

# Are you Willing?

## Training as a vital part of technical ministry



I was consulting at a church recently when I observed the strangest thing. Just 30 minutes before the first worship service was about to begin, the music pastor brought a 17-year-old high school senior up to the platform and sat him at the piano. He showed him middle “C” and all of the other keys, including the sharps and flats.

He then placed some sheet music in front of the young man and showed him how the notes on the music corresponded to the keys on the piano. Then the pastor said, “I know you listen to a lot of music and are interested in learning how to play the piano, so I’m going to let you play for this service. I’ll be here next to you and will look over your shoulder and hit a few notes here and there whenever you need help.”

Now, if you’re thinking that I made this up – you’re right. It would be ridiculous for anyone to even think about putting a non-musician at the piano during a worship service. Yet similar events happen all the time when it comes to volunteers working in technical ministries.

### NOW, A TRUE STORY

I had just completed the final tests and adjustments on a new sound system that was installed in an existing church, and was attending the first worship service that would use the system for the first time. The head sound volunteer mixed that first service, and, with the exception of a few minor glitches, things had gone fairly smoothly.

During the second service, I decided to walk around the room to check the loudspeaker coverage and general system performance. While I was away from the mix booth, there was a transition from music to spoken word. As the

pastor moved up to the podium microphone and started talking, it was obvious that the mic wasn’t on. I dashed back to the booth, only to find a different person sitting behind the console with both hands in his lap!

Who was this person that I’d not seen before? Sitting next to him was the same head sound volunteer, who had decided to put the “new guy” in charge of the sound system while he worked on sorting some PowerPoint slides, oblivious to what was happening on the platform.

At this point, I began to freak out. What was wrong with the system? Did we forget to plug some mic lines into the console? Was the mic not plugged in on the platform? *What did we forget?*

Then I witnessed one of the most amazing things I’ve ever seen. After about a half-minute of no sound, the new sound person ran his finger across the labels on the console and finally located the channel for the podium mic. He then proceeded to un-mute the channel and pushed the fader up to the point where the podium mic went into full-tilt feedback. We’re not talking just a little ringing; we’re talking plug your ears and head for the exits!

Resisting the impulse to completely collapse into a sobbing heap, I jumped over the wall into the booth, wrestled the fader from this young man, and brought the system back from the brink of destruction. Later I was told that operational problems such as this happen all the time at this church.

### WHY BE PROFFICIENT?

One of the most common requests from a church staff

## INSIGHT

when discussing sound requirements is to have a system that is easy to operate. This request usually stems from a lack of proficient technical ministries volunteers.

The most frequent stipulation is a high-quality system with great capability, yet one that is easy to operate or even operates automatically. To some degree, this is like wanting a Formula One race car that can be driven by a beginner. It just doesn't happen.

Why is it that we're so willing to degrade the functionality or capability of a system because of a lack of proficiency on the part of the sound operators? Why do so few volunteer operators train and practice at the technical ministry work that they do?

I've been in some churches that have totally incompetent technical volunteers, and yet somehow this seems perfectly acceptable to the church staff and leadership. But I've never experienced a church with a first-year piano student playing during worship. Nor have I found a tone-deaf worship leader. And in all the churches I've visited over the years, I've yet to hear a sermon given by an untrained and unprepared pastor.

We should not lower the quality and capability of our systems to compensate for the shortcomings of the people involved. If the wrong person holds any ministry position, causing that ministry to suffer, then we must help them find ministry work within their talents and gifting.

Technical ministry needs folks willing to serve, willing to learn and willing to spend the time that it takes to be good at what they do. They must assume a professional attitude, as does everyone else involved in the ministry. If a pastor can spend years studying for ministry, why can't technical volunteers put forth a little effort to practice and obtain training?

### ANOTHER TOOL

The case for training can be made many different ways. Let's use the fairly recent emergence of digital mixing consoles. They're a good example of greatly increased technology power and capability, to the point that they're becoming a standard for concert tours, theatres and larger churches. Total scene recall and dynamics on every channel? It's the best! Once you've mixed on digital, the only reason to go back to analog would be for a specific feature or certain sound quality.

But some folks are afraid that new or different technology like this might be more complicated than they're accustomed to. However, the reality is that digital consoles are really not at all difficult to learn. Without a doubt, coming up to speed on a digital console is far easier than learning to play any musical instrument. With some time and practice, the average sound operator volunteer can get around them quickly and easily.

Thus a digital console is simply another tool for ministry that requires a proficient operator, one who trains and practices, reads the manual to figure out how it works, discovers hidden features, and learns how to quickly troubleshoot problems when they arise. Just like the musician playing the piano or the pastor preaching the sermon, the sound operator must have at least a minimum level of proficiency in order to be an effective member of the ministry team.

### SOME SUGGESTIONS

Once a church determines that a proficient technical staff is essential to a smooth, seamless worship experience, the next issue becomes where to get proper training. My suggestions:

**Reference or Text Books.** There are several good books available today that can provide the basis for a good education in audio. In fact, this magazine lists many of the best books, starting with the basics and beyond. And some of these are specifically geared toward church sound personnel (see *Resource*, page 57 of this issue).

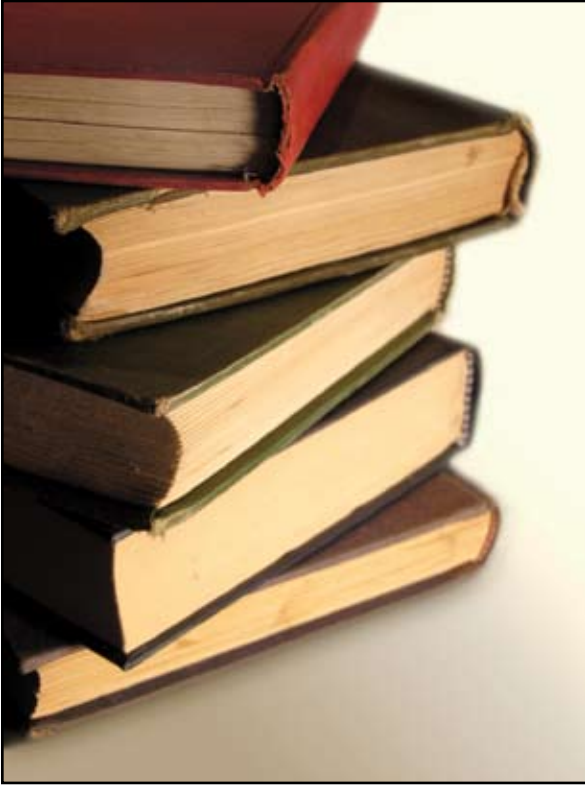
The goal is consistent growth of skills and proficiency. Learn and understand what a dB is in its different forms. Develop a good understanding of signal flow, balanced and unbalanced lines, phantom power, gain structure, filtering, dynamics, amplification, loudspeaker directivity, acoustics, and the physics of sound including the relationship between frequency and wavelength. This knowledge is akin to a trained musician learning music theory – it's essential.

**Product User's Manuals.** Knowing and understanding all of the equipment making up a system is crucial. Each component offers unique capabilities and limitations, features and controls. Read the manuals that are provided with each component!

**Practice Practice Practice.** The more one works with the system, the more one understands both its operation and limitations. Experiment with the mixing console; figure out the application of every feature, whether it's needed or not. Not really familiar with exactly what that compressor is supposed to do? Read the manual, run a CD on the system while playing with the compressor settings – find out what it really does! Further, schedule dedicated technical rehearsals where the focus is squarely upon practicing and working through technical issues – and don't let it become a musical rehearsal!

**Take Classes.** There are so many educational opportunities available, it's almost astounding. Again, some of these are listed in this magazine. And there are so many more. Keep your ears/eyes open, and/or contact a local sound professional (contractor or consultant) to find out about these opportunities.

**Go To A Pro.** Consider hiring a competent professional sound operator to provide your sound team with group and individual training. When augmented by a good basic



understanding of theory and systems, a professional can offer invaluable knowledge and information that only comes with years of experience.

As technical ministries volunteers, we owe it to the ministry, our team members and ourselves to do whatever it takes to be as proficient in our calling as we can be. Training takes effort and is sometimes just hard work. But any time invested is time that will be rewarded with greater success and the ability to be more effective.

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## SOUND TERMINOLOGY

**Signal ground:** The common electrical reference point of a circuit, usually separate from the chassis ground but tied together at the power supply. (Courtesy of the Rane Professional Audio Reference.) For more definitions, see Glossary, page 65 of this issue.