

Churches may be affected by FCC change on wireless microphone frequencies: Following shift to all-digital television signals

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When the switch to all-digital television signals was completed nationwide in mid-June amid great fanfare, many churches were unaware that their wireless microphone systems could be affected.

The Federal Communications Commission auctioned off the lower half of the 700-megahertz band to several telecommunications companies and reserved the upper half of that spectrum for law enforcement, fire and safety operations and municipalities. Many of the sound systems in houses of worship operate in that 700-megahertz band.

So what will be the impact on congregations?

“That’s going to vary widely [according to] where the church is located,” said Rex Campbell, media-services manager for the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Churches in rural areas may not notice any problem, he said.

“In the more urban areas, it’s a little different. The more crowded the airwaves are, the more likely there will be interference,” he explained.

Even churches in cities may not see an immediate difference, Campbell said, because it will take a while for the telecommunications companies to make use of the bandwidth they have purchased.

Beyond the question of interference, some churches have wrestled with issues of legality. Experts such as Tim Hendrix, a senior accounts manager at Ford Audio Video in Dallas, insist that it technically became illegal June 12 to use a sound system that falls into the 700-megahertz range.

But finding a definitive answer from the FCC—either by wading through regulations on the agency’s Web site or by phoning to ask—can be problematic.

Hendrix noted that it technically has been illegal for several years to operate any wireless microphone system without a license from the FCC, but the market exploded so quickly that it exceeded the government’s ability to enforce its regulations.

“I don’t know how the FCC would ever enforce it, but eventually if someone continues to use a wireless mike in that 700-megahertz range, they will get nothing but static,” Hendrix said. But he added that no one knows when that interference may begin.

He agreed that churches in urban areas may feel the effects first. Wireless microphone manufacturers no longer sell systems in the affected range, Hendrix said. Most are offering rebates to churches that want to trade their old systems in for new ones in a different range, though the rebate may be small.

That gave Pastor Jerry Raines of Hampton Road Baptist Church in DeSoto, Texas, an idea. When he and a team of missionaries are on a mission trip to Brazil this summer, they will donate the church’s old system to churches there.

“These mikes are still good anywhere else in the world,” Raines explained. The microphones could be given to local missionaries who could dispense them to churches that would use them. *-Associated Baptist Press*