

stuff you wish they taught in seminary



“It’s Too Loud!”:

RESPONDING TO VOLUME CRITICS AT YOUR CHURCH

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The scene is set. It's a Sunday morning, and the band is cranking through the second of a four-song set. You loved the latest Hillsong or Bethel song and things are moving in the right direction. However, at the back of the room is an individual you've seen before: the person who loves to say, "It's too loud."

Over the last 20 years of being a part of growing churches, I've noticed a constant din of people who complain about how loud church can be. **Whether the music is blasting during worship or a speaker is simply turned on, these folks find a problem with the volume on any given Sunday.** However, I've also noticed that churches that are growing and making a difference tend to run at a loud volume—it's not an exception.

The reality is that if your church uses contemporary music to connect with and build up your community, chances are you've heard complaints about the volume.

I recently connected with executive pastors and leaders at some of the fastest-growing, most influential churches in the country to find out exactly how loud their weekend worship services are. As you can see below, a trend emerged: each of these churches tends to run loud volumes in their main auditoriums.

Here's a list of eight churches along with their speaker volumes in A-weighted decibels:

- [12 Stone Church](#): 92 to 95 dBA
- [Christ Fellowship, Miami](#): 91 to 93 dBA
- [Connexus Church](#): 92 to 95 dBA with peaks of approximately 100 dBA
- [Crossroads Church \(Cincinnati\)](#): 94 to 98 dBA with peaks of 103 dBA
- [Liquid Church](#): 95 dBA with peaks of 102 dBA
- [Mosaic Church \(Orlando\)](#): Approximately 98 dBA
- [Sandals Church](#): Approximately 98 dBA
- [Traders Point Christian Church](#): 93 to 95 dBA

Each one of these churches make an impact in their communities and reach thousands of people every weekend. So their practices beg the question: if these churches are running at a loud volume, what are they saying to those in their community that complain about the "noise"? More importantly, what can you say in response to the volume critics at your church? This is a complex issue, but there are a few things to consider as you lead conversations about volume control.

Quick Lesson on Volume and Hearing Damage

One complaint lodged against loud services is that it could damage people's hearing. While it is possible to damage hearing at many different volumes, it requires more than volume itself. Significant damage to hearing occurs through a combination of the following factors: proximity to the sound source, sustained exposure, and dBA levels. Look at the chart below for examples of the combined factors required to result in hearing damage:

dBA LEVELS	EXAMPLE [ref]	SUSTAINED EXPOSURE FOR DAMAGE [ref]
85 dBA	Snowblower	8 hours
90 dBA	Lawnmower	2 hours
95 dBA	Inside a subway car	1 hour
100 dBA	Riding a motorcycle	15 minutes
105 dBA	Table saw	3.7 minutes
110 dBA	Jackhammer	111 seconds (1 m)
115 dBA	Emergency vehicle siren	57 seconds

Obviously, we don't want to run our worship services in such a way that it would damage anyone's hearing. However, most churches that do run loud don't run loud enough to do damage in the amount of time that we worship. For instance, if your church runs at 95 dBA, you would need to sustain that level for an hour straight (which is virtually impossible to do given the dynamics of how music works) in order to sustain any damage. Obviously, pushing above 115 for any period of time could end up causing damage. However, typical levels average far lower than that across prevailing churches. The important thing to note is that growing and prevailing churches don't run at a volume so loud that it would do damage during the 20-25 minutes of worship.

3 Reasons Churches Run Loud Services

It fills the room.

The reality is that when you run a loud volume during the service, it gives the impression of the room being fuller. There's something about a full room that encourages engagement. Ultimately, musical worship is about drawing people in and inviting them to be a part of an experience, and when it runs louder, that full room encourages people to lean in and engage more.

A louder volume encourages more singing.

Trust me, you don't want to hear me sing. If the volume of the music is so low that you can hear me sing, it may discourage you from singing, not necessarily because I'm such a terrible singer, but

because you are worried about what I think of your singing. Louder volumes actually encourage people to participate.

Less somber, more celebration.

A significant reason for keeping the music loud is that most churches are trying to project a celebratory tone rather than somber one. This celebratory tone communicates that Jesus is alive and making a difference in people's lives today.

3 Things It Might Be Besides Volume

When people complain about volume in our churches, sometimes they are really complaining about other things. It takes training to understand how volume works within any given room; an experienced audio engineer can speak knowledgeably about the volume of any given experience. However, when others that are less familiar with the science of sound complain about what they call volume, it might actually be something else that's causing them discomfort. Three examples of other things it might be are:

The mix

I'm convinced that when people complain about volume, they are often really referring to the mix but don't know how to articulate it. It could be that there's too much screeching electric guitar, or cymbals piercing through at an inappropriate spot, or maybe the bass is just rumbling and muddying the mix too much. If we're hearing a complaint about volume, then we need to investigate whether it's just a bad mix in the room.



Lousy musicianship

Maybe the electric guitarist isn't quite up to be leading this audience, or maybe the drummer is banging too harshly on the drums; in short, poor musicianship could be causing a distraction. Sometimes people complain about the volume when what they're really thinking is that the folks on the stage aren't leading them in an efficient and effective manner.

Your style

Let's just speak plainly: some folks simply don't like your musical style. They wish it was something else — maybe quieter, more somber, more reflective, or more introspective—something other than your current style. Acknowledge that sometimes when someone complains, what they're saying is not "it's too loud", but "it's not how I want it."

5 Practical Tips for Helping People Who Think It's Too Loud

Acknowledge that you hear them.

Whenever anyone complains about anything at your church, you first need to understand what they're saying, so slow down and listen to them. Ironically, if someone feels like he or she is not being heard when they are talking about volume, it will just upset them even more. Clearly acknowledge that you hear them when they voice their complaints.

Explain your purpose.

Always lead with the "why" of the volume. Any of the following may apply:

- Our church is about reaching those who aren't in church, and we're trying to create the kind of church that unchurched people love to attend.
- We are trying to reach those that aren't currently connected to our church.
- One of the things that we found is that a louder style of music helps draw in and engage people who might not otherwise come to church.

Don't fight people at the level of dBA levels or a scientific number but start with the "why". Explain it clearly to them and try to get them on board from a missional point of view.

Offer them a different place in the room.

Even in the most acoustically tuned rooms designed to create a uniform experience, there will be places that are louder than others. Try directing those who are bothered by the volume to a spot in the room that isn't as loud. Directing them away from the volume can be a practical service to these folks.

Let them know you have earplugs.

A good best practice for churches that are running decibels anywhere in the mid-90s or higher is to have earplugs readily available for people to use. Make sure that your guest services team, the team at the sound booth, and those greeting guests at the doors have some available for anyone who might find the service too loud. A good set of earplugs will reduce sound 10 to 20-decibels in any room, bringing it down to a comfortable range.



Reinforce that your team is working to make this a great experience for everyone.

Please don't throw your sound team under the bus. Those folks work hard on a regular basis to ensure a quality experience for everyone who attends. Go out of your way in these interactions to articulate that you support your team and that you want to work with them to make it great.

Finally, remember that it's a minority of people who are complaining about your audio.

Even if one or two people complain about the sound at every service, the reality is there are lots of others who didn't say anything at all. Consider what is happening to the interactions taking place in the room. If the volume in the room is driving down engagement, it's too loud. However, I suspect that in

most churches we don't run sound loud enough to increase the engagement.

Finally, [Revelation 4](#) paints this incredible picture of what it's going to be like to be before the throne. While we can't replicate all of that, we are trying to catch a glimpse of it by modeling our experience after what we see in the Bible.

I'd love to hear from you about what volume you run at your services and how you interact with the people in your church who think it's too loud. **Thanks for pressing on and for making the kind of experiences that people will engage with and be encouraged by.**

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An advertisement for Design Pickle. It features a black and white grid pattern in the background. The text "UNLIMITED GRAPHIC DESIGN HELP for only \$370 per month." is prominently displayed in green and black. Below this, it asks "Can someone say Amen?". At the bottom left, it says "LEARN MORE @ designpickle.com". On the right, there is a black hexagonal shape containing a white circle with a hand holding a pickle, and the text "DESIGN PICKLE" next to it.