

## Churches Turn Up Volume With Big Sound Systems

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Five centuries ago, church designers introduced massive pipe organs to fill sanctuaries with music and draw the masses into spiritual oneness with God. Today, elaborate sound and video systems are rapidly becoming the worship enhancer of choice.

“Before, it was a nicety. Now, it’s almost a requirement,” Laurel church consultant Charles D. McNear said of the sophisticated electronic equipment being added to existing churches and incorporated into new ones.

“Worship is a form of entertainment,” said Al Perry, technical adviser for media ministry at Fort Foote Baptist Church in Fort Washington, which included a \$300,000 audiovisual system as part of a \$6 million sanctuary it completed a year ago. “If people are not entertained, they don’t feel like they’re participating.”

Sound systems with mixing consoles have been around for years, especially in churches whose “praise and worship” services include live bands with electric guitars, synthesizers and drums. The newer systems, with dozens of microphones and high-performance speakers, supply not only greater volume when desired but an even distribution of sound so that every worshiper hears words and notes at the same volume and with little or no distortion.

Strategically placed cameras show pastors, performers and congregants from various angles, with their images projected on wall-size screens. Some video directors mix it up, showing clips from a mission trip on one screen while the choir sings on another. The screens also are used to display lyrics or Bible verses — or a message to the parents of a child who has just fallen in the nursery.

Megachurches are most likely to spend megabucks for audiovisual equipment — 3,000-seat Evangel Temple in Upper Marlboro and 1,500-seat McLean Bible Church each spent about \$800,000, said George Sauer of DMX Music in Rockville, which installed both systems two years ago.

But in recent months, “smaller churches with 500 seats and under [have been] catching up,” said Taly Walsh, senior vice president for marketing and membership at International Communications Industries Association in Fairfax, which tracks developments in the audiovisual industry.

Use of the high-tech electronics has been largely an evangelical and Pentecostal phenomenon, but other churches — including many Catholic congregations — also have introduced such systems in their sanctuaries, said Shelagh Rogers, publisher of Ontario-based Technologies for Worship magazine.

Orthodox and Conservative Jewish synagogues generally prohibit the use of electronic equipment during services because it violates the laws of Sabbath observance, although some Conservative congregations, such as Ohr Kodesh in Potomac, use amplification systems turned on before the Sabbath.

The rabbi and cantor use fixed microphones but cannot adjust them during the service, said Joseph P. Miller, executive director at Ohr Kodesh. “We’re trying to figure out how they can wear wireless mikes” without touching them, he said.

Reform temples are more liberal in their use of electronic sound and occasionally might use video during worship.

Sophisticated sound and video systems require trained technicians to operate cameras and mixing consoles that can accommodate up to 64 microphones.

Fort Foote Baptist’s media ministry consists of 22 adult volunteers, most of whom have been trained in-house to adjust sound levels and video angles from a 10-by-40-foot glassed-in booth at the rear of the sanctuary, said Jesse Robinson, chair of the media ministry.

As in many modern designs, Fort Foote’s 700-seat sanctuary is fan-shaped to offer a greater sense of intimacy. Video technicians use four ceiling cameras with 360-degree panning capability to capture images for two screens.

Sound is piped through eight ceiling speakers, four in the center and two on each side of the stage.

In addition to the adults, about 30 teenagers and other youths have signed on to learn the system. At least seven high school graduates from the church have continued their AV education in college, some as volunteers and others as majors preparing for a professional career, Robinson said.

Perry, who worked as an engineer for Channel 7 before retiring to start his own video production company, began videotaping services at Fort Foote 10 years ago because he thought the pastor, the Rev. Joseph W. Lyles, “had a certain presence.”

A novelty at first, videotaping became a learning tool for Lyles, who still reviews tapes of his sermons. Then Perry and others realized it was a great way to involve members unable to attend services, especially shut-ins, college students and military personnel stationed away from the area.

Today, the ministry mails about 80 tapes a week at no cost, part of the annual \$15,000 operating budget. It also sells another 30 to 50 tapes to members and visitors who want to keep a copy of a particularly meaningful sermon or choral performance.

Other churches with recently expanded electronic capabilities include First AME Church in Manassas and Oak Grove Baptist Church in Sterling. Churches building sanctuaries with enhanced sound and video include Mount Ennon Baptist Church in Clinton, First Baptist Church of Glenarden and New Antioch Baptist Church in Randallstown, near Baltimore.

Advances in technology have brought equipment prices down considerably in recent years, much as they have done with home computers and high-resolution televisions, making it possible for more congregations to invest, said DMX's Sauer. About five years ago, before the introduction of liquid crystal display technology, a video projector would have cost about \$35,000, he said. Now one can be purchased for less than \$10,000.

Still, outlays can be considerable.

First Baptist of Glenarden will spend more than \$700,000 on electronic equipment in the \$25 million, 4,000-seat sanctuary scheduled for groundbreaking this summer, said Deacon Oscar Grant, director of media ministry. The design includes six digital cameras, two 12-by-20-foot projection screens and computerized lighting to provide color and spot effects for the pulpit and stage areas. The system will allow for immediate availability of worship services on DVD, CD, videotape and audiotape, he said.

New Antioch Baptist Church has budgeted \$600,000 for electronics equipment for an \$11 million, 2,500-seat sanctuary scheduled for completion this summer, said Joseph Blackwell, president of the church's AV ministry.

"We have a pretty good system now," he said of New Antioch's 800-seat worship space, "but the difference will be like night and day." Sound capability and power will be three or four times greater, and the speakers will be hidden in the ceiling so there's no visual distraction or obstruction as can occur with a cluster of speakers hanging over the pulpit.

Video cameras will be digital, offering sharper resolution, Blackwell said. His committee hasn't completed its shopping, he said, because technology changes so rapidly that it wanted to wait as late as possible to order — something it must do within the month.

Video quality has been one of Fort Foote's disappointments, said James Easterly, media operations manager. The cameras they purchased, of the older analog variety, have not performed as advertised and produce blurred images when zooming in on the pastor, choir or individual worshipers, he said.

The church has budgeted \$58,000 to replace the cameras with digital units by year's end.