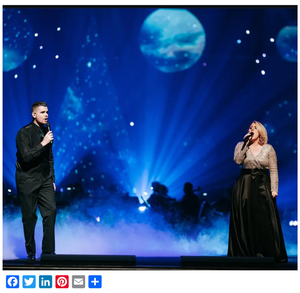
What's the Roadmap to a Successful Christmas Production?

by Andres Caamano | Audio, AVL Projects, Lighting, Production, Video, Worship Service Planning



With the start to the Fall season just days away, thinking about Christmas might seem a bit early to many. In truth, if you're part of a tech team planning your church's next Christmas production, look to start ***now*** or you might even find yourself a little bit behind, especially if you have big plans for this year's production.

With three-plus months until Christmas, you may wonder, what's the path toward ending up with a standout Christmas production? Among the biggest challenges is figuring how much time you'll need to prepare, particularly when accounting for scale. Then there's the question about how much change you anticipate will be incorporated into the production, compared to prior years.

Planning is crucial toward having a successful production, but make sure to also be flexible as the production quickly approaches. Understand that despite anything that's been previously planned and deemed imperative, don't let proposed changes later on derail the production.

Begin With Conversations Over Big Ideas

For a strong understanding of what direction to take an upcoming production, it's ideal to sit down early on with church leadership.

"I would start having conversations with pastors in late September or early October," noted Water of Life Community Church production manager Debbie Keough. "I think you need a confirmation from the pastor about the production's direction. From there, you hope you have the support for the plan for Christmas, before really ramping up."

Similarly, Scott LeBeau, former lighting designer for New Life Church, had a similar mindset. "Some churches can begin preparing in September or October." Despite that, LeBeau suggested planning even earlier. "At New Life, if I had my choice, I would have liked to start in August. The bigger the church, the bigger the production, the earlier the start in planning."

For Adrian Gates, technical director at Great Roads Church in Acton, Massachusetts, August was an ideal time to begin planning. "I've seen some start at the middle of August, and others start around Thanksgiving. It depends what you want to do." The complexity of such a production can vary widely. "Some churches will keep it to an amplified service with psalms. Others rebuild their stage with other technical details, like needing a rental."

A number of churches, though, who have made their productions a tradition, start even earlier.

At Community Christian Church, with seven locations in Illinois, its Christmas production wheels start spinning in May. "In our unique circumstance, we've been doing it for 18 years. We begin meeting in May or June for content," said executive pastor of worship arts Eric Bramlett. "In June or July, we recruit the key people on the production staff. By August, we announce auditions, which are held at the end of September."

Figuring Out the Right Scale

A church's style can point toward what seems right for your church, relating to the scale of the upcoming production.

"Have an understanding of your church's dynamics. Stay within the same general scale," noted Keough.

During the planning stages, accounting for the size of what you can accommodate can decide a lot.

"It's important to think that for a bigger cast, to divvy up the responsibilities. We are mindful in our production about having varied ages," said Bramlett. "We want to have roles that are clearly defined and effective for kids to perform, and to have roles for adults to enjoy, where they can be engaged."

How big a production should be seen as possible for your church?

"I would say as big as you can stage and can manage…I'd encourage that," Bramlett noted.

Another crucial element that should aid in determining its scale, is how many experienced team members will play a part.

"With an experienced worship leader or team, they'll know how to do best with what they have," detailed Gates. "If you have a bunch of 15-year-old volunteers, you could get something really good done. Will it be the same as what you could get with semiprofessional musicians? Probably not."

Beyond those working on the production, LeBeau pointed to the leadership as critical in determining its scale.

"Ninety percent is direction from leadership, whether it is coming from the senior pastor or the collaboration between the worship and production teams," he said. "There are many moving pieces and a lot of churches have their comfort zones. Most importantly, what is the story we are trying to convey that year?"

Incorporating Collaboration

Early on in planning, turning to tech team members for input on potential changes or ideas might be an option. At first glance, some ideas could easily be seen as achievable. Others, though, may require lots of extra work or cost, to where they may end up getting cut.

When taking a closer look at an idea, think of all the layers that are needed for it to work. For example, "If you need flying drummers, how are you mic'ing them?" asked Keough. "Does the pastor want a camel? Is someone riding that camel? Then, how best is it to record that and how do you mic that person?"

Having an open conversation to come up with ideas can be useful, noted Gates.

"If you ask for ideas, that can be helpful. The team can have ideas on cool things they want to try, possibly something seen in other productions or churches," Gates said. Some ideas, though, might simply not be realistic. "There may be lots of enthusiasm (for a particular idea). One situation, though, had it where we were talking about winching someone up to the ceiling. You have to counter some ideas, though, with experience and wisdom."

To unearth any problems leading up to the production, Bramlett described scheduling one or two production meetings as it approaches. "As a team, we are looking at particular problems, in things we have to solve," he noted. "What are the challenges of this unique production?"

During such a meeting, the team practices "paper tech, walking through the cues, for lighting, sound and media," Bramlett added. "It's an opportunity to have just the tech experts there, having a shot at what the timing should be."

Looking to Reinvent the Wheel?

With each passing year, and each Christmas production, how much should be carried over and how much should change?

Months before the production, it can be tempting to jump into incorporating a lot of new elements. Instead, think of what's worked in the past, and focus on building around that.

"I think churches love consistency," said Keough. "If your pastor isn't asking to go too far out of the box, look to stay with what has been successful for the church."

From LeBeau's perspective, each year's production should be seen as an opportunity to improve and grow.

"I think we learn from every year," said LeBeau. "We learn from what works, and what we can duplicate. And we also learn what did not work. That gives us an opportunity to try something new and creative."

For Gates, he agreed that looking to incorporate some change into the upcoming production has its value. "It's always good to move in the moment. People have their own skills and strengths …they can make it their own."

An upcoming production can initially be planned to not have any changes, but recognize that there will be differences.

"Even if you do the same production for 20 years straight, there are people who are going to do it in their own style," added Gates.

With Bramlett's production, for what's become a yearly tradition, he seeks to make changes around the edges annually.

"I like about a five percent to 10 percent change each year," he noted. "It gives the audience something that is mostly familiar. Then there's the one unique thing (with what's been changed), that keeps them on their toes."

Contending With Last-Minute Changes

As a church's Christmas production quickly approaches, all the planning done months earlier can't predict the unavoidable curveballs. Understanding that those last-minute changes will inevitably occur, it's best to not feel panicked when they arise. Having taken the time to previously plan, it will help you immeasurably, versus having you overreact about any changes.

"If you are the leader of the production, people need to be inspired by your calmness," noted Bramlett. "If they see you sweat, they will sweat. Your job is to absorb the tension and process it and create the best solution."

Despite having done extensive planning, don't expect to avoid such late changes, Gates said, "Last-minute things will always come up."

When deciding whether to move forward on a part, Gates detailed, "If it's hard to do and feels like a side quest, you can likely leave it to the side." Keep in mind, though, if a suggested change leaves someone out from being involved in the production, avoid incorporating it. "Otherwise, if a proposed change is no real difficulty, then it's worth doing it."

If you plan well enough, finding the time to make such changes shouldn't amount to too much of a hurdle. "I like to make room for stuff," noted Keough. "The earlier you can get most of your other major projects done, you'll have time for (possible changes)."

LeBeau also highlighted the significant value of planning when confronted with last-minute changes to a production.

"That's why planning up front is so important," he said. "Having a gameplan put together, with the people and their job responsibilities outlined, allows you to focus on an adjustment, versus trying to do it all at once."

Sign Up for the Worship Facility Newsletter!

SUBSCRIBE NOW

RELATED CONTENT

How Have Church Lighting Needs Changed, Amid a 'New Normal'?

Churches learn how lighting needs have changed now that live streaming and broadcast are becoming more popular....

For Some Churches, Tech Upgrade Plans On Track, Rising

With many churches being dealt the gut punch of closing for in-house services for about 3 months, some churches have discovered new upgrade needs...

Keep Calm and Cue the Camel: Surviving Christmas in Church Production

It's that time of year again—the season that comes around with clockwork precision, yet somehow always feels like it sneaks up on us. For those...

How to Best Plan for An AVL Upgrade, While Contending with Tariffs

Many overseas AVL manufacturers today are having to contend with the possibility of rising tariffs from U.S. sales. Those added costs typically affect a company's...

Post-Christmas Production Analysis

I have to be honest, when I sat down to write this article, I had a little bit of writer's block. I was supposed to...

NEW THIS WEEK

5 Common OSHA Violations in Church Facilities

We all know churches are places of worship and community gathering. But did you know they are also subject to the same Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards as any other workplace? Church leadership should know the potential violations to...

Recent Vatican Events Powered by K-Array's Firenze System

Event technology specialists, Agorà, won the European tender for the construction of an audio and video distribution system, intended for the 2025 Jubilee celebrations in St. Peter's Square, Rome. Following the death of His Holiness Pope Francis, the system was...

Telycam Ships Vision+ 4KZ Professional Box Camera

Telycam has begun shipping its new Vision+ 4KZ professional box camera. Packing an incredible array of features into a compact form factor at a surprisingly affordable price, the Vision+ 4KZ delivers the stunning quality of Telycam's PTZ cameras for use cases that...

tvONE Ships CALICO PRO 1200 and New CALICO PRO Firmware & Software

tvONE, a leader in video processing, signal distribution, and media playback solutions, is proud to announce the shipment of its new video processing solution, CALICO PRO 1200. CALICO PRO (C7-PRO-1200) is a compact, 10-bit video processor that ships with a fixed I/O...

Lessons From A "Seasoned" Church Production Tech

It's not just about the tech, but rather our abilities to keep an open mind, continually learn, bring joy to our efforts as well as to those around us, and more.

© Worship Facility & EH Media LLC. All rights reserved.