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## Religion Finds Technology

By J. D. BIERSDORFER

LIVE full-color images from cameras placed around the room started to appear on the wall-mounted projection screens, and the crowd began to quiet down in anticipation. The room was full of sleek video and audio gear and illuminated by theatrical lighting equipment, but the event was not a stage production, a sports event or a television-show taping.

It was church on a Sunday morning.

Specifically, it was the Calvary Cathedral of Praise, a Pentecostal church in the Kensington section of Brooklyn that uses the latest in video presentation and professional sound equipment to enhance and enliven worship for its members. Hymn lyrics are superimposed over live shots of the choir, and the pastor is in view on the screens no matter where one sits. The sound reproduction rivals that of a concert hall.

Calvary Cathedral is not alone: houses of worship all over the country are going high-tech in a variety of ways. From digital sound systems to PowerPoint sermon outlines to multiple remote cameras that send out streaming Webcasts, technology has found religion — or maybe it's the other way around.

"Churches, just like everybody else, are looking at the power of their communications," said Randal Lemke, executive director of the International Communications Industries Association, an audiovisual industry group based in Fairfax, Va. "They've got young people coming up who are very visual. They're trying to use the same technology that people are using in businesses and in entertainment."

The association sponsors InfoComm, an annual trade show that showcases products and developments in the audio and visual industries. Dr. Lemke said that although religious groups have long attended the show to learn of new audio products, their interest in video projection and presentation systems has risen significantly over the last five years.

"There's clearly a trend toward better production," said Sam Berkow, a consultant for the Walters-Storyk Design Group who oversaw the integration of sophisticated sound and video systems into Central Synagogue, home to a Reform Jewish congregation on the East Side of Manhattan. "Once people can buy a reasonable sound reproduction system for home, like a CD player and a pair of speakers for \$500, their expectations for sound quality increase exponentially."

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Shannon Stapleton/Gamma, for The New York Times

**CONCERT SOUND** - Members of the Calvary Cathedral of Praise in Brooklyn listen to a choir soloist over an elaborate sound system as her live image is projected on video screens.

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Many churches are investigating how they can provide Webcasts and reach out in other ways over the Internet, said Shelagh Rogers, publisher of Technologies for Worship Magazine and an organizer of Inspiration, an annual conference focusing on new technology for religious institutions.

"The bigger churches have all the bells and whistles already, like the video projections, the screens, and the really good sound systems," Ms. Rogers said. "Now the growth that we're finding is in the churches that have 500 seats and under." John Rasz, pastor of the 360-seat Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Wheeling, W. Va., for the last 18 years, uses a system of Sony presentation projectors at his service each week to display announcements and hymn lyrics, and shows an occasional clip from a Hollywood film like "Braveheart" to reinforce points in his sermon. "I love movies," he said. "If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a video has to be worth a million."

The Rock, an interdenominational Christian church in Roseville, Calif., led by Francis Anfuso as senior pastor, takes congregational interactivity to a new level. The church has a 330-seat sanctuary with a big-screen television and integrated keypads built into seat armrests. The buttons on the keypads allow members of the congregation to answer multiple-choice questions asked by the pastor during the service.

The answers, which often touch on delicate issues like emotional abuse or spending habits, are quickly compiled into percentages. (A recent question was "How many of you have ever attempted suicide?") The pastor takes the responses and adjusts his sermon on the spot, recounting stories about life experiences that address the congregation's concerns.

"The pastor's primary vision for preaching the service was to take a monologue and turn it into a dialogue," said Brett Drury, an administrator at the church.

The Rock of Roseville had its own software designed for its custom-built keypads, but commercial programs for such church systems exist, too. Fowler Productions, a company based in Norman, Okla., that has helped scores of churches integrate audio-video systems into their services, makes a Windows-based program called SongShow Plus that combines slide-making features with a database of hymn lyrics and Bible verses that can be displayed with a presentation projector.

Bigger churches that have had integrated presentation systems for years are finding new ways to use their equipment. Frazer Memorial United Methodist Church in Montgomery, Ala., has the video and audio equipment to produce its own television programming and streaming Webcasts of Sunday services ([www.frazeronline.tv](http://www.frazeronline.tv)) for interested people who cannot physically make it to church. Remote-controlled cameras are placed in parts of its 2,300-seat sanctuary that are hard to see, like the baptismal area. During his sermon the pastor uses a remote control to flip through PowerPoint slides shown on large screens by two NEC Nighthawk projectors.

The enhanced audio and video can prove helpful to older members of the congregation, not just restless teenagers. "Generally, with high-tech kind of stuff, I tend to think of young people as being the most impacted," said Rusty Taylor, the business administrator at Frazer. "But quite frankly what I'm finding is that it's the older people who really enjoy it because it magnifies the



Top, Shannon Stapleton/Gamma; John Decker for The New York Times  
A television monitor, top, at the Calvary Cathedral of Praise in Brooklyn; a screen displays an interactive question at the Rock, a church in Roseville, Calif.; worshipers use armrest keypads to answer the question.



Shannon Stapleton/Gamma, for The New York Times  
VISIONS - Monitoring multiple video cameras and sound during services at the Calvary Cathedral of Praise in Brooklyn.

words for them and gives them close-up pictures or gives them a good seat no matter where they sit."

And video effects appeal, of course, to younger members who have grown up with computers and video games and summer action movies, many churches have found. Brian Behm, who has attended North Heights Lutheran Church in Arden Hills, Minn., for most of his 24 years, said he appreciated the presentation technology as long as it did not overshadow the service.

"For me, what's more important is the substance of what's going on," said Mr. Behm, who said that the church recently added a weekly service just for young adults. "It wasn't about adding flash to the services — they had to change what they were talking about. What's pertinent to a 40-year-old is different to what's important to a 20-year-old college kid."

Osborn Ross, an administrator at the Calvary Cathedral of Praise, said that some members of the congregation were initially wary when elaborate sound and video systems were incorporated into their worship service.

"They thought we had gone overboard and gotten way too elaborate," he said. "Then, after a while, they settled down and realized it was the wave of the future and we needed to go in that direction."

Although gaining acceptance from members can be the biggest hurdle, integrating high-end technology into houses of worship can present other challenges. Central Synagogue, a landmark Moorish Revival building dating from 1872, was painstakingly rebuilt after a devastating fire nearly destroyed it in 1998. "In 1872, they didn't think about distributed sound systems or reverberation or video because it didn't exist," said Mr. Berkow, the design consultant.

He went on to design a system that could properly amplify both the spoken word and music from the synagogue's 4,600-pipe organ by discreetly tucking speakers and microphones as well as video cameras into the building's recreated interior. "The aesthetic consideration was extreme," Mr. Berkow said. "In Central Synagogue, the ark is a main architectural feature and you're not allowed to block it. You can't put speakers in front of it."

Robert Scott, a sales manager with Fowler's design group who has worked on church systems around the country, said: "If you've got a church that's got a clean ceiling line, hanging projectors from the ceiling is not an option, because that now becomes obtrusive and draws attention to the equipment itself, and we don't want to do that. We want the attention drawn to the screens and the message that's coming across the screens."

St. Mary's Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, a Catholic church in Covington, Ky., incorporated a powerful sound system into its majestic 950-seat sanctuary during a recent renovation. The main speakers are camouflaged and painted the same color as the room's pillars. "The tour guides challenge people to find the speakers," said Jennifer Weber, executive director of the Cathedral Foundation, a group that maintains the building.

Regardless of denomination, getting the message out is the goal of any religious institution, and technology will undoubtedly play a growing role. "The message hasn't changed in 2,000 years," Mr. Scott said. "The way we deliver

that message to our congregations — that's what's changing."

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