

A True Story about a Church Drummer

with good intentions



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This is a story for churches with good acoustics and for past JdB Sound Acoustics Clients.

Paraphrased by Joseph De Buglio
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Church music conferences seem to be both a blessing and a curse. While they have some excellent teachers and they teach a lot of great stuff, they can also lead people into turning a great sounding house of worship into a disaster zone. Here is how.

A few years ago I helped a church with their acoustics. The church is typical of many churches out there. Simple "A" frame construction, rectangle and average size. Their worship style is very typical with a mix between Pentecostal and Evangelical praise singing. They have a full worship band with drums, bass and two rhythm guitars, keyboard and the standard 4 vocals plus lead singers.

Before the church did their acoustical treatment, they had all the problems many churches have. Stage is too loud, the bass player and drummer are out of control, the vocalist can't hear each other and so on. They had 5 complete sound system replacements in 15 years. They tried IEM systems with modest success but nothing seemed to really work. In the end, what really mattered was with the worship experience itself. The congregation was just not singing and members could hardly remember the sermon 5 minutes after worship was over. Hearing the minister in loudness was never an issue but understanding what was said - was.

When I was asked to help, the skeptical church members were not sure if my technique would actually work. Boldly I told them that not only it will work, but it will help to strengthen the church and how the church grows from there is up to the leadership. I also quoted 1 Kings 6:29. It is a promise from God that if you follow that recipe, you will have a great worship space. It is promise from God and every church should claim it.

The results of the room fix were very much what was predicted. As each section of the church was changed, the sound kept getting better and better. Congregational singing became better and better. For the first time, the musician noticed that they

could hear the congregation singing as well as hear themselves on stage. This was a new experience for many of the musicians.

The minister noted that way more people were calling mid week about the sermon. Sometimes it was just a thank you and other times it was to discuss a part of the message. We're not sure if this is because there are more people attending or more people are following what is being preached. Either way, these are both positive outcomes.

One other detail should be added, the speaker system was redesigned. The speaker system was changed first in the process. While the sound was technically better, there was only a slight reaction from the congregation. Yes, speech intelligibility improved into acceptable levels and there was slightly more gain before feedback but the better sound did not get the congregation to sing out more or participate more with the worship. The comprehension of the message seemed about the same as before.

When the acoustics were installed, things started to really change. Intelligibility increased another whooping 5%. It went from 89 to 94%. The gain before feedback* changed from 3 inches with the old sound system to 13 inches with the new sound system to 22 inches with the new acoustics. (**The working distance of using a pulpit or handheld mic without feedback and the person talking at an average level of 65dB at 3 ft.*) It wasn't until now that the sound system improvements were really being enjoyed. It was the enhanced ambient sound of the room that made the listening experience much better.

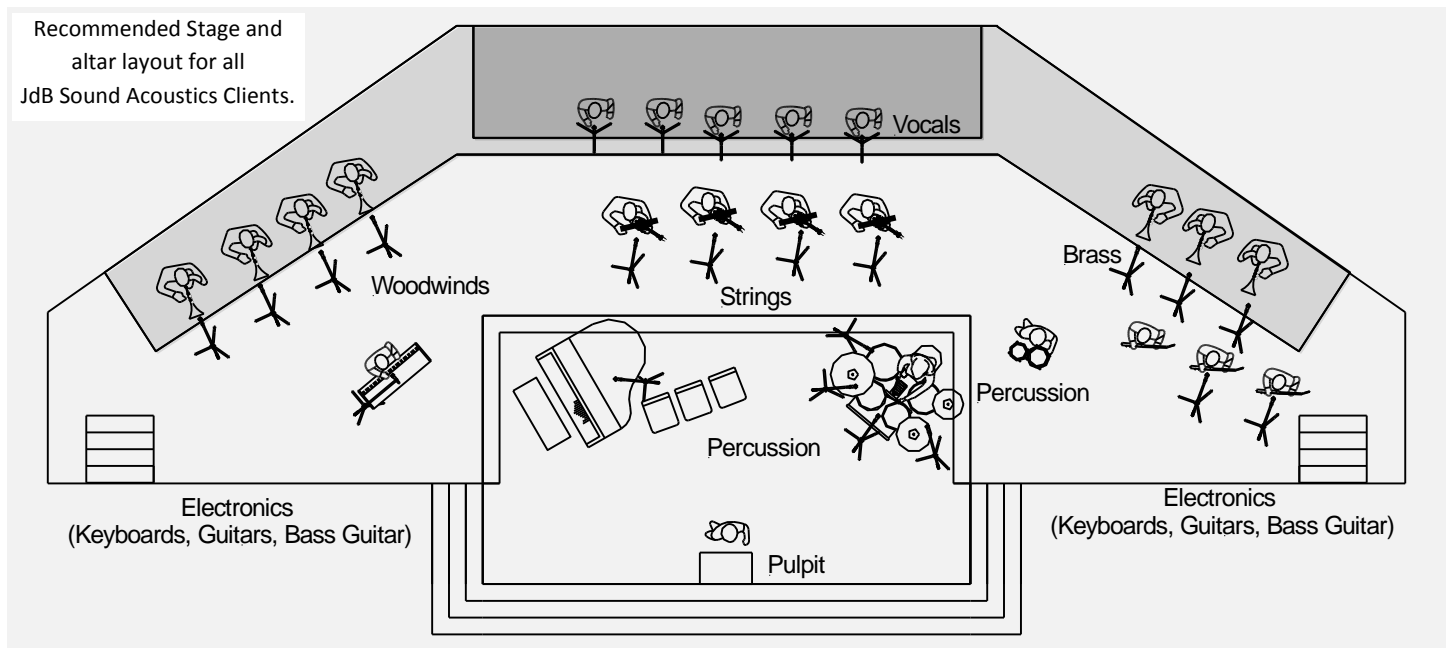
The changes on stage were profound too. The drum shield and In Ear Monitors were put into storage. The floor monitors came back but fewer of them were needed. The drummer was moved to the front of the stage and about half way between the side wall and center. The vocalists were moved to the back of the stage and on risers. The bass player was on the other side of the stage. With this better positioning of musicians, there was good sense of harmony on stage. Those who wanted to improve their talents became better performers and those with talents were getting better at leading people in worship. Everyone could hear each other just fine. The congregation was singing and the worship was always a great experience for members and visitors.

One day, the drummer goes off to a music conference. He learns a lot but one message that seemed to be the mantra of the day was – get the drummer into a booth or get drum shields. Being in the booth will allow the drummer to play more “freely.” When I heard about this, I knew it could not be a good thing.

Two weeks later, a drum shield went up and the drums were moved to the back of the stage. This was something the drummer did on his own. That Sunday, the first thing people noticed was that the drums were way too loud. As a result, the soundman raised the volume of the whole sound system to keep

turned them off. I am sure the drummer thought the soundman was being an idiot. The minister then gets up and talks to the drummer over the glass shield. Red faced, the drummer starts to play quieter. The congregation kept on singing loud. This continued for the rest of the praise and worship part of the service.

To make sure that this was not a fluke event, the drummer was placed back in the front and the drum shield was removed. Again the congregation was singing just as loud as the week before and the soundman was now running the sound system



up. For the first time in a few years people were complaining that the sound was too loud. On average the sound would be about 85 to 90dB back in the sound booth. Occasionally the congregation would sing over 95dB on familiar choruses. The congregation enjoyed drowning out the sound system while the people on stage didn't miss a beat.

Now everything was 10dB louder and all of the noise was from the sound system. On stage, the minister and worship leader noticed that you could not hear the congregation singing any more. Within a few weeks everything was out of control.

Finally, out of frustration, the soundman took upon himself to turn off the vocals and turn down the rest of the sound system in the Front of House (FOH) speakers. Yes, the drummer kept playing loud but, the congregation started to sing louder. How loud? They were singing with an average SPL level of 100dB. The sound system was being totally drowned out except for the drums. The drummer was oblivious to everything with his headset monitors. He didn't even notice the soundman had

about 3 dB lower than was he was accustomed to. Just by turning the sound system down a little, it got the congregation to sing more and that didn't seem to bother the musicians on stage. With the new acoustics, they were already able to hear each other just fine.

As a side note, the drummer noticed that he was already playing quite freely all along. It took a while but the drummer finally conceded that once the room acoustics were fixed, he was already playing in the best possible conditions for church worship. I'm no drummer but I was a musician. In church ministry, watching the audience, seeing how they are responding to the music can make a world of difference in how people participate in the worship.

Another item was noticed too. Since the new acoustics, the soundman never tried running the sound system a few dB lower because in the old sound system setup and old room acoustics, the monitor spill was so bad that it was hard to tell if people were hearing the main speakers on the floor monitors 10 rows

back from the stage. At times in the old setup, the monitor spill could be heard to the back of the church. With the acoustical changes, the monitor spill can be heard about 2 feet ahead of the first row of seating. In other words, the monitor sounds stay on stage and the audience sound stays in the audience, but reflected sounds from the back of the church can be heard up front – not as an echo but rather, to let the people on stage to know how loud they have to play.

What this experience has taught me is that most of the people who teach at these music conferences have one thing in common. The majority of them perform in churches that have hostile acoustical problems and what they bring to the table are coping skills in performing in such spaces. Most churches are indeed the most unforgiving places for any musician to perform in. Few musician get to perform in churches are as good as or better than some of the best know concert halls. Since most people are familiar with poor sounding spaces or spaces that have great sound effects from a musician’s point of view, many don’t know what a good space sounds like nor have ever experiences the impact it has on a congregation.

When a church hires me, after addressing all of their concerns, I add two more goals whether they ask for it or not. The first is to make the room sound attractive to visitors and help grow the congregation with better sound. The second and the most important goal is to win people to Christ. It is always great to hear stories of people who were “stay at home Christians” or were discouraged Christians in a church where hearing was always a challenge until they visited a church with great acoustics and then becoming full time members. Growing a church has to start somewhere. Hearing stories of people coming to church for the first time and staying from then on in a committed relationship in Christ and his people, that gives me the greatest joy.

The next time you go to a mission or music conference, be careful about what you learn. Before suggesting any changes, make sure it is with everyone’s consent. A perfectly great suggestion for a poor sounding worship space can undermine everything in a good sounding worship space.

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All information presented here are from the experiences of Joseph De Buglio. He has been hired, contracted, consulted and installed sound systems and acoustical systems or advised over 1,000 churches in his 30 years of serving the church community. He has also visited as many churches.

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