PROPER PRIORITIES

What? Your top-dollar sound system didn't solve the problem?

by Gene Kim

Three months ago, your church invested hundreds of thousands in an extensive audio upgrade. A new main system and broadcast suite as well as the addition of a monitor console, in-ear monitors, wireless systems and microphones. Oh, and updated backline as well.

When it was done, the problems you spent years complaining about were finally going to be solved. But months later, the mix sounds eerily similar to what it used to be.

The band is becoming more and more frustrated about the same issues. The mix engineer looks exhausted. And you're wondering: "We spent all that money – why aren't our problems solved?"

The system isn't broken. The problem is what the new components exposed.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS

Opening weekend is flawless. The "hired guns" mix engineers delivered. The commissioning team trained your staff on the new system. Documentation was provided. Everyone is thrilled.

And the commissioning team did exactly what they were contracted to do. They installed, optimized, and handed off a world-class system.

What they weren't contracted to do – because most churches don't budget for it – is develop the organizational capacity to sustain it. That's not a criticism of integrators, it's a gap in how churches scope audio, video and lighting (AVL) projects.

Month 1: Everything works perfectly. The engineer is running the pristine console file from opening weekend.

Month 2: The strain starts shows. The engineer is now managing a system three times more complex with the same deadlines and exponentially higher expectations.

Month 3-6: The drift begins. Console files get tweaked. Settings change. The band starts asking: "Why does it sound worse than before?"

Month 6-plus: Someone gets called back for a "refresh."

In short, the same problems you paid to eliminate are back. This pattern plays out with remarkable consistency. Not because the gear is poorly designed or integrated, but because the system revealed a problem that was always there.

WHY THIS HAPPENS

Jim Collins warned us: "Technology accelerates momentum – it doesn't create it."

A new console doesn't fix unclear expectations between worship and tech; poor communication across departments; lack of volunteer training systems; and an engineer who's never managed complexity at this scale.

The new level of capability also means there's going to be a learning curve as you implement and create communication and workflow systems to sustain it. The engineer who faithfully ran the old system is now being asked to do a completely different job – without anyone telling them that's what happened.

The lead engineer is now expected to operate a system they've never been trained on at this level; lead more volunteers; manage multiple downstream mixes simultaneously; maintain new broadcast and streaming demands; and meet new expectations that tripled overnight.

Without development, they're being judged by standards they were never equipped to meet. When complexity rises but authority and support don't, people stop asking for help. They quietly hold it together – until they can't anymore.

This is how engineers get "slowly cooked."

INTEGRATOR DILEMMAS

Here's what the best system integration companies already know:

- Technical training – "here's how the system works" – can be delivered in a few days.
- Leadership development – "here's how to manage complexity, lead volunteers, and sustain this over years" – takes six to 12 months.

Most integrators would *love* to include ongoing development in their proposals. But churches balk at the price as they whittle down features and capability against budget realities and constraints.

Somewhere in the "good-better-best" conversation, coaching is easy to get nixed. So the scope gets narrowed to gear plus basic training – and everyone hopes it'll be enough.

It's not the integrator's fault. It's that the industry has trained churches to think of AVL projects as gear purchases, not organizational investments.

The churches that get this right budget development alongside installation. They bring in coaches, schedule follow-up training, and treat the system as a 12-month rollout – not a one-weekend launch. Smart integrators recommend this. Most mid-size churches decline it.

And six months later, everyone wonders why things aren't working.

WHAT CREATED THE BOTTLENECK

The system's capacity was upgraded, but th engineer's capacity stayed the same.

The old system had limitations everyone complained about. But those limitations also hid problems. Limited channels meant simpler workflows. One console meant less to manage. Lower stakes.

The new system removed those limitations – and suddenly every organizational weakness became visible. The system didn't create these problems. It exposed them.

Complexity doesn't reduce the need for leadership. It raises it.

MISSING INVESTMENT

When churches budget a $200,000-plus upgrade, the investment should include: the system (gear, installation, commissioning), and the development (training, coaching, leadership support). Without both, you haven't built an asset. You've built a liability.

Development means:

- Technical training. Not just "here's what this button does" but "here's how to think about signal flow at this scale."
- Leadership. How to lead volunteers, manage complexity, and communicate with non-technical leadership.
- Systems thinking. How to maintain standards over time and build processes that don't depend on heroics.
- Authority and support. Clear expectations, decision-making power, and permission to ask for help.
- Timeline. Six to 12 months during the transition.

Skills can be learned in weeks. Leadership capacity takes months. Internalized judgment under pressure takes repetition, coaching, and time.

WHO PROVIDES THIS?

Some integration firms offer ongoing training and support as part of their scope. If yours does, take it. It's worth it.

If not, this is where coaches like me come in. I work alongside integrators during commissioning – not just to mix the first weekend, or to replace their training, but to extend it into the months after they leave.

The best integrators already recommend this. They know the handoff from "system installed" to "team empowered" requires someone who can stay engaged long-term.

This isn't about gear versus people. It's about completing the investment.

REAL ROI

Churches that invest in development can expect engineers that stay onboard for two to three years longer; systems that remain optimized (no drift, no emergency "refresh" calls); volunteers that develop faster; and a dramatic drop in leadership frustration.

Churches that don't invest end up bringing some back in three to six months for a "refresh" (paying twice); they experience the same frustrations they paid to eliminate; they burn through engineers every two to three years (turnover costs $30K to $50K per cycle); and they blame the engineer for problems leadership created.

Upgrading the system without upgrading the operator isn't an investment – it's a deferred crisis.

WHAT THIS MEANS

If you're planning an upgrade, don't just budget for gear. Budget for the person who will operate it. The system is half the investment. Development is the other half.

If you've already upgraded and things aren't working, the system isn't the problem. The missing piece is almost always development and support. The engineer you have might be entirely capable – they just need capacity they don't currently have.

The engineer isn't failing. The system didn't fail. The investment was incomplete.

Incomplete investments don't fail immediately – they fail slowly, three to six months in, when the excitement wears off and reality sets in.

Gear amplifies capacity. It doesn't create it. If you're an integrator – you already know this.

If you're a church leader planning an upgrade, don't just ask your integrator "How much for the system?" Instead, ask: "What does it take to operate this well – and who's going to develop that capacity?"

The gear is half the investment. The people are the other half. **CS**

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