

MEDIA TECHNOLOGY FOR WORSHIP

Recent advances in media technology have brought sweeping changes to many aspects of everyday life, including church. In 2012, 35 percent of US congregations were using video projection equipment, a number that has surely increased since that time.¹ Using technology to enhance the ministry and message of your congregation takes practice, but with some planning and intentional effort, you can reap great benefits.

New Technologies Expand Options

Media technology has increased the options for making worship more visually accessible and inviting. Worship leaders may project song lyrics on a screen in order to free worshippers from the use of hymnals or show a single graphic design to illustrate the worship service's central theme. Preachers may display the sermon's key points to make it easier to follow or include a video clip instead of telling a story orally. Churches that have the resources or in-house volunteer talent may develop their own videos or project the image of the preacher and the band on multiple screens using image magnification so that worshippers can see their faces close up.²

How to Get Started

To get started, assemble a worship design team that includes the preacher and a variety of creative and technically oriented individuals. "Creatives" could be professionals in the arts, but also anyone who reads or is involved with art in the community, writes or crafts as a hobby, or watches movies for enjoyment. "Techies" could include professionals or anyone able to work with or willing to learn computers, projectors, digital cameras, or video cameras.

To arrive at a visual metaphor for the sermon and worship service, team members can look individually and collectively to television, movies, and the internet for tangible objects or events that become the basis for the primary metaphor of the day. One method is to first develop a single idea as the focus and then search for

an image that communicates it. Brainstorming with the small group can often be the most effective way to arrive at this.³

Ultimately, effective worship design requires attention not only to technology but the use of metaphor. Metaphor, the "tangible representation of an abstract idea," has long been used in the language of sermons and written prayers. By using media technology, worship designers can represent this metaphor visually. Len Wilson, a worship consultant, thinks it's helpful to make a distinction between the theme, the main message that worship leaders want to get across, and the metaphor itself, which can be visually represented by an object or a combination of text and object.⁴

"This Is Hard Work!"

Developing computer graphics and videos for worship can be time consuming. It takes about five to ten hours to produce basic graphics, including announcements, song lyrics, Scripture lessons, and images to illustrate the sermon. Developing a video from scratch takes even longer. A video with simple graphics and no special effects takes about ten to fifteen hours per



finished minute to produce, not counting time spent brainstorming. Luckily, videos must be brief: one minute for most topics, three minutes for special projects, and five minutes maximum.⁵ Doing media projects on a regular basis for worship can be compared to riding a roller coaster. Once the work on a project finishes and the team is ready to breathe a sigh of relief, they are asked to do something else, and the excitement and fear begin again.⁶

While it can be challenging to develop and implement new ideas week after week, advance planning can help. Worship teams can lay out a detailed, color-coded production schedule using an Excel spreadsheet and assign a different project to each color. Note the person responsible to carry it out and keep track of deadlines. Update weekly if necessary.

Creative Ways to Expand the Media Palette

A common trap is to think of the projection screen primarily as a place for printed words such as song lyrics or announcements, rather than thinking of visual imagery as important in its own right. Here are several ways to expand the “media palette” in worship and beyond.

- Instead of leaving the screen empty between song sets or announcements, revert to a default image such as the worship service’s central graphic, allowing worshippers to meditate on its meaning.
- At the beginning of the service, consider projecting a series of still images in a continuous loop for worshippers waiting for the service to begin, a technique borrowed from movie theaters.
- Design an image as a visual representation of the Scripture lesson. For example, to illustrate the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch on the road to Jerusalem, one worship team created an image of a long road leading to a city far off in the distance. In gazing at the image, worshippers could imagine themselves in the story during the Scripture reading and throughout the service.⁷
- Outside of worship, images and videos can be used as a visual marketing tool in the church’s social media and website presence, ensuring that the work is being put to full use.

Pitching a Tent in Electronic Culture

Some people may object that media technology in worship represents an attempt to be relevant at all costs. Yet

Tex Sample, who lectures widely on the church and popular culture, points out that Jesus accommodated himself to contemporary culture by using the vernacular language of Aramaic and telling parables, though he also selectively resisted the culture by breaking purity code to heal persons who were thought to be impure. In this way “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14), with the Greek word translated “to live” meaning “to live or camp in a tent” or “to pitch or inhabit a tent.” In a similar way, the church can “pitch its tent” in an electronic culture by using sound, video, and lighting practices taken from the entertainment industry without being crass or shallow.⁸

Resources

- Technologies for Worship (<https://tfwm.com>) and Church Production (<https://www.churchproduction.com>) are online magazines addressing the technical needs of church worship. TFW is available free in print in the North America, while Church Production is free in the US only.
- Capterra, an online resource for business software buyers, provides a list of reviews of worship presentation software at www.capterra.com/church-presentation-software/.
- The Work of the People (www.theworkofthepeople.com) is an ecumenical platform that produces videos and looped images for use in worship.
- Internet Movie Database (<https://www.imdb.com/>) is a web resource that offers a searchable database of millions of movies and television programs.
- YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com>) is a collection of user-generated videos, many of which can be useful in services. You can use the free service, ClipGrab (<https://clipgrab.org/>), to download these videos so you don’t need a browser open to show them.

1. Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin’ On Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 49.

2. *Ibid.*, 118-119.

3. Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Taking Flight With Creativity: Worship Design Teams that Work* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 45-55.

4. Len Wilson with Jason Moore, *The Wired Church 2.0* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), 57.

5. *Ibid.*, 32, 15.

6. Constance E. Stella, *Video Ministry: Using Media in Worship Without Going Hollywood* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 35, 53.

7. Wilson and Moore, *The Wired Church*, 59-62.

8. Tex Sample, *Powerful Persuasion: Multimedia Witness in Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003), 24-33.