

Fellowship Church has long been recognized as one of the most innovative and exciting churches in North America. Known for its creative leadership in worship and excellence in technical production, it is a model for congregations across the country.



IMAGINATION Brought To

by Sherry Ashbury

When the church decided to redesign their main campus worship center, they called on national performance engineering firm, Clark ProMedia (CPM). Building on its successful development project at Fellowship's Plano campus, CPM worked closely with Mike Walker, the church's Media Director, Matt Wheeler, FOH Audio Engineer, and Irving Clay, Video Director, to re-imagine the physical worship experience for the 4,200-seat Grapevine auditorium. This collaboration resulted in the design and implementation of an eye-popping, high definition video projection system and a sound reinforcement system that rivals the best auditoriums in the country.

The point is to create a unique experience...

Having once toured for a living, Walker had no trouble verbalizing what he wanted for Fellowship's room. He has worked upwards of 2,000 shows over the course of his career. Some months ago, Walker attended the Celine Dion show in Las Vegas, which uses a complete Meyer Sound system, and realized that type of experience was what he wanted for Fellowship. "To the ear, and visually, it was mind blowing. I knew that at Fellowship we needed to have the horsepower to wrap around and engage each individual – to

help them feel like the pastor is having a one-on-one conversation with them. The point is to create a unique experience – to get people to forget what's going on outside – a sick family member, a divorce, a bad day. If we can help them feel connected, and lead them somewhere, then we've done something."

Begun in Irving, Texas, 15 years ago with 150 people, Fellowship Church has a track record of doing just that. "Ed (Ed Young, Jr., Fellowship's Senior Pastor) has always had a vision to bring in more creativity and arts with an ultimate desire to better reach people for Christ," says Walker. Repeated transformations of their auditorium by a gifted production team support the pastor's desire and ensure that attendees feel connected. Walker admits, "That's sometimes difficult in a 4,200-seat room. To make the performance of the hymn *God Rest You Merry Gentlemen* at our Christmas production unique, we built empty picture frames, put actors in them and flew them over the audience." ZFX, an international flying company regularly employed by Broadway and Las Vegas shows for aerial effects worked with Fellowship's scenic and costume design teams to create the end product.



Life

SOUND THAT SOUNDS GREAT

Fellowship's main auditorium was originally designed at a time when there was no technical staff. Walker describes the initial system: "Our previous audio/video solution was not helping the audience to connect during the worship service. You could walk through the room and there were literally six different zones of audio. We've had six years to discover what we don't like and what we want to accomplish. Primarily, we want the audio and the video to engage no matter where a person sits." Walker, who now manages a technical team of 23, wanted to create an environment that would be a natural extension of the creativity and excellence

Fellowship demonstrates in its worship service.

To say that the redesign and implementation of the Grapevine auditorium was a fast-track project would be a gross understatement. Young sat in the audience at a weekend worship service and later gathered his key staff. He had already wanted to upgrade the screens, but after his experience in the service that Saturday evening, he told them he wanted new screens – big and bright. And he wanted sound that sounded great. "With that in mind," Walker says, "I called Clark ProMedia late that evening. Six weeks later we commissioned the new loudspeaker and projection systems."

QUALITY COMPONENTS MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

A great deal of thought went into the redesign of Fellowship's audio system. "The idea was to give a stereo experience to everyone in the audience," says George Clark, Chief Engineer and cofounder of Clark ProMedia. "Meyer Sound was the natural choice... because of the way they are manufactured, they pay attention to the phase response of the loudspeakers, which results in one line of their speakers integrating very well with another line of their loudspeakers. What this means is there is not only an SPL match across the room; there is a tonal match across the room as well," he adds.

"When it came to their video system, Fellowship wanted the biggest and brightest screens they could get," says Adam Rixey, Clark ProMedia's Senior Design Engineer who led the video design effort for the project. GrayHawk screens by Stewart Filmscreen and the Christie Roadie 25K, a 25,000 ANSI lumens projector, work together to create a stunning video image. Rixey explains, "With literally the brightest video projector we would recommend, the highest-quality Stewart screen material available, and this sound system, the audience experience is certainly better than what most of the country will find at the cinema."

OBSTACLES OVERCOME

The most obvious hurdle in Fellowship's design/install was the time frame in which it needed to be completed. Walker relates: "Obviously it takes time to physically build speakers, have screens constructed, and run electrical systems. In fact, our electrical scheme had to be completely redone. At the same time, we were launching a new series which required stage turnaround, in effect, a room transformation.



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We did the project from initial conversation with our pastor to completion in six weeks. Whew! I get tired thinking about it," says Walker. "The funny thing is that even if we had more time I don't know that the end product would change. It just put a large amount of stress on everyone due to the compressed time frame. We were fortunate in that we had experts at every turn with the staff at Clark ProMedia. I am also very proud of what my staff brought to the table, the riggers, and the electricians. There were no weak links, which is another one of the reasons this worked in the time frame it did," he adds.

CPM knew that every service at Fellowship is national act touring quality. The audio, video and lighting are all on that level. Clark elaborates: "The church's requirement was that the P.A. needed to be able to accommodate tour quality. Every service is basically like going to a concert at a high end performing arts space."

Rixey relates the challenges associated with the video design of the room. "The major challenge was taking a room designed for rear projection, with a balcony, and converting it to a front projection system that doesn't block sightlines. Exhausting the amount of heat being radiated off such a large projector was another issue." Walker was also concerned that with the size of the projector, it might be too noisy for the room, but it was not. "Christie has engineered the Christie Roadie 25K so the fans can be separate from the projection unit. This makes for a quieter room," says Walker.

CROSSOVER TO OTHER CONGREGATIONS

Just like any other church audio design, Fellowship's plan was unique to their space. However, Clark is quick to point out that components in the Fellowship design could be crossbred in another application. "A design incorporating Meyer loudspeakers as the basic building blocks can be used in other rooms to achieve similar results."

Components of the video system would work in other designs as well. "While the Christie Roadie 25K is too large for smaller churches, we would recommend going with a projector of that magnitude and brightness for venues with more than 4,000 seats," Rixey says. Walker is thrilled with the projectors. "The Christie Roadie 25K puts out 25,000 ANSI lumens and with 2K resolution and a 1500:1 contrast ratio, you get exceptional image quality," he says. "Stewart Film screens are top of the line. We would recommend them to anybody that has a projection system that requires a screen larger than 16 X 9," adds Rixey.

A FULFILLING PARTNERSHIP

Fellowship's partnership with Clark ProMedia was forged with the advent of the church's satellite campuses in 2003. Young had discussed the concept of satellite campuses with his friend, Andy Stanley, pastor of North Point Community Church (NPCC) in Atlanta. When Young saw how well the re-imaging solution had worked at NPCC's Buckhead campus, he knew that was what he wanted for his church. He and his staff asked, "Who did Buckhead?" The firm was hired to implement the Fellowship Plano re-imaging solution, and within months, CPM's innovative solution allowed them to bring

two additional satellite churches online. Walker describes that experience, saying, "Every now and then you come across people that you connect with. We felt like Clark knew what we wanted to do and we took that discussion to the next level."

Houston Clark, CPM President and cofounder, recognizes the effort expended by his entire team on the Fellowship project. "We all pooled our resources to make it happen. People shifted roles, and even those not working directly on the project made allowances in other areas to allow the key players the opportunity to focus on Fellowship's redesign. We were privileged to have the opportunity to partner with Fellowship for the upgrade of their projection and P.A. systems," he says.



LONG-TERM IMPACT ON CONGREGATION

Both attendees and staff members have weighed in on their approval. Walker's online blog has had a number of hits from people he has never even met. They tell him that it is amazing how the sound and the screens have drawn them to the stage. They feel much more connected. The staff reaction is one of gratefulness and humility. Walker says, "They are enjoying the opportunity to take worship to another level. I feel blessed to work with people that want to do that, people who aren't satisfied with the status quo." Connie Hewett, an employee in the church's bookstore/café, says it this way: "After the first service with our new sound system, I told my husband that our church's audio is better than our local movie theater's!"

Walker thinks the congregation will feel an even greater level of connectedness in the long-term. That is a big deal for a church with more than 20,000 regular attendees. "My desire is that we will be able to take the tools that we've been allowed to have and find a way for reaching people and connecting them to the local church, and beyond that to a relationship with Jesus Christ. I would like us to reach people better. We've now eliminated the technical excuse." One of Walker's stated goals was to hit the bar set by the Celene Dion Theater at Caesar's Palace. He says, "We're actually on our way to superseding our original goal."

Sherry Asbury is a freelance copywriter whose past clients include Clark ProMedia, Christie Digital, FSR, Meyer Sound, and North Point Community Church. She may be reached at sherry_asbury@hotmail.com.

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