

How to Provide Outstanding Music to Your Congregation

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Get a good sound system

This one step will help solve many problems. Congregants will enjoy the service much more if they find the music and voices pleasant to listen to. Better quality musicians and vocalists will look forward to coming back if they get to perform through nice equipment.

Get someone qualified to run the sound system

At Church of Today, we're fortunate to have volunteers for most all our needs. But running sound equipment is a highly skilled job that involves more than knowing where the "on" switch is. So we have a professional sound technician, whom we pay to come in and operate the sound system for both services each week.

Try to find someone you can rely on to do the sound every week, who will learn all the intricacies of the system. If you can eventually pay this person, you will see a wonderful return on your investment. How many times have you been unable to enjoy a speaker/performer because they were too loud/soft/shrill/muffled? A skilled sound technician keeps people from even noticing the sound system. Instead, they only hear the message.

Lose the hymnals

Project the words to group songs up on a screen where they can be seen using a projection system. This can be done inexpensively by using a slide projector. Your local graphic-service store can make custom slides of whatever you need. By putting the words on a screen, you ensure the congregation will keep their heads up and be more interactive with the room instead of buried and mumbling into a hymnal.

Use background music during the service

If you have live musicians, have them play quietly through spoken portions of the service. At Church of Today, I play the piano non-stop through the seating music, opening solo, the minister's welcome prayer, first group song, newcomer acknowledgements, and meditation. I also play during transitional moments when people are approaching or leaving the stage. This constant back-ground music provides a live "sound-track" for the service and smoothes out the presentation.

Schedule performers/songs well in advance

I usually have my performers and songs chosen anywhere from 1 to 4 months in advance. This is made much easier by knowing what our minister's lessons will cover. It's no accident when people tell me "The songs you performed today were just perfect for the lesson." By keeping track of when songs are performed, I can also be sure not to use them again until plenty of time has gone by. Scheduling ahead also gives the performers enough time to memorize their music. This always looks much more professional.

Finding good songs

This is a never-ending challenge and the hardest part of my job. Besides asking the soloists if they have suggestions, I'm always looking for songs on my own that I will assign a soloist to sing. Sources that have proven

helpful include movie sound-tracks (they often feature one "feel-good" song while the credits are rolling); sound-tracks to TV shows (Touched By An Angel, concerts on PBS,); contemporary country music, which features a lot of "gonna get my life together" songs; and the internet where you never know what you might find. I've also developed a relationship with a few other music directors, and we e-mail song requests and suggestions to each other.

Finding good performers

Once again, volunteers are wonderful to give of their time, but not always qualified for the job. Part of the success of our music program at Church of Today is due to hiring professional musicians who maintain consistently high standards of performance. In San Diego, professional singers expect at least \$40-50 for one service and \$75+ for two. We've been paying more than that for quite some time, and as a result, I now have singers regularly approach me about performing because they've heard we pay a fair wage and we have an excellent sound system. I prefer the diversity often found with "pop" singers instead of traditional church operatic singers. I suggest looking for pop singers performing at other churches or in piano bars, coffee shops, and musical theater groups.

Conclusions

Some of the above suggestions involve spending money, but to have a professional music program, you have to hire professionals and use professional equipment.

You might be one of the fortunate churches that has a pool of incredibly talented musicians willing to give of their time, but most churches aren't. A leap of faith is certainly called for to make the transition from a small congregation singing along with a tape player to a large congregation enjoying professional quality musicians and a good sound system. Building and maintaining an excellent music program takes time, effort and money, but you'll reap the benefits in increased attendance and an enthusiastic, "turned-on" congregation.

Should you need tips on equipment, musicians, running rehearsals, song suggestions, etc., please feel free to contact me by EMail I'll get back to you as soon as I can.

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