Jon Hein serves Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church in Summerville, South Carolina. In issue 27 of this newsletter he described the construction of a new church. In this issue he shares thoughts on projection technology. Additional comments and an expanded sidebar article are under Worship the Lord at wels.net/worship.

Church Architecture:
Perils and Positives of PowerPoint

By Jon Hein

"Are we going to use PowerPoint in worship?" I know I rolled my eyes when that question was raised in our building committee meeting five years ago. I didn't want it. I even tried to say so. "I was never taught how to use PowerPoint at the Sem. I doubt I'd ever use it in a sermon." Our building committee chairman replied, "But pastor, unless Jesus comes back, this church is going to be around for awhile. You won't be the only pastor to preach here." Touché.

Whether or not to use PowerPoint. That question arises during a building project. We wrestled with it in my congregation. In the past six years, a dozen congregations in the South Atlantic District have built their first sanctuary. They all wrestled with the question.

Three types of questions must be answered in the larger PowerPoint debate:

1. Questions about desire: Do our people want projection technology in worship?

2. Questions about function: How will this technology be used? Will it add new aspects to the service or simply enhance what is already being done?

3. Questions about aesthetics: How can you install the equipment without negatively affecting the aesthetics of the sanctuary?

The question of *desire* comes first. If people don't want it, why bother? Don't assume everyone in our tech-saturated world wants PowerPoint. Plenty of people feel they get enough high-tech razzle-dazzle at work or school. But conversely, if you think worship is done best without technology, don't project your personal opinion on others. It's as simple as this. *Ask*. Ask your people.

You might start by experimenting with PowerPoint. Many electronics vendors will let you borrow a projector. It might need to sit on a stand, projecting onto a free-standing screen. That's okay. You're just trying to give people a taste of what can be done. After a few weeks, have an open forum. Listen to your people to see if there is desire.

If the desire is there, you move to questions of *function*. Function will dictate the system you need. Do you think it important to use PowerPoint extensively, even singing hymns and reading creeds off the screen? A system to do that well may be more expensive than one for more moderate use. Consider also the ongoing expense of time. A tech savvy person needs up to eight hours a week to prepare for a service.

My experience – in my congregation and throughout my district – has been that the best way to use PowerPoint is *moderately*. In churches where it is used sparingly, I have heard only positive feedback. Just as important, I have never heard strong negative comments by the anti-techies. This approach requires a less costly system. It's easier to prepare from week to week. But the key is restraint. PowerPoint presents limitless options for visuals. Resist the temptation to overdo it!

We have two rules in our congregation. First, there is the glitch rule: anything we do with

PowerPoint enhances worship, but nothing in worship depends on it. We could have a power outage, or a burned out projector bulb, or any other glitch, and worship isn't affected.

Second is the rule of seven. The entire service uses, at most, seven different slides…seven image changes. We might begin with religious art that fits the theme of the day. For sermons, I might use a photo that *aids* in my introduction. Perhaps we project a cross-reference passage or a quote. But that's it. We avoid sensory overload.

Moderation. That's the key word when discussing how PowerPoint will function in worship.

Finally, consider questions of *aesthetics*. These are crucial because architecture is art. Imagine taking a beautiful watercolor and putting it in a plastic poster frame. The frame would serve a function, but it would also detract from the beauty of the painting. Likewise, a large projector with visible wires can mar an otherwise beautiful sanctuary. A projection screen, even off to the side of the chancel, can be the wart on an otherwise lovely chancel face.

There are simple ways to hide your projection system. You don't even need a screen. A special paint is available that contains a silver or silica resin. It turns a wall into a screen. The paint is costly, and it limits your color selection on that wall to white or various shades of grey. But now you don't have a boxy-looking screen cluttering up your worship space.

> A projection screen can be the wart on an otherwise lovely chancel face.

If you have an elevated chancel, consider screens that install in the floor. When you use PowerPoint, the screen rises up.

The projector need not be an eyesore hanging from your ceiling like a high-tech stalactite. If you are building a church, a good architect will be able to find a way to hide it…*if you tell him it's a priority*. Our architect included decorative trusses in our design. They bear no weight, but they gave us a way to hide our projector and other lighting.

Another possibility, especially in an existing church, is a projector with a long-focus lens. It can throw an image 60 to 100 feet. It's more expensive, requiring at least double the lumens for a clear image. But having a projector mounted out-of-sight, perhaps on the back wall, is probably worth a few thousand dollars.

We recently conducted an extensive worship survey. One question asked people to rate how much they appreciated PowerPoint on a scale of 1 to 5. The average, 4.8. My eye-rolling had been premature. I'll admit, part of the reason for that score is that I've been blessed with members who are easy to please. But mainly it's because we spent of lot of time wrestling with those three issues – desire, function, and aesthetics. If you are considering PowerPoint, please, do the same.

Decorative trusses bear no weight but hide our projector and other lighting.

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 is described more fully in the online version of this article.

PRESENTER BEWARE

"Think of it as technological cocaine – so effortless to embrace initially, so difficult to relinquish after that. People who use PowerPoint generally don't stop using it." Julia Keller wrote those disparaging words in the *Chicago Tribune* in her piquantly titled article, "Killing me Microsoftly." Ms. Keller is among the large and growing group of Americans from whom PowerPoint presentations elicit eye rolls and sighs, rather than rapt attention. She goes beyond eye rolls, and likens PowerPoint to "a Cognitive Veg-o-matic that slices and dices human thought."

Why such harsh words for such a seemingly innocuous program? How might they apply to our use of presentation technology in our sermons?

Traditional multi-slide PowerPoint presentations are becoming increasingly passé in the world of professional presenting. The reason is that a presentation ultimately stands or falls on the quality and relevance of the content, rather than the digital format. Flying letters and animated pictures can't make a bad presentation good, and can only make a good presentation worse. Too often, rather than augmenting a presentation, the slide program had become the substitute for it, elevating form over content. Professional presenters now encourage people to have killer content, and then make every slide defend its life. Poor slides are far worse than no slides.

Gospel presenters would do well to heed the warnings sounded by their secular counterparts: PowerPoint will never fix poorly written sermons. Slides of pretty pictures may grab someone's eye, but distract them from your main point. You might get oohs and ahhs. You might even get that rapt attention. But is it possible to relieve boredom and yet fail to communicate?

In one sense, none of this is new. Visual aids for preaching are as old as Eden. (Just think, God didn't have to google an image of a sheep to convince Adam that he shouldn't marry one!) But the world has changed greatly in one generation. We are living in post-literate, visual world. We don't just want to see it; we want to see it in high-def. This broadly impacts our job as Gospel proclaimers.

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.
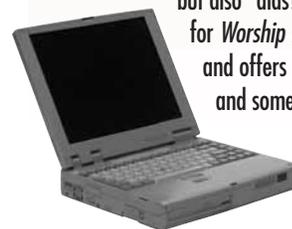
Jonathan E. Schroeder

Worship the Lord
Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors