

A dramatic landscape photograph of a cliffside with a church spire under a cloudy sky. The scene is captured in a cinematic style, with the sky filled with large, textured clouds. The cliff face is a mix of light and dark tones, suggesting different rock formations or shadows. The church spire is a prominent feature on the right side of the cliff. The overall mood is contemplative and somewhat somber.

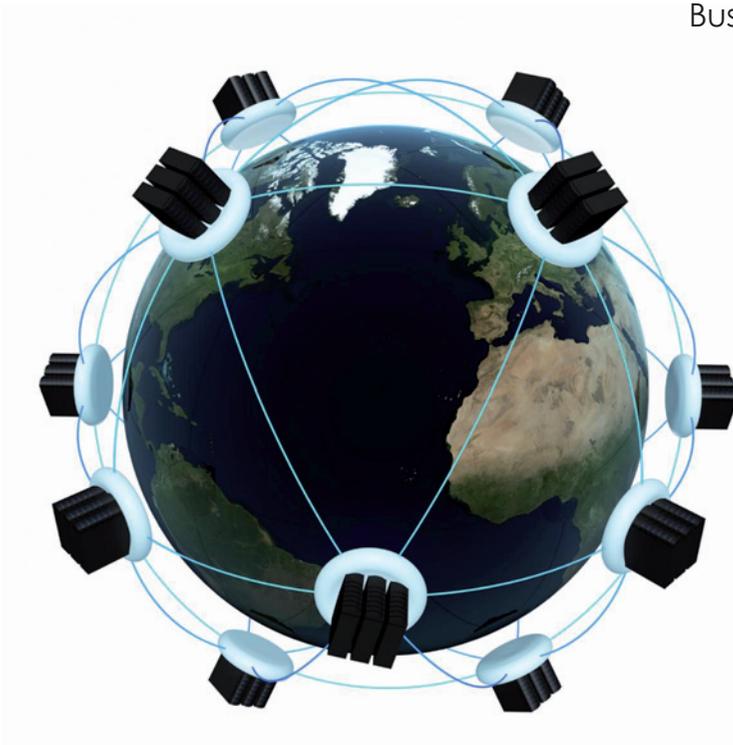
2011: The Year
CHURCHES
Move Into The Cloud?

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2011: The Year Churches Move Into The Cloud?

2010 was a great year when it came to technology. Smart phones were being released left, right and center, iPad's changed how a lot of us do things, and websites were making increasing use of social media, just to name a few.



Businesses were also continuing to move more towards “cloud computing” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud_computing). Businesses all over the world are starting to realise that being in the cloud is the way of the future. Most people have a personal Gmail, Hotmail or Yahoo email address that's been hosted in the cloud for years. So why not business email? Why not church email?

Every church is at a different level when it comes to technology. Some don't use computers, some barely, some are more up to date, whereas others are leading the way.

So how are churches going to move their technology more into the 21st century in 2011? Moving more towards utilising the cloud is a great start, especially when it comes to efficiency and saving a lot of money.

What are the benefits of being in the cloud?

1. Access from anywhere

Being in the cloud means you can be anywhere, on any computer and still access all your information. All you need is an Internet connection.

This is handy if you want to travel. You can't take your 27" iMac with you to Japan can you?

2. Access on lots of Internet enabled devices

These days everyone has a laptop, everyone has a smart phone, and soon everyone will probably have a tablet. You can even get Internet on your TV these days.

All these devices have one thing in common – the ability to connect to the Internet. That means you can access your information on any of them and they all sync with each other. Make a change on your laptop - see that change on your iPhone. Simple!

3. It's cheap!

Servers cost thousands of dollars. Then you have to think about the software and licences, and not to mention upgrades. It's going to set



you back a lot over the years. Being in the cloud can cost you NOTHING. That's right. NOTHING! I currently run one of my businesses completely in the cloud. All I pay for is my Internet connection. All my online storage is completely free!

4. No more backups

Most cloud companies out there today have advanced backup systems, so you no longer have to worry about backing up to that portable hard drive every week. I have experienced A LOT of crashes over the years. Most were recoverable, but the amount of time it took copying files back, setting up all my email accounts and importing emails was such a pain.

All your emails and files are stored nice and safe in the cloud so all you have to do is open another computer and log into your account and "Viola" all your emails and files are there. You can sleep easy at night.

5. No need for a huge IT support team

I for one don't know a lot about managing and upkeeping a server. That's what I love about the cloud. I don't have to. Other technicians do that for me and provide me with a simple administration system. This allows me to do what I need to do without having to worry about a crashed hard drive or updating my software. Huge time saver!

What are the disadvantages of being in the cloud?

1. You need an Internet connection

For most cloud services you need an Internet connection. If the Internet goes down, so do your emails and files. Most businesses rely on Internet these days in general, but it's still handy being able to access emails and files while the Internet is down.

The good thing is that a lot of cloud companies (Google Apps for example) allow you to have an "Offline Mode" which means all your files and emails can be downloaded, stored and synced with your computer so that they are still accessible when the Internet is down.

2. You need a decent Internet connection

This isn't a big issue, but in countries like Australia where I live, we're a bit behind when it comes to Internet speed. Having a slow Internet connection can be a big drag especially if you are dealing with online files and documents. So take this into account.

3. Your data is stored on some computer sitting in some data center

That's right. When your data is in the "cloud", that means it's sitting on a server somewhere in the world. This could be a scary thought because you don't have control over it. When you delete emails and files, are they really deleted or are they still stored somewhere? This is something to take into consideration.

You must remember that most of these cloud companies would be with thousands if not millions of people. So if you're afraid that your data will be compromised, chances are it won't.

If you're really concerned about this, it might be a good idea to read the company's Terms and Privacy Policies to ensure you are comfortable.

What “cloud” services are there?

The list is ever increasing, but here are a few to kick you off...

1. Online Email, Calendar and Documents

The most common company out there at the moment doing this well is Google Apps (<http://www.google.com/apps/>).

For those who don't know what Google Apps does, it basically sets you up with a Gmail account (while using your churches domain name) and gives you access to all the online features such as email, a calendar and documents.

It's free, and you can have up to 50 accounts (I've heard of churches with more than 50 without paying) and around 7GB of storage for each account. That's a lot of emails!

You can also store personal files and share them with Google Docs (this is apart of Google Apps and even personal Gmail accounts). Google Docs provides a replacement for the Microsoft Office Suite (Word, Excel, etc). It's not perfect yet, but they are making continued upgrades which don't cost you a cent.

You can even import all your emails, calendar events, and contacts from popular email clients such as Microsoft Outlook (<http://tools.google.com/dlpage/outlookmigration>) into your Google Apps account.

You can read more about cloud email at: <http://www.cloudemail101.org/>



2. Online Communication

My church has recently opened up campuses in multiple countries, so communication is a big key. Phone calls from Australia to overseas can be expensive, so why not try an online alternative?

Skype (<http://www.skype.com/>) is one of those great alternatives. Most people know of it and have used it for personal use. Why not for church communications? You can set up phone and video calls with your team no matter where they are in the world.

You can even get Skype apps on your smart phones and tablets making it even easier to communicate on the run.

3. Online Storage

Servers are expensive to buy and upkeep. So why not look at online storage? There are plenty of companies out there doing this well these days.

One of my favourite, for personal online storage, is DropBox (<http://www.dropbox.com/>) which gives you 2GB free. For a small \$9.99 per month you can get 50GB.

You can even go with services like the increasingly popular Amazon S3 (<http://aws.amazon.com/s3/>). You only pay for what you use, which means it is extremely scalable and you can control what goes on there. Amazon S3 can be a little overwhelming at first, but once you get your head around how it works it is quite simple and works out quite cheap.

4. Online Databases

Churches need databases to effectively grow their church, keep in contact with new connections in the church, and even



provide services to volunteers like online rostering and registrations.

I haven't seen too many Church specific databases out there, but from what I've heard a lot of them are clunky and too hard. The best thing to do is ask other churches what they use and what's working for them. Some have a custom database like what I have created for my local church.

If you don't have the luxury of a programmer, maybe even look at cloud CRM platforms that a lot of businesses use such as Salesforce (<http://www.salesforce.com/>) and SugarCRM (<http://www.sugarcrm.com/>). These can be modified quite a lot and should be able to be set-up to suit your church.

When it comes to church rostering, the days of excel documents are coming to an end. Churches need to be more efficient, communicating with their team constantly and being able to collect unavailabilities without losing them. That's why we here at elvanto (<http://elvanto.com/>) have created a system that gives you all the features and makes rostering a breeze.

Where to next?

Moving your church into the cloud can seem like an overwhelming and daunting task, especially if you've been around for a while and are used to using your computer.



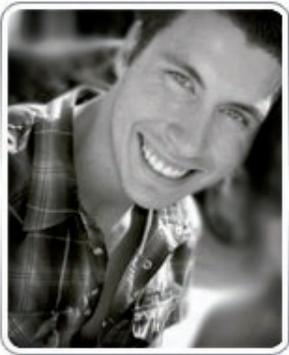
If you want to go this way, take it slow. Do your research. Start off with the simple things and make your way up to the more complex tasks. I started off by migrating my emails to Google Apps, which was actually quite simple once I got my head around it.

Get help. Ask someone who has done it before. Find out from their experience.

The up and coming months and years are going to be interesting times. The cloud is most likely going to become more and more prominent so why not jump on the band wagon.

See how it will make your church run a whole lot more efficiently and cheaper.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ben Sinclair is the founder of online rostering software www.elvanto.com. He was only 14 years old when he started a web design company with his Dad. After selling the business back in 2010, Ben now has years of experience creating software and making things simple for his clients. Ben is passionate about creating software that solves problems but at the same time is simple for anyone to use. Check out his Online Roster Software designed specifically for churches at www.elvanto.com and sign up for a 30 Day Free Trial today!