

Four Books and Three Websites: Seven Essential Resources

by Michael Bausch

What follows are reviews of current books and websites that will be useful to pastors wanting to use digital technologies to promote the mission of the church. The works cited are offered as helpful guides into the practical and theological issues of the use of such technologies.

Book Resources

Susan J. White, Christian Worship and Technological Change. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

While this book has been around for more than a decade, it is a starting point for anyone wishing to address the church's use, and resistance to, a wide variety of technological developments. Susan White's work is an important survey of the church's response to many of history's important technological innovations. Avoiding promoting one technology over another, her goal is to show how the church's adoption of various technological innovations shaped worship and liturgy. White concludes that technological progress is inevitable, and it is always a free choice whether to see a new technology as something that will help the church accomplish its mission.

She points out that churches quickly adopted most technological innovations as they were developed, resulting in the widespread use of things not now considered to be "technology," such as duplicating and copy machines, anything working with electricity, mass produced hymnals and bibles, and a wide variety of musical technologies. Those still bound to the expectation of a one hour worship service will find her discussion of the liturgical implications of the invention of the clock to be quite amusing!

White also discusses how 19th century bio-tech research would eventually result in many churches replacing wine with grape juice in communion, quickly changing a 1900 year tradition of using wine with the sacrament.

As we find ourselves awash in a sea of quickly changing technologies, White reminds us that this is nothing new for the church. In some ways her book provides us the small comfort of knowing we join a long line of church leaders faced with similar dilemmas: to decide when and how to use, or not to use, the products of technical progress.

John P. Jewell, Wired For Ministry: How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other New

Technologies Can Serve Your Church. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004.

Jewell organizes his material around three main themes helpful to church professionals as they seek to understand and integrate new technologies into education, evangelism, mission, administration, and worship: 1) to be aware “of the pitfalls of the new technologies in the life of the Christian community 2) to “develop a knowledge of the promise of new technologies that can facilitate and enrich ministry” and 3) “to develop a working strategy for the implementation of the best practices for the integration of technology in ministry.”

Using terms such as “technolust,” “technostress” and “technobabble,” Jewell is clear in his critique of the church’s use of tools of this digital age, while simultaneously showing how the church can embrace these means for reaching out.

Through a series of short chapters, Jewell provides a thorough survey of the issues that must be mapped out when considering such things as communicating with today’s “Net Generation” of children and youth, starting an Internet ministry for visibility and evangelism, building an online learning system for your church, or what authentic screen-based worship might be like. Ever interested in integrating technology and ministry, Jewell offers the balanced perspective pastors will appreciate.

While much of what he suggests is not new to church people aware of recent technological developments, what is new is that today’s technological tools are even more affordable than they ever were. Jewell also has a good eye for what he calls “the fit” of technical skill, technological tool, and congregational sensibilities and needs.

Tex Sample, Powerful Persuasion: Multimedia Witness in Christian Worship. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.

Tex Sample’s latest book is a real treat to read. Always autobiographical in his approach, and rooted in a teaching and writing ministry, he embraces technologies which provide a full use of multi-sensory and multimedia experiences in worship. What I appreciate most is not only this embrace, but also his theological reflections on the urgency of this embrace. Few commentators have given this a more readable treatment. Without straying into dry theological formulas, Sample manages to keep his material lively, informative, and compelling. The stated focus of his book is to answer the question, “how can the church use multisensory and multimedia rhetoric in ways that are intrinsic to, or compatible with, faith?”

What he provides are some really good answers. “The use of multisensory and multimedia rhetoric requires a craft knowing of the uses of image, sound, beat, light, move, and dance in the emergent culture and how they serve in the representation and presentation of God’s story.” He calls for “faithful experimentation” to learn this new “craft” as part of the “prophetic work of the church” to be “an alternative community of faith able to love the world but also able to oppose it and to call it into question.”

For Sample, the use of media technologies is to serve the progressive witness of God's story of justice, peace, and love in a broken world. Those considering using visual arts and products of popular culture in worship, or those already doing so, will benefit from Sample's foundational theological work.

Tom Mucciolo and Rich Mucciolo, Purpose, Movement, Color: A Strategy for Effective Presentations New York: MediaNet, Inc. 1994.

This short, 71-page book offers pastors and lay teams everything they need to consider when presenting computer-enhanced, screen-based messages. Using research on the impact of color and shape on the human mind, speaker placement in relationship to the screen, and the power of purposeful communication, the writers concisely explain the basics for electronic presentations. "By establishing a central theme, by paying close attention to layout and design elements, and by incorporating color into the presentation, your chances for a successful event dramatically increase."

The book covers the importance of graphic symbols for anchoring the eye to your slides, and the use of geometric shapes (such as arrows) to lead the viewer to a certain expected or unexpected bit of content. In a section about emotions and background color, various emotional responses are linked to the colors one chooses as slide backgrounds: red heightens emotion, blue indicates a conservative approach, green stimulates interaction, etc. Citing research studies, the writers back up assertions on how men and women respond to various colors.

Another helpful section of the book gives specific advice for those accompanying their verbal presentations with visuals. For example, the authors recommend that the screen is to the speaker's left side (or on the right side from the audience or congregation's perspective). The reason given for this is that we read from left to right, so the viewers' eyes move easily from the speaker standing to the left of the screen to the material being shown on the screen.

While this book was written many years before most in the church were presenting sermons and liturgy with screens in the sanctuary, the basic principles still apply.

Internet Resources

<http://www.marcprensky.com/>

This next resource is helpful to those wishing to understand the impact of digital technologies on today's children and youth, and how teachers (and preachers) need to find new ways to communicate with today's "digital natives."

Marc Prensky is an educator who creates videogame-based training tools designed to teach today's technically fluent children, youth, and young adults. In his groundbreaking article, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants", Prensky coins the term "digital natives" to refer to those who are natural users of computers, video games, and the Internet. Those not born into this digital world he calls "digital immigrants"

who, while using much of today's technology, retain an "accent" because they were born before the advent of home computers, cell phones, and the Internet. Prensky maintains that today's educational challenge is for the digital immigrants teaching in classrooms (and preaching in our churches) to find ways to effectively reach out to the "natives" in our midst.

At his website, Prensky offers downloadable versions of his many articles about today's youth and how they think differently, and how their brains are changed as a result of their use of digital technologies. When navigating his website, click on "Writings" to go to a number of his free articles, including those with practical suggestions for developing effective teaching and learning strategies.

Prensky says that while today's teachers (and preachers) do not need to master all the new technologies to be effective presenters, we do need to involve the digital natives by listening to them on how they might teach (or preach) the material, and to enlist them in helping design their learning instruction.

What I like about Prensky is that he has given us a way to understand the shift that has been taking place ever since the development of the radio, the camera, the moving picture, and television: those who use these media are affected by them. Prensky discusses how the "digital" world of technology is changing human brains. If brains are being changed, and if multiple generations of people are now shaped by electronically-delivered content, how does the church harness this force for the sake of the gospel?

<http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/>

David Bruce's web contribution is to affirm the presence of the gospel in today's films. Using the slogan, "Pop culture with a spiritual point of view," the website provides reviews of films currently showing at theaters as well as DVD's available for rental and purchase. Each review offers a synopsis of the film's story line and then adds commentaries from Christian writers sharing their perspectives and uncovering scriptural references, theological themes, and "what to look for."

I find the site very useful when I have a hunch there might be sermon material in a film that I am either looking to rent or going to the theater to see. For example, with the entire media buzz" surrounding a film like "The Da Vinci Code", HJ offered plenty of study resources and interpretive guidance. David Bruce, webmaster and founder of the site, loves film and has made a contribution for those searching for deeper spiritual meanings in films.

That said, his website is more than a film database. Dozens of reviewers discuss current TV shows, music, fiction and nonfiction books, and comic books, all with an eye towards their spiritual contribution. You can stay current by reading Blogs, listening to podcasts, or getting RSS feeds sent to your email address. HJ is a great starting point for church leaders wishing to understand and reflect upon the many messages communicated through today's popular culture.

<http://www.textweek.com>

This website is well known to many clergy as a starting point for weekly sermon preparation. While organized by lectionary text, the site offers the capacity to search for specific scripture passages, making it helpful to those not particularly bound to using the lectionary. The website is full of resources including sample sermons, illustrations, stories, primary sources and bible translations.

Of particular interest to those using projection technologies are the art and movie concordances. Works of art are searchable by their connection to scripture passages and themes, and are presented in chronological order with the oldest art listed at the top of the page and the newest works at the bottom. This information is helpful for those looking for either more classical or more contemporary art.

The movie concordance also lists films and scene descriptions by their connection to lectionary texts and themes. Unfortunately with most descriptions there is little guidance for where to find the scene in the film. It is left to the reader to watch the film, find the scene, and preview the content for its suitability in one's worship setting. While this isn't the best solution for those hoping for a reference to quickly-found DVD chapters and minute marks, textweek still provides a stimulating starting point for finding film clips appropriate to lectionary scripture passages.

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