Guidelines for Using Computers

Dear Brothers in the Twelve Tribes,
Because of the many questions and situations that continue to arise, I would like to try to summarize the conclusions we have come to in council during the past several years concerning our use of computers and the Internet. It is so important that we would have wisdom from our Father and proceed with extreme caution and much diligence in our use of this technology. The old adage, "Fools rush ahead where angels fear to tread" aptly applies here.

There are relatively few uses for computers — really only three — that have proved to be beneficial to our life: word processing, communications, and bookkeeping. Of course, every clan needs to do these three things, but not necessarily with a computer. People have been doing all three fairly effectively for thousands of years without computers. But they can be very useful tools for men and women who are full of the Holy Spirit and who are fascinated by our Master and His word, enabling them to communicate more effectively and efficiently, and to maintain accurate records (1 Cor 7:31). On the other hand, those who are fascinated by computers will only tear down what our Master is trying to build; they will fall into the snare of the evil one (2 Tim 2:26), and their children's eyes will be on their fathers' idols (Eze 20:24).

Access to Computers
Every computer must be under government. If we are wise, we would no more let an untrained or undisciplined person use a computer than we would let such a person operate a chain saw. Every computer has a steward who is responsible for what is stored in it, what programs are running on it, who uses it, and how it is used. No one would ever use a computer without covering, or use it for a purpose that does not build up the Body of Messiah.

Computers and Our Children
We would no more put a child in front of a computer to keep him occupied than we would put him in front of a television. Visually stimulating "screen savers" or other "multimedia" programs have tremendous potential to distract or even defile our children and ourselves. While we have no law against children using computers, it should only be with very close supervision and with a clearly defined purpose in mind. For example, a child may learn to type on a computer, but he or she should be not be allowed to explore the computer (which he may be sorely tempted to do), changing its screen settings, colors, trying out other programs, etc. I have my daughters learn to type by typing things for me, such as the Intertribal News, and I insist that they not look at their fingers as they type. I have yet to see a computer program for learning typing that is not foolish and "video-game-like". Probably a good old-fashioned typing book, an electric typewriter, and diligence is the best way to learn to type.

Computers that Come in with Sheep (or Goats)
With very few, if any, exceptions, we do not need sound systems or other multimedia equipment on our computers. More and more people will be coming into our communities with computers, and those computers will very likely be full of all sorts of foolish, distracting, or defiling things (like sound cards, speakers, games, encyclopedias, viruses, or worse). And some of these computers will also be far more powerful than some communities will need. We should not just plug in these computers and put them into use without judging what is in them and where (if anywhere) they can best be put into service.

Concerning E-Mail
We use e-mail for governmental communications between the clans and tribes, including file transfer for the intertribal news and teachings. Since we have established our Twelve Tribes web site we have also used e-mail to respond to people who respond to our web site. However, we do not want to encourage using e-mail for general correspondence, either between the clans and tribes, or with our relatives outside the community. The apostolic workers who have e-mail accounts should not become mail dispatchers, and the confidentiality of their communications should not be compromised by others using their e-mail accounts. Some apostolic brothers may have a wife or deacon whom they trust to communicate for them,

but any account sharing beyond that has a great potential for abuse.

[In the future we hope to replace our use of CompuServe or Internet-based e-mail (and telephones, too!) with communications over our own radio network. Each community would have a "telegraph office" where trained operators would dispatch incoming and outgoing messages between the clans and tribes. A technique called "encryption" would enable messages to remain confidential so that only the intended recipient could read them. We hope to have at least one inter-clan and one inter-tribal radio link set up soon to begin experimenting with this system.]

Internet Access

Many of our people have expressed an interest in accessing the Internet to obtain information, such as schedules of evangelistic events, product information, addresses and telephone numbers, etc. However there is tremendous potential for distraction and defilement, even for those with discretion and self-control. It is not called the "World-Wide Web" for nothing. When searching for information, you do not have much control over what images appear on your screen. For example, recently a responsible brother was searching for something on the Internet, using a "search engine" (a service available on the "Web" for helping find things) that he had often used before. But this time he was using it very late at night, whereas before he had used it in the daytime. He was shocked that it now was "visually enhanced" with sexually-suggestive images. Of course, he quickly switched to another search engine, but this is only one instance of the unpredictable nature of the "Web." You can see that, unless we are looking at our own web site, children should never be watching when we search the "Web."

[Actually, similar surprises can come via e-mail. Sometimes pornographic "junk mail" can arrive in your electronic mail box. If you do not recognize the sender of any message, you would do well to consider carefully what is in the "Subject:" field before you open it. If something looks suspicious to me, I just delete it without even opening it. Fortunately, CompuServe automatically filters out most off-colored "junk mail" (I'm not quite sure how), but some things slip through.]

Anyway, to prevent both lawless access to the Internet and breaches of e-mail confidentiality, no computer that is accessible (i.e., in an office or common space) should have an e-mail interface or "Web browser" with the password already entered into its configuration. That is, anyone who attempts to use that interface should be required to actually type the password in order to gain entry (and the password should not be generally known or easily guessed).

Having our own Web Sites

Several heads of cottage industries have shown an interest in having an "on-line" version of their product catalog on the "World-Wide Web." In some cases, outside agencies have contacted our industries offering to design and set up a web site for them, for a fee, or to include our product information on their web site. So far we have not received faith to accept such offers. If we do indeed set up our own web sites for our cottage industries, their design and maintenance will be entirely under our control. Outside contractors will *say* that they will build us a web site "entirely according to our own design," but there is a spirit about advertising in general and the "Web" in particular. Of course we wouldn't hire outside contractors to build a café for us "entirely according to our own design" — it wouldn't be clean. Only priests can touch these things.

Hardware and Software Standards

In the interest of our being able to freely exchange files between the tribes and clans, such as freepapers, teachings, Intertribal News, and graphical images, it is helpful if we all use the same programs for these things. So before you make software decisions, I would suggest contacting us at the print shop in Yehudah.

Copying Software

In May 1997, at an apostolic meeting in Rutland, we discussed at length the question of copying software. The notes to this meeting have been distributed with the teachings (970518R2), but I will summarize our conclusion: We decided that we should purchase a separate copy of every program we use for each computer that we use it on, unless the manufacturer explicitly give us the right to install multiple copies

from a single purchase. This will give us a good conscience and protect us from expensive lawsuits and bringing reproach upon our Master's name.