

The Tale of Three Churches

By Joseph De Buglio

Church sound systems and church acoustics are like building a car. Three churches are given three boxes and in all of the boxes they have the exact same parts. Each church has to organize themselves to assemble the parts and create a drivable car that meets all of the safety codes. There is one catch. There are no instructions, no plans and no examples of what that car should look like.

The first church puts everything together. What they have looks like a car, it smells like a car, and it even sounds like a car but..... They don't have a car. The tires don't touch the ground, the engine is backwards, and the battery can only power the lights, but that will only last until the battery runs down.



Illustration 1: Gateway Community Church Abbotsford BC



Illustration 2: St James Anglican Church

The second church hires an engineer. He uses his expert knowledge and education. With his help, the church puts everything together and what they have also looks like a car and it looked amazing. It won a prestigious aesthetics award for being the most original looking car in the world. Like the first church, everything is there but nothing works. The tires do go to the ground but the axles are being used as antennas, the doors are all in the wrong places and the windshield wipers are being used as direction signals. The car was useless. As with the first church, both of these churches built "piles of junk."

The third church hired a skilled worker who assembles cars every day instead of an engineer. This person didn't just assemble any car but one who had a reputation of building the best performing vehicle that met everyone's needs regardless of price. He helps to organize the church and they get to work. When it is all done, the church assembles a unique one of a kind Rolls Royce Hybrid Mini Van. Everything is top notch and works perfectly. Not only is this car luxurious and attractive, but surpasses many of the safety codes. It is also a great car for the soccer moms and it has amazing fuel economy. This car performed perfectly no one noticed that it have very little – if any - aesthetic value.



Illustration 3: Swan River Mennonite Church, Swan River Manitoba. Can you see the acoustical treatment?

As you can see, all three churches had the same parts and they all cost the same to build. However, the results were all over the place. This is what happens with most churches when it comes to sound and acoustics. The two most important parts of a worship space of any church in any denomination or independent church is hearing and music. Many churches subscribe to a myth that you can build a church any way you want, add a sound system and presto, a perfect worship space. Thank you Architects for perpetuating that myth and lie.

History, as recent as today, show that 95% of churches new and old wind up like the first two churches in this story. Unfortunately, of the one percent that do get it right, for 90% of them - the great results have come by chance. From this story, here is what happens to most churches.

The first church that built had no acoustical assistance or sound system assistance. The second church also had no acoustical assistance but they did have a great sound system. In the end, this church performs no better but because they had a great sound system, they assumed that they had a great sound and this is true when compared to the first church.

The third church had great acoustical advice and they were able to assemble a church that made worship easy and exciting - even when the minister wasn't one of the top 100 preachers in the world. All of the ministries, from the praise team to the organist to the choir, and every solo performer; everyone had nothing but positive experiences.



Illustration 4: Kingston Road United Church, Toronto, Ontario. A rejuvenated church in the heart of the city

When the first church saw what the third church did, they hired that same skilled worker and he was able to get the first church to sound almost as good. It didn't look as good but people are there for the worship, not for the aesthetics. Their worship experience is almost as good as the third church. As the first church became healthier, the high quality acoustics offset the less than perfect aesthetics. For the first time the first church has a complete car that now runs almost as well as the third church. It may not be as pretty or as economical, but the church is finally on course and it is strong within the local community.



Illustration 5: Creekside Community Church, Waterloo, Ontario

The second church saw what the other two churches did, but instead kept listening to the advice from the super churches and repeatedly copied the sound systems of the larger churches. They kept installing newer and more expensive sound systems every few years with little to no real improvement with each upgrade.

All too often, many churches look at the bottom line cost before they even get started. The first two churches thought that building a completed car would be too

expensive and the luxury items were only for the rich and famous. What some people consider as luxury, others consider it as long term planning as these luxury items make the car more durable, longer lasting and it did not cost extra. Consider this; the average church worldwide is over 100 years old. Will your church be around that long?

In my travels, I have had many church members and church leaders refer to their churches as "piles of junk." Calmly I assured them that their worship spaces are merely incomplete and if they follow the right prescription, the

Sanctuary will be transformed into a sound friendly house of Worship. While any church can be "fixed" the fixes will look like the room has been changed, whereas a new church can have all of their acoustical design embedded into the finishing of the room, which always give the church a greater aesthetic appeal. Again - at little to no extra cost. **We have to break the myth that church acoustics is expensive. It is NOT!**



Illustration 6: Gateway Community Church, Abbotsford BC. Mid construction of a new State of the Art Modern Cathedral.

The one thing that has always impressed me about churches is the high tolerance they have to abuse. Did you know that the average church waits 2 years before fixing a blown high frequency driver in their loudspeaker systems? Meanwhile, the average person waits only 15 days to replace the speakers in their car stereo system. Did you know that the average church will upgrade their sound system every 8 to 15 years. Recently some churches have been on a replacement cycle of their sound systems every 4 to 9 years with only marginal improvements with each upgrade.

Did you know that the majority of sound contractors and churches

don't do before and after testing of the new acoustics and/or sound systems? When they do such testing, the improvements often show little to no change in performance. (Exchanging one set of problems for another set of problem doesn't add to any gain in performance.) On the other hand, when a church changes their acoustics according to the example in the scriptures, the improvements are often over 200 to 400%. (In acoustics and sound systems, a 3dB change is often considered equal to a 100% change.)

All too often churches spend thousands on their sound systems with the expectation of a better worship experience, growing spiritually, growing in numbers and in being an asset to the local community. In the end they see little change and the assault of poor sound and the less than enthusiastic congregational singing continues on. The second most requested thing that I hear from most churches after their worship spaces are fixed is – **CAN WE GET OUR CHOIR BACK???** So what your telling me is, that after switching to a praise and worship team style of worship for the start of the church service, they encountered the same sound problems the choir had years ago and once the problems are solved, you would rather have the choir back – but - you don't want to admit that because the praise and worship teams are supposed to attract new and younger people to church. Well, if your church is caught up in growing the church with music, rather than the message....well? When a church hires me to fix their acoustics, the first thing I concentrate on is creating a space great for hearing speech regardless of what they ask of me. I will not compromise on that issue. It just so happens that in creating a great place for speech, you are also creating the ideal space for music and it is free.

These are my opinions and my experiences in working with many churches. While I have met thousands of wonderful people who want great sound in church, the organization style of many churches and denominations don't allow for the church community to learn from their past mistakes. In the field of church sound and church acoustics, there is a lot of misinformation floating around that confuses a lot of church boards. Even my messages get lost or are misunderstood in all of the chaos. As a result, the vast majority of churches are like the first two churches building a car. Isn't it time for more churches to do what the third church did?

So what happens to all that information the third church learned? Can that information be collected and passed on to other churches to experience the same success? Churches like the third church would love to pass on their

information so that other churches can be built with better result. Sadly, there is no one out there to gather such knowledge and pass it on.

As a final thought, can you imagine what the second church would sound like with all of the high end equipment if they got their acoustics fixed?



Illustration 7: Creekside Community Church, Waterloo. Ontario. A gym that performs like a high quality worship space with variable Acoustics.

By Joseph De Buglio
63 Lockerbie Ave
Weston, Ontario Canada M9N 3A3
416-248-9007

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.

© by JdB Sound Acoustics and Joseph De Buglio 2011