

The average church buys 10 sound systems

Do churches really buy that many sound systems?

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The first sound system

The first sound system is the cheapest system the church can afford and is installed without much knowledge or research about system design, by someone with good intentions.

It does amplify sound, and everyone adjusts their hearing and puts up with it. Every time the system is turned on, it sounds different. This sound system lasts only until the minister threatens to leave, when church members do leave, or enough people complain about it.



Figure 1: In some churches, years later they are still on their first sound system

The second sound system



Figure 2: This church was on the verge of closing if something wasn't done

The second sound system is by a church member, or a friend of a church member, or a person, who does church sound on the side or as an extension of their secular business. The new sound system is better behaved but, in the end, the overall performance is only slightly better than the previous system. The minister is annoyed by people asking him to repeat or explain parts of the sermon almost every week. The person or company installing this sound system are under the notion that at the end of the project, they will have a modest profit. Did anyone see a Profit! Oh! What a novel idea!

The third sound system

The third sound system is a sound system designed and installed by a professional, meeting most of the goals promised in a verbal agreement. While some parts of the sound system are performing well, other issues become more noticeable. Yes, there is less audio feedback heard, but speech clarity for people over 40 has not improved. Amplified music sounds mushy. The minister's confidence takes a hit every time people talk to him after the service or through the week, asking questions as if he is not preaching the Gospel properly, when it was the sound in the room that changed the words that left his



Figure 3: This church upgraded from a L/R to a cluster. It was not good enough, but better than before.

mouth and arrived to the listeners as being something else. Some people returned because the sound was more stable, not because it is much better, and for others, it is more likely they miss their friends.

A written agreement is never offered or requested because we all know the myth and lie, that the outcome is too unpredictable and rarely lives up to expectations. Often this sound system is in whole or in part paid for from a single donation or is bequeathed from a persons will. The professional thanks the churches he helps for upgrading his car every few months.

The fourth sound system

The fourth sound system is designed and installed by another professional promising to do better. In making some parts of the sound system better, it came at a compromise of something else regardless of the cost. The church buys additional hardware for the system from someone else and it does provide some marginal improvements, but not enough to satisfy most



Figure 4: Sound was ok, but never great, even after several upgrades

of the church members. The designer had suggested for acoustical improvements but downplays it so that the acoustics would not impact the sound system profits. People with hearing aids that have the “T” switch like the loop system but even in the hearing aids, real sound clarity is not there, even with the high quality digital technology used to make a loop system work so much better. While these people are not straining to hear because of loudness, understanding the message does come into question.

Another mythical illusion that is often perpetuated, is that there is more profit in audio hardware than in supplying acoustical treatments and proper acoustics fixes are too expensive for the average church to afford. The professional thanks the church for the new motor home.

The fifth sound system

The fifth sound system is installed by a well-known professional who also expresses a warning that the acoustics must be fixed too. After the installation is completed and after the honeymoon phase of the upgrade has passed, you realize that things that have improved did get better, but other problems showed up, limiting the sound system’s overall performance as being no better. You call him to come back, he offers you more gear, but you cannot afford it.



Figure 5: Everything was designed and adjusted perfectly. It was not enough.

Many people say they like hearing the MP3 playback of the message in their car, on their computer, or Bluetooth, and most of them quietly wish they could have understood the message while at church, so as to being able to ask the minister meaningful questions

at the end of the service to expand their understanding of the Gospel. Church elders notice a high turnover in church attendance. They attribute the turnover to social and economic reasons, certainly not because of sound.

Inside of all the fancy professional paperwork, there was supposed to be a professionally written performance agreement, which was never included, so the church has no recourse. The cycle of stepping two steps forward is met with surprise when everyone finally realizes that they also took an equal two steps back. The professional keeps your money regardless of your choices and swims victory laps in his new family swimming pool.

The sixth sound system

The sixth sound system is installed with great promise by a high-end professional with the same warning that the acoustics should be addressed. The proposal included an acoustical design that came from a person who is a professional at noise management, and has never designed a successful performing acoustical space in any of those type of projects. The church ignores doing the acoustics, banking on the new “state-of-the-art” devises that are filled with promises of improvements to make the sound problems go away.



Figure 6: New building, the perfect sound system, no acoustical system. Church attendance dropped from 90% to be below 40% after 3 years and have never recovered after 20 years.

In silence, the church leaders accept another expensive system upgrade that shows just a minor change that hardly justifies the cost. There was hope that the congregation would be more involved with singing, but they are just as passive as before.

The high-end professional takes your money without hesitation so he can have bragging rights to sell to other churches. These professionals know that the majority of churches do not talk to each other or check references. They also know that most churches are too stubborn to get their acoustics fixed first. The professional upgrades his home theatre to schmooze and impress his secular clients who are harder to sell products and services to, because they have specific performance goals written into their contracts that they will not compromise on.

The seventh sound system

The seventh sound system looks impressive, and it also includes a different acoustical design. The professional suggests that the bigger and “better” new sound system would be a great sales gimmick to attract more people from the church across the street. More people do come, but because the Church board, did not implement the



Figure 7: It is possible to turn a gym into a sanctuary with the right acoustical treatment.

acoustic plan, congregational singing languishes, and more hardware is purchased to do entertainment style worship, leading most of the people into getting engaged in the show. The rock concert quality sound system, the video walls, motorized lights, smoke machines, are all adding to the entertainment elements that distract people from the subpar sound quality. The professional now travels first class.

The eighth sound system

The eighth-sound system the professional designs is used as a gimmick along with multi-media to compete with other online ministries. Additional digital technology is used to mask the real sound of the church from the online service and to broadcast publicly. The equipment does an excellent job in preventing people from hearing echoes and the poor-quality reverberation of those who have attended church, have learned to put up with. For those who attend regularly, they like the weekly show. The right acoustical treatment would have been cheaper, but the enslavement of technology blinds everyone from seeing the bigger picture. The church continues down the path of substituting worship with entertainment – but still calling it worship because they include words like Jesus, Holy Spirit and God in some of the songs. After all, it is all about Him. We can get saved later. Right!



Figure 8: Looks are deceiving. This church just keeps upgrading their sound system every few years. Wonder what they will do next?

After getting a contract and deposit, the professional, who used an expensive rental car during earlier visits, shows up in a new luxury car, demonstrating that high end sound systems are needed in every church, regardless of whether they make any meaningful improvements.

The ninth sound system

The ninth sound system the professional designs is to keep the church growth momentum moving forward to attract more people from the other side of town. Again, acoustics is ignored. Since most of the other churches have subpar acoustics, most people attend the church with the best music show, the best motivational preacher, the best coffee, the best free food, the shortest sermons, or all the above. Such churches get people addicted to the drug like effect when dopamine and endorphins are released after following a specific ritualistic, high energy program. Who can pass up that kind of drug and alcohol free high every week?



Figure 9: With all of the system upgrades and designs, 30% of the seating is either in a hotspot or deadspot. All of that razzle dazzle can't get attendance or 70%.

Scientists call dopamine and endorphins the Happy Drugs the body naturally releases when stimulated. A galvanizing, well planned choreographed series of songs, music, visuals, and storytelling events trigger the natural drugs in the brain. Many people are hooked to this type of worship. Whenever the show becomes too routine and it does not have enough stimulation, many will look for other churches to get the same buzz. When that stimulation isn't enough, then they go back to the first church and start over again. Biblical teaching becomes secondary or nonexistent and any teaching from a Bible is focus on ways to keep people stimulated by focusing most of their attention on themselves.



Figure 10: Another perfectly designed and adjusted sound system and they are not happy. More equipment is on the way!

Who knew that sanctuary acoustics could lead to secularizing the church worship into worship entertainment? Many churches, look and sound like a business rather than a place where Christians come to show their love of God through a holy time of gathering of the faithful – and not the addicted? Some churches have bought different versions of the ninth sound system purely to attract those who thrive on that kind of stimulation which is a cheap way to get rich in a religious business. Oh, didn't you know! Most people with a higher income greatly support churches that make them feel good. Being saved or born again, is assumed or skipped over if you give a lot and the message makes you feel better. That is no different than those high priced motivational speakers living very wealthy lives entertaining people with their secular version of the health, wealth and the prosperity gospel.

The professional tells his neighbor how another church paid for another addition to his house. If you want to soar with eagles you have to be an eagle. In case you didn't know, eagles are classed as scavenger birds.

The tenth sound system

The tenth sound system is designed by an expert. This is the final new sound system most of us never hear about. It is a sound system that will never have to be redesigned again. All that is required in the future is that as equipment ages, you only need to replace what is broken or upgrade the technology as more capabilities become available.



Figure 11: This church started with the 4th system. When they decided to fix the room first, they did not need to upgrade, but they did upgrade to a digital mixer to give them all the abilities of those high-end systems you read about in church sound magazines costing thousands of dollars more.

This sound system is designed the same as the 3rd sound system following the upgraded acoustics designed by someone who does church acoustics and sound systems exclusively and gives a written description of how the worship space will perform after the upgrade. Even though his professionalism is

lacking, everyone is thrilled that congregational singing was finally fixed since the church opened at no added cost. The acoustic upgrade, which costs a fraction of any of the other sound systems allows this older sound system design to outperform all the other six previous sound systems by 400 to 2500%. (Audio improvements follow a logarithmic scale.) If your church is past its third sound system design or upgrade, stop, save your money, and fix the room. The room is essentially screaming that it needs to be fixed and the sound system is always amplifying the problems.



Figure 12: New Church, New Sound System, with proper acoustical management working very well starting from day one. It is possible.

There are a lot of sound contractors who will keep designing, selling, and installing you a newer sound system so they can buy a newer cottage, a bigger home or take another cruise ship vacation this month. The expert looks into the full church and prays that another soul hears the Gospel message and starts living a life with Christ, than seeking religion.

The facts

The fact is, not many churches will really buy 10 sound systems. Few churches will start with the tenth sound system. The majority of churches skip steps, but the outcomes are no different. Many churches start with the first sound system while many newer and wealthier churches start with the 3rd or 4th system. Other churches go from the 4th, to 7th, or 8th system. Some churches are on the 3rd or 4th



Figure 13: Seventh Sound System Upgraded with Acoustics

version or the 9th system. The shortfall of these worship spaces are all predictable by the mere fact that any room that doesn't have any acoustical treatment or the right method of managing church acoustics, means the results are always the same.

Equipment

Churches that are on system 3 through 9, often have individuals who are gadget and technology driven. To some of them, fixing the acoustics is like putting the brakes on technology. If anything, visit any church out there that has upgraded their sound system in the last 5 years and you will find lots of perfectly good hardware that was deemed useless because it didn't live up to its promised performance. The truth



Figure 14: Fourth sound system upgraded with acoustics

is, all of that hardware that is still working or repairable would have never been bought in the first place had the acoustics been ideal. With good acoustics, the tendency is to buy higher quality technology less often because you know it is going to work the first time and every day after that as the manufacturer designed it. Every piece of audio hardware is limited by the acoustics of the room it is used in. That is a hidden secret every equipment manufacturer knows about and intentionally leaves out of their manuals.

If you ask any audio manufacturer these days, many will admit that 50 to 60% of their equipment ends up in churches. Yet after 70 years of churches with sound systems, in all of that time, the quality of worship hasn't really improved. The only change is that in more and more churches the worship is switching from active participation in the pews and seating, to passive worship. That really isn't worship - that is being entertained. That is like being addicted to feel good messages and a focus on what you get out of worship rather than worshiping because you have a true love for God.



Figure 15: Second Sound System upgraded with acoustics

What should worship look like, Matthew 22:37-39 He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the lord your god with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ "This is the great and foremost commandment. "The second is like unto it, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

When you are at church, during worship, do people sing and pay attention to the sermon with the focused attention of someone loving God with all their heart, mind, and soul, or does it look like people having a good time, swaying to the music, sipping coffee during the sermon, remembering the jokes and the story at the beginning that often has little to do with the short message?



Figure 16: This is a church that added the acoustical system instead of upgrading their sound system. Once again, after the acoustics were installed, the need to upgrade the sound system was not necessary. The acoustical system cost less than the sound system another company had quoted the church. The church noticed that congregational singing sounds amazing, and the piano and pipe organ sounds so much better.

After working with churches for a long time, these are some of the stories some churches have shared on their journey to getting the performance from their worship space and sound system their congregation deserved. The ongoing myth that eventually audio technology can replace or put off the need to complete or fix the acoustics of a church is one of the most expensive decisions a church can make. For some churches, the repeated cycle of redesigning sound systems to reach that elusive goal of perfect sound every few years, costs more than replacing a parking lot, a roof, more storage, employment for a second pastor or church staff, and so much more. Technology improvements comes with the illusion that it has the power to defy the laws of physics when it comes to church sound systems.

A sound system can only perform as well as the room allows it. You do not have to take my word for it. Look at any concert hall or performance space that is profitable and it will have acoustical planning, panels or features that help to turn any performance into a memorable event. The same applies to recording studios. The better the acoustics, the less time it takes to complete a project, the lower the cost to the customer. The quick results and lower costs lead to a higher rate of returning customers for future projects. Recording studios and concert halls depend on repeat business and the single most common elements they have are acoustics. Why would this model for sound excellence be any different in a church?

What is the difference between an expert and a professional?

The church sound **professional** is the knowledgeable salesman with business degrees and higher education, often in unrelated fields for his business or company. While their company does a lot of churches, church work is not exclusive and is no better than anyone else's results. Everything that they do is profit driven. The professional knows how to say what the customer wants to hear, manipulating the customer into believing they are the best. The professional shows an extreme level of patience, well-rehearsed business etiquette, confidence, quick with the paperwork, and makes the promise that whatever you ask for, they have the talent to do it. Professionals count on repeat customers who remember their professionalism that masks their recollection on the unimproved results.

The church sound **expert** is the person who works exclusively on churches. He knows how to accurately diagnose the problems, and is compelled to tell you the truth, whether you like to hear it or not. He believes that the more informed the church leaders are, the more likely the church will make the right decisions that will save the church thousands of dollars in the future. He can precisely predict the results before anything is done and rarely makes mistakes. He can back up the results from past experiences. The expert will be honest and care more about getting you the right solution that will work the first time, at the expense of any illusion of being a fancy, smooth talking professional. The expert is often not profit oriented, he cares more about your reputation within the church community, by getting results that count. He often gets referrals or is asked to fix other rooms in the same church, and never gets a repeat customer. If the expert must go back and fix the room again, he is not an expert. He is a "professional expert," you know, the jack of all trades, passing himself off as an expert.

Who is fixing your church today?

Which sound system is in your church?