New Marco Island Church:

TRANSFORMA THROUGH TEC

by Michael Kirby
ince day one at his new position as Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church Marco Island, Florida in 2003, Timothy Neptune was convinced that the church was in need of a major transformation. Not only did the church need a transformation spiritually, but also physically. A major part of the transition from old to new would be a new facility constructed to act as a bridge between where they were and where they needed to be. “The church needed to reevaluate our mission, vision, and values and then once again be reminded of our mandate to reach every man, woman, and child in our community with the Gospel. Part of reaching all segments of our community included a complete facility transformation with a focus on technology,” explained Neptune. His vision was to create a ministry that could be spread around the world, from a new, high end, state of the art worship center. Their message would be delivered via the internet and thru the radio program, Classic Christian Gold, which is produced at the Church and extends to over 150 outlets worldwide. The pastor would follow with a major church planning effort in west Florida.
While the Pastors focus was to create a thriving ministry for the Island to be shared around the globe, there was a concentrated effort to make sure he had the “right” space in which to accomplish his goal. Neptune explains his first meetings with Donnie Brawner, President, Brawner & Associates. “I told him that it needed to have the ambience of the Marriott here on the Island, but still have technical capabilities that would allow for theatrical production, television and even concerts, all in the same space. There would be traditional décor with dark wood accents and trim, tall unique ceilings, a warm feel, but I also wanted a way to alter the space for special events. In one word, it had to be flexible.”

Turning Over the Design

February marked the opening of the new First Baptist Church of Marco Island, FL. The new facility features a 500 seat, state-of-the-art worship center, commercial kitchen, library, Starbucks™ style coffee shop, children’s spaces, multi-purpose areas, youth rooms and conference facilities. The goal was on creating intimacy, flexibility and future expansion.

Neptune adds, “We wanted to appeal to those living in Marco but also to those visiting the Island, a mix of retirees and younger generation families. Our goal was not to ostracize the older generation by building a contemporary facility, but we had to make everyone feel comfortable.” The Island does not have a different church on every corner. It was a tall order, but the church chose Brawner & Associates because they felt they had the mindset to satisfy traditional and contemporary tastes and seemed to understand the church. “Donnie Brawner told me early on, that we needed to create an environment that produces an inspirational audience experience,” explains Neptune, “and that’s what they did. We turned the design of the whole sanctuary over to them.”

The actual design of the worship center started in 2006 over 1,000 miles away in the Springfield, MO offices of Brawner & Associates. Brawner was tasked with providing turn-key design & installation services for the project including overall sanctuary design, ceilings, seating layouts, audio, video, lighting, digital signage, scenic elements, acoustics and motorized rigging systems. Technical systems were also designed for children areas, youth rooms and fellowship spaces.
Blank Square, Open Canvas

Brawner said it all started with a blank square on a CAD drawing. “We had an open canvas to develop the space which is unique, but it paid dividends in the end,” remarked Brawner. “We started the process by determining stage/platform layout, seating arrangements, sightline studies and ceiling configurations. Next, we went into the technical elements and how we would integrate those. Our approach does not start with designing ultimate systems individually but rather how they fit together seamlessly as one unit. Lighting, audio and video need very different and sometimes conflicting prerequisites to be a success. We often use scenic elements as the vehicle to blend it together. At the end of the day in Marco Island those scenic elements help define the space.” Similar to an architect, Brawner says he accomplishes this by creating a sort of “master plan” and then works with strategic partners on designing everything to fit the criteria.

The focal point of the worship center design creates a technological canvas in which to paint with light.

In this case, the canvas is a full-stage scenic wall that flows into a color changing soft-fabric ceiling that can be used subtly or as a vibrant background. “Our design criteria for the stage set included, depth and dimension, vivid color capability and something that would register well for the live message but also something that we could go to TV with,” remarked Brawner. “It allows a very simple, classy look for their traditional service followed by a very hip, trendy looking contemporary service.”

The real workhorse in the success of the wall & ceiling is the impact made with lighting. LED units were used to light both the stage ceiling and wall units. Brawner & Associates lighting designer Ron Robertson, comments, “After visiting a few trade shows with us, the church was really into this new technology. LED lighting saved us conduit and wire on the front end and now saves the church in maintenance, lamp replacement and most importantly, power consumption. Due to some challenging HVAC routing on the stage area, the LED units eliminated a lot of heat concerns.” Neptune offers, “Our attendees are blown away by the stage lighting. It really helps create a mood in the sanctuary and enhances the whole worship experience.”

Selling The Design Concept

At a design review meeting in Florida, Brawner faced challenges trying to sell its plan for a custom auditorium ceiling. The design concept called for a ceiling built from over 120 custom, fabric wrapped panels that would tie into the stage ceiling to create a forced perspective look. Neptune explains, “Their concept and inspiration for the forced perspective ceiling came from Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting of ‘The Last Supper.’ I was worried about how this would work out in the end but I trusted them and went with it. It’s a pretty neat feeling to see it completed.” But Brawner had to convince the team that
the design had multiple purposes. For one, it was a major part of the acoustic solution but it was also the masking for HVAC systems, sprinklers and even their own audio speakers, lighting and rigging systems. "After several meetings," Brawner adds, "the General Contractor was uncomfortable finding contractors to fabricate or install the ceiling so we decided to treat it as a scenic element as well. We contacted our partners at Infinite Dimensions/ID3 out of Atlanta and they built it for us. It was a pretty intricate design but they really did an incredible job with it."

Outside of the LED units, a very flexible lighting system was configured by Ron Robertson. ETC sensor Installation Racks provide the dimming for the facility which included an Emergency Lighting Transfer System. Custom circuit distribution included 120V, 208V & 110V convenience power throughout the space. Data is provided through a series of Path Port nodes and patch bays. Lighting control comes from the versatile Jands Vista Console with S3 surface and an HP TouchSmart Display, Robertson adds "this console is a great choice for church applications. With volunteers involved in lighting operation in many cases, the Jands Vista allows you to see a display of the lighting on its screen really making control very user-friendly." House-lighting is controlled via an ETC Unison system with remote stations. Lighting units include a whole compliment of ETC fixtures, High End Systems Studio Commands and X Spots, plus Chauvet COLORado 1 LED units.

Brawner comments on the lighting design: "The stage trussing was designed to support the fabric ceiling. But, the church liked the contemporary look and the versatile hanging positions it offered. Main front-of-house lighting positions were designated as motorized line-set systems that allow the battens to be lowered for maintenance with safe, high-trim limits. As opposed to long looped cable picks that require a lot of maintenance and are ugly by nature, we chose a pantograph system to ride the motorized battens. The wiring feeding the distribution is flat wire that's sent through the pantograph. ETC source Four Pars were our choice for house-lighting. Contrary to popular belief they are actually very competitive and you end up with more control over the house lighting. The light is actually focusable allowing you to keep spill light off the corners, walls and so on. This makes the decorative wall sconces more effective. There is nothing worse than an un-effective wall sconce. It doesn't usually get much attention, but I am a big fan of clean house-lighting. Often times, in many auditoriums it is one of the biggest, unidentified problems with the room."

Audio Components

The worship center space includes a professional audio system made up of Electrovoice and EAW components with a Yamaha 48-channel digital console. Stage monitors are also mixed from this front of house console. A programmable Symetrix SymNet distribution unit links the console with its power amplifiers. Stage monitoring is made up
from floor wedges, rigged over-head speakers and Shure in-ear monitors. Aviom A-16 Personal Monitor Mixers and distributors handle monitor sends to appropriate cabinets. In addition, there is a distributed audio system allowing for controlled audio church wide, inside and out.

Brawners partners, SG Integration provided design of the church's audio systems. Brandon Hite explains, “We use EASE software to help us model the room, develop the coverage pattern, study acoustics and render surfaces. All of this data gives us the information we need to determine the best audio choices for the space. The choice is always narrowed down to a couple of possible solutions and we then collaborate as a team to determine how this fits into the “master plan” and make our final selections.” Shawn Hurtley, Technology & Facilities Director, FBC Marco Island, FL comments “The sound is stunning. This system, in this room with these acoustics, is truly a perfect match. It’s a tight room.” Brawner reminds us however, “this success once again is part of an overall master plan for the entire space that starts on day one, not just an audio design.”

The HD video system feeds live and pre-produced content to three IMAG screens fed with Panasonic projection and digitally records program material for post production. The system includes operator and remote controlled cameras and a full HD video edit suite complete with Apple Mac Pro machines running Final Cut Pro, Sony Anycast Station HD recorder, Network Electronics routers and audio monitoring. Digital signage content is distributed to built in 50” plasma displays throughout the facility and driven by an Ethernet-based matrix switcher, HD content server and playout units.

The motorized rigging system enables staging flexibility with multiple battens for stage electrics and scenic pipes. According to Dave Loftin, Brawner & Associates Project Manager, “The custom motorized systems provided by Texas Scenic include drum and block line-set systems, pipe, motor, loft blocks, cable and pantograph. Two Upstage Walk Along Traveler Tracks were also installed and a custom control panel off-stage right for control of the motorized systems.”

Scenic elements include the 55’ X 21’ upstage set wall with star stops and embedded electric, a three dimensional cross unit with embedded LED lighting and a screen surround for the 16’ X 9’ center video screen and the stage ceiling.

While it’s not routine in most churches, Brawner’s design called for a stage curtain. “The pastor wanted to be able to totally change the feel of the room in the push of a button,” explains Brawner. “The curtain works very well and
it was part of the initial plan. We had to make sure that from a lighting and audio perspective it was considered.”

Other considerations were portable, room matching modesty walls onstage to provide a clean, sleek stage look. A custom glass podium with wood matched trim was designed and built by Prestige Glass. Emphasis on the future included dedicated power services for touring performances or outdoor special events.

Dave Loftin, Brawner & Associates Project Manager admits, “I have to credit Pastor Neptune for thinking about technology on the front end and getting some technical assistance up front, for some of those very early decisions that often get over-looked. It is crucial because you pay for it later, but more often than not we get brought in late in the game. We assisted the church with developing all of the technical systems budgets from the start and there’s always some give and take. It required some priority decisions from the top. In this case, the Pastor was very involved in the process all the way through which can make a big difference in the speed and efficiency of things.”

Pastor Neptune has a couple of suggestions for anyone setting out to build a new facility: “Never settle for the first contractors, architects or consultants you interview just because they make a good presentation. Really dig in and do your homework and study your options. One bad contractor can really damage the effort. Secondly one of the most valuable things we did was to hire a facilities/project manager to oversee all of the construction elements from start to finish on a day to day basis. It simply would not have turned out this well without someone from our staff watching it 24/7. Shawn Hurtley was a crucial element to us during this process.”

“We are blessed to have had the opportunity to assist First Baptist Marco and we are so glad to be a part of what is happening there,” says Brawner.

“The new Worship Center - exceeded our expectations,” Senior Pastor Neptune concludes. “It is just what we had hoped for, a combination of traditional elegance with new-generation technology. It answered the call for the facility transformation we needed. It is an incredible space that offers outstanding sound and video capabilities, with flexible lighting - an excellent experience - just what we were promised. We couldn’t be happier.” Tim Neptune, Senior Pastor extends a welcome to anyone wishing to experience the new First Baptist Church Marco Island, Florida.

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