WORSHIP SOFTWARE SELECTION GUIDE

Deciding on what worship software package your church should use can be a daunting task. At last count there were over 45 packages to pick from. The biggest problem for those new to worship software is just knowing what there is to consider. This guide was written to help give some guidance to those new to worship software.

A lot of people don't even know what questions to ask or what is available in features on different programs. My first suggestion is simply to download one of the trial versions of a popular worship software package and play with it. This will go a long way with helping you understand what is available.

Many churches simply choose to use PowerPoint. A lot use PowerPoint because they became familiar with it at work or school. A lot already have the PowerPoint because their church received it with their Microsoft Office software package. One advantage of PowerPoint is that there are so many people familiar with it. It is also relatively easy to use. PowerPoint can, however, be very limiting. It really wasn't designed for church worship. If you do a lot of planning for your services and hold to a strict order of service then you may be able to make PowerPoint work. There are a lot of things that PowerPoint won't do however. If you want to be able to easily make changes on the fly or use a feature such as text over moving video then PowerPoint probably won't work for you.

Probably one big reason NOT to use PowerPoint is the fact that to many people, PowerPoint is what the see at work or in school. It carries a distinct "flavor" with it. It may be that the last thing you want to do is to have members of your congregation get this feeling that they are at work or school when they are at church. They may not even know why they don't like the projected songs, but subliminally you may be reminding them of work.

A great number of worship software packages were simply developed because users became frustrated with the limitations of PowerPoint, they knew that with a little "C" programming, they could overcome the limitations that they saw.

Some of the worship software products are designed to completely replace PowerPoint. Most are designed to handle congregational singing but will allow you to run PowerPoint from them. A few are designed for you to use PowerPoint as your main projection software but give you various features to augment it. Whatever you do, if you decide to use PowerPoint I recommend that you avoid using the same backgrounds and themes that come with PowerPoint so that you can avoid the "business" or "school" look and feel to your audience.

WORSHIP SOFTWARE OVERVIEW:

Worship software has been around for several years now. Some packages have been continually updated and are in their 7th or higher release. Some products were hatched in the last year. A lot of the packages started with some programmer who was the church "techie" who got frustrated with the limitations of PowerPoint and decided to write their own software for projecting song lyrics. As time went on, they added scripture showing code, code for announcements, static and animated backgrounds and even text over live video feeds.

Many of these software products have maintained "mom and pop" status and are run by an individual in their spare time as a hobby turned home business. A few products have gone mainstream with full time programmers and support staff. Several have a hybrid status with a supporting equipment or mainstream software company providing administrative support to some talented programmers. In the last couple of years even "open source" collaborative worship software packages have been released by users who believe that software should be free and open to all.

PowerPoint remains the #1 product for sermons and announcement slides. Most products allow the importing of PowerPoint slides. There are a few specialty products that don't actually replace PowerPoint but act as "add-on" or "back-end" products to help deal with the inadequacies of PowerPoint. In addition, some specialty products are especially designed with a musical performer in mind or for those whose main need is for a specialized database of organizing worship and staff rather than presenting lyrics.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

The guide is written as a series of questions. Do NOT use the guide to simply pick the software with the most features! The first thing to do is to simply decide which features that your church needs. First look at each question and ask yourself to rate the question as "Not Applicable", "Nice" or "Critical". "Not Applicable" means that this question is of no relevance and should be ignored."Nice" means that it might be a useful issue but is not very important." "Critical" means that it is an important item that must be met by this software.

HERE IS WHAT TO DO:

1. First, download a trial version of one of the popular software titles such as EasyWorship, Songshow Plus, Presentation Manager, Sunday Plus, etc. just to try one out.
2. Now that you have some experience, go through the questions in this list and rate their importance.

3. Eliminate the questions from the list that are rated as "Non Applicable". This may allow you to greatly reduc the size of this exhaustive selection guide. Recreate the list with a smaller number of questions.
4. Review questions rated as "Critical". Examine the software products with the list. If a software product doesn't meet your "Critical" rating then eliminate the software from consideration.
5. Review the remaining software products that meet your "Critical" rating and see what "nice" features they have. Remember, all the software that remains meets your critical requirements. Just because a question has more "Nice"s however doesn't make them the best. Ease of use counts, and some "Nice" ratings are worth more to you than others.
6. MOST IMPORTANT: Download a trial version of the software and try it out. Make a dry run of making up a sample worship service and see how it works for you.
7. Talk to other users.

Here are some things to consider when looking at worship software packages:

STEWARDSHIP ISSUES: (Costs, Longevity, etc.)

   Even though you may have a limited budget, be careful about making your decisions based on cost alone. Once you pick a software product and use it for a few months it can be a painful process to change to a different one. You may spend a lot of time training staff. You may also spend a lot of time "tuning" up the song list. If you decide to change to a different product later, you may find it extremely laborious to convert all your songs over to the new software. A lot of these products have incompatible databases. Change products and you may be starting over from the beginning. The bottom line is that you need to make your decision with care.

DATE: _____

SOFTWARE NAME: _____ VERSION: _____

MANUFACTURER: _____ WEBSITE URL: _____

REVIEWER(S): _____ PRICE(S): _____

REVIEWER SPECIAL NOTES: _____

_____

_____

INSTRUCTION MANUAL:
Does the software come with a comprehensive manual?
How easy is the manual to use? Does it have a good table of contents and keyword index?
Can you get a printed version of the manual if you want it?
Is the manual electronically searchable?
Is the manual on the Internet only or do you get a copy for your church?

TRAINING:
Is there a training guide for you to use as your church tech staff changes?
Are demonstration tutorials available?

SUPPORT:
Is there online email technical support?
Is there a online discussion board for user support from other users?
How active is the online user group?
Is there telephone support?
Is there online chat type technical support?
What hours and days is the technical support available?
How knowledgeable are the tech support staff? (have you tried asking a question?)
Does the support staff quickly respond to questions?
Is there an extra cost for support?
Do you have friends or staff who are already experienced with the software?

Does the manufacturer website provide for free backgrounds, animations graphics or video backgrounds?
Does the software have a help screens or tech tips integrated within the software?

CONTROLS:
How easy is the software to use?
How easy is it to change the song schedule "on the fly"?
Does the software provide for both mouse and hot key combinations?
Can you reassign keys?
Can you reassign mouse button functions?
Does the software provide for the presenter to control it or does it require a separate operator? Is the software controlled by an operator in the control booth or by the presenter?
Does the software provide a preview frame in the control screen?
Does the software provide for a hotkey to quickly go to black screen or a default screen when needed or in an emergency?
Can you show different screens on two or more different projectors at the same time?
Does the software provide for Macro or script creation and usage?
Does the software provide for RS232 or USB projector control or lighting control?
Does the software provide for auto advance of slides based on time settings?
Do you need scrolling text or scrolling lyric features?
Does the software allow different resolution for the control screen versus the display screen?
Does the software show thumbnails of upcoming, slides, songs, movies, etc?
Can the user controlling the software rearrange the service on the fly while presenting and the audience not see the changes?
Can you assign different levels of access to the software to different users?
Does the software use standard Windows or Mac conventions?

	N/A	Nice	Critical

SONG LYRIC TECHNICAL FEATURES:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
Does the software allow editing of songs?			
If the song director wants it, can you repeat the chorus or specified line or add a new song "on the fly"?			
Does the song integrate with CCLI "Song Select" or "Integrity Worship" type products for importing lyrics?			
Does the software allow for "cut and paste" text into lyrics?			
Can you specify a different graphic per stanza or only one graphic per song?			
What kinds of transitions important to you are provided? (wipe, box in/out, diamond, cover, blinds, circle, ellipse, dissolve, squeeze, weave, etc.)			
Does the software provide for wipe direction, type and speed?			
Does the software have transition speed control?			
Are the transitions smooth or jerky?			
Does the software provide background bordering?			
Does the software provide separate author, copyright, composer font display control?			
Does the software provide song database features such as search by title, first line, word, author, composer, tempo, key, source, etc features?			
Does the software allow you to create type of song groups in the database?			
Can you have multiple versions of the same song?			
Does the software allow adding of comments to songs for the controller that are not shown to the audience?			
Does the software autoformat lyric text to fit screen?			
Does the software allow autoformat of lyric text to fit a specified part of the screen?			
Can you specify that the lyric text auto increase size and auto decrease font size to fit the display area?			
Does the software provide for individual formatting control of title and footer text?			
Can you specify that song titles only show on the first screen of the song only?			
Does the software come with songs ready to use? Are they the songs that are useful to you?			

GRAPHIC/FONT INTEGRATION:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
Will the software handle all the graphic formats that you need? (jpg, gif, bmp, png, tiff, etc.)			
Does the software provide for graphic resizing or tiling to fill the screen or do you have to pre-edit the to a certain size?			
What fonts are allowed, limited fonts or all Windows and true type fonts?			
Does the software provide font shadows to improve clarity?			
Does the software provide for font shadow sizing and color?			
Does the software provide font outlining to improve clarity?			
Are the fonts smooth or jagged?			
How many free backgrounds and graphics come with the software?			
What is the quality of the free backgrounds and graphics?			
Does the software allow control of background brightness, contrast, etc?			
Can you blur the graphic, pixelize, fade, control transparency or brushstroke the image backgrounds?			
Does the software provide for gradient backgrounds and color control?			
Will the software display web pages?			
Does the software allow you to assigned a specified color as transparent?			
Does the software allow you to specify the location and size of a graphic on the screen?			
Does the software allow you to preview a thumbnail of the graphic before selecting it for the presentation?			
Does the software provide for a "blackboard" type feature where user can actively type in or draw on screen during presentation?			
Can you automatically change all fonts on a slide to all caps or mixed caps/small case?			
Can you control, center text or align text right or align text left?			
Can you make both global changes to all song fonts or attributes and individual changes to certain stanzas?			
Can you save specific graphics with a particular song in the database?			
Can you assign graphics to a song for that schedule only?			
What file formats are natively supported: .jpg, .bmp, .tiff, .png (preserves transparency), .psd (photoshop native), others?			
Can you drag and drop graphics/videos to the schedule on their own (without the creation of "dummy" songs)?			
Can you drag graphics from the database onto a scheduled item?			

	N/A	Nice	Critical

MOVIE/ANIMATION/VIDEO INTEGRATION:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
Will the software handle all the movie or animation formats that you need?			
Consider WMV, mpeg, mpeg-2, mpeg-4, avi, MOV, flash, M1V, MP2, MPA, MPE, MPV2, and M3U , animated gif, etc.			
How smoothly does the software transition back and forth to movie or animation format?			
How well does the software integrate with DVD or VCR input?			
Does the software provide play, pause, fast forward, slow, rewind controls? Are the controls only seen by the controller or by the audience?			
Does the software provide for live video feed integration?			
Does the software allow for motion backgrounds?			
How smoothly does the software handle transitioning back to the beginning of the loop on looped videos? (jerky or smooth)			
How many free video or animations come as part of the software?			
What is the quality of the free videos and animations?			
How smoothly does the software handle transitions from one video to another?			
Does the software provide text overlayed on a video/animation background?			
Can you control the size of the video on the screen (shrink/expand)?			
Does the software have animated transitions such as page flip, spin, roll, zoom, etc?			

AUDIO:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
Does the software allow integration/playing of MP2, WAV, MIDI, ASF, WMA, etc. files?			
Does the software allow audio volume control?			
Does the software allow individual audio control of different audio files?			
Does the software provide for audio mute, mixing, right/left, etc.?			
Are the audio controls seen the audience or only by the controller?			

	N/A	Nice	Critical

BIBLE TEXT FEATURES:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
Do you plan to use this software to show scripture text?			
Does this software provide the versions of the scriptures that you want to use?			
How quickly can this software bring up scripture text?			
How easy is it to find and insert scriptures "on the fly"?			
Does this software automatically format the text to the screen?			
Does the software integrate with common Bible software programs such as Logos, Online Bible, WordSearch, Quickverse, etc.			

SERVICE PLANNING/INTEGRATION:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
Does the software allow easy copying of service schedules between computers?			
Does the software allow moving song lyrics databases between computers used for planning or presenting services?			
Does the software provide for printing of service schedules			
Does the software provide for printing of song lyrics?			
Does the software provide for a listing of presenters, leaders or performers actually used in the service?			
Does the software provide for listing, categorizing and scheduling available staff or presenters?			
Does the software provide for automated CCLI data recording?			
Can you access the song databases and service schedules over a network for collaborative planning?			
Can you remotely access the song database and service schedules over the Internet for collaborative planning?			
Does the software provide for quicklists of known songs?			
Can you print a full song title list of available songs for planners? How about song lyrics, schedule and CCLI report?			
How long does it take to build a new schedule from scratch?			

	N/A	Nice	Critical

POWERPOINT or SLIDE INTEGRATION:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
Is it important to you whether this software easily integrates PowerPoint presentations?			
Does the software smoothly transition back and forth from PowerPoint?			
Does the software allow you to start with some other slide in a PowerPoint presentation other than slide #1?			
Does the software allow looping slides for announcements until intervention by the operator?			
Can the software call on more than one PowerPoint presentation at different times in the schedule?			
Does the software allow you to make up announcement slides within the software without PowerPoint?			
Does the built in slide maker allow font control, insertion and resizing of graphics, drawing tools, etc?			
Does the software provide spell checking?			
Can you assign different show timings to different slides?			

AUXILIARY FEATURES:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
Do you need "nursery call" features? (The ability to show some text or numbers at the side of a screen without interrupting the presentation. You give numbers to people with children in the nursery and then flash their number on the screen if they need to go to the nursery.)			
Do you need the ability to scroll in special announcement text during songs, etc.?			

SPECIALTY ITEMS:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
Does the software have a teleprompter feature?			
Does the software provide for special input devices such as foot controls? (Sometimes used when a performer controls the software.)			
Can you run this program in single screen mode? Does it support more than two screens (one control, one for editing/song entering, etc, and one presentation?)			

MUSIC FEATURES:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
Does the software show musical notes?			
Do you need shaped notes?			
Do you need the ability to show chords or other musical notation?			

COSTS:

	N/A	Nice	Critical
What is the base price?			
Does this software have different levels, i.e. one cost for the basic level software and additional costs for "pro" features?			
Is the cost of the software a "one time cost" or are you buying a subscription?			
Is the cost a "site license" or do you have to buy a separate license for each computer used for projection?			
Do you like the philosophy of "open source" software and want to support that?			
If you want to display Scriptures through the software, are there additional costs for the Bible versions you want to have? What are the costs for the versions you want?			
What are the costs of upgrades and patches?			
What is the return policy of the manufacturer if the product doesn't work well for you?			

	N/A	Nice	Critical

LONGEVITY:

I am a bit concerned about bringing up the issue of "longevity". First of all, none of them have been around very long. This is a new industry. I have a lot of concerns that there are over 40 companies making this type software. You would expect that over the course of the next few years that many of these products may stop being supported.

Be careful about picking a product just because one of your tech team members is familiar with it. If your church's main "tech expert" on this software moves away, does this software lend itself to someone else picking up the support of it?

What indications do you have that the software manufacturer is in the business "for the long run"?

How long has the software manufacturer been in business?

Is this software the product of a single individual? What happens to support if that individual gets ill or quits supporting this product?

Does the manufacturer have enough staff to support the product even if a key person gets ill or leaves the company?

Does the software manufacturer have a history of continually upgrading and refining the product?

OTHER QUESTIONS:

Do you use an Apple or Windows operating System?

Do you have the appropriate computer system to run this software?

Does your computer support the video resolutions required?

Does this software require a dual head video card?

Does your computer have enough RAM for this software?

Does your computer have enough video memory for this software?

How hard is it to uninstall the software if you decide to change?

MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION:

Does the manufacturer allow you to run a full featured demo of the software to test in your church environment?

If you buy a new computer, how hard is it to move your software and databases to the new computer?