

Building Interpretive Communities

There are many fears associated with introducing a screen and projected imagery into worship. I find these fears are based on often unexamined assumptions about the relationship between message and audience.

The church is all about communication. The first verses of the Bible tell the story of God's communication with the primordial chaos: "the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep...and God said, 'Let there be light; and there was light.'" In those early verses from the book of Genesis (1:2-3) we find a communicator (God), a message ("Let there be light."), an audience ("the face of the deep"), and a response ("and there was light...").

"Sustained use of media in worship requires the recruitment, training (liturgical, scriptural, technical, and aesthetic), and ongoing spiritual formation of many people, most of whom may be volunteers." Eileen Crowley

Jesus teaches his disciples and the gathering crowds with parables, with stories. He communicates a message to an audience and asks response of them. The early churches, and every subsequent generation of Christians, have used various means of communication to tell others the stories of faith and to invite them into a relationship with the love of God in Jesus Christ. The stories, doctrines, traditions, and teachings were shared through oral communication, written letters and sermons, manuscripts "illuminated" with hand-painted illustrations of the text on the page, mass-produced Bibles and pamphlets, visual arts of sculpture, painting, fresco, mosaic, etching, and photography, musical arts of lyric, melody, and harmony, and later, motion pictures and animated stories.

Modern communication theory tries to ana-

lyze the various parts of communication, primarily message-sending (the message itself, the sender or communicator, the means of communicating [oral, print, electronic]) and message receiving (the audience, their understanding of the sent message, and their response to the message).

Drawing on the work of Paul Soukup, S.J. in his article, "Understanding Audience Understanding", I want to help us become aware of some of the assumptions people within our congregations may be making about communication process when screens and visuals are introduced into worship.

The abstract of Soukup's article defines our territory:

"On the one hand, the 'powerful message' construct paints the audience as passive recipients of the meaning presented in the media. On the other hand, the 'active audience' construct places most interpretive power in the audience...A middle position sees audience understanding emerge from an interaction between messages and audience members."

POWERFUL MESSAGE THEORY

This view of media was developed in the 1920's as mass media were growing in power and it was understood that the audience was merely a passive recipient of these persuasive and effective messages. The assumption was that "if the message was sent and the audience exposed to it, it would have the intended effect." Audiences were understood to be passive, and in some ways, powerless under the effect of a strong "bombardment" of messages. If the communicator carefully constructs the message, it was thought the audience would automatically receive it and understand it entirely.

There is certainly some truth to the idea that

there are “powerful messages” that have an engaging, gripping, attention-holding quality to them. Many have concerns about sophisticated, immersive, professional-quality messages that create powerful responses in audiences, particularly unsophisticated audiences such as children or those who choose to be ignorant or divisive in their view of life. Powerful media can display violent, militaristic, racist, consumerist, and sexist programming in a way that is embraced, imitated, and accepted by audiences. These messages and those who communicate them are part of the content of life, and intended and unintended audiences will want to be prepared to address them. This is an aspect of the “Powerful Audience Theory” of communication.

POWERFUL AUDIENCE THEORY

The other pole of this way of understanding the communication process sees the audience as having the most power, and this was based on a view that the audience selects the messages it will receive, and will create the meaning of the programs “based on their experience rather than on the presented meaning of the media source.” This view of the audience began in the 1970’s and continues to this day with the increasing popularity of audience generated programming on websites such as YouTube, and the decreasing market share of the ABC/NBC/CBS television networks.

Powerful audiences have the remote in their hands, ready to change channels frequently and quickly if the programming or message doesn’t suit their interests or needs. Intelligent audiences know they have the freedom to expose themselves or not to various communicators and their messages. Audiences know they have “psychic shields” that have sensitized them to messages they wish not to experience (such as pictures of starving people, or blatantly sexist lyrics in a song, or violence in any form) and can “turn off” the messenger and the message with a change of channel or a mental shield. The rise and

fall of various programs and personalities shows how audience tastes and interests change quickly, always forcing programmers to adjust their messages and means of communication.

“The slide lecture, with its integration of word and picture, is an ideal format for engaging students who are citizens of the media age.” Camille Paglia

MESSAGES IN WORSHIP AND PREACHING

Traditional congregations accustomed to speaking-listening styles of worship with lots of music and an oration for a sermon will be concerned about the power of the message only as far as how well it is presented. A “good sermon” will be perceived as a powerfully delivered piece of communication from the preacher, and a “boring sermon” will be perceived as having less power. The congregational “audience” wants a powerful message. It is interesting that congregations who are good listeners never understand themselves to be “passive” because they know how they choose to listen carefully to interesting and well-presented messages, and they also know how they “tune out” the preacher when things get slow or uninteresting. How many times have people confessed to planning out their week while “listening”, or to thinking about the brunch menu, or visualizing their golf putt up the center aisle! In the oral presentation dominant worship, there is an interactive balance between the powerful message and the powerful audience.

However, when screens and visuals are introduced into worship, something different happens. A few critics will be quick to see that screen as no different from a television screen or a movie screen, and give to that church screen the same sort of negative evaluation they give to TV and the movies. They will associate the church screen with the “powerful message” theory they have adopted in regards to the mass media they have seen and heard, and for some reason

will not see their generous exclusion of oral presentation from their critical framework.

For these critics, it is perfectly acceptable for the congregation to be considered an “audience” but not to be “spectators.”

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE CONGREGATION AS AUDIENCE

- They sit and listen.
- They pay attention.
- They concentrate on what is being said.
- They go inside themselves and process what they are hearing.
- They sometimes respond to music they hear with applause.

Major distraction: listening interrupted by noise from children, loud sounds such as coughing, from traffic outside, or other noises from heat system, etc.

Spoken communication invites intellectual growth.

Sermons are “meaty” and provide intellectual food that the mature and educated can digest.

Listeners are active rather than passive.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE CONGREGATION AS SPECTATORS

- They sit and watch.
- They are being entertained.
- They are passive onlookers.

Visuals are the “spoon-feeding” of coddled or powerless children.

Adults can listen, children look.

Listening goes deeper than looking.

Major distraction: looking is interrupted by other visuals such as architecture, the human speakers, and other movement in the congregation.

Visuals invite shallow emotional response.

A THIRD WAY: THE INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

In his article, Soukup suggests that the two poles of communication audience research are extreme positions that help us under-

stand the forces that act upon messages and people. A middle or third way of understanding takes into consideration the fact that messages and audiences are always in relationship, and affect and change each other. As Soukup writes

“Meaning results from the actions of both. Programs/texts do carry meaning, meanings which their creators did in fact intend. Audiences for their part do actively negotiate meaning, based on, for example, their positioning, their prior experience, and their needs. Communities of interpretation offer another means to understand audience understand of programs/texts.”

Messages and audiences interact, whether they are in oral communication settings of speaking and listening, or in visual communication settings including screens and looking.

Worshiping congregations are, at best, communities of interpretation. Good listeners have always known this, but may not have always understood their prejudice against looking and seeing.

The congregational “audience” wants a powerful message.

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE CONGREGATION AS AN INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY

- They organize around scripture, sacred music, liturgy, and praxis.
- They engage the “kingdom” stories of faith.
- They honor book and ritual.
- They pray and keep silence together.
- They study, discuss, and imagine, constructing alternative visions of life through faith.
- They experience the arts together: paintings, sculpture, music, film, dance, fabric arts.
- They grow in trusting one another.
- They develop means for whole brain learning.

- They formulate ways to engage the world through faithful witness.

Principles Of Interpretive Communities

Interpretive communities center themselves around the scriptures.

Interpretive communities grow in relation to their mutual study of scripture together. They find ways to experience scriptural story and theological theme through commentaries, poems, novels, paintings, films, short stories, sculptures, fabric art, movement and dance. They expose their faith to the arts in all of its forms, and their conversations together create meaning through theological reflection. These communities come to understand their life and faith as lived in the midst of a particular location and community.

Interpretive communities are grown over time.

Those who join with a worship community participate in that particular community's history, tradition, and practice. This is a living process over a period of time. People have come and gone in the life of that community, and the community is always changing through births, marriages, confirmations, deaths, as well as through its participation in its entire social, educational, mission, and worship experience. People grow comfortable in these communities as they spend time with them.

Interpretive communities equip one another to grow in understanding.

Interpretive communities equip one another to construct, present, and interpret the messages of Christian faith through their educational, social, worship, and mission practice. They go to art museums and talk together about what they see; they attend concerts and films to experience, engage, and discuss with hearts of faith; they form book groups to read anything that informs hearts

and minds about life, love, theology, critical social issues, or recent biblical scholarship; they select social projects and join efforts to identify systemic injustice, oppose war, eradicate poverty, dismantle racism, and work for gender equity; they develop, present, and evaluate worship experiences that build community, honor and worship God, and send people equipped with faith and purpose out into the world.

Interpretive communities equip one another to construct, present, and interpret the messages of Christian faith through their educational, social, worship, and mission practice.

Conclusion

It is easy to fall into assumptions about a world of powerful messages that seem to render powerless their recipients, or that audiences are able to effectively resist and control manipulation or propaganda. A better way might be to consider building "communities of interpretation" which actively engage, interpret, and construct the meanings that a broken world desperately needs.