

# Biometrics in the Church!

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Those of us who love watching 24 and other high-tech shows can't help noticing the use of biometrics to enhance their computer system security. Of course, it makes sense for those with top secret files to use such devices as fingerprint scanners, retina scanners, and voice print analyzers to protect them. Surprisingly, that technology is very affordable, and has a use in ministries!

## What is Biometrics?

Biometrics refers to the use of tools that measure and analyze human characteristics for authentication purposes. In law enforcement we've seen them move from simple blood type and fingerprints to DNA. DNA is a much more accurate measurement, allowing testimony that more uniquely identifies someone, and does so with a smaller margin of error. It's accuracy is rarely challenged successfully.

Similarly, biometrics allows going beyond simple passwords to something much more secure. And the cost is very reasonable, about \$120/computer (networks sometimes require an additional software package). We tested and were very pleased with the U.are.U workstation scanner and software from [www.DigitalPersona.com](http://www.DigitalPersona.com). It interfaced nicely with Windows Active Directory, and was very simple to set up. These are the units sold by Dell, among others, and even come integrated in keyboards and notebook computers! In fact, for years I used an HP iPAQ PDA that had this technology built in. I knew my data was secure.

## Why Use Biometrics in a Ministry Setting?

Most ministries have sensitive data on their computer systems like congregant and/or donor information, payroll records, and more. Many states now have privacy laws and regulations requiring that these files be adequately protected. Working with many churches and ministries, we usually find poor password policies in place. We see things like folks sharing their passwords with workmates and even putting them on Post-It® notes stuck to their monitors!

A colleague recently shared what his organization refers to as the Fraud Triangle, the three points of which are motivation, rationalization, and opportunity. Though we can't protect systems from the first two, we can protect them from opportunity. Biometrics is a great way to do so.

Consider the following two scenarios:

- Many on church and ministry staff have notebook computers and PDAs with sensitive data on them. These devices are easily stolen, giving the thief access to that data.
- Many churches and ministries have a K12 school as part of their program. We don't want there to be any opportunity for a kid in a lab to gain access to the data on the administrative network, so we've always recommended that computers used by kids not have a physical connection to the administrative network. The challenge is that having their systems completely separate make them more difficult (and costly) to support.

Using biometrics instead of passwords eliminates these concerns!

## Is It Worth It?

Justifying the cost of technology in ministry is always a little tricky. Some industries, like financial institutions, are so heavily regulated that they have large technology budgets. For them this isn't a problem. Surprisingly, many churches and ministries that get CPA financial audits are finding that the security of their systems are being scrutinized much more closely since Enron. They are having to demonstrate good security policies and practices.

Regarding biometrics, the relatively low cost needs to be addressed almost like an insurance policy. If an organization has 30 computers, is it worth nearly \$4000 to secure their systems with biometrics? The cost to use biometrics needs to be measured against the cost associated with a security breach. And while that doesn't seem likely, it does happen! We once gained a client after their previous network engineering firm took a copy of their database and began renting it out as a mail list! So, if your data were compromised, how much might that hurt your ministry's reputation? And how might that impact donations and offerings?

## Another Benefit: Simple Administration

Biometrics are easy to set up, and users never forget their passwords. That makes network administration easier while also making the network more secure. Biometrics is right for many church and ministry systems.