

The Abyssinian Baptist Church



Eternally Rebuilt and Reborn

by Rich Williams

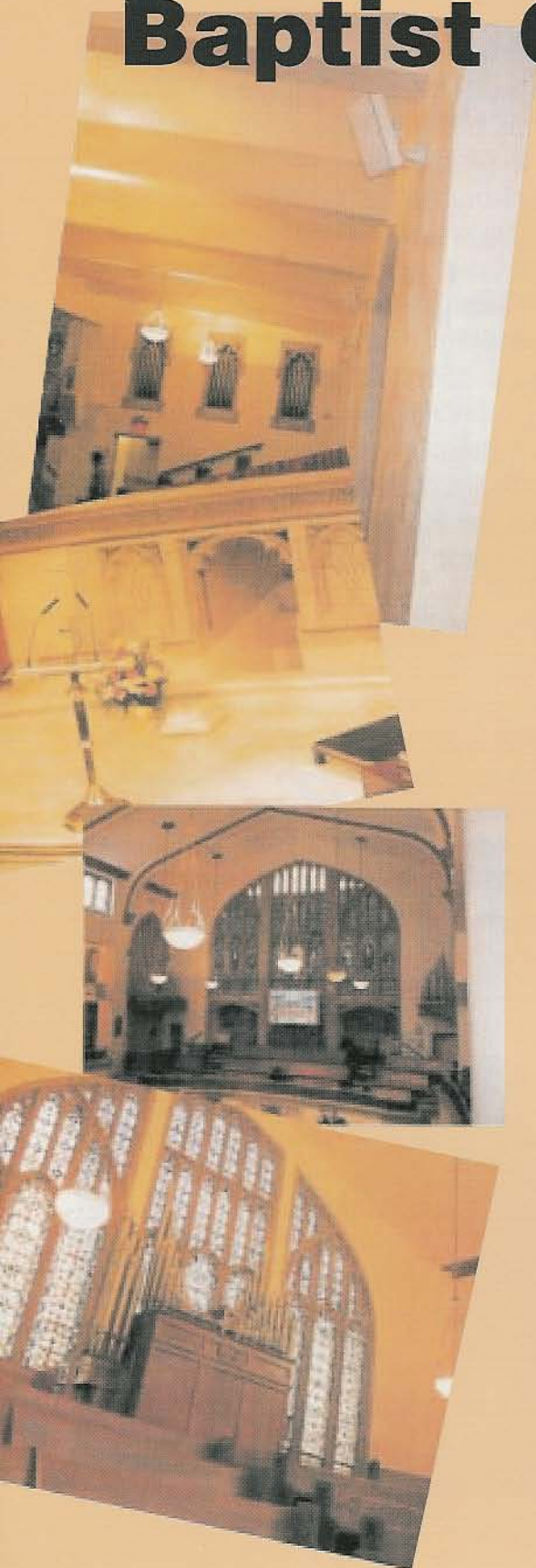
Almost 200-years ago, in 1808, African Americans, accompanied by a group of Ethiopian merchants, unwilling to accept racially-segregated seating in the First Baptist Church of New York City withdrew forever their membership and organized their own church. Few could have foreseen so far into the future that this revolt in the defense of personal and religious freedom and dignity would lead to the creation of the first, largest, and most gracious internationally known African-American Baptist Church and congregation. The name Abyssinian Baptist Church is inspired by the ancient name of the nation from where its Ethiopian founders had come, Abyssinia.

In its earliest years, Abyssinian Baptist Church services moved from their first house of worship on Worth Street to the Broadway Tabernacle and later to buildings on Thompson and Spring Streets before finding its permanent home in the spring of 1920.

Lots were purchased on 138th Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues and an extensive tithing campaign began. Ninety-five percent of the 3,000-member congregation pledged one-tenth of their weekly income to the new Church and community house. Ground was broken for the construction of the present Abyssinian edifice on April 9, 1922. At a cost of \$334,888.86, on June 17, 1923 the buildings were dedicated “to the worship of God and the service of humanity”.

Over its two-century history, respected reverends such as Adam Clayton Powell Sr., Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Reverend Dr. Samuel Proctor, Reverend Dr. Calvin Butts, and the many others before them, have challenged their congregation to continually be the “light” and the “salt of the earth”.

Since 1989, Rev. Dr. Calvin Butts continues to be very active in the struggle to eliminate racial discrimination and generate positive images and messages for the African American community. As president of the Organization of African-American clergy, Rev. Dr. Butts led the fight against police brutality in the City of New York, spearheaded boycotts against other





New York Institutions for racist policies and employment discrimination against African-American people, led a highly effective and nationally acclaimed campaign in eliminating negative billboard advertising in the Central Harlem and other New York City communities, and waged a campaign against negative lyrics and images in the recording industry, specifically rap music, targeting African-American youth. Rev. Dr. Butts is, above all, a man of God who continues to be invited to preach from the distinguished pulpits throughout the Tri-State Area, the Nation and the world.

When time began to take its toll on the Abyssinian Church edifice, after almost 75-years of service, the Rev. Dr. Butts and congregation once again faced down their adversary and interrupted with dignity and grace. In 1998, a massive construction undertaking began to breathe new life into the aging facility and in April 2002 the project reached completion.

Greg Graves donates his time as the Church Sound and Production Manager. He continues to work for a construction company that was directly involved in the rebuilding of the Abyssinian Baptist Church. He points out, "Stained glass windows and the installation of both brasshounds diffusers to improve the lighting of the Church and an air-conditioning system were added, as were walls, the roof, fixtures, etc. It was literally gutted and rebuilt from the inside out. The Church is ever growing and constantly expanding."

Monte's Brothers, established in 1966 by partners Steve Minozzi and Bob Pelepako, is one of the most well respected and highly specialized systems integration firms in the tri-state New

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York area. They service clients as far away as California and the Virgin Islands and ninety-five percent of the company's business is specializing in sound system integration for houses of worship for all the faiths. The company maintains a staff of twelve full-time employees at their new headquarters in Ardsley, New York; a mere 20-minute drive to Manhattan.

Providing pristine sound for the most acoustically challenging worship environments is a specialty at which the firm excels, as their client list can attest to: Catholic cathedrals include the St. James Cathedral Basilica, St. Agnes Cathedral and St. Joseph's Cathedral of New York, the St. John the Baptist Cathedral and St. Francis of Assisi Cathedral in New Jersey, the St. Louis King of France Cathedral in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Holy Cross Catholic Church in American Virgin Islands, on Christiansted Island.

The firm is also highly regarded in sound system integration on work for Synagogues, such as The Larchmont Temple, Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, Temple Beth Torah in Upper Nyack, Temple Beth Abraham in Tarrytown and the Barnert Temple in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey.

Monte Brothers was originally retained to consult and design the multi-purpose sound system as part of the two-year, multi-million dollar reno-



vation of the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Music and video play an incredibly important role in the Church, from its Music Ministry for all ages, to services that feature two choirs, a band, a three-camera video shoot, plasma flat screen monitors, and a voice lift audio system. The Church also has a production studio to produce and market its own inspirational music and tapes. Taking into account the many aspects of the facility's renovation, existing architecture, all forms of technology and the construction process, the overall renovation plans were completed in December 1999.

Monte Brothers began their work when overall heavy construction commenced in December 2000. "As a wall came down, we had to ready to be ready to do our part of the work and then get out of the way," states Bob. "The major obstacle was pulling all audio and video wire," states Bob, "And I cannot even guess how much wire was used in this job; we were pulling wire right up to the end."

The two-level Sanctuary, with a five manual, sixty seven rank Memorial organ built and installed in 1978 is located on the main floor and features a massive choir balcony over the chancellery. The Vestry, a floor below the sanctuary, features a stage and Chancellery for other services. The Vestry is located down a hallway from the Fellowship Hall, where other social, civic and community events are held. The rooms are all independent of each other with clear lines of sight between rooms.

Based upon the Church's need to use each room individually or to combine rooms for overflow events, Monte Brothers designed an audio routing backbone using Biamp System's VRAM Variable Resource Automixer. The VRAM is a completely tamper proof, 10-input / 2-output programmable automatic mixer, in which all mixer parameters are under microprocessor control and are easily programmed via BIAMP System Commander software.

System Commander provides RS-232 control from a PC of the VRAMs, VRAMEq (alternative unit featuring 3-band channel equalization, with variable mid-frequency), SPM723 Programmable Stereo Preamp/Mixer MSP11 Multi-Function System Processor, MSP22e Multi-Function

System Processor, and PMX84 Programmable 8x4 Matrix Switcher products. System Commander allows the user to recall presets, execute buttons, adjust levels, and even adjust the VRAMEq and SPM723 EQs. Each room communicates via Biamp Systems PMX84 Programmable Matrix Switcher, which provides gated and ungated audio feeds to the other rooms.

One Biamp Systems' VRAM is used in the Sanctuary, which is tied to the VRAMs installed in the Vestry and Fellowship Hall by Biamp System Commander Software. Systems control is from one TEKvisions touch screen installed in the main audio video control room, adjacent to the Vestry, and the second touch screen located in the balcony mixing console area.

The Sanctuary's unique FOH (front-of-house) system dual-purpose voice lift sound system, is a tried-and true design that Monte Brothers has used with great success in many other well-known, yet acoustically challenging houses-of-worship.

The Sanctuary's FOH stereo music loudspeaker system consists of a pair of Crown CT410 amplifiers powering Renkus-Heinz SR7-6 two-way loudspeakers, electronically crossed-over by using Biamp Systems MSP22e Multi-Function System Processor. No additional subwoofer support is required since the SR7-6s provide an ample and accurate low-end response for the dynamic musical performance that includes a full band and two choirs. The voice lift loudspeaker system consists of twenty-two CAMM DT2X loudspeakers that are distributed along the outside walls of the facility and powered by Crown CT1200 and CP660 power amps. Additionally, two Renkus-Heinz TRC-32 under balcony fill loudspeakers pull double duty as music support for the FOH system and voice lift system support.

Steve Minozzi states, "The unique thing about this installation, and we do it quite often, is we blend the Hi-Q Renkus-Heinz FOH system with the Low-Q voice lift CAMM speaker system. They operate simultaneously and complement each other in the same space. This kind of sound system you see very rarely, if ever."

A Mackie SR32-4VLZ Pro analog mixer on the FOH system is used for music mixing for the

liturgy and concerts. The signal from the console feeds into the VRAM, which is controlled by the TEKVisions touch screen for routing to the other locations throughout the Church.

The Vestry and the Fellowship Hall both feature the same voice lift loudspeaker system with the VRAM handling all signal routing and voice lift signal separation between the Renkus-Heinz loudspeaker system and the CAMM voice lift systems. Custom-made control panels installed in the Vestry and Fellowship Hall limit VRAM presets to four main system settings. For video presentations, the video's audio is routed to the FOH Renkus-Heinz loudspeakers.

The Biamp VRAM, MSP22e signal processing and Crown amps are located in the control room. "Short of the mixing console, room control panels and loudspeakers," Steve Minozzi states, "It's a very clean installation and there is no gear outside of the control room."

Minozzi also says, "With the Biamp Systems' electronics, we've given the client the ability to have all the components talk to each other through the Biamp Systems System Commander software. Everything in the facility is accessible from any touch screen anywhere in the building. From the touch screen in the balcony the engineer can reciprocally control or combine any or all of the three locations. As an example, from the sanctuary's touch screen, he can set up the vestry for an event that could be taking place there in 20-minutes, then set-up functions for the fellowship hall, while the sanctuary service is taking place, all without interrupting the service."

Steve adds, "All presets are saved so if a device ever fails, we can download those settings to another device and simply replace all of system functions."

As an additional fail safe, Monte Brothers installed a PC into the sound system in case they ever needed to dial in and manipulate the system. Steve points out, "If the clients should ever run into some serious problems, we can update software from anywhere in a matter of minutes."

Since the Reverend required low-profile microphones, Monte Brothers chose Audio-Technica 915QMR-LMX mics along with the Audio-Technica MX351 Smart Mixer. Depending

upon the Reverend's on-stage position, each microphone tracks others with millisecond reaction time. Steve adds, "This microphone configuration provides much greater gain before feedback as well."

Audio-Technica AT873 Hyper-cardioid and ATM61 mics are used as the primary vocal mics for the soloists. AT935H overhead mics are used over the choir area. Additionally, Steve points out, "An AT935QMR/mix low bar shotgun microphone is used off the balcony rails to mic the choir from the front in order to give it more dimension in the sound system. Wireless mics are ATW R73 wireless receiver and ATW 830 Lavalier wireless headset mic systems."

A TELEX wireless intercom system for communications between the three video camera operators and the engineers are housed in the control room.

Three floor boxes are installed in the stage with the central box outfitted for all of the band and music XLR inputs, and the other two boxes are outfitted for the voice lift mics that are controlled for the VRAM.

The end result? Minozzi reports, "The Church wanted a user-friendly, efficient, transparent, high fidelity audio system capable of effortless audio recordings and processing. We like to work from a set of tried-and-true audio tools, with a intuitive user interface at the system's head-end and a reliable backbone that combine seamlessly to deliver pristine music. The recently completed major renovation is designed to carry the congregation into the next 100 years. We're pleased that our audio system design is a part of that journey."

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