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## Church Architecture: Presenter Beware

Jonathan Schroeder, pastor at Faith, Sharpsburg, GA, teaches courses at the seminary's Winterim on technology in worship and Bible class. In worship he is a technology minimalist. In Bible class he uses projection more extensively. His "less is more" approach for worship leads to the helpful comments below.

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This content supplements *Worship the Lord* #28, January 2008, a publication of the WELS Commission on Worship. The published article ended with these words:

So if we use presentation technology as visual aids for our sermons, how can we ensure that they aren't just "visual" but also "aids?" This month's online content for *Worship the Lord* explores the issue and offers some tips, some warnings, and some topics for further study.

**Transmission without communication:** I can't count how many times I have seen a hilarious commercial on TV and when later relating it, I completely forget what the commercial advertized. I can remember all the details that made it funny, but for the life of me I can't remember what it was trying to sell. Hasn't it missed the point? The advertisers transmitted plenty of information, but they failed to communicate. It's no different in sermons (PowerPointed or not). If people remember your pithy illustration but not how it communicated the Word, haven't we missed the point? Apply the same principle to your use of presentation technology. Pretty pictures and fancy backgrounds might grab someone's attention. But is it possible to relieve boredom and yet fail to communicate? Of course! Evaluate your use of presentation technology by its ability to communicate, not simply to transmit information.

**TV news syndrome:** Every night the evening news features an anchor filling most of your screen, but behind the anchor person there is always an image – usually of what the anchor is talking about. If they are talking about arresting someone, there's a picture of handcuffs, etc. Years ago, when TV news first began to use those images, they caught your eye. But when is the last time you found yourself watching the news and actually looking at that image? The images have become so ubiquitous that our minds completely block them out. In fact, the only time people usually even notice that image now is when it's wrong: the anchor is talking about the arrest of a pedophile but has a picture of the President showing behind him.

Avoid TV News syndrome in your use of presentation technology in homiletics. Your text mentions "sheep" so you Google image search for a picture of a sheep and plop it in. Paul tells us to run as if to win the prize, so you stick in a picture of a trophy. Do those images actually communicate, or are they just window dressing that will quickly be dismissed by the audience?

**Make your images part of the communication not parallel to it.** When you put images up in front of your congregation, you are telling them to not pay attention to the preacher and to focus their attention on something else. Hopefully, you are in the middle of preaching Law and Gospel. To what will you turn their attention? Make it worth not paying attention to you. Preaching is a different communication environment than Bible class. It is most often a dialogue rather than a didactic experience. Ensure that your use of presentation technology (slide, pictures, videos) is part of or enhances the dialogue rather than distracting from it.

**Use the strength of the medium.** The point of presentation technology during sermons is to bring material to bear that could not be relayed in another way. Putting your sermon theme and parts up on the screen when they are already in the service folder fails to use the strength of the medium. The medium is meant to convey sights, sounds, movements, and text—not just text with a trophy in the background.

**Less is more.** Less images; less transitions; less words; in fact, less presentations. The less you use it, the more striking its use will be.

**Just because they make it in your size, doesn't mean you should wear it.** This adage about wardrobe can be applied to your use of presentation software during your sermon: just because PowerPoint can do it doesn't mean you should. Brothers, are you using animations that make your text come in like a typewriter or flying in like a car? For the love of all that's good and right in the world, please stop. It is not catchy or edgy; it's just old.

**Follow the Fourth and Seventh Commandments.** Copyright laws apply to churches, too. It's not just a file cabinet full of copied choir music that's illegal. So is your use of copyrighted material in sermons. During Bible class, the concept of "fair use" largely covers you. However, in a worship environment, it would be quite a stretch. You need to use images or material that are in the public domain or procure permissions for their use.

**Chronological snobbery.** We live in a post-literate, visual world; people learn with all their senses. Never forget that worship can be multisensory without being multimedia.

**Give it the time it deserves.** Using presentation technology in your sermon will not save you time. It will take much more time. It requires some knowledge, some training, and a lot of effort to do it well. A great little book to start with is *High Tech Worship? Using Presentation Technology Wisely* by Quentin Schultze.

*Jonathan E. Schroeder*

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### Announcements in chancel?

Jon Hein wrote, “A projection screen can be the wart on an otherwise lovely chancel face.” So also can the projected content militate against the ambiance and focus desired in the chancel. Do you project all sorts of announcements before the service along with location of restrooms? Is that really what the chancel wants to say to people as they prepare their hearts for worship?

See Jon Schroeder’s comments under **Use the strength of the medium** in another Issue #28 supplemental article. Worship folders are good places for announcements. Perhaps other parts of the building are better than the chancel for projecting announcements and restrooms.

Here’s the solution implemented at Calvary, Dallas – announcements projected in a large gathering space with ample room for visiting and refreshments.



### Additional reading

“Technology in Worship. Useful Tool or a Clanging Cymbal?” by Mark Zarlring; *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 99, No. 4, Fall 2002. A version of that article is [online here](#).

(more)

From [Preach the Word, v4.4](#), March/April 2001.

The main article mentions a survey on preaching that appeared in January 2001 on the Christianity Today website. "What was interesting about the survey is that listeners consistently graded preachers higher than they graded themselves. The listeners also thought less of methods preachers felt would help their preaching than the preachers did."

["A Study of the Means the Holy Spirit Uses to Build the Church"](#) by Silas Krueger; *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 101, No. 4, Fall 2004. See the section *Christian Worship or PowerPoint?* (pp 270-271).

### Screens or not?

Some churches flash hymns on screens for ease of congregational singing. The varying backgrounds of people gathered in a mission congregation may cause the suggestion to be made. When weighing suggestions that call for major decisions, the planning committee might use a procedure suggested by Marva Dawn in her book, *A Royal "Waste" of Time* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999). In Chapter 25 she compiles lists of advantages and disadvantages for screen use. After compiling and reviewing such lists it may be easier for a committee to come to conclusions. Screens, for instance, can stand in the way of architectural integrity and become aesthetic distractions that take away the worshipers' focus on the altar, the cross, the symbols. Today many are experimenting with screens and power point demonstrations. Only time will tell if this serves as an aid or a distraction.

From [Designing a Worshipful Environment](#), Mission Counselor Wayne Schulz's presentation at a Home Missions conference in 2000, expanded for the 2002 and 2005 national worship conferences. The entire presentation is available at the link.

**Even *USA Today*** has covered the topic of "screens or not" with special reference to hymnals...or not (September 3, 2003). The article is generally positive about projection technology but also includes these comments:

- Huge non-denominational churches don't want the doctrine that comes between hymnal covers – in songs, liturgies and lessons. Many churchgoers prefer the catchy tunes of new praise-and-worship songs. ...
- Flickering screens and disposable programs give the sensory impression that faith is fleeting, too, says Carl Daw Jr., director of the Boston-based Hymn Society, which promotes congregational song and preserves its history. ...
- Hymnals connect past and present, says Paul Grime, head of the Commission on Worship for the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.  
"With a hymnal, I'm teaching my sons the songs I hope they will sing when they are 60 years old. If you only sing what is contemporary – all now and all today, and that is always shifting – what will be your essential grounded memories?  
"For a Lutheran, a hymnal is one of the things that shapes the piety of the people," Grime says. "It expresses the teachings of Scripture in ways that are memorable and handed down for centuries. It introduces them to ideas they may not have otherwise encountered. Little phrases and images are painted for people that help them understand God and the Church.  
"Where else can you get the entire doctrine of salvation in six stanzas? If you want to hold to your denominational distinctiveness, you need a book that expresses it." ...
- At St. Paul's Lutheran in St. Louis, the Rev. David Smith will welcome the new book. "A screen would look absurd in our traditional architecture." ...

- A Canadian music minister, the Rev. John Platanitis of Oshawa, near Toronto, sees hymnals as a roadblock when he visits Pentecostal churches.

"To me, 'Flip to hymn No. 363' is time wasted in a worship service," he says. By relying on PowerPoint praise projected on screens, people can hold hands, clap or raise their arms to the Lord.

There are trade-offs, however. Platanitis acknowledges that the short songs that work best on a screen are too often emotional "generic buddy-buddy God songs," without the theological heft found in classic hymnal choices.