

Why Churches Buy Three Sound Systems, and How You Can Buy Only One

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by Jim Brown

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There's a saying among the better sound contractors that they want to sell a church their **LAST** sound system. That's because, strange as it seems, most churches are so afraid of buying sound systems that they do it three or four times before they finally end up with one that works well enough to meet their needs!

The first is purchased when they build the church, and the architect says he'll design it. What really happens is that he passes the work along to a sound contractor, usually the new kid on the block who's trying to get his foot in the door by doing the designs for free. He prints up a list of whatever equipment he has the best deals on (and which his competitors aren't franchised for), and sends it along as a specification.

The system goes out to bid. Often our hero is the low bidder, but nearly as often someone who knows as little about things as he does proposes a different system that's cheaper. And since there's no knowledgeable authority to decide which is the better deal, the lower cost system often wins. No matter -- neither system is likely to meet the church's needs anyway, and most are replaced in a year or two.

Why are these first systems replaced? Some of the most common problems are feedback (howling), poor speech intelligibility and muddy music caused by too much reverberation, the system can't be heard on the platform, dead spots, hot spots, and just plain unpleasant sound quality. And so we move on to system number two.

There are several variations on system number two. Often, members of the praise and worship team make exploratory visits to their friendly musical instrument and recording equipment store, where everyone either is, has been, or knows someone who is or has been a roadie for a band. And all of those folks know how to put together a sound system -- after all, they did it every night for their bar band, and got paid for it! Add to that the fact that they're on commission, selling all kinds of sound equipment designed to be used in bar bands. And gee whiz, isn't a church system just like a bigger bar band system? So we have another designer who doesn't know much of anything about sound systems for churches, but he's selling his equipment.

A second common variation on system number two starts out with someone in the congregation who is either a sound contractor or knows someone who is a sound contractor. And because he's a friend, or a friend of a friend, he's asked to design the next system. Maybe he's actually qualified to do it, but more often his specialty is paging systems for offices and factories, or touring systems for rock bands. So here's another designer who doesn't know enough to get the design right.

Other common variations on the theme are electronics engineers from industry who head down to the local Radio Shack or music store, and stereo enthusiasts who think everything will be fine if they just install the latest monster cables, and super exotic amplifiers, loudspeakers, and microphones.

So this second time around, the designer is chosen because he's someone's friend, but still not because of any proven ability to put together a good church sound system. System number two is purchased and installed, and rarely works any better than the first. But it's now a couple of years later, twice as much money was spent as planned, and attendance is sagging because of the poor sound. The pastor still has poor communication with the congregation, and the praise and worship team sounds more like noise than inspiration.

Desperate measures are called for. If they're lucky, the church comes to the realization at this point that they'd better find someone who really knows what they're doing, a proven expert with a track record. That someone is an acoustic consultant who specializes in sound system design for churches and performance spaces. Someone who understands how loudspeaker systems interact with large rooms, why feedback happens and how to

prevent it, how to get good sound and equal loudness to everyone in the congregation and on the platform, how to prevent music from turning to mush, how to prevent hums and buzzes from happening, and all of the myriad other things which can go wrong in a big room. Someone who insists on coming in to meet with the pastor, leaders of the praise and worship and technical teams, study the worship space, and measure its acoustics. Someone who will have to be paid to design the system because they don't work on a commission or markup from the sale of the system.

Why Does All This Have to Be So Complicated?

After all, isn't all we're talking about nothing more than a simple PA system? Why can't the church just buy a mixer and some loudspeakers at Radio Shack (or a music store) and hang them on the wall? That's what they did in the smaller church they just moved out of, and it worked fine!

There are several major reasons. First, as the size of the worship space gets larger, the demands placed on the sound system grow exponentially. In a small space, the choir and praise band are much less likely to need amplification to carry to the congregation, and there is rarely enough reverberation to make it hard to understand the spoken word. The church I grew up in never had a sound system, and we could hear the preacher just fine! But its seating capacity was only a few hundred.

The larger the space, the more reverberation there will be to muddle both the spoken word and the praise band. Echoes from rear walls, balcony faces, side walls, and ceilings can make things even worse. It takes very skillful sound system design to overcome these problems. It can be done, and done well, but it isn't easy. Sound must be very carefully controlled, focused only on listeners with as little as possible spilling onto walls and ceilings. This takes the right type of loudspeakers in the right place and very carefully aiming. Loudspeakers designed for bar bands or for touring sound are rarely the right choice here.

Second, the role of sound and amplification has become much more central to praise and worship. Music is used to inspire, to lift the spirit, and to bring the unchurched into the fold. Choirs which used to sing with only a piano or organ are now accompanied in many churches by a rhythm section. In churches which incorporate a contemporary style of worship, the sound system must be able to make the choir much louder to balance with drums and electronic instruments, and the various musicians must be able to hear each other well to play together. Again, careful control of the sound is critical if this is to be accomplished without feedback.

The acoustic design of the worship space is fundamentally important to both of these concerns, and many churches are designed with no competent acoustic advice. Often, there is so much reverberation in a church that the praise band has turned to mush before the sound system is even turned on. Careful sound system design and enough money CAN provide good speech intelligibility in almost any space. But there is NOTHING that can be done with a sound system to improve the sound of the praise band in a bad acoustic environment beyond overpowering it with carefully focused energy. By this time everything is far too loud for comfort, and often so loud that it both drives people away and causes permanent hearing loss! Certainly not a Christian thing to be doing to anyone!

The Role of a Consultant

An acoustic consultant is an expert who you hire to design your church's acoustics and your sound system. Some consultants specialize in acoustics, while others specialize in sound system design. Many of the larger firms have people who do both. A consultant

needs a good technical education in his field, and a lot of experience designing sound systems for churches and performance spaces. Most have earned degrees in acoustics, physics, or engineering. The sound system consultant needs a solid understanding of both acoustics and electronics, as well as ongoing education to keep up with advances in the field.

The acoustic consultant will help your architect develop the shape and layout of your worship space. He or she will help choose the room finishes for the ceiling walls, floors in order to provide the room acoustics which are best for your congregation's style of worship. Which (if any) floors should be carpeted? Should there be pew cushions? Where should the choir be located? The praise band? The organ? The acoustic consultant will also work with the architect to make sure the church is quiet -- HVAC systems, elevator motors, door latches, and the like are some of the key concerns.

Organ companies and music stores are notoriously bad at providing advice on the design of acoustics and sound systems. A true consultant is independent of stores, contractors, and manufacturers. Many salesmen have begun calling themselves consultants, but they lack both the education and the independence to legitimately do so. They make their living on the profit or commission from sale of equipment and the labor to install it. One of the most important things a good consultant will have to do is help you make hard decisions during both the design and budget process. And they must help you choose between different brands of equipment, and choose the best sound contractor in your area to sell and install your system. Put simply, you need expert, impartial advice. You need to be confident that he or she is technically correct, and is advising you in your best interests, not their own.

Lest this sound like a blanket indictment of sound contractors, allow me to add one important caveat here. There are a handful of contractors around the country who have someone on staff capable of designing systems to meet the complex needs of a contemporary church, and who can be trusted to really have their clients best interests at heart. In most cases, these individuals are the consultants of tomorrow. But your chances of finding them, and, when you do, knowing the difference between them and a good salesman who knows all the right words, are quite slim. And even if you did, their advice on the hard decisions would still carry less weight both with you and your architect when it came to making the hard decisions, even though it may be perfectly good advice.

Doing It Right The First Time

It really is much better to do it right the first time. And a lot less costly, in the long run, when you realize that most, if not all, of the money spent on the first two systems is wasted! Here are some of the things a good consultant will do when a church (or a new sound system for an existing space) is being designed.

- ◆ Send a questionnaire to be filled in by the pastor and by members of the technical and praise and worship teams. This does two things. It helps the consultant understand the congregation's unique needs, and it gets the team leaders thinking about them in a more thoughtful way.
- ◆ Once the questionnaires have been returned, meet with the respondents and other key members to work through all the important planning decisions which can affect acoustics and audio.
- ◆ If a new system is to be installed in an existing space, make acoustic measurements in the space to be used at the design stage.
- ◆ Prepare a written report summarizing all of the decisions reached during the

meeting, describing all of the uses which will be made of the worship space and the functions which the sound system should provide, along with a rough budget for the sound system.

- ◆ Work with the architect to get the acoustics right for the intended uses, and to prevent noise from both inside (HVAC systems, motors, transformers, door latches, footsteps in the hall, etc.) and outside the building (highways, airplanes) from intruding into the worship space.
- ◆ Work with the electrical engineer for the project to get clean technical power and grounding, so that everyday operation of the system is not troubled by hums and buzzes, and conduit for sound system wiring.
- ◆ Work with the mechanical engineer for the project to make sure that HVAC systems are quiet.
- ◆ Work with the architect to find good ways to conceal loudspeakers, either by building them into ceilings and walls, or by turning them into architectural elements which don't look like loudspeakers.
- ◆ Work with the architect and the congregation on both the shape and layout of the worship space, so that, for example, choirs are in a location where they can be miked without feedback, and so that the relationship between the choir, praise band, organ, and congregation allows the choir to be heard without being overpowered by the praise band or the organ.
- ◆ Design a sound system which provides both good intelligibility for the spoken Word and clean dynamic sound for the musical elements of praise and worship, and which is well balanced throughout the congregation.
- ◆ Design system elements which provide good sound to those on the platform.
- ◆ Review architectural, electrical, and mechanical drawings before they go out to bid to make sure that things worked out at the design stage actually show up satisfactorily on the drawings.
- ◆ Help the congregation work through budget issues. Sound systems nearly always cost more than the congregation expects or is prepared to pay. Some parts of the system can usually be deferred and purchased later, but it's usually necessary to dedicate more money to the sound system than was originally planned. These are sometimes hard decisions, and it's important to be working with someone you trust in working through them.
- ◆ Document the system thoroughly with drawings, a specification, and a make/model specific equipment list so that it can be competitively purchased from a good local contractor.
- ◆ Help you find a good contractor to install the system, and help you either bid or negotiate the purchase with that contractor.
- ◆ Coordinate with the contractor during the installation process to make sure things are done right, and work through the conflicts with other building elements which inevitably develop in any major construction project.
- ◆ Once the system is installed and tested, come in to work with the sound contractor to tune and balance the system to the worship space, and to verify that the contractor did his work well.

Finding A Good Consultant

How does a church find a good consultant? Strange as it may seem, there are no good lists of consultants qualified to design sound systems for churches. There are professional societies, but they include many who specialize in completely unrelated areas of acoustics.

One way to begin your search might be to ask some of your local sound contractors to point you to the better consultants they've worked with. You'll probably learn two things here. First, if they try to limit you to contact with their sales or "engineering" department, you know you're not dealing with the most ethical contractor in your area. Second, from the better contractors you'll get the names you're looking for. When the same names start showing up on several lists, you know you've got independent consultants.

The contractors from whom you got those names are the more ethical ones you're probably going to want to invite to bid on the system once it gets designed. It's a good sign if the contractor initially wants to send someone to talk to you, but early on refers you to some consultants when they see the size or complexity of your needs. And conversely, it's a bad sign if the contractor insists that they can do the job just as well as a consultant and save you a lot of money.

A second (but generally less productive) way to search is to contact other churches in your area, and within your denomination on a regional or national basis. The problem with this approach is that in most churches, the people who were around during the design process and worked with the consultant during that time have now moved on to other churches. The person now in charge either don't know who the consultant was or don't know enough about how things went to offer a meaningful opinion. (For example, if things went badly, is it because the consultant gave bad advice, or because the consultant's advice wasn't followed?)

Don't limit your search to churches or consultants in your area. Most of the better consultants are centered in a handful of the larger cities and work nationally. It's much more important for you to have a local sound contractor than to have a local consultant. The consultant will need to travel to your church only a few times to provide the services you need, but you'll want the contractor to be there for you long after the job is done to provide support, and to help you expand the system as you grow. In the grand scheme of things, the consultant's travel expenses aren't nearly as important as getting someone who is well qualified, independent, and understands your needs.

Finally, interview prospective consultants to find out how they work. Will they do the things outlined in this article? Will you be able to make them understand your needs? Will they be willing to help you make hard decisions (like spending more money or changing the room shape), or will they take the path of least resistance and tell you what you want to hear? Are they wedded to only a single approach to things, or are they capable of "thinking outside the box?" Will they slow down to communicate technical concepts to you in plain language, or will all of their explanations fly over your head?

Buying a sound system can be a daunting task for any church, but be encouraged. If you'll follow the advice offered here, you really CAN get it right the first time!