last, we are getting it. Radio Shack's TRS-80 (Model III) can be purchased with two diskette drives for \$2,500. The Apple II, with appropriate equipment, costs about the same. Both are widely available. Both are easy to use. The Apple seems to be most favored by users, but the TRS-80 offers quick servicing (rarely necessary). As I will mention shortly, it also is compatible with a very powerful list-maintenance program that is not available yet for Apple Computers.

Struggling churches may not be able to afford one. Could several struggling churches pool money and buy one, with a common secretary paid by the hour? Consider this before you reject the idea of a computer. Problem: secrecy. This is the great advantage of a computer in your own church. Perhaps your secretary could go over once or twice a week to use the common computer.

The advantages a computer offers to a growing program cannot be overestimated. Consider the following fields: mailing list development and maintenance, word processing, publishing, budgeting and records, and a legal defense program (see "Brush-Fire Wars," *Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. IV, No. 2, March/April, 1980: reprints are available from ICE). Churches that ignore the benefits of a computer may wind up paying for more in forfeited opportunities than the computer would cost. (What the tool offers deacons is remarkable; the ability to help struggling families think about the family budget, design a budgeting program, and a means for housewives to manage it monthly. Could each family help finance the computer by donating money for time used for better budgeting?)

### Mailing Lists

A revolution has taken place in fund-raising over the last decade. The advent of the computerized mailing list has made it possible for churches and especially parachurch organizations to target new sources of financial support. The enormous costs of "shotgunning" — radio, television, newspaper display advertising, etc. — have made it prohibitively expensive for smaller ministries. It is costly to announce the existence of a program to tens of thousands of people who really are not that interested, in order to locate and motivate a few hundred who are.

There are ways around the problem. One way is to develop a "phone-in" ministry, where a daily prayer or message is presented. You can advertise the existence of the phone number cheaply enough. Then, at the end of each message, there is a 15-second pitch to mail in for something at a P.O. Box. I built up

*Remnant Review* in the early years from 50 to about 450 by giving a weekly telephone update on gold, silver, and the money supply. I could run a one-column inch ad in the *Los Angeles Times* for \$50, and I always generated four or five \$45 subscriptions from each ad. That was cost-effective advertising. But it was a financial newsletter I was selling, not the Gospel. Motivating people to respond to an appeal to the Gospel takes longer and is not immediately self-financing. However, I still recommend the 24-hour a day recorded message. Code-a-Phone sells some good equipment, or you can rent another unit monthly from the telephone company.

To get the phone-in ministry to work, you need to get the caller to respond in some way. The idea is to target the audience. The newspaper ad is your "shotgun." The caller self-targets himself and calls in. Those who are not interested drop out. Those who are interested will probably call again. The goal is to use the massagings to screen the audience. Those who finally respond to an offer are far hotter prospects. They represent what the sales industry calls "qualified prospects."

The recorded message is somewhat more personal than the printed page. The human voice has a greater degree of personalism. But people are not going to walk in the church door just because of the tape, unless the tape does something related directly to church services, such as offer a brief summary (with tantalizing questions) about next Sunday's sermon. What people will normally respond to is the offer of literature of some kind. They may hesitate to schedule a visit with the minister, but they are willing to take the next step: writing for a free tract, newsletter, or whatever.

The person who responds to an offer has taken an important first step. He has requested something. You are not shoving anything down his throat. This is very important. Your goal is to bring the person into fellowship on a step-by-step basis. He needs to know at each stage that he is initiating the next step. Your job is to encourage him to take each step. But you need to do this on a cost-effective basis. You should not waste church resources.

With a mailing list, you can target your audience. You can mail questionnaires. You can contact the person to interview him. This enables you to get some idea of his needs and interests, his opinions on matters of life and death, business and leisure. But the more complex the data, the more difficult it is to keep track of him. This is where the microcomputer comes in handy.

Furthermore, you need to send out newsletters, tracts, or other materials to show him the relevance of Christianity. (This will be difficult for churches that do not see the relevance in every area of life of the Gospel.) How can you do this effectively?

The first, least expensive step appears to be the old "shoebox" system. You need a card file of 3 by 5 inch cards. These are purchased least expensively at a local college or junior college, rather than in an office supply store. Then you need access to a

photocopy machine. You need to run off labels with the person's name and address. One goes on the I.D. card (alphabetical), and perhaps another on a "topical interest" card, if you have identified him to that extent. This way, you can get an idea of what topics most interest readers.

You keep the other sheets of labels in reserve, for mailing purposes. You need to put on your envelopes this message: "Address Correction Requested." The Post Office will send a dead letter back, but at a fee of 25¢ per letter. This keeps your list up to date. Problem: corrections on your master sheets can be a hassle, once the list goes over 300 names or so. You have to paste on new addresses over the slots on the master sheet (33 names per sheet, e.g., Avery label sheets). Then you have to run off a new set of sheets. Or you need a separate sheet of corrected addresses, but then you have trouble with zip codes (which you need in sequence if you mail bulk rate). The zip codes must be sorted, then arranged numerically.

I recommend a mailing at least once a month, to remind readers that you are still around. A church newsletter aimed at topics of general concern is important. You should not be sending out an "in-house" letter to those outside the church family. You must demonstrate your relevance.

You also need a mailing list to announce special meetings, a conference, a movie, or other occasional programs. If you have the person's phone number on your data file, it helps. But you do not want it on the actual mailing label that goes in the mail,

Not many churches will ever develop a mailing list the size of Calvary Temple's in East Point, Georgia. The *Temple Times* goes out weekly to over 10,000 people. But there is always the possibility that your church will develop a list of 2,500, if you work at it all the time. Any time you go over 500, you have to start thinking about computerizing.

The revolution in information storage and handling since 1976 has been astounding. The TRS-80 and the Apple II are great tools. Unfortunately, the "software" or programs are not that impressive yet. They have mailing list programs that are slow, small in capacity, and barely adequate. You will pay \$200 or so for one. Or you can buy a really fast, comprehensive program for the TRS-80 (Model III) for about \$2,500 from a private software firm. This program gives you the capability of putting 1,386 names on one 5-inch disk, with 50 categories to identify the person, such as: anti-abortion, pro-Christian school, anti-pornography, pro-Constitution, or whatever. You can write a report or "personal" letter aimed at any or a combination of these interests, and the computer will print out labels (as well as a professionally typed letter) for only those people whose interests you have pre-selected. You can even tell it which names to address "Dear Joe," or "Dear Joe and Martha." And the program is so simple to operate that anyone who can type can learn to use it in a day. The company:

Political Data Systems  
101 S. Whiting, Suite 112  
Alexandria, VA 22304

(I want to say at this point that the co-developer of the program is on the board of the ICE. I recommend it only because it is the best program I have found, not because he is connected to ICE.)

The microcomputers are powerful tools. As software improves — and thousands of geniuses, all looking for a profit, are out

handling of existing "toy" computers will escalate rapidly. They are "toys" only because the programs are poor. Electronically, they represent a revolution, today. Now that IBM, Hewlett-Packard, and other computer giants are entering the field now dominated by Radio Shack and Apple, the market will expand, which means that software will improve dramatically.

#### Word Processing

The \$1,000 typewriter is really obsolete. The ability of a microcomputer (at \$2,500) plus a word processing program (\$300 to \$500), plus a printer (\$300 to \$6,000) to produce reports, manuscripts, and typed-quality mass-produced letters, is creating a revolution. You can put sermons, outlines, quotations, Bible references, information from huge, commercially inexpensive data storage banks (U PI, Wall Street Journal, and library information), and anything else on a little plastic disk. You can recall these data by topic, or date, or writer. You can format them into paragraphs, and have the machine shift them around. For \$100 to \$200, you can buy spelling dictionaries that will tell you when you have misspelled a word, or even when you have forgotten to close a parenthesis, or close a quotation with a quotation mark. (*Microproof* has 50,000 words: Cornucopia Software, Box 5028, Walnut Creek, CA 94596; *Grammatik* has 38,000 words, plus the punctuation mark checking device: Aspen Software, Box 339, Tijeras, NM 87059. ) In short, a revolution in newsletter writing, article writing, and book production is here — for under \$5,000.

Say you want to write up weekly sermons. You put them into the computer, just by typing (which allows you to type far faster, by the way). Then you decide to update them, correct them, and put them into a book. You just call back the originals, make the corrections electronically, push a button, and get copy out of your printer. Or you can locate a typesetting company that allows your computer to talk directly over the phone to their typesetting computer. Presto: you can demand about a 30% discount (they pay no one to type the manuscript into the computer), and the total entry time is about an hour, possibly less. Within days, you have in your possession camera-ready copy, without spelling errors (thanks to your electronic dictionary), and formatted by your professional typesetter. A book can go from raw sermons to a finished product in less than two months — possibly a month, if the book printing company co-operates.

#### Church Budgets

Want to know where the money is going? Want to be able to budget more effectively? Want to be able to see graphically where the money is going? Want to be able to call up the names of everyone who has donated over \$400, or \$1,237.58? You can get an instant report from a microcomputer. Want to send out year-end reports to each member telling him how much he gave, for his tax records (or conscience)? Easy with a computer. Your secretary can do it in an afternoon. Or a deacon can.

In short, unless your church is very small, it is time to consider buying an Apple II (with an 80-character formatting screen: optional) or a TRS-80 (if you want to buy the program from Political Data Systems). If a church member has one, get your secretary to use it once or twice a week, if you can. After she uses it for a while, you will see whether it is worth the \$3,000 to \$5,000 investment. I think you will find that it is.

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