

Church Production

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Magazine

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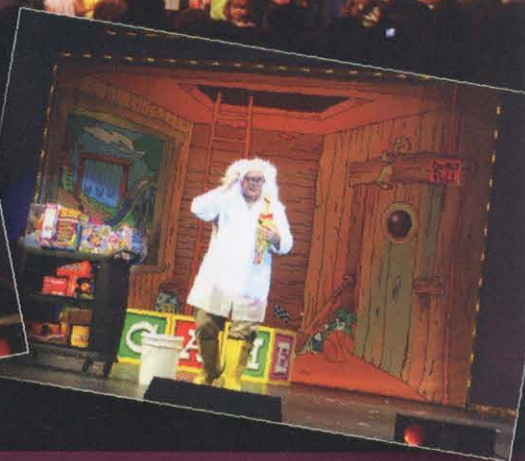
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Lighting for Worship

CULTIVATE THE LIGHTING STYLE THAT ADDS IMPACT TO YOUR CHURCH'S INDIVIDUAL WORSHIP

As a consultant I work with many different churches in all parts of the country. While working with these churches, I get the privilege of meeting lots of different people and spending time worshipping with them.

If there is anything that I have learned about churches, it is that no two are alike. This is especially true for worship styles, as worship styles are as varied as the people that fill up the churches.

I personally am glad that there are many churches to choose from. Having many different church choices allows people to choose one with a worship style that they feel comfortable with. A great example of this is a comparison and contrast of the church I grew up in, where my parents still attend, and the church that my wife and I attend with our children.

My parents' church is a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, very conservative and formal in its teaching, and very formal in its worship. Every week you are assured that you will sing a selection of classic hymns from the Lutheran Hymnal such as "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" or "I know My Redeemer Lives," accompanied by a great sounding pipe organ. You will also hear various music selections sung by the choir.

In contrast, my church in Nashville, Tennessee, Cross Point Community, is conservative yet conversational in its teaching and informal in its worship. Each week we sing a selection of songs written by contemporary Christian artists such as Matt Redman, Chris Tomlin, and David Crowder, accompanied by a full rock band. Video screens have replaced the hymnal, a choir is a rarity, and the closest thing that we have to a pipe organ is a synthesizer.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not implying that one worship style is right and one worship style is wrong; that's not the case at all, just that they are different. Two groups of people worshipping Jesus Christ, in two different ways.



Broken down into their basic parts, there are four primary purposes for using creative lighting. These are VISIBILITY, SELECTIVE VISIBILITY, MOOD, and MODELING.



Easter Worship at Cross Point Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee. Lighting design by Greg Persinger of Vivid illumination.

Photo courtesy Lee Steffen, Penguin Creative.



So by now you're probably wondering what this has to do with lighting for worship. Well, each church is going to light their worship based on their worship style, and just as each worship style is different, their lighting is going to be different, yet the concepts behind the lighting are timeless.

The Fundamentals of Worship Lighting

Broken down into their basic parts, there are four primary purposes for using creative lighting. These are visibility, selective visibility, mood, and modeling.

First we use lighting for visibility. This is the primary reason for lighting, for if the subject is not lit and is in the dark, the audience will not see it.

The second reason we use lighting ties directly to the first. Selective visibility is the use of lighting to call attention to an area of the stage that you want the audience to focus on, while not calling attention to an area of the stage you don't want the

audience to focus on. The best example of this is brightly lighting the area of the stage you want the audience to look at while keeping the areas of the stage you don't want the audience to look at dark. By selecting what you light and what you don't light, you select what is visible to the audience and what is not visible to the audience, selectively forcing the audience to look at what you want them to look at.

The next reason for using lighting is mood. Creating mood with lighting can be accomplished in several different ways. It can be done with intensity, color, lighting angles, or a combination of all of the above.

Typically, a dark stage gives an audience a feeling of sadness or fear, while a bright stage tends to give an audience a feeling of happiness or joy. Likewise dark colors such as blues, purples, and reds can give an audience a feeling of sadness or fear while bright colors like amber, pink, and yellow give an audience a feeling of happiness or joy.

... intensity, lighting angles, and color don't create the emotion, instead the visual cues provided by the lighting immerse the audience in an environment, that when taken in context with the other emotional content that is being put forth from the stage, help to powerfully communicate the subject.

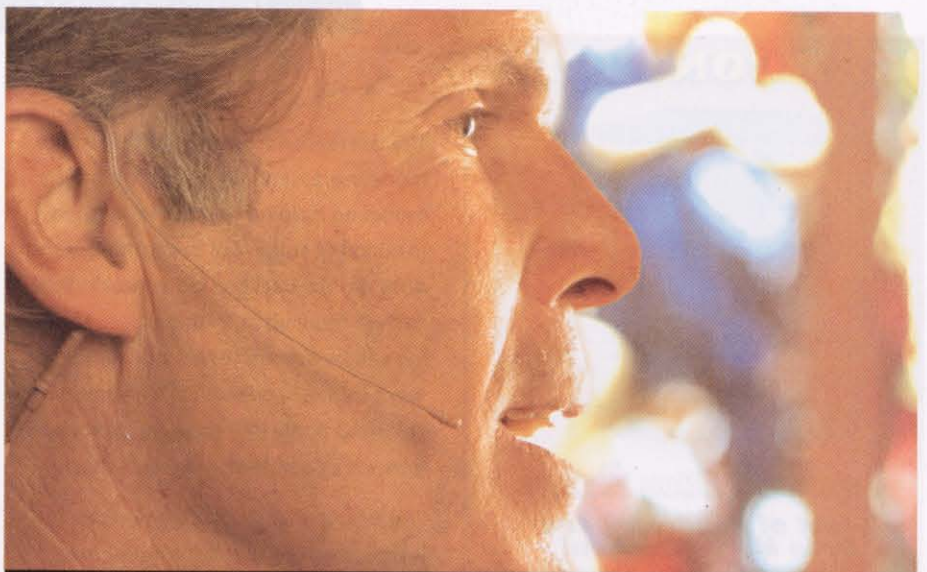


Pete Wilson, pastor, Cross Point Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee.

Lighting angles can also create mood. Steep lighting angles can create harsh shadows that make people look evil, while flatter lighting angles look more natural and tend to be more pleasing to the audience. Lighting coming from two very different, unsymmetrical angles can create tension while symmetrical angles feel very natural and comforting.

Of course intensity, lighting angles, and color don't create the emotion but instead are visual cues, that when taken in context with the emotional content that is being put forth from the stage, help make for more powerful communication of the subject.

Typically, a dark stage gives an audience a feeling of sadness or fear, while a bright stage tends to give an audience a feeling of happiness or joy.



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The last reason for using lighting is for modeling. Essentially, using lighting for modeling is doing nothing more than making the subject of the lighting stand out from the background or making the subject more visually interesting. Modeling can be accomplished in a number of ways, including variations in intensity, color, the angle that the light is projected from, or a combination of all of these.

The next concepts that we need to understand are that lighting is communication and that lighting enhances communication.

Lighting is communication in this sense that it provides visual cues to the audience. For example, when we use selective visibility we tell the audience where to look and where not to look. When we make the audience and the stage lighting bright, we tell the audience we want them to participate. When we darken the audience and highlight one portion of the stage we tell the audience to quiet down and pay attention to what we have lit. If we light the stage with the color red we create a feeling of evil or tension, but if we light the stage with a sky blue we convey the feeling of peace. We are effectively communicating concepts and commands to the audience via the lighting. However, lighting tends to have its greatest impact when we use it to enhance the communication that is happening on stage.

As I said before, intensity, lighting angles, and color don't create the emotion, instead the visual cues provided by the lighting immerse the audience in an environment, that when taken in context with

the other emotional content that is being put forth from the stage, help to powerfully communicate the subject.

It all boils down to this: We use the four primary lighting concepts, visibility, selective visibility, mood, and modeling, to communicate the same message that's coming from the stage, reinforcing the message, increasing both the message's impact and the audience's retention of the message.

So how do we practically apply these concepts to our worship lighting? First, you need to be appropriate with your worship lighting. Know and understand your church's worship style.

Attuning Lighting to Your Church's Worship Style

Earlier I talked about the difference in worship styles between my church and my parents' church. My parents' church is much more traditional while my church is contemporary. In my church, strong color choices, lots of variation in intensity, and movement when using an automated lighting package are expected at every service. In my parent's church, the lighting package is static and none of the fixtures have any color. The lights come on at their preset levels and they remain that way for the whole service. The system is capable of dimming the lighting up and down, but intensity changes are saved for special services that happen a few times a year.

At my parents' church if you went in and decided to change the lighting by making intensity changes, adding color, or automated lights, the lighting would become a distraction to worship instead of enhancing worship. What is appropriate for worship in my church is not appropriate for worship at my parent's church.

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Second, be tasteful. Lighting is definitely an art, and as with any art, taste is highly subjective. In lighting, there is not necessarily wrong or right, just better or worse.

There isn't a hard and fast rule to what is right and wrong in lighting. For example, in most churches you wouldn't want the lights to be flashing during the altar call. However, I know of a few churches where this is exactly what they do, they flash the lights during the altar call and the way they do it is very effective. In the correct context, flashing lights for the altar call is right while in other situations it would be very wrong. What determines whether it's right or whether it's wrong is your church's worship style.

Third, when doing worship lighting, be subtle. By this I mean make your lighting changes at the appropriate time so that the changes don't distract. There is no faster way to break the mood of

the moment than making a big lighting change in the middle of a sermon or a prayer when the audience wasn't expecting the lighting to change. This distracts them from the message as the visual cue provided by the lighting doesn't match what's happening on stage.


Before you make a change, ask yourself if this is going to enhance worship or distract from worship. Is there a better time or a better way to make the change? This includes intensity changes, color changes, and movement of automated fixtures.

Fourth, in worship there is a leader and there are followers. Always remember when doing worship lighting that you're the follower and not the leader. Let the people on stage lead and then enhance what they're doing. I can't tell you how many services I've been to where the worship lighting didn't match what was being done on stage. It was as though the

worship leader and the lighting operator were in two different rooms. Remember, if your lighting doesn't enhance what's happening on stage, it's a distraction.

Fifth, be a worshipper. Don't get so bogged down in the technical aspects of lighting that it becomes a job instead of an act of worship.

There are many other things that could be added to this list, but they all have their roots in these basic concepts. Work to master the basics first and then use the basic building blocks to create more complex lighting designs that work within the context of your church's worship style. Soon you will be creating worship lighting that adds visual impact to the message of Christ.

Greg Persinger is the owner of Vivid Illumination. He can be reached at greg@vividillumination.com. 

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