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WAYS TO PRAISE

CHRISTIAN MUSIC CONFERENCE SHOWS OFF MOST UP-TO-DATE ELECTRONICS

LISA FERNANDEZ, Mercury News

Music-minded ministers, and vendors hawking technological equipment to bring houses of God into the multi-media age, descended on the Santa Clara Convention Center on Tuesday for a five-day spiritual workshop and trade show aimed at getting more church leaders to use music to save souls.

And not just any music -- cool music.

This is the first time the Christian, tech-savvy organization Inspiration Technologies Conferences, based in Toronto, has visited Silicon Valley. About 400 church leaders from San Jose to Texas signed up to attend the workshop. Highlights include a free concert by a world-class worship band today at 9 a.m., and an exhibit floor on Friday and Saturday filled with high-tech goodies, such as plasma screens and the latest in lighting systems, intended to make churches as acoustically pleasing as a symphony hall.

"We want music to help people connect to God," said Pastor John Chevalier, of Foursquare Gospel church in Healdsburg, where the church band plays rock, gospel, jazz and eclectic sounds. "We don't believe Gregorian chanting has a place in the 21st century. But we might take those words and mix them up a little bit."

All of the attendees on Tuesday shared the vision that there is a benefit to fusing technology and spirituality to get more people -- especially young ones -- into church pews. Bowing their heads to offer a quick prayer before classes began, the various church "**praise** team" leaders delved into their lessons, ranging from "Worship in the Digital Age" to "How to Make Your Worship Band Tight."

But several did acknowledge that they hold ongoing debates with traditionalists over whether religion should move into the modern age -- and if they should use electric guitars and Power Point presentations to achieve that goal.

"It's been an uphill fight," said Karlton Sheley, media pastor at Church of the

Highlands in San Bruno, a conservative evangelical Bible church with about 1,500 members. Sheley was referring to the struggle he's had, mostly with his elderly father, Don, the founder of the 46-year-old church, who resists technology and anything too "showy."

But over the years, Sheley said, he's been able to convince his father that people like music, a full orchestra, white lights and slide projectors to jazz up a service.

"Sometimes my dad sees the audience and says, 'Wow.' "

The same dilemma -- both generational and cultural -- takes place at Templo La Luz in Redwood City, a mostly Latino church of about 400 people from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Cuba.

"We have elders from the 'home country' who like 'coritos,' or old hymns in Spanish, and we have young Latinos who like hip-hop," said Mark Gutierrez, a church worship leader, searching to find the right music mix. "To minister to them both is so challenging."

According to a June cover story in Music Trades magazine, author Kent Morris writes that the church music business is booming, mostly because of a national spiritual reawakening, and that the '60s generation raised on rock is now looking to clean, inviting worship centers for an uplifting musical experience.

Some Christian denominations are more hip to the modern music movement than others, said Barry Cobus, the conference organizer and founder of Technologies for Worship Magazine. Evangelicals at mega-churches and non-denominational Christians are the most open to spending \$1 million or more on sound systems, he said, while Presbyterians and United Methodists are just starting to catch on. Roman Catholics, he said, "are a bit slower" to accept the changes.

Roberta Ward, spokeswoman for the Diocese of San Jose, who did not attend the conference, said that the Catholic church doesn't have a problem with technology or instruments, per se. "But the church has very clear guidelines in terms of music and lyrics. We must use scripturally based lyrics. The question we have is if it's entertainment, or if it's worship."

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The Inspiration Technology Conference runs through Saturday at the Santa Clara Convention Center.

For more information, go to [www. tfwm.com](http://www.tfwm.com)