

The Procurement of A New Sound System



When a church is in need of a sound system there are various ways it can proceed. One method is called the design/build method. It involves the following steps:

1. The church must determine what the needs and desires are for the system.
2. The church must find a number of audio contractors. These can be found from word of mouth references from other churches; advertising sources; previous personal experience of individual committee members; church's previous dealings with a specific contractor.
3. The church must express to these contractors their needs and desires, along with current problems if applicable. This is best done through visits at the church with each contractor, and a written explanation of your needs and desires. Ensure the committee has not omitted any requirements of specific groups within the church.
4. Instruct the contractors to provide a design/build proposal. The proposal should include details of equipment proposed and why it is suitable for your situation; supporting technical information such as computer sound system design program printouts; a number of references of churches similar in acoustics, size and system function.
5. Carefully evaluate each proposal, including a check of their references, to determine which contractors are in fact qualified and are proposing what you asked for. Take into account how the contractor conducted himself at the initial meeting.
6. Select the contractor you feel is most qualified and is offering a suitable system at a fair price.
7. Oversee the installation to ensure the contractor does what he proposed, and sets the system up to your satisfaction.

This method will usually result in the best sound system for the church at the lowest cost, if the church is diligent, and/or fortunate in finding a good trustworthy contractor. With this method the contractor must interpret your needs, evaluate the sanctuary acoustics, perform a general sound system design, calculate the best price of the required equipment, and prepare a written proposal. This would typically require seven to fourteen hours for an average medium sized church system. The contractor must be knowledgeable in church audio systems and possess appropriate test equipment and computer design software.

Problems for the church with this method can include lack of sufficient investigation time invested by the committee in evaluating the various contractors, and lack of sufficient technical expertise in the committee to understand differences in various proposals. (Knowing when they are looking at apples and apples as opposed to apples and oranges.)

A variation on the design/build method is when the church invites two to four selected contractors to make presentations to the church board detailing why they should be the chosen contractor. The presentations should include an explanation of the contractor's history and experience, demonstration of their design abilities, and references. The church then awards the project to one of these contractors and trusts him to provide good long-term value at a reasonable cost.

Another method is the tendering process. With this method the church provides contractors with a specification for tendering on. The specification must be technically detailed and explicit; most churches do not have the expertise within them to produce this document, therefore, a consultant must be hired to perform this task. This method involves the following steps:

1. The church must determine what the needs and desires are for the system.
2. The church must find a qualified audio consultant to produce the specification document. A suitable consultant is not easy to find. The audio field is so diverse that few consultants are familiar enough with the unique requirements of a church to be able to design an appropriate system. Note that a consultant with a sterling reputation for theatre design, for example, will not necessarily be the right one for the church. I'm not criticizing consultants here; I've learned this from first hand experience with consultants.
3. The consultant interprets the church's needs and produces the specification document.
4. The consultant selects contractors he knows from previous experiences would be qualified to supply and install the specified system properly, and asks them to tender on the project.
5. The consultant evaluates the tenders received and advises the church which ones are the best values. The church selects the successful tender with the consultant.
6. The consultant oversees the system installation, ensuring the contractor does what he is supposed to do. The consultant will conduct the final system set up with the contractor.
7. The consultant presents the completed system to the church.

This method will result in a good sound system provided the church finds a good audio consultant, and they have communicated all their system needs and desires to the consultant in full. The total cost though will generally be higher than with the design/build method because the consulting fee along with the tender quote will be appreciably more than a design/build price. With this method the contractor must only calculate the best price he can offer for the equipment and installation services and prepare a short tender document. This would typically require two to five hours time for an average medium sized church system.

The consultant will obviously have a fee for his services determined by how much work he performs. The fee may be a percentage of the successful contractor's tender. Most churches should expect fees starting at approximately \$2,000.00 for a relatively small straightforward system. With new buildings the fee could be up to \$10,000.00 if acoustic design services for the sanctuary are included.

Over the years we have been a professional church audio/video contractor we have seen churches experience many problems that could have been avoided if they had followed the above guidelines. Perhaps the most significant mistake is that church officials fail to realize that a sound system is much more than simply a collection of equipment. Even when this fact is understood, the church often incorrectly assumes that general commercial sound contractors, music stores or live sound companies know how to design a proper house of worship system.

Some may ask which method is best for the church. I believe the design/build method is best for at least two reasons. First, serious church contractors will always be diligent in providing good services at a fair price, guiding the church along the way. If the church is diligent they will receive long-term good value.

Second, the tendering process has become, more often than not, a process of seeing what company will claim to do the most for the least. A company who has deliberately tendered low to get the job usually succumbs to the pressure to 'get in and get out' as fast as possible in an attempt to make a little profit. This always results in poor long-term value for the church. We can tell by simply looking and listening which systems (and church structures) were the result of the lowest bid. We also know because individual church members often later tell us about the poor value they received.

I would also suggest that in some circumstances a church might be justified in not considering more than one contractor. I do not intend to discount the wisdom in seeking two or three proposals, however, if a contractor has established a track record of high quality work and fair pricing with a church, the church will naturally wish to continue with such a contractor. In such situations it is not fair to other contractors to ask for proposals, as the usual outcome is that these contractors invest considerable time and effort with little or no real prospect of being rewarded for their efforts.

It is the duty of the church and Christian contractor alike to adhere to Christian principles in their business dealings. The church's dealing with non-Christian contractors should attract that contractor to Christianity.

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Date: unknown

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