

## Why Technology in Worship?

One of the most divisive, and distracting, issues within many communities of faith is what has come to be known as "the worship wars". Battles can centre around music styles, volume, styles of leadership, structure of liturgy and, perhaps the most recent battle-front, the use of technology (or not) in worship. While this page is primarily devoted to providing resources for multimedia in worship, it is important to remember that anything we might use, prepare, say, sing or do can only ever be a tool to enable those gathered to encounter a glimpse of the majesty and splendor of the God of Creation.

I once heard someone suggest that the screen and data projector had become the stained-glass windows of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Stained-glass windows were one means of telling the stories of God at work with His people in ways that largely illiterate people could begin to understand. Of course, they were art as well and all of us would be able to tell of "good" and "bad" windows we have encountered. (For those of you who enjoy a laugh, the *Vicar of Dibley* episode, "The Window and the Weather" is a wonderful account of stained-glass windows and church councils!).

So, if our screens are the stained-glass windows of the new millennium, our screen content should both tell a story and be "good art". Quentin J. Schultz writes:

Presentation technologies can shape worship for both good and bad. The key in using presentational technologies wisely is employing them well in a service of worthy purposes, not for their own ends. We should not use technology for the sake of technology but in support of commendable worship.<sup>1</sup>

I believe that multimedia must be more than a new way of projecting words or images onto a screen. Our use of technology must be driven and informed by our liturgy and should only ever add to what Schultze describes as:

...authentic, meaningful and God-glorifying worship...<sup>2</sup>

One of my favourite multimedia websites is *The Work of the People*. On their website ([www.theworkofthepeople.com](http://www.theworkofthepeople.com)) they outline their purpose in the following way:

**Lit.ur.gy. noun. pl. liturgies.** From the Greek word λειτουργία, (transliterated, "leitourgia") meaning "the work of the people." Liturgy may refer to, or include, elaborate formal rituals or simple daily activity. Liturgy unites the Christian Church; the Church comes together around liturgy to express its nature as a faithful and distinct people. Film in particular is one form of an emerging visual liturgy. Media has the ability to unite the Church, to tell stories shared by the Church, to mark the Church as distinct. The Church's task is to create and share in liturgy. This is the work of the people.

Every community of faith is liturgical - from the "highest" to the "lowest" of churches. Unfortunately, like so many terms, "liturgical" has been used pejoratively to somehow imply a lack of the presence of the Holy Spirit in worship. Failing to understand that without liturgy there is no work of the people and, therefore, no life for the people in worship is to reduce our times of corporate worship to little more than a show, at best, or a dirge, at worst. No amount of clever technology will ever substitute for a genuine encounter with the living God, but nor will doing things the way we always have mean that we will retain the passion of those who went before us.

I believe that the gathered community of God's people at worship is one of the most significant missional "tools" available to the church. How our liturgies – in their varied forms and expressions - express our adoration of God and how they enable people of all ages to journey into a deeper understanding of, and relationship with, Jesus Christ is at the heart of why we must be *creatively discerning* in the way that we use multimedia and multi-sensory "technologies" in leading the people of God in the "work" that is worship.

In addition, we must also be "culturally aware" in the way we introduce and use technology in worship. Is our "art" relevant to those we are seeking to reach? Are we using appropriate images and words to allow connection? This is, and always has been, the first task of the missionary – and make no mistake, we are missionaries to a "strange" culture. This is, and always has been, the first task of the missionary – and, make no mistake, we are missionaries to a "strange culture".

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<sup>1</sup> High-Tech Worship?, Quentin J. Schultz, 2004 Baker Books, Grand Rapids. p.13

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p.14

Is this a reason to reject technology? I believe that the church has always used multimedia and multi-sensory “technologies” to help people “see” the Kingdom of God. It may not be stretching too far to suggest that many of the events of the Old Testament capture the senses of those encountering the presence and activity of God – think burning bushes, talking donkeys (not Shreck!), snakes and staffs, water spilling from rocks. In the New Testament we find Jesus drawing in the sand, placing mud (made from dirt mixed with saliva) on a man’s eyes, painting pictures (parables) with words but referencing them to the sights and sounds about him

Throughout the historical development of the Church new technologies, such as the printing press, have been embraced as a means to proclaim the word of God in ways that would be accessible to more and more people. As I’ve already said, stained-glass windows used the technology of the day to illustrate Biblical truths. In more recent times radio, television, film (and the derivative video and DVD) and the internet have been embraced – some would claim redeemed!

I am a believer in the use of technology to enhance worship – there is not one church that I know of that does not use some form of technology (think about it). What I do not believe is that the use of the latest technology will be the cure-all to declining congregations and bored church attenders (I do not believe that there can be bored worshippers). The church needs to rediscover our creative discernment in what we do when we gather for worship. We need to reclaim and celebrate a commitment to excellent worship. We must re-imagine what liturgy can be. We need to use every available tool to do that. But **we must never** believe that those tools will replace, or excuse, a lack of passion and vision and preparation. Quentin J. Schultze adapts Philippians 4:8 to emphasise this point:

1. Is it beautiful?
2. Is it lovely?
3. Is it true?
4. Is it right and fitting?
5. Is it of excellent quality?
6. Is it worthy of being part of our praise of God?<sup>3</sup>

So, let’s explore technology in worship. But let us never become so infatuated with technology that we lose our “first love” for the Creator of all good things, the giver of good gifts and the One in whose Name worship becomes truly life-changing.

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<sup>3</sup> ibid, p.37