THE USE OF VISUAL MEDIA TECHNOLOGY IN LITURGICAL WORSHIP

Andrew Ruddell, 2004

1. Introduction

In the past few years there has been considerable increase in the use of 'high-tech' visual media technology (VMT) in worship. This has been especially popular in Pentecostal and other reformed non-liturgical worship styles which have embraced the more aggressive methods of the marketing and advertising industry to reach the modern culture. It is not uncommon for churches to be spending from $20,000 to $1,000,000 on VMT.[1] Before lunging into expensive outlays, Quentin Schultze[2] urges churches to question the function and effectiveness of VMT.[3]

'Is it fitting? Is it fitting to project announcements about chili suppers while people are gathering in the sanctuary for worship? Is it fitting to put a screen over the cross at the front of the sanctuary? … Is it fitting to project sermon notes that change quickly or are so elaborately illustrated that they call attention to themselves? … Churches that spent more than $2 million on video and slide projection systems but could have done nearly as well with overhead projectors' (Schultze, 2004a).

We also need to examine why people are attracted by VMT and what it achieves within liturgical worship. Forty years ago Jacques Ellul identified our narcissistic predisposition towards the empowering effect of technology when he wrote:

> In the modern world, the most dangerous form of determinism is the technological phenomenon. It is not a question of getting rid of it, but, by an act of freedom, of transcending it. … The first step in the quest, the first act of freedom, is to become aware of the necessity (Ellull,1964:xxxiii).

VMT is a contentious issue in many churches. It brings with it both challenges and opportunities for worship, as well as blessings and problems. While VMT has become very popular in many Pentecostal type churches, it has a more limited use in liturgical worship (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, etc.) which is focused on Word and Sacrament, where visual natural elements (bread, wine and water) are consecrated as Christ's body and blood for the people of God by the Word of God. Along with the confession and absolution of sin, prayer, reading and preaching; this utilizes the richness of relational dialogue. While this dependence of human utterance may come lacking in 'wise and persuasive words' and with the inherent risks associated with human speech; it is guided by rather deliberate and precisely spoken words of Scripture through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As with the preaching of the Word, both VMT and its content must also be subject to exegesis to determine its nature, function and structure, as well as truth, logic and consistency (Groothuis 2000). Because visual formats are often perceived as a medium, this aspect is largely ignored. Through critical analysis one can assess what the medium is capable of and fails to do. Too easily we can become 'habituated to a particular form of communication, and our mentalities and sensibilities will bear its mark.' In fact technology with its emphasis on the rational and artificial can be so efficient that our fallen human nature develops a dualism that sees the natural (tradition, spirituality, or intuition) as

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[1] This not only includes a basic projector and speaker system, but also theatrical lighting system, huge sound boards and an assortment of wireless microphones and video cameras (See web article: 'Modern technology spreads old message', by Andrea Uhde. The Cincinnati Enquirer, Sunday, June 8, 2003).

[2] Quentin Schulzte is professor of Communication at Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (Calvin College, Michigan). He has just written a very good book on the wise use of technology in liturgical worship (Schulzte 2004b).

[3] See similar comments in unpublished manuscripts by:
Pr Adam Cooper (Data Projection: Principles for its use in public worship, 4 Sept 2003), and
Prs Nuske and Renner (Technologies and their impact on worship, 15 Feb 2000).

being redundant. Citing Psalm 115:4-8 McLuhan (1964:45) argues that 'we become what we behold.' We fail to see that the 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan 1964:7-21).

The use of the photographic medium to provide: entertainment, 'indisputable evidence' (from horse racing to crime), impact, immediacy, etc. has significantly expanded our 'reality awareness.' However, it is precisely these attributes that make it a persuasive approach to communication malpractice. Matthew King[4] has described how photographs are often used to substantiate the cultural lies that entrap us. He describes how Curtis' photographic portrayals of how the American Indian was supposed to look, did not indicate their true position.

2.   Communicating a specific message: The spoken and proclaimed Word versus the visual

While optical illusions or visual paradoxes abound, less examples exist for the spoken message. Although some may see non-visual forms of communication such as speech as inhibiting imagination, it can have a distinct advantage in passing on specific information with greater clarity. Reading written symbols or letters can be the most selective and abstract form of communication. However, because abstract reason requires effort, our fallen nature takes possession of it and is reticent to part with it (claiming it as our own), especially if we are isolated from (the *persona* of) the writer. By possessing and dwelling on the message, the reader being isolated from the validation that occurs in conversation, is free to further abstract as they desire. The spoken word provides the most effective, immediate and relational[5] means by which a specific personal message can be conveyed, simply comprehended and it is validated between conversing people. The spoken word is a particularly active form of communication and its disclosure of authenticity makes it particularly suitable for lie detector tests. 'Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks' (Matt. 12:34; see also LW 51:83).[6] Where reading is purely cognitive at first, speaking is more psychological and is an act of the whole body/being.

Our conversation becomes dysfunctional when we ramble on with matters central to us rather than listening to the other person. Our egocentric verbalising is an impediment to good communication and we strive for better ways to coax others to listen to ourselves. Technology often gives us that edge but in the process we lose the ability to listen and relate.

Through the power of visual media, the advertising industry has capitalized on the irrational aspects of human desire, fear and fantasy to create 'contrived realism' rationally abstracted to achieve its own specific goals. Its demand for the church to engage in 'cutting edge' technology feeds a lucrative industry. The web article 'Video for Worship' by Tom Patrick McAuliffe is most telling, when he writes: 'The question is: How do churches get people into the pews so they'll stay there, absorb the message, and ultimately give their dollars to the church?'[7]

3.   Recent research regarding the use of VMT in worship

Research by Koster (2003 cited in Schultz 2004b:18,105) found that nearly 60% of churches in the Michigan region use some form of VMT, which appears to be part of a rising trend (25% in 1998 to somewhere over 50% in 2003). The dominant formats were computer and video technology. The least likely to use VMT in any form are the Orthodox churches (showing a total rejection); next is the Roman Catholic Church. However, over half the Evangelical and mainline Protestant churches use

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[4] From the 2003 Massey Lecture 'You're Not the Indian I Had in Mind' by Matthew King.

[5] i.e carrying conviction, enthusiasm, certitude, authenticity as well as their opposites.

[6] Luther writes: Sermon on Gospel Jn1:1-14 The word he speaks within himself and which remains within him, is never separated from him. … however his word is not merely an exhalation or a noise, but it carries with it the whole essence of the divine nature … divine nature is formed to accompany the image and it becomes the very image itself. …
Human speech also indicates something about this; for through it the heart of man can be known. … This is so because the intention of the heart follows the word and from the word, the heart is known as if it were in the word. … for Christ says: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" [Matt. 12:34]. (LW 51:83)

[7] From the following website: http://videosystems.primediabusiness.com/ar/video_video_worship/

some form of VMT. Surprisingly, some will even frequently use projectors as a stand-alone 'worship leader.'

The greatest motivating factor was contemporary relevance (84%). Strong secondary motivations were outreach to youth (77%) and evangelism (65%); reducing print materials (66%); exploration of artistic media (60%); and, using the talents of members skilled in VMT (59-43%). Those churches who reject VMT generally cite tradition or budget as the factors, not theological issues or internal politics. Those who do integrate VMT do so for reasons of contemporary relevance and evangelical outreach. It is apparent here that operating at a subtle level is an ever-increasing dependence on technology for relevance and meaning in our modern culture.

It needs to be noted that factors such as: use of skills of the congregation, exploration of artistic media, and keeping up with neighboring churches are not inherently dependent on biblical worship and can tend to be in opposition to it. It is especially interesting that many of the reformed churches which started off with plain walls and furnishings and denying the real presence have gone down the road of VMT. The following words of Luther are prophetic:

> But no one paid attention to God's revelation of Himself, both in His Word and in visible signs. And I fear that those times will return. ... And now, when Christ could no longer be perceived personally and physically, He bequeathed to us His Word and Sacraments, which we can perceive with our five senses. But despite this we ignore it and invent something apart from it, as the monks did, in which one neither sees nor feels anything that God commanded.
> (LW 22:421)

The liturgical churches which have a strong emphasis on the spoken word and real presence, and in some cases, colourful vestments, icons and stained glass windows, have shown little interest or need for VMT. It is also noted that much of the debate that previously applied to vestments and icons also applies to the use of VMT. Neither can be used to obtain God's grace, but listening to God's spoken word and responding to it enables us to thank with our entire being.[8]

Research by Schultze (2004a, 2004b:53) found that projection technologies don't contribute significantly to attracting youth or keeping them involved in a congregation's worship. While services centered on visual media can: 'generate buzz and entice youth, but in the long run youth tend to be the biggest critics of adults' attempts to make worship relevant. Their operative description of high-tech worship is *cheesy*, partly because they know the production values can't compete with popular movies and video games.'

4. The benefit of the Word in describing 'things not seen'

We need to develop those skills that will make us more sensitive to hearing the Word of God and the clear message that he cares for us. This requires a strong emphasis on the spoken and written word and the enacted word in baptism and the Lord's Supper. While visual media may enhance this, it can never replace it.

Clear images need to be chosen and evaluated, and should not give a message which is in opposition to scripture. The unclear or contrived message of art and other visual media may be a distinct disadvantage.

Due to the invisibility of eternal things, visual media gives only a partial view of reality limited to the physical and temporal. With the eye we may see only what is visible, but the Gospel is God's wisdom,

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[8] Luther writes: 'Not that I reject entirely external adornment; but it should not be called a divine worship, much less should it hinder or obscure this one true worship. But, if a person desires to be of service, he should demand and promote the worship of thanksgiving or he will be condemned together with all other works and merits with which one desires to win or to purchase God's grace. ... If I cannot or must not preach, I still want to listen; whoever listens also assists in thanking and honouring God, since, where there are no listeners, there can be no preacher. If I cannot listen, I nevertheless want to be among the listeners; at least I want to be present there, with my body and its members, where God is praised and glorified.' (LW 38:108-109)

secret and hidden (1 Cor 2:7-10). 'What can be seen is only temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal' (2 Cor 4:17-18). 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb 11:1). The Word was revealed to the apostles whose testimony is passed on so that we may be saved (1 Jn 1:1-3, 4:14). The use of VMT limits its theological function and care should be taken not to over-state in worship by separating it from scripture.

When the congregation speaks, prays or sings God's Word together as in the divine liturgy, it glorifies God with one heart and one mouth (Rom 15:6). United through the spoken or sung Word, the congregation is less likely to be distracted by alien motives of media that are autonomous to simplicity and frugality, humanness and warmth (Bonhoeffer 1998:43-48). If media can enhance worship then it should be used. The worst fear with technology in worship is that something of the sacred will be lost to what is secular and artificial.

Liturgy is intrinsically direct, participatory and communal; whereas electronic and computer technology is automated, highly specialized and individual. It consists of the faithful gathering in one location at the same time to hear and proclaim, to confess and be absolved, sing and praise, to eat and drink the holy sacrament. Therefore, methods need to be explored which evaluate and reduce the propensity to isolate or distance people within that community; turning celebration into entertainment, sacred space into clutter, natural lighting and art forms into the artificial, and the living Word simply a source of information or 'dot-points'.

5. The advantages and disadvantages of Visual Media in Worship

Crowley (2004) lists how VMT can function in worship.
- To convey information such as welcome messages, announcements, theme or scripture of the day and direction for liturgical action.
- To encourage participation in worship; lyrics, prayers, scripture, sermon points, focus for communal contemplation.
- To enrich communications through: textual reinforcement, illustration and use of maps and diagrams, metaphor, magnification of actions, connection to/with another location.
- To provide beauty, liturgical and/or media aesthetics, open up an interactive 'space' for discovery

In terms of liturgical worship where considerable emphasis is already given to the beauty of natural objects, many of the functions described by Crowley (2004) are already being undertaken by existing means and do not significantly enhance our worship above what God has commanded us to do. Although some things can be done better (e.g. 'Power-point' can be more aesthetic than the standard overhead projector transparencies). The liturgy can be projected in the same manner as lyrics and this can reduce printing costs of service orders. At a time when hymnody is becoming less popular, conveying it through visual media is a means by which it can be reinvigorated. The quality of hymnody sets a new standard for other songs that are being used; as well as inspiration and example for new ones being written.

About 8 % of men and 0.5 % of women have some form of colour blindness. This equates to about 1 in 12 of those participating in worship. Due to the emphasis of colour graphics with VMT, it is essential that the choice of colours is carefully considered, especially where colour codes or colour contrasts are used to express information. Other factors that can affect colour perception include tumors, aneurysms, glaucoma, and other diseases.[9]

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[9] While most colour-blind people can see black and white accurately, and all shades of yellow and blue (even the dimmer shades of yellow such as gold and olive), about 99% will have trouble distinguishing between red and green. When they look at green text on a yellow background, both will appear yellow and the text is invisible.
Contrast is important and by keeping colours bright, it is easier to distinguish between them. Problems are created by using various shades of one colour. Because turquoise contains some green, shades of turquoise all appear quite light. By placing colours against an appropriate background, even less-safe colours can be made more visible. Because red often appears as green it can be used against white. Because red and green make yellow, green objects appear yellow and therefore green is best used against black, turquoise against black, and magenta against black (the magenta tends to appear lighter).

An important problem is that the use of such technology, including the screen, can be counter-productive to enhancing worship when it impairs liturgical movement, obscures or diminishes primary liturgical actions (Lord's supper, baptism, preaching) or unfavorably affects the worship space. Many liturgical churches are not architecturally designed for the use of VMT and considerable effort may be required to accommodate it. Many church buildings are designed to take advantage of letting in the morning sunshine. This will make projection difficult, and can be blocked out (e.g. exterior shade cloth) although a natural asset is lost.

As described previously it is better if the congregation listens to the words of the Pastor than visually pre-empting them with the screen. This creates disengagement between the Pastor and congregation. Therefore only the responses need to be displayed. The fact that the Pastor and congregation are using different cues for their responses creates both a visual and cognitive separation that needs to be watched. For simple responses such as in the Blessing it is not necessary to have it written on the screen. This way the congregation is encouraged to memorize aspects of the liturgy and it becomes internalized (as we do with the Easter response 'He is risen, indeed'; and also the Lord's prayer and creed). Though, one will need to maintain that because something isn't written on the screen it is not important.

At Good Shepherd Lutheran Church (Toowoomba), Pr Paul Smith uses VMT solely for the liturgy and lyrics, not advertising[10]; there is no 'flashy Jesus, any dangly colours or impressive backgrounds … the bottom line is: if it is on the screen, you could find it in either the bulletin or hymnbook … words on the screen only include the very necessary rubrics (such as "offering is received")' (pers. comm.). Furthermore, visual technology can be useful in assisting and integrating the hearing and visually impaired[11] as well as parent's looking after children and people with disabilities such as the elderly with arthritic hands.

VMT can be of significant benefit in specific worship applications and other non-liturgical activities which require the transmission of information, such as bible education and catechesis.[12]

Other advantages
- No need for visitors to feel uncomfortable because they know where they are in the service order.
- Visual affects have the advantage of being able to readily provide thematic images and colours that are applicable to the liturgical season; and specific feasts.
- The volume of singing is likely to be greater when people are singing while looking ahead at the projection image rather than face down into a book.
- The technology enables video, movie clips and song clips to be used in worship. However, if these are used without discretion then they become a disadvantage.

Other disadvantages
- Effort needs to be made that congregational participation is enhanced rather than reduced.
- VMT and associated computer equipment is expensive and becomes obsolete in several years requiring upgrade. Funding is also required for software upgrades, light bulb replacement (several hundred dollars), cables, etc.
- Some specialized training and skill is required for the effective use of the technology and media.

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[10] This includes before and after the service.

[11] At Good Shepherd LC, Pr Paul Smith uses a font size of 72 with 24 characters spaced in seven lines for each of the two screens.

[12] In his book 'The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint' Tufte (2003) asserts that 'PowerPoint' software when not used properly encourages a certain style of presenting arguments and information that obfuscates complexities. See review by M. Stumpf in 'Science' 30 Jan 2004, Vol. 33:630.

- Visual media technology can be quite selective with regards to the targeted audience. Although it may be appealing to modern western culture it has had an opposite effect on some of our worshiping Sudanese communities. This is usually due to the lack of ritual and the frequent changing of the service order. Because no single outline of the service order is supplied they can not anticipate what is next in the service. This may be alleviated by providing another screen to provide the outline or it may be included as an inset on the existing projection.
- The effective use of media and technology often calls for particular skills and training.
- Stringent copyright regulations apply making use of lyrics and images costly.
- VMT equipment is expensive and prone to be stolen. It requires extra security.
- Because technology means that we can do more and bigger things in a shorter amount of time; it has a reciprocating effect when the technology fails to work. One must be prepared for this. Power black-outs are a possibility. An alternative printed service order needs to be prepared and on standby. Also A spare bulb needs to be accessible.

6. Conclusion

Much has been written on how technology has infiltrated our society (eg Postman 1985; Ellul 1990), to the extent that only who or what appears on TV is important. Although it may be useful to speak the language of the culture we also need to be aware that technology brings with it perceptions that are more elusive to much traditional thinking. When worship is made to conform to technological values, confusion and disorder occurs. Particularly within the church, VMT adds a new level of judgement to discern real needs and false values. The task of this paper has been to draw attention to these aspects.

Worship brings a community together in confessing sins, praising God, receiving the Lord's Supper, prayer, listening to the Word read and preached, etc. The mission of the church is the clear word that God cares for people. Because the spoken word is more selective in the message conveyed than the imagery emphasised with VMT it can do this very well. With printed media we become more detached from each other and this even more so with images; which even if beautiful, have the disadvantage of a less precise message.

Low-tech worship is counter-cultural and needs to be re-assessed, for the benefits of simplicity, low cost and natural elements that VMT can obscure. While VMT can be of benefit in the display of liturgy, hymns and other spiritual songs; it needs to be used with discretion.

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