Audio-Visuals and Visible Words

Many congregations seeking to renew their worship areturning to new projection technologies in an effort to enhance proclamation and deepen participation. The reason for such developments is compelling: we live in a visual culture, while often our worship remains cerebral, detached, boring. One doesn't have to read Marshall McLuhan ("The Medium is the Message") to appreciate the power of the image in contemporary culture. The implications for worship are challenging, exciting, and worthy of reflection.

Worship and Technology
Such challenges are not new. Liturgical history is full of examples. Gothic architecture shaped the mystical spirituality of medieval liturgy. Copiers made bulletins with printed prayers the norm in the United Church. However, most traditions first resisted the use of instrumental accompaniment in worship on two grounds: 1. It was a sell-out to the idolatrous and decadent values of the surrounding culture; 2. It made worshippers passive, too dependent on the instruments, and undermined congregational participation.

Culture and Counter-Culture
Worship has always had a complex relationship with culture. We beg, borrow, and steal in order to get our message across. However, to remain true to the Gospel, our worship also needs a counter-cultural edge, a capacity to critique problematic symbols, values, and practices. We are in the world, but not of it. To paraphrase Romans 12:2, we are called to transform, not conform. This tension continues to be at the heart of every encounter between worship and technology.

Visible Words
Long before the advent of audio-visual technology, Augustine defined a sacrament as a "Visible Word." Not a bad definition for worship! All worship is meant to be sacramental, incarnational, embodied. Worship needs to be a multi-media event, involving all the senses and aspects of bodily presence – sight, sound, smell, voice, touch, movement, gesture, mind, heart, thoughts, emotions, stillness, action. Try listing all such categories and ask, "How are these engaged in our worship?"

Beyond "Traditional" and "Contemporary"
Such questions apply equally to "traditional" and "contemporary" styles of worship. For example, a multi-page order of service crammed with didactic prayers, and a PowerPoint screen with countless slides of repetitive lyrics each share a common flaw: the tyranny of text. In the first case, authentic struggle by the community to discern God's will is replaced by reading lists of individual sins or needs – "shopping with our eyes closed," one person has called it. In the second, printed words are simply transferred to the screen, and an opportunity for a deeper visual experience is missed. Imagine, for example, singing, "Lord, listen to your children praying..." to classic and contemporary images of that for which we pray. Prayer is the language of the heart, and our eyes are windows to the soul. We all long for worship which is a rich experience of visual art, musical diversity, sensory engagement, and embodied witness – an encounter with the Incarnate Visible Word.

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