

Lights, camera, worship

High-tech wizardry is as expected at these churches as pipe organs are at others

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By BERTA DELGADO / The Dallas Morning News

It might be the Gospel According to Mark, but in many churches these days, it's sound and lighting according to U2.

High-tech innovations in lighting, video and sound often originate on the concert tour and filter down to performing arts centers and, then, into big churches, experts say. As a result, they note, weekend services at many houses of worship now have somewhat the look and feel of performing arts centers.

Take Fellowship Church in Grapevine.

The church, which draws 16,000 people or more, has a sanctuary with comfortable, theater-style seating. The stage can be changed, even moved around to suit any message the Rev. Ed Young Jr., senior pastor, is delivering. (Once, while preaching about God's armor, he sat in an Army tank.) The stage also has a ramp, so Mr. Young can walk down among the congregation while preaching.

One Sunday this month, the stage accoutrements – tall tubes and boxes and other shapes glowing with purple, orange, green and red lights – were rented from a company that does stage design for VH-1 and the Grammys.

"Most people think church is boring, that it's something they have to suffer through and don't really want to be a part of," said the Rev. Rob Johnson, Fellowship's worship pastor. "We're trying to tell them we're excited that we live in our faith. God is the author of all creativity.

"He gives us all these wonderful things, so use them."

When Mr. Young preaches, even folks at the back of the balcony have a good view. That's because his image is projected onto 16-by-24-foot screens flanking the stage (and a slightly smaller one behind him). "Media ministry" members, working in a control room decked out with \$800,000 worth of electronic equipment, also roll video onto the giant screens.

And, thanks to a state-of-the-art audio system, every word on tape or spoken live by the pastor, every note sung by the praise and worship team, can be heard clearly throughout the 4,000-seat sanctuary.

"These technologies in some ways are the new pipe organ," said Dr. Leonard Sweet, a preacher, professor, church historian and author. "This is the language of this emerging culture – sound and image," said Dr. Sweet, who teaches at Drew University in Madison, N.J. "You bring the two together and it helps create a worship experience."

Shelagh Rogers, publisher of the Ontario-based

Technologies for Worship magazine, said the industry has grown dramatically in the past decade.

"When you think that just five years ago some churches were still using overheads to get their music sheets up, things have changed greatly," she said.

For 10 years, the magazine has sponsored an "Inspiration Technology Conference." It's grown by 30 to 35 percent each year, she said. More than 2,000 people are expected for this year's version, May 19-24 in Cincinnati.

Craig Janssen, co-founder of Addison-based Acoustic Dimensions, called the technology trend in the church "a steamroller." His company says a basic system runs around \$500,000. A system to accommodate concerts and other productions costs about \$1 million. But many churches spend way beyond that.

"It's not a luxury anymore, it's expected," he said.

Acoustic Dimensions does acoustic, audio, video and lighting consulting for some of the biggest churches in the area. Clients include Fellowship, Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, The Potter's House in southwest Dallas, Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco and Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship. Nationally, the Addison company has worked with megachurches including Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, Saddleback Church in Mission Viejo, Calif., Brooklyn Tabernacle and Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia.

Launched in 1991 with three employees, Acoustic Dimensions now employs 30, he said.

Just because a place of worship embraces technology doesn't mean that it has to have the feel of a Fellowship or Willow Creek, Mr. Janssen said. Even very traditional churches are finding ways to employ new technologies. The National Cathedral in Washington, for example, called on Acoustic Dimensions to help with a new speaker system, an installation that could not disturb the cathedral's neo-Gothic architecture.

Mr. Janssen said that church leaders must understand what their ministry is about and what their worshippers' needs are before Acoustic Dimensions can help design a system that works for them.

For instance, Bishop T.D. Jakes of The Potter's House has an international broadcast ministry. But he also has a congregation that calls the church home. His stage has to be properly lit for television. But those worshipping in person want to feel like they're in a church, not a broadcast studio. So Acoustic Dimensions worked with architects to design a ceiling that conceals a lot of the high-tech equipment, said Cathy Hutchison, marketing manager for the company. The lights can be seen from the stage, but not from the pews.

Prestonwood leaders wanted an emphasis on community in their 7,000-seat sanctuary. So, Ms. Hutchison said, the acoustics are designed to minimize echoes, providing a sense of closeness for congregation members.

Theatrical lighting illuminates the huge stage, a stage strong enough to support an elephant during the annual Christmas pageant. The lights focus on the Rev. Jack Graham, whose messages, like those of Bishop Jakes, are widely televised. But the lights are designed to render the huge choir, seated behind the pastor, fuzzy to home viewers.

Baptist, Pentecostal, nondenominational and charismatic churches lead the high-tech charge. Still, said Ms. Rogers, of

Technologies for Worship, the Cincinnati conference will draw attendees from more than 50 denominations, including Methodists, Lutherans, and Catholics.

Following tradition, Orthodox Jews on the Sabbath generally refrain from activities such as using electronic equipment, driving, switching lights on and off, so they do not employ technological systems.

But Temple Emanu-El, a Reform congregation in Dallas, does make use of modern technology. James Ledbetter, facilities manager, said the sanctuary has a sound system that complements the acoustically sound sanctuary. Still, he'd like to improve it.

At Central Synagogue in New York City, the congregation took the opportunity to marry the old with the new in rebuilding after a fire in 1998.

"We built in flexibility," said Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein. "We can't assume that what works now will work in 10 years."

The synagogue's sanctuary, which is half a city block from front to back, houses a two-console, 4,345-pipe organ. The synagogue also integrated sophisticated sound and video systems, including hidden microphones and small video cameras.

"There's nothing inherently wrong or immoral about the use of technology in religion," Rabbi Rubenstein said. "If it's serving a higher purpose, there's no problem with it."

Pope John Paul II has told Catholic parishes to embrace technology, local leaders said.

"Unfortunately, the Catholic Church is, a lot of the time, on the backside of the curve on this," said Curtis Stephan, music director at St. Ann Parish in Coppell, where a state-of-the-art sound system includes monitor speakers hidden in chandeliers.

Many older Catholic churches, he said, were designed acoustically with pre-electronic, non-amplified sound levels in mind.

Mr. Stephan said Catholic churches will never use the type of elaborate systems during worship as some Protestant churches use.

"The Catholic Church is going to be more subtle and transparent," he said. "You almost don't want to know the sound system is there. In other churches, that's what draws the attention. You go in and say, 'Wow, look at the lighting.' They use a variety of lights to change the mood, more like you would do in for a Broadway show or concert."

Mr. Young, of Fellowship, agreed – up to a point.

"Our church was not built on technology," he said. "Yes, it has helped us to build on things, but our growth has not come solely because of technology.

"It can be the tail that wags the dog, and you have to keep the tail in check."

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