Can 'The Cloud' Simplify IT?

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Few phrases have caught the imagination of computer users and IT managers as has "The Cloud." It will impact the way your ministry uses computers and, approached strategically, it can save your ministry money while also simplifying your IT operations.

The Cloud—What Is It?

The Cloud means different things to different people. Some say it's about saving energy, others say it's about outsourcing IT services, and others say it's about moving everything to off-site datacenters. While all of those— and many more— are true, there are two things everyone agrees on:

1. *The Cloud is about where data and applications reside.* In The Cloud, data and applications are stored on and accessed from servers. Technically, those servers can be in a datacenter, or they can be in your server room.

2. *The Cloud is about how data and applications are accessed.* Computers access servers via TCP/IP over a cabled or WiFi connection; that's also how they do so over the Internet. And, ideally, Cloud data and applications are platform and operating system agnostic, which means they can be accessed by:
   - Windows, Mac, & Linux computers,
   - Tablets, like the iPad, and
   - Smartphones, like the iPhone and Android.

The Cloud, by its very nature, facilitates mobile computing.

Most organizations' networks satisfy these aspects of cloud computing— if they focus their data and applications on servers, and if those are available via the Internet.

Is Corporate America in 'The Cloud'?

Mostly, no. But that's changing, and we'll look at how and why in a moment.

There are three dominating reasons why corporate America is mostly not in The Cloud:

1. *Security & Trust.* Corporate officers understand their fiduciary responsibility to make decisions that protect the corporation from liability and from loss of assets. They know they must protect proprietary information (databases, documents, product designs, etc) that helps them fulfill their mission successfully. Many understand that putting their data in The Cloud is risky.

2. *Internet Reliability.* Those who work in IT see Internet outages often. Most are short, but some are longer in duration— hours or days. Corporate officers understand that if they were Cloud-based and a longer outage occurred, the personnel costs could be staggering. In these days of slim profit margins the risk of an Internet outage could mean the difference between profitability and bankruptcy.

Fortunately, these two reasons are fairly easily overcome… more on that shortly.

3. *IT Directors Protecting Their Turf.* Most IT Directors know that outsourcing to The Cloud could significantly reduce the number of personnel in their department. Many fan the flames of reasons 1 and 2 to protect their turf. In The Church, this is usually not an issue.

Protecting Data in The Cloud

One way to understand good Cloud strategy is to focus on the two 'halves' of The Cloud: *Public Cloud* and *Private Cloud*. The Public Cloud refers to services running on servers that are generally available to anyone interested in those services. Some examples are Google Apps, Yahoo, Facebook, etc. In contrast, Private Cloud services run on servers that are generally not available to the public. In other words, only those who are pre-authorized can access those servers. Private Cloud servers are secured similarly to the way you might secure the servers in your server room.

Some popular Cloud services include communication services (email, instant messaging and chat, social networking), websites, databases, and data storage (like for photos, documents, etc). Of those, some (email, instant messaging and chat, databases, and document storage) should always and only be done in the Private Cloud. That is a primary key to having a good corporate Cloud strategy.

One Additional Caution

Recent events suggest it is wise to make certain your datacenter is located in the same country as your ministry. If your datacenter were in another country, and that country's government decided to sever its Internet connection with the world, you wouldn't be able to get to your data until that situation changed. So, if you are a church or ministry in the U.S.A., for example, make certain you choose a datacenter in the U.S.A. if you decide to outsource your servers.

The Cloud does have the potential of moving your ministry forward while saving personnel costs and capital expenditures. Done wisely, The Cloud is a terrific option. Remember: make certain it is Private Cloud and located in your country.

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Cloud Pros & Cons	
Pros	Cons
• No (or *nearly no*) IT staff	• Not in your control
• IT is outsourced	• Vendor may not have mission loyalty
• Saves salaries & capital expenditure planning	• Might not save money overall
• You're no longer responsible for disaster recovery & business continuity	• Your data is somewhere else… can feel like a vulnerability
• Accessible from anywhere on any 'connected' device	• No connection, no access— period