Worship the Lord

WELS
Christ's Love, Our Calling.

Let's rethink how we think about technology in worship

By Caleb Bassett

The debate concerning the role of screen technology in worship is nothing new. The pages of this publication took up the topic already more than ten years ago. The good advice given then could be summed up neatly with one word: moderation.

But cultural and technological developments since that time have given new insights on the effects of pervasive digital technology in our homes, classrooms, and public spaces. Indeed, as screens transition from large-format installations in front of the crowd to small-format devices in every purse or pocket, the question of the appropriate role of screen technology in worship is as relevant today as it was a decade ago.

My contention is that the current state of affairs requires more than merely updating our advice for the latest devices. Instead, we must *rethink how we think* about screen technology in leading the congregation in liturgy and song.

Test our fundamental assumptions

One way to rethink how we think about screen technology in worship is to *test our assumptions*. A mistaken assumption at the foundation of our thinking will lead to flawed applications later. The result may be a flurry of mitigating efforts, few of which address the fundamental issue at the root of it all and some of which may actually make matters worse.

For example, the thinking about screen technology to lead the congregation in liturgy and song generally goes something like this: "The screen will be an alternative to what's printed. Those who wish to use the screen will use the screen, and those who wish to sing and speak from the hymnal or worship folder will sing and speak from the hymnal or worship folder." The assumption is that screen technology is a neutral medium and therefore assumes a *supplemental* role in the worship space. I believe that this assumption is almost certainly mistaken.

Consider some recent research from the field of educational science. Anyone connected to a school or college knows that the use of screens in education has become almost the *sine qua non* of what's considered quality educational methodology. Administrators first installed screens in the front of classrooms and information-dense books and handouts were replaced by semantically-thin slide decks. More recently, screens were put in the hands of every student through direct funding or policies requiring students to "bring your own device" (BYOD). While educators vigorously debated the relative merits of various devices and software programs, the general assumption was that *any* added technology would be an improvement.

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But recently the debate over *which* devices and software to use in education has dramatically shifted to *whether* such technology should be used in the first place—or at the very least, whether it should *always* be used. Prompting the shift were studies demonstrating that students who took notes on laptops or tablets achieved poorer outcomes than those students who processed coursework with non-digital technologies such as ruled paper and a #2 pencil.

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Even more startling (and relevant to the topic of this essay) was the discovery that the use of screens in the classroom had a degrading effect on peers who did not use a device. Researchers compared the effect to something like cognitive secondhand smoke. Merely being in view of an active screen has been shown to cause a degrading effect on the focus and attention of nearby peers.

This result may not be all that surprising when we consider our own experience. Human beings are generally powerless to ignore surprising new information in their field of vision, an effect most pronounced when new visual data appears in the periphery of our focus. This is why something that appears alongside you so easily startles you. It's why your laptop displays notifications in the upper corner of the screen. It's why a flickering light bulb will make you look again and again long after you've consciously acknowledged that the bulb is flickering.

Generally speaking, liturgical churches that decide to adopt screen technology to lead the congregation in liturgy and song seek a physical arrangement that doesn't necessarily replace the altar, font, and pulpit as the focus of the worship space. This leaves the areas slightly above and to the edges of our visual focus for the screens to be installed. Ironically, the laudable effort to preserve the architectural and liturgical integrity of the worship space moves the screens to a position where the visual effect of disruption and distraction is the strongest.

Remember also how screen technology works: imagery and text (often animated) is projected as flickering light in front of the congregation. Projection slides suffer from resolution constraints—a slide can only hold a small amount of visual information while also retaining legibility. Such resolution constraints are the reason why information-dense content like liturgy and song must be split over numerous slides. Text and tune that fit easily on a single 6×9 page usually require more than a dozen slides in a hymnal projection edition. Each build in the slide deck is another blink or flash (not to mention another opportunity for disruptive human error). It becomes virtually impossible, then, for the worshiper to keep his or her eyes from the magnetic allure of the projected pixels as they flicker in the most sensitive part of the visual field. And once neighboring worshipers are invited to swipe their way through the service on a smartphone or tablet, the effect may well become even more pronounced.

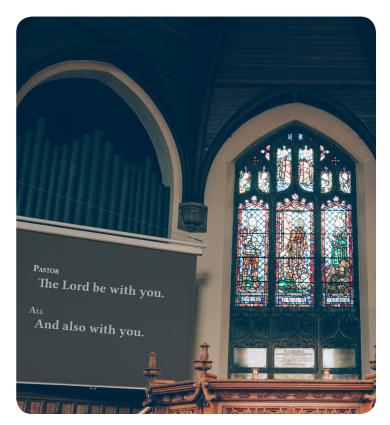> *The screen will accept nothing less than to own the room.*

Screen technology tends to disrupt other media and easily dominates the environment by demanding attention from everyone in view. This is not supplemental, additive, or merely neutral; it is a fundamental reorientation of the worship space. Indeed, the screen will accept nothing less than to own the room. To assume that worshipers who find screen technology disruptive or distracting will be able to simply ignore it misunderstands the nature of the medium and downplays the qualities of our human

senses. This is why more and more instructors (especially in higher education) are surprising their colleagues with the announcement that they, too, are eschewing the use of screens in their classrooms. Worship leaders may wish to rethink the issue as well.

Examine our embedded metaphors

A second way to rethink how we think about screen technology in worship is to *examine our embedded metaphors*. We have certain ways of *describing* topics that may preclude us from seeing a topic in a different—and perhaps better—light.

Consider, for example, how technological metaphors dominate the ways our culture describes the world around us. The enduring mystery of human consciousness is explained in terms of a computer that "processes information" and "stores things in memory" in spite of the fact that the human mind does no such thing. The paradigm of technocracy that so dominates American civic life creeps also into our conception of Christian ministry: people are no longer complex, embodied beings in need of the daily care of a shepherd but instead become resources to be "managed" and workers to be "activated" by ministry experts. Rich concepts like "preach the Word" and "encourage one another" are replaced with phrases like "deliver Christian content." Embedded metaphors refashion the world in their own image.

One metaphor that deserves scrutiny is the idea of "technological progress." Because of the undeniable progress that human society has enjoyed as a result of technological development, we have adopted the word "progress" for virtually *any* new application of technology. The more radical technologists in society go even further. They alloy the idea of progress with an assumed sense

Embrace our cultural anchors

A third way to rethink how we think about screen technology in worship is to *embrace our cultural anchors*. Let us enjoy the happy reality that time and time again the cultural practices of the church, shaped as they are by the gospel of Jesus Christ, become suddenly relevant to a new generation of people disillusioned by the listlessness of life unanchored by ultimate truth.

For example, we're observing in our society the growing strength of a sort of digital temperance movement. The movement is motivated by a variety of cultural developments. Waves of revelations have detailed how social media companies have explicitly engineered their products to harvest profit from our insecurities and have deliberately worked to draw us into destructive patterns of digital addiction. It seems increasingly impossible to find a public space that isn't dominated by scrolling chyrons covering the latest political demagoguery and highlights of hat tricks and home runs. Even the local gas station punctuates the few quiet moments spent topping off the tank with a rapid-fire barrage of ads, news blurbs, and weather reports. Few moments remain that are not held captive to the content of a screen.

Commentators have called this the "attention economy." In a traditional economy natural resources are developed into products which are sold for profit. In the attention economy *you* are the product and your *attention* is the resource to be mined. One author has fairly called the business tactics of the attention economy a "race to the bottom of the brain stem." How apt. The goal of the attention economy is not to invite you to enjoy life in the full, but to convert you into a compulsive checker of news feeds and binge watcher of original programming.

The reaction has been what you might expect. People are sensing that something's being done to them and it's not benevolent. Ironically, the dominant forms of expression today (i.e. social media) are filled with depictions of *disconnecting from digital technology*. Photos of open books, quiet spaces, and peaceful settings offer the modern mind a glimpse of the alluring hope that man does not live on likes alone.

In this environment the temptation is to become ourselves captains of industry in the attention economy. We *could* fill the pre-service time with rotating ads for church events. We *could* shoehorn a showing of the WELS Connection between the offering and the prayers. We *could* assume that colorful clip art will make a great hymn even greater. But modes and methods better suited for the attention economy are becoming more and more likely to elicit a reaction like, "Eww, gross" instead of, "Hey, cool."

of inevitability to it all. This is the dominant ideology of Silicon Valley and is rapidly assuming an outsized role in shaping the broader society's view of moral philosophy and ultimate purpose. Nevertheless, enough dark footnotes are attached to the use of technology to prevent us from equating progress with any and all application of technology.

Historians point out that the 20th century saw an unprecedented amount of death not because of plagues or natural disasters but because mankind had developed technologies to make the mass destruction of human life possible. This is not to equate PowerPoint with concentration camps or Facebook with napalm, but to illustrate that it is intellectually dishonest to reason that the application of technology is in itself human progress.

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By examining this embedded metaphor we can escape the unhelpful "are you *for* progress or *against* progress" dialogue that can so easily arise when a diverse group of individuals discuss how best to walk together in Christian community. If we can accept that new technology does not in itself equal progress, then we will enjoy the freedom to accurately assess when the application of a particular technology might not, in fact, be progress toward the goals of Christian worship. After all, making a wise decision *not* to do something is as vital a form of progress as any other. Indeed, it may be a kind of progress we need.

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And so here we are again—the seemingly old-fashioned, liturgical, Lutheran church anchored to ultimate truth is bringing out treasures old and new to a world dying for something better.

We are fellow travelers who answer the call of Jesus Christ to be a communion of believers shaped over lifetimes by patterns and paradigms not immediately apparent to the world. Our churches are places where the primary task is not to demand more attention but to offer Sabbath rest for the whole person—body and soul. What we offer is not something that attracts eyeballs with its overwhelming brightness but creates a new heart of worship by its captivating beauty.

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I have taken an admittedly contrarian view on the topic of screen technology in worship. Indeed, any call to *rethink* implies that the process may involve discarding some ideas and reforming some assumptions. Yet I have not indulged in a simplistic "all technology is bad everywhere" jeremiad. I have pointed out that just as it is true that not all technology is *bad* everywhere, it is equally true that not all technology is *good* everywhere. The wisdom is in discerning between what's good and what's bad—or perhaps even more difficult, between what's good and what's best.

> *Not all technology is* bad *everywhere …*
> *not all technology is* good *everywhere.*

I have presented a range of empirical, cultural, and theological observations that I believe support the conclusion that congregations which resisted the impulse to direct attention to the screen may rightly feel validated in their decision. I sense that this may also be a good time for congregations who bet all the blue chips on the power of presentation technology to reexamine whether such practices will foster the kind of embodied community that offers a countercultural witness to the commercial logic of the attention economy. The modern world is oriented toward the fundamentally ephemeral model of content delivery, but the gospel creates an eternal community gathered around a word and a meal. While I remain fascinated by technology and enjoy the benefits it has brought to my life, it seems nonetheless unmistakable that the character of the kingdom to come will be decidedly more human than machine. Perhaps it will be best for the character of our worship to reflect this in a time like ours.

> *This article is also available at* blogs.wels.
> net/worship. *We welcome your comments
> or questions.*

"Moderation…"

Worship the Lord previously addressed projection in numbers 27 and 28: worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/wtl-church-architecture. Note the supplemental content posted along with the archived issues. One item is "Designing a Worshipful Environment," 38 pages of helpful content by former Mission Counselor Wayne Schulz (d. 2011). See "Screens or Not?" Regarding some uses of projection, he wrote in 2000/2005, "Time will tell if this serves as an aid or a distraction…."

See also Caleb Bassett's presentation from the 2017 worship conference, a narrated presentation "Screens in Worship," worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/2017-worship-conference-presentations. Direct link: vimeo.com/228517631.

Holy Week Resources

If you haven't finished planning for Holy Week, find some ideas under Church Year Planning Resources here: worship.welsrc.net/church-year-planning-resources.

Check for new music at NPH: online.nph.net/music-video/sheet-music/choral-music.html. Use the seasonal filters to find a new setting by Phillip Magness of "He's Risen, He's Risen." Also John Reim's "Lamb of God," perhaps with a vocal quartet (or two voices on a part) if you don't have a regular full SATB choir. Could the string trio part be played on an electronic keyboard?

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