

Faith in the future

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How can a church compete with football games and rock concerts? By thinking big and building a venue fit for worship 21st century-style

The days of wooden pews and dressing in your Sunday best for church are slowly fading away. Of course, you can still find worship services following traditional formats that have been used for decades. However, an increasing number of churches are finding that a more effective way to reach people is to present services in comfort and to convey spiritual ideas in terms of real-life applications to which people can relate. Some believe that, for the most part, people are not concerned with spirituality.

Others believe it's the times we live in, rather than a lack of concern with religion, that has more to do with staying away from church. This is the Information Age! With the Internet, TV, radio, magazines, newspapers and other media at our disposal, the flow of information is never-ending. The more ideas and information we have to process and analyze, the more likely we are to spread our interests thin. And human nature dictates that we will spend less time on that which doesn't give us an immediate, tangible return on our investment of that time.

When the benefits of services are not materially evident, the going can be tough for religious institutions. That's why some churches are struggling to attract new members, or even to keep current ones. How can the situation be improved? Finding ways to make a church stand out as a destination for spiritual enrichment, and make it compete effectively with other interests lobbying for our attention, is no easy task.

A new spirituality

We live in an era of sport utility vehicles, 30-screen movie theaters and multi-million dollar sporting facilities featuring comfy seats and as much luxury as you can handle. The sheer size of buildings promotes the idea that events occurring inside are directly proportional in importance and benefits. That same mentality

carries over from the secular world into the religious world. Leaders of some Churches believe that worship services should be as big and important as any other activity.

On Easter Sunday 1983, a small gathering of 32 worshippers showed up at Cascade Hills Baptist Church in Columbus, Georgia. In addition to meagre attendance, the church community was also mired in debt. The newly-appointed pastor, Bill Purvis, had his work cut out for him. Certainly one of his

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goals was to lead the church out of debt, but that was secondary to leading the discouraged to a new spirituality.

As Pastor Purvis spread his ministry throughout Columbus and the surrounding communities, attendance slowly began to increase. Members also began taking up specific ministries within the church. The increases in attendance and activity led Pastor Purvis to consider making some "big" adjustments.



[Top] The new renovations give the church a theater-like atmosphere.

[Photo] Television Production Service, Inc.

[Left] A side view reveals the 36ft lighting row over the stage and the 50ft lighting row over the audience

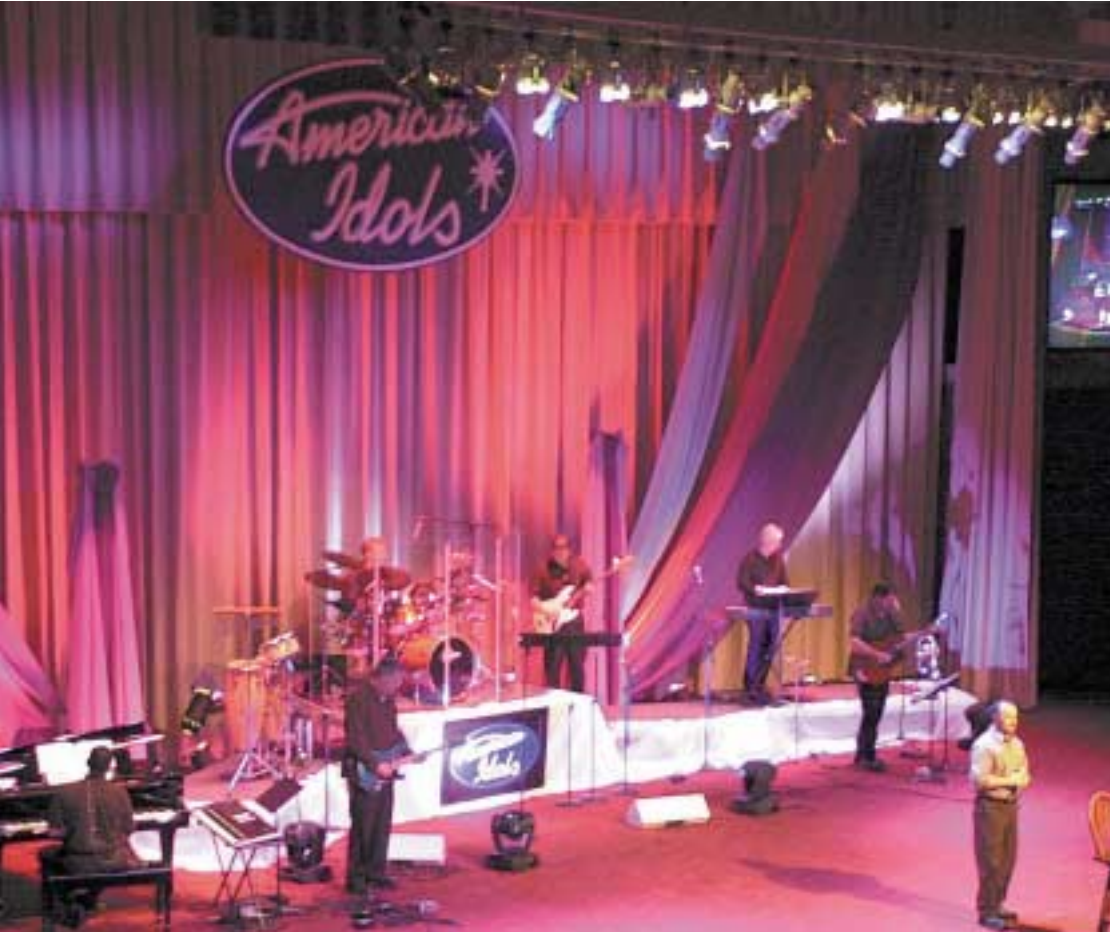
[Photo] Cascade Hills Church

[Overleaf, top] The facility continues to impress as a destination for spiritual enrichment – it has become one of the five largest and fastest growing churches in Georgia

[Photo] Cascade Hills Church

[Overleaf, bottom] A series 680-Z hoist, rated at a capacity of 1,300lbs





The Cascade Hills church was a very modest, one-level brick structure, and as membership continued to rise, worship services were becoming too cramped for comfort. On the other hand, donations were increasing and debt was beginning to disappear, so plans for a new building began to materialize. When the time was right, Cascade Hills took a big step forward and broke ground on a new 500-seat facility, located adjacent to the existing structure.

Once the new 500-seat building was completed and opened for service in 1988, members soon found themselves at close quarters once again. Membership continued to grow, and plans for even greater expansion were drawn up. Once the financial support was in place, a bigger piece of land was purchased, and construction on a 1,500-seat church began in the fall of 1994. By Mother's Day of 1996, the beautiful new facility was open for worship. The greatly increased capacity meant that further expansion would not be needed for quite some time. Or so it was thought.

Seeing is believing

Renovations to improve and expand the Cascade Hills structure were under way again by the end of the 2002 calendar year.

This time, renovation plans were quite aggressive. First, there was an obvious need for increased seating. By replacing conventional pews with theater-style seating and opening up some walls, the plans would allow for nearly 1,000 additional seats.

Also, theater-style seating calls for a theater-style atmosphere. Plans also included high-quality sound and lighting systems. In a facility the size of Cascade Hills, those seated farthest away need all the help they can get to hear the proceedings during the course of a worship service.

Plans for improved lighting systems formed the final element of the renovations. In a theater, proper lighting allows those in attendance to stay focused on the action on the main stage. Even though Cascade Hills' services are faith-based and spiritual in nature, as the old saying goes,

seeing is believing. Proper lighting focuses attention, and effective lighting peaks interest.

When the blueprints called for lighting hoists and rigging, one of the project's contractors, Television

Production Service, Inc., called on the Peter Albrecht Company, Inc., based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The company specializes in providing rigging systems and winch and hoist systems for all kinds of engineering projects in the world of entertainment, including theaters, arenas and convention centers. When approached about the renovation project for Cascade Hills, Peter Albrecht had confidence in its ability to deliver a high-quality solution because it also had previous experience in working with churches.

Setting the stage

One of the most noteworthy church-related projects Peter Albrecht had worked on was the Crowne Centre, on the campus of Pensacola Christian College in Florida.

The 6,035-seat, 297,000ft² auditorium is used for church worship services but also hosts a number of other activities. The most interesting feature of the Crowne Centre is the stage (altar), which sits on a turntable 100ft in diameter. The stage area also includes a second-level proscenium stage.

Under contract with Mainstage Theatrical Supply, Peter Albrecht designed, manufactured and installed all of the motorized rigging machinery and controls for both the stage house and the auditorium. The motorized rigging consists of nine line shaft machines, installed on a walking grid within the rotating stage house.

Over the audience are a series of eight motorized grid-mounted lighting sets and ten multi-line motorized grid mounted sets, which allow 64 acoustical reflection ceiling panels to be automatically tuned to the intended environment. All of the machinery is operated from two computerized control points, which allow for preset positioning and cuing.

The biggest concern for the Cascade Hills project – as well as the Crowne Centre project – was safety, for the operators of the systems as well as those taking part in activities in the venue. Originally, Peter Albrecht was asked to provide a manually-operated solution involving hand-cranking elements for Cascade Hills. A number of firms in the Columbus, Georgia area could have satisfied the need for a hand-cranking system. Peter Albrecht specializes in motorized rigging solutions, and made recommendations that included motorized systems and an explanation of the benefits of such a solution as opposed to a manually-operated system.



While a motorized system costs more than a manually operated system initially, future cost savings can be significant. A motorized rigging system is always ready for immediate operation. It does not require time-consuming labor to climb up to loading galleries to pile on weights. Also, with a motorized system, there is no need to resort to expensive double-purchase counterweight systems to compensate for a lack of stage height. When dealing with critical focusing of stage lighting, re-lamping or changing gels does not require time-consuming refocusing, thanks to the precision return to previous trim heights found in electronically-operated systems.

A secondary concern dealt with the aesthetics of the systems: in other words, the more inconspicuous, the better. If the lights and apparatus are distracting, they can take away from members' enjoyment of participating in worship services.

Let there be light

Inside Cascade Hills, Peter Albrecht installed three motorized lighting systems – two above the stage area and one over the audience – in increasing lengths – 28ft, 36ft and 50ft – from the stage out to the main seating area.

Each series 680-Z hoist system is rated at a capacity of 1,300lbs, and all are industrial grade, most often selected for Class 1 services. The bearing and transmission components of the hoist systems are most commonly found in factory use.

The rigging and other apparatus were then

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painted the same color as the church ceiling, in an effort to make them blend in with their surroundings. To the average eye, the hoists and rigging are no more visible than the lights themselves.

Entering the project near the end of the renovation timeline, Peter Albrecht completed its assignment on time. In approximately three months, from initial phone contact and preliminary plans to final tests and opening night, it put together a solution that drew praise from the Cascade Hills project managers.


The first service in the newly renovated church, which was also the first Saturday night service in the history of Cascade Hills, was a success. Worshippers for the weekend totalled 2,050, more than 6,300 per cent higher than the attendance of Easter Sunday some 20 years earlier.

Cascade Hills is seemingly thriving and prospering in this Information Age, and thinking "big" has made the difference to a large extent.

The congregation of Cascade Hills continues to grow and the word continues to spread. In fact, it has been recognized as one of the five largest and fastest growing churches in the state of Georgia. The facility itself continues to impress new members and serves as a comfortable gathering place for all to worship in. ●


Tom Ziolkowski, president of Peter Albrecht Co., Inc., has 40 years experience in providing rigging solutions for the entertainment industry.

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