

Dan Goldstein reports on a market finding renewed growth in the EMEA region – that for AV technologies in Houses of Worship. What was once a maintenance project has evolved into something far greater.

Finding renewed faith

Five years ago, the worship market for AV in Europe consisted mainly of refurbishing systems in buildings that were centuries old. Budgets were limited, but not as limited as the extent to which installers could tamper with the buildings' historic fabric, impinge on the church's aesthetics, or impede congregation sight lines.

That market is still very much with us and, if anything, is growing slightly. Historic cathedrals and churches in Central and Eastern Europe are now being restored after decades of neglect under communism, substantially broadening the market's geographic range. Meanwhile, EU enlargement has increased the mobility of workers from those countries and, as they migrate westwards in search of well-paid work, they bring a greater frequency of church-going with them – reversing the trend in falling attendances in countries as diverse as the UK, Ireland, Spain,

Italy and the Netherlands.

To cater to this market, manufacturers have responded in a number of ways, most notably by building more DSP power into their column loudspeakers and other enclosures suited to historic church interiors. Other areas of innovation include more discreet gooseneck microphones, easier-to-use control systems, and the ability to paint speakers in custom colours to match church décor.

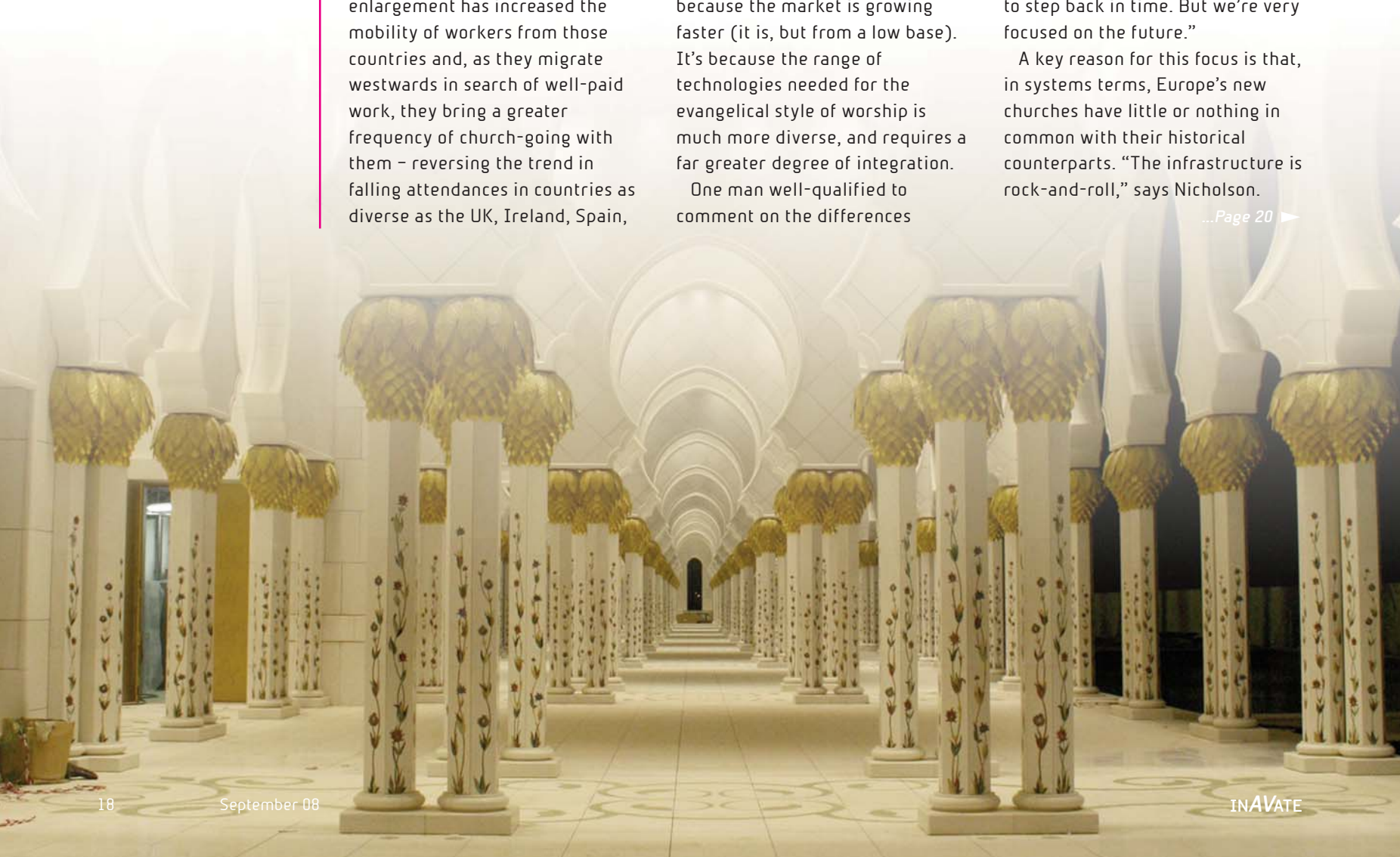
In terms of future potential, though, the market that will matter most to AV integrators – and the companies which supply them – is that for new-build evangelical churches. This isn't just because the market is growing faster (it is, but from a low base). It's because the range of technologies needed for the evangelical style of worship is much more diverse, and requires a far greater degree of integration.

One man well-qualified to comment on the differences

between these two markets is Paul Nicholson, whose company Midas ProSound was responsible for the AV installation at Winchester Family Church featured in InAVate Nov/Dec 2007. Nicholson says his firm's worship projects divide "about half and half" between traditional churches and the new breed. "We've just done a lovely Italian church – the system had been in there for 30 years," Nicholson says. "We put in a new induction loop system, new mics, a better amplifier. We're happy to go with the flow if that's what the client wants, and we can go into an old church and be very sympathetic to the architecture. It's easy for us to step back in time. But we're very focused on the future."

A key reason for this focus is that, in systems terms, Europe's new churches have little or nothing in common with their historical counterparts. "The infrastructure is rock-and-roll," says Nicholson.

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The FoH position at Winchester Family Church before and after Midas Prosound went to work on it.

► “You can see what’s delivering your sound, your lighting and your video. There’s no requirement to hide it away.”

Nicholson adds that when it came to bidding for the Winchester job, his company’s experience in venue technology proved to be at least as important as its traditional church credentials: “The reason the church accepted our quote is that we were looking outside the box. I got the feeling that the other quotations were a bit ‘copy and paste.’ A lot of dedicated church installation companies are rather conservative – they start using certain brands of products and they stick to them. We do have a portfolio of brands that we support, but we like to be creative – we’re always looking for new things.”

As in the US – and in marked contrast to the traditional worship sector – many of Europe’s new churches are starting life in buildings that were never designed

to be religious sanctuaries. Winchester Family Church is not alone in using a converted cinema, while warehouses and industrial units are also popular, for reasons Paul Nicholson can easily explain: “If they move to an industrial estate, churches can often get grants, and there are no noise issues in terms of neighbours. If they want to have big bands and big systems, they can.”

In today’s multi-faith Europe, the re-purposing of buildings for worship is not the sole province of evangelical Christianity. Followers of Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and other faiths are often obliged to hold religious assemblies in buildings that were not conceived as temples – although, ironically, these buildings include abandoned Christian churches of varying ages.

Outside Europe it’s a different story. The United Arab Emirates sees newly built mosques opening every day, the most notable of

which is, of course, the Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi. Audio consulting for that landmark project was conducted by PMK, a Dallas-based integration firm with a broad base of customers but a particular renown for worship projects. PMK, which divides its business into acoustics design and AV systems units, has offices across the US and also in Dubai, where acoustics specialist Adam Foxwell is based.

“In the Grand Mosque,” says Foxwell, “we tried to get the reverberation time [RT] low enough so that you get good speech intelligibility, and we’ve done the same thing in smaller mosques that have been part of bidder developments here. If you listen to recordings of the Moslem call to prayer, a lot of the spaces are very wet in terms of reverberation.”

Despite this problem, Foxwell

► says it is still unusual for independent acoustics consultants to be used in the field. “The percentage of our work taken by the worship market is a lot lower here [in the UAE] than it is in the US,” he says. “We’ve had other proposals for mosques here, but a lot of these things are being built without independent consultants.”

Foxwell attributes this lack of market penetration to two things: the relative simplicity of mosque installations and a possible reluctance on the part of end customers to pay consulting fees. If anything, despite the high proportion of new-build projects, the sector would seem to have more parallels with the traditional church market in Europe than with America’s mega-church business.

“In the US, where we have a big chunk of the church market, you’ve got things like the I-Mag projection screens, and that’s not part of the mosque experience,” Foxwell points out. He adds, though, that there is still potential for systems technology in mosques: “Another thing they’re doing in US churches now is using electroacoustics to help modify the RT, because of the need to shift quickly from a music-based acoustic to a speech-based acoustic. A lot of mosques would benefit from that, too. But these temples are much like old cathedrals – there might be a case for putting in line arrays, but it’s a discreet thing. You don’t want the equipment to be visible or apparent. You want the church to speak for itself.”

In contrast, Foxwell says, the new breed of American churches is “almost technology-driven – they’re competing with one another to have the biggest and best in AV equipment.” Talking to Paul Nicholson, it’s clear that in this respect, the market has something in common with touring. Churches want to put on a great show, and are not afraid to use – and budget for – state-of-the-art technology to drive it. The fact that many churches rely on amateur bands and volunteer technicians can create challenges, but Nicholson says his company’s rental activity makes it well-placed to rise to them.

“Being a rental company as well as an installer gives us an advantage,” Nicholson says. “We are used to working with bands, setting up their sound, working with big digital consoles. These are things that are becoming increasingly important.”

It may even be the case that the worship market is ahead of its rock touring counterpart in some respects. Carl Bader, co-founder and CEO of Aviom, says the sector’s lack of pre-conceptions makes it particularly open-minded to new systems solutions. “A lot of the part-time or volunteer staff in churches don’t have a long history of doing things a certain way. They were looking for a better way, and they found us.

“The reason we’ve been successful in churches is that our products solve a major problem. Every musician who plays through a PA has experienced the

frustration of bad mixes in the monitors, but the added issue for worship users is the challenge of controlling the volume in the sanctuary. By fixing the monitor mix, we’ve allowed stage volume to be brought down, and we’ve made in-ear monitoring a practical solution for a much broader user base.”

And while Europe’s new churches may currently be found occupying improvised spaces, it’s not hard to envisage a time when, like their US counterparts, they save enough funds through donations – and through hiring out their facilities to third parties – to have new temples built especially for them. That in turn would open the floodgates for the full mega-church experience – not necessarily in terms of congregation size, but certainly in terms of technology. HD projection screens, dedicated AV recording suites for the archiving of services, HD cameras for broadcasting those services to a wider audience beyond the sanctuary itself...these are all things that Europe’s worship market will surely embrace in the years to come.

No wonder Paul Nicholson is smiling when he says: “We’ve got a new-build church we’re working on that’s just a whole in the ground at the moment. We’ll go in and we’ll do what we want to give them an infrastructure that’s the right solution, future-proofed, with low maintenance or none at all. We’re much better equipped to do a modern church than a traditional church installer would be.” 

More info from:

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