Worship and Technology Across the Generations
By Michael Bausch

The editor of this edition of "Liturgy" told all of her writers, "The assumption behind the issue is that worship is naturally intergenerational." I think we can all agree with that. I think we might also agree that to talk about technology and worship in the same breath seems rather unnatural. While I have been using technology in worship for a long time, I've never talked about the technology. The best technology is invisible technology. It is invisible because it serves the central core of the church and its worship: to capture the gathered community's attention, to engage them in a Holy Conversation, and then to send them out on missions of love and justice.

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 a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep…Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:2-3, NRSV). In those early verses from the book of Genesis 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…").

Later, in Exodus 3, God catches Moses' eye with Divine Fire at the burning bush. As Moses comes closer, the Holy Voice engages him in a discussion. God then sends Moses on a mission to tell Pharaoh to "let my people go." Jesus taught his disciples and the gathered crowds with parables and stories. He communicated a message to his audience and asked response of them.

The early churches, and every subsequent generation of Christians, used various communication methods 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 speaking and preaching, written letters and sermons, manuscripts illuminated with hand-painted illustrations, 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 video vignettes.

The church's mission is to communicate the Gospel and to make disciples in every generation. To do that, teachers and preachers communicate the Gospel using the available technologies of their generation.

100 years ago, Christian clergy in the U.S. promoted the church's use of emerging motion picture technology to communicate the Gospel to children, youth, and adults in worship and religious education, as well as to promote mission awareness and involvement. While some church leaders shared this interest in the new technology, there were others who raised the caution flag, seeing danger in the "via media." Those who advocated using the new moving picture technology as a tool of the church countered by

pointing out that church people have always opposed technical changes before adopting them, including such things as quartet singing, the pipe organ, the printing press, and new translations of the Bible.

The situation hasn't changed much when we speak of worship and technology today: there are many who embrace it, and there are others who oppose it. The very word "technology" has become a barrier, a metaphor for a kind of rapid change that isn't always good or helpful. Yet experience shows that the technology people allow into the sanctuary is the technology that serves the worship functions of the church.

Churches have already adopted many different technologies into worship space that have become virtually invisible because they have been so well integrated into the worship space and experience. These include the following:

Architectural Technologies
These provide structural building features such as foundations, walls, and roofs, along with windows and ceilings; lighting fixtures, heating and cooling systems; furnishings such as altars, tables, pews and chairs; chair lifts and elevators. Included in this list might be the decorative technologies placed into sanctuaries such as those that facilitate fabric art and banners, plant and floral arrangements, pictures, art work and seasonal displays of altar arrangements.

Liturgical Support Technologies
These include sound systems with amplifiers, speakers, and microphones; organs, pianos and other musical instruments; clocks (we all know how the clock has quietly changed expectations about service length!); communion elements (bacteriological studies influenced a shift from wine to grape juice); printed worship bulletins, songbooks, and hymnals; audio and video tape recording systems and broadcast capabilities, and so on.

Presentation Technologies
While these might be understood to be liturgical support technologies, I think they deserve special attention. They include projectors of all kinds (slide, film strip, 16mm, LCD video, etc.); surfaces for image projection including walls, screens, fabrics, etc.; computers and presentation software such as PowerPoint; flat screen televisions in place of projector and screen; data sources such as 35mm slides, video tape (analog) or DVD movie, computer (digital) generated text and visuals or even Internet brought into the sanctuary with wireless signals.

Recent surveys show the prevalence of presentation technologies in today's churches. In an April, 2008 report, the Barna Group cited a study on church use of emerging technologies, including worship technologies of large screens showing video imagery and movie clips.[1] They found that 65% of Protestant churches have a large screen projection system in their church. They also found that the rate of adoption of these systems has slowed since 2005, and that the large-screen system is related to a church's size and theology. Among churches with less than 100 adults in weekly

worship, only 53% use these systems, while 76% use them in churches with 100-250 adults, with upwards to 88% of churches drawing more than 250 adults to worship each week.

The survey also found that only 43% of churches described by the pastor as having "liberal theology" have the big screen possibilities, compared to 68% of churches self-identified as theologically conservative. We are left to draw our own conclusions on reasons for this until more data is gathered about why this is true.

88% of churches now with a big screen in place show movie clips or other video segments, which is more than in 2000, but less than in 2005.

George Barna, the director of the studies, speculates that small churches may be less technologically friendly because of lack of size or budget, and that they just might be small because of that kind of self-limiting thinking. In addition, he says that as more digitally-resistant churches find ways to fit their vision to the use of these technical tools, there may be further growth in the use of such technologies.

Because of the wide use of presentation technologies across the U.S., most church members have experienced worship with them in place. If their own churches don't employ them, they've seen them used when they've visited other churches for special occasions like baptisms and holiday celebrations with family, or just out of curiosity to see what other churches are doing. My experience is that what these visiting church members report when they get home is less an observation about technology, and more about what they experienced: how they liked singing with their heads looking up at a screen rather than down at a hymnal; how they liked not having to hold a heavy hymnal; how they appreciated not having to follow along with a worship bulletin in an unfamiliar church and could just follow along on the screen; how the pictures and video clips they watched connected with the mission and message of that church; and how they noticed a lively spirit among those who had gathered for worship.

Another recent study shows that just as more and more church goers are becoming accustomed to presentation technologies in worship, so too are they increasing the personal use of various media technologies in their daily lives. The Nielsen Company, known for its data on television viewing, issued its first quarterly "Three Screen Report" regarding television, Internet, and mobile usage in the U.S. in May of 2008.[2] What they found was that those aged 55 and older watched an average of 168 hours of television a month, twice as much as children and teens, and 36% more than 18-54 year olds.

As a percentage of the video-watching audience (defined as video seen on live television or playback), the 55+ age group accounted for twice as many viewing as children and teens. Those 35 and older accounted for 63% of the video viewing audience in comparison with 37% of those under the age of 34.

When we put this data side by side with Barna Group studies on church attendance, we find that the age groups watching the most television and video are also

more likely to be attending church. A 2006 Barna Group study showed that 54% of elders (born before 1945), and 49% of boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) attended church services, while 43% of busters (born 1965-1983) and only 33% of mosaics (born 1984-2002) attended. [3]

Where we might think our older members would be against the use of presentation technologies in worship, and media in general, they are in fact the very people who use media technologies at home more than other age groups.

Stated in other terms, someone who turns 100 years old this year was being born as churches in Connecticut, Indiana, and California were advocating showing movie scenes in worship. Documents from 1909 show how clergy and laity from several denominations were promoting the use of motion pictures in worship and education. [4]

Today's 85 year-old was born in 1924. That was the year my grandparents were married, and for their honeymoon they went to see a silent film in Chicago. Today's average 85er was born as churches in the U.S. had been using motion pictures in education and worship for well over 15 years.

While the Nielsen studies show that people across the generations are comfortable with television, movies, the Internet, online video, and mobile media, there is still some discomfort and resistance about using presentation technologies in worship. There are many reasons for this, including the resistance of a lot of tired clergy who are overextended in their ministries already and can't see adding something new to what they're already doing, and including church members who regularly see how poorly presentation technologies are used in their workplaces. One need only go to www.youtube.com to view short videos featuring how not to do PowerPoint presentations!

If all these people who come to church already are familiar and comfortable with television and other media use, why is it that there is such resistance in some congregations, particularly self-identified liberal congregations, to the use of such technologies in worship? I am convinced that what we've done is trained clergy and developed congregations who have come to expect that worship is for our ears and not our eyes. We've developed congregations of auditory learners who expect that worship is more about listening and hearing than it is about looking and seeing.

Consider how most Protestant worship has been mediated by the aural arts of music and preaching. This 500-year-old emphasis on speaking and listening has pushed aside the worshipful use of visual arts of painting, sculpture, film, and photography.

The reasons for ear-centered worship go back to Exodus 20:4 and it's cautioning against graven images and extend through the Protestant Reformation with its elevation of the spoken, preached, and printed word as the best means to produce faith. As a result, most Protestant worship today is designed for the ear. Most of what happens in worship—music and spoken words-- treats the ear. We take it for granted that our ears

are the instruments of faith, and we give them music and preaching that is pleasurable, instructive, and worshipful.

The ongoing National Congregations Study through the Hartford Institute for Religion Research One has reported that in the U.S. 90 percent of a typical worship service involves listening to choirs, liturgists, and preachers.[5] Worship has become a listening culture where people come to hear a good sermon and listen to good music.

While statistics vary, studies show that of today's adults, 70 percent are visual learners, 25 percent learn by hearing, and 5 percent are hands-on learners. Is this true of our worshiping communities? Given the viewing habits shown by the recent Nielsen report, this is probably so. Given the resistance that many pastors report to attempts to use video clips and other visuals in worship, it might be that our church practice has created congregations full of auditory learners, or at least of people who have grown accustomed to an ear-centered worship culture.

Age alone does not determine which sense is dominant, as many youth and young adults are also auditory learners. I remember a faithful member of a congregation I served who closed his eyes during the entire sermon. It wasn't that he wasn't listening….he could tell me specifically what I had said. This auditory learner was simply blocking out all visual stimuli so that he could concentrate one what he was hearing. I imagine that were he alive today, he would oppose any use of film or photography in worship on the grounds that it would be distracting to his concentration. During a particular confirmation class, I recall a couple of teenagers who, instead of watching a class video, sat with their heads on the table, eyes closed, a picture of lazy inattention. When they correctly answered every question I asked, they proved that despite appearances, they were listening very carefully to the video. They were auditory learners and they did not need to see the screen to know what was going on.

Our churches are full of such auditory learners, and since aural content has been the predominant practice of many churches, most worship communities are composed of people who prefer an auditory approach to worship. Many of these church members would find it distracting to look at pictures of any kind. These are the people who, when hearing a suggestion to show a video clip during a sermon, would say, "If I wanted to watch a movie, I'd go to the movie theater."

That said, many churches have successfully integrated more visuals into historically audio-centered services by projecting visual announcements, words to hymns, images that enhance the sermon, and classical religious art. There is evidence that congregations, even auditory ones, enjoy the pairing of sound with sight when it is done tastefully, sparingly, gracefully, and gradually.

These experiences are further strengthened when presentation technologies are used to celebrate the intergenerational nature of the church. For example, some churches have easily integrated into their services pictures and video clips that show:

--pictures of the couple that was just married in the church the previous weekend
--photographs of the latest new born with mom and dad, grandpa and grandma
--pictures of the whole family gathering after a baptism
--scanned images of art projects from a church school class
--pictures of the confirmation class as infants and now as they are at confirmation
--short video clips of a recent youth service project
--emailed photographs of church members on a mission trip
--screen shot of a community news item featuring a church member
--photographs of a recent senior citizen luncheon program
--photographs or video clips of church members who reside in assisted living facilities or in nursing homes

These materials can be presented in worship during the announcements, as a special mission report, as part of the offertory, as an introduction to a special time of recognition, or during the sermon presentation. All ages of worshipers give special attention to these visual portrayals of their church family and friends.

Over many years of developing a visually-rich worship experience, we heard many positive comments from people across the generations. One woman who visited with her children and grandchildren said, "I've gone to church my whole life but this is the first time I got something out of it. It was because I could see what you were preaching about." Other long-time members who had attended worship weekly came to prefer the visual service because they could understand more of the message with its combining sound, words on a screen, pictures, religious art, and relevant movie clips. Attentiveness increases with younger members too. Infants and children quiet when an interesting visual is presented. I recently saw a two-year old stand up on the pew and lean forward to see the pictures that were illustrating my sermon. She followed along intently.

There are other positive intergenerational results that can emerge from the convergence of worship and presentation technology, including increased attendance, attentiveness to worship content, and mission awareness and response.

A visually centered and culturally relevant worship experience creates an interest among those searching for fresh and meaningful worship. Children, youth, and adults start coming to church with the expectation that something new, different, and engaging will be presented as part of the worship service. My experience with a visually-rich service showed that young adults and families with children started attending worship more regularly. They represented a generation accustomed to screens, relevant music, and film clips, but for whom the application of these materials to biblical story and theological theme was exciting. Members invited friends and family into the worship service. Grandparents began to report things like, "I came to the media service because this was the service my children and grandchildren attended. I also came to like it myself."

Another response to the use of visuals in wors hip was increased discussion and

interaction with material presented during "visual sermons." With the addition of visual illustrations, including symbols, diagrams, film clips, and photography, people could reflect upon their own experience with what they saw and heard, and gain a memorable experience to talk about afterwards with others. Pictures made the preaching themes more memorable by adding an additional sense, the visual to the auditory.

Effective visuals help people better understand the mission projects the church promotes. Pictures of these projects, and in some cases brief video clips, help draw people into the project and stimulate financial support for these very specific needs. After Hurricane Katrina we raised thousands of dollars because we were able to show pictures of local people on site in Louisiana purchasing and delivering diapers, towels and blankets. In another instance, hundreds of dollars were quickly donated to help out a local family with hospital expenses associated with the premature birth of twins in a nearby city. We were able to show pictures of the newborns on a weekly basis and report their progress as well as highlight the amounts being donated by church members toward various medical needs. Parents reported more conversations with their children about what they had seen on screen, and a growing church family awareness of the opportunities for serving the needs of others.

Developing an Intergenerational Interpretive Community.

Probably the most important change that took place as a result of the introduction of media arts in worship was the development of an intergenerational interpretive community. As more and more people became engaged in direct experiences with creating liturgical media art,[6] they came to understand the importance of having theological conversations to link biblical text with cultural media productions such as film clips and pairing of images to music and lyrics.

As youth and adults became comfortable developing PowerPoint presentations with original photography and appropriate music, we found teams of fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, daughters and mothers, and fathers and sons offering to provide pieces of liturgical media art.

Rather than becoming recipients of someone else's messages about scripture during worship, they became direct participants with a stake in a creative engagement and application of scripture to cultural media. People developed fluency with a kind of hybrid worship language from the creative interchange between cultural media and theology.

Introducing visual presentation technologies into congregations accustomed to an emphasis on auditory technology can be jarring.Yet with sensitivity to the audio and visual needs of congregation members of all ages, it can be done gradually and well. When such changes are harnessed to the purposes of worship—to gather around, experience, and respond to the Word of God in words, music, imagery, sacrament, and offering—the change is understood as serving the heart and soul of the worship community. Worship becomes engaging for all the generations, and the technology that helps make this happen remains invisible.

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[1] "New Research Describes Use of Technology in Churches," April 28, 2008 and available at http://www.barna.org

[2] This is from "Nielsen's Three Screens Report: Television, Internet and Mobile Usage in the U.S." (May, 2008). See http://www.nielsen.com for the latest quarter's report of the "Three Screens" survey results.

[3] See http://www.barna.org

[4] See Terry Lindvall, The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908-1925 (Lanham, MD and London: The Scarecrow Press, 2001).

[5] This is data from the 1998 research of the National Congregations Study through the Hartford Institute for Religion Research http://hirr.hartsem.edu/cong/research_ncs.html. Findings for the 2006-07 research had not been released at the time of this writing, but may now be available at the website.

[6] For further discussion about the developing field of liturgical media art, see Eileen Crowley's Liturgical Art in A Media Age. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).