

Choosing the Right Integrator

Several years ago, Casey Green, Worship Pastor at Eastern Heights Church was faced with a big decision that would shape the future of his building

by James Knight

The Cleburne, Texas-based facility was looking for an AV integrator who could not only work with their vision, but also plan for the future and ensure that—like many churches—they would be able to cope with the demands of an increasingly technological world. Several years before, he'd been introduced to Jeff McLeod—Managing Director of Church Audio Video, and asked Jeff and his team to work on several small church projects. So, when Casey needed to make his decision, Jeff was the first stop. A few months later, they had the makings of a fully integrated AV system, not only meeting the church's needs—but crucially, their budget too.

That relationship was built on trust, experience and an in-depth knowledge of Church Audio Video's core values—however, when a church needs an integrator and doesn't have the luxury of a 'preferred partner', how can one be chosen?

Luke Fellingham, Sound Engineer at CCK Brighton, England believes that reputation is key. "When I look for a provider, I want to know they have a reputation for delivering projects at both a good price and a good result," he says, "Knowing the standard of their work before starting a job, either from previous experience on small projects or speaking to other engineers is invaluable."

He points out that while word-of-mouth is key to trusting an integrator, building an effective relationship is a real must—"If we're looking to work with someone for several months, and hopefully on follow-up assignments too, we

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High energy worship requires tasteful technical planning

need to feel as though they understand our vision and sympathize with our goals.” Fellingham states that the vendor should certainly be accustomed to churches and working in a worship setting, as many houses of worship don’t have the full-time technical personnel on site—instead they rely on generous volunteers to operate equipment.

However, it’s important to consider times when integrators are not actively jumping in to support a project—instead allowing churches to search far and wide for the right company. A good indication that an integrator is reputable, states Cory Schaeffer, VP of Sales Worldwide for Listen Technologies and Board Member of international trade association InfoComm, is by looking at their accreditations and association memberships. “The InfoComm CTS-D & CTS-I (Design and Install) certifications are based on an ANSI (American National Standards Institute) standard, and are the result of real testing where one integrator’s skill can be measured against another. The certifications are different to degrees in music technology or sound engineering, as they relate specifically to systems integration and require constant renewal to keep the title, which ensures staff are always in touch with the latest skills.” says Schaeffer. This allows integrators to confirm they not only possess the technical knowledge, but are also up-to-date with the latest in integration technology.

McLeod also reaffirms Schaeffer’s memberships and accreditations tip, citing the National Systems Contractor Association as an excellent body to consult, both for members in a church’s local area, and on whether a particular integrator has a suitable skill set to work with worship facilities.

Green suggests that location was also a factor in choosing Church Audio Visual—“we weren’t going to use

someone hours away because they couldn’t always drop what they were doing to fix a problem that we might have. It’s a great benefit to be able to call Jeff if we have an issue—whether it’s five minutes before the service, or midweek—and for an engineer to turn up in about an hour.” The proximity of an integrator to a potential client is something that Jeffrey Miranda, President of Los Angeles-based NeoLogic Sound also finds key to developing a successful relationship. He states that having an integrator on the other side of the country can be problematic, should a church have a critical failure with only an hour to go before a major service, and suggests that churches look for a partner within the same state to guarantee prompt support times. Miranda also brings up the issue of ‘brand-favoritism’ with integration specialists, suggesting that a multi-brand vendor can provide an impartial product selection. “Some integrators will always use the same product line—regardless of purpose—and I personally believe that the biggest thing we as integrators have to do is to look at a system as engineering, and therefore choose the

right products for the job from a vast selection. The ability to go direct with multiple brands means we can narrow-down our selection until we find the best product for both price and purpose.” He mentions the Martin Audio OmniLine® as an example, stating that whilst it’s an excellent product in the right circumstances, it certainly isn’t suitable for everyone—NeoLogic’s relationship with Martin Audio, however, enables them to offer this product should the circumstances appear, and for when they

don’t, Miranda can use his array of other brands, including Tannoy and RCF to provide the right product.

Kurt Williams, VP of Church Development at design-



Church Audio Video System Designer, Mark Helms testing the video projection software



Worship in full swing at Eastern Heights Church in Cleburne, TX

and-build firm T&W Solutions, based in Indiana, USA, explains how he would go about choosing a vendor. "At the end of the day, it's all about people—a good integration team, with a heart to serve the Lord, can make what could be a time of ministry distraction into a time of ministry focus. Selecting a team to service your church should be based on the relationship with the team members that you'd be interacting with regularly throughout the project." Williams makes clear that every project, first and foremost, is all about God, and secondly, the people behind the project. These people can either steer your church through the landmines of the integration process, or turn you and your church into another unfortunate statistic.

Both McLeod and Miranda support Williams' people-orientated view, with McLeod declaring: "Most importantly, churches need to find someone who can make a real commitment to their vision—not just providing the equipment, but providing the framework for the church to achieve their goals." Miranda expresses his belief that a suitable integrator is one who is familiar with the diverse array of church denominations and the circumstances under which these systems are used. He comments "I have a UCC customer who uses a more traditional style of worship, with mostly a cappella vocals and light music—which is different to my other customers, who utilize a full band, backing groups

and high SPLs, and I think it's really important that an integrator has experience working with the widest possible range of churches, and that the engineers on their team have personal experience." Miranda, who is still Senior Audio Engineer at First United Methodist of Santa Monica, explains that his experience helps him understand the internal workings of his clients' churches—he can really understand their requirements and the circumstances the end product will be used under. "The experience differentiates us from our competitors—we may sell the same equipment, but this experience shows that we really understand the situation," he states.

Church Technical Directors, Worship Pastors, and engineers have a wide variety of factors to consider, and if they can find the right vendor to support them, they will not only have a suitable, cost-effective system—but a more effective way of connecting with the congregation, fostering new faith and changing people's lives forever. ♦

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