

AUDITORY AND VISUAL LEARNERS IN THE PEW

by Michael Bausch

When addressing issues of technology and worship, many leaders think that resistance to such innovation is rooted in a discomfort with change itself. While resistance to change is natural and real in many of our churches, those working to change something in the life of a congregation might strengthen their case for a specific change by acknowledging that what is feared is not the change. Rather, people fear that somehow the proposed changes will negatively impact the very heart and soul of the congregation. They do not fear the change so much as that the change might not “fit” the culture of their church. An example of this is proposing to add visuals into worship and preaching. The fear is less about adding a screen and projector to a sanctuary, and more about how this might change the worship culture and practice of a congregation.

Leaders interested in incorporating screens, computers, and projectors into worship sanctuaries must address this fear. While it is important for leaders to learn all they can about screen, projection, computer, and sound technologies, it is even more important to notice what introducing those technologies into worship will or will not do to the heart and soul of the worshipping community.

EAR-CENTERED WORSHIP

One of the biggest hurdles faced by those wishing to add more visuals to worship is the reality that 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 its 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. One recent study reports that in the U.S. 90 percent of a typical worship service involves listening to choirs, liturgists, and preachers. People come to hear a good sermon and listen to good music.

AUDITORY LEARNERS AND VISUAL 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 on 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.

Age alone does not determine which sense is dominant, as many youth and young adults are also auditory learners. I remember a couple of teenagers in my confirmation class 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."

Yet, the 21st century provides a new challenge to communicators of faith. Worship professor Doug Adams has asserted that 60 percent of those under the age of 60—raised on viewing television—remember primarily by what is seen. 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 worshipping communities? Probably, but given the resistance that many pastors report to attempts to use video clips and other visuals in worship, it might be that the church has created congregations full of auditory learners. What is understood to be resistance to technology and adding a screen to worship might more likely be resistance to introducing the foreign language of visual illustrations to people who are accustomed to experiencing worship with their ears.

Those wishing to gauge the audio/visual orientation of a congregation may well look for clues among people. Studies in neuro-linguistic programming have shown that people use language that reflects their dominant learning sense. "Do you see what I am saying" is a visual learner talking, just as "do you hear what I am saying" is used by an auditory learner. I have a hunch that people who love telling jokes are auditory learners, because they hear a joke and remember it, and have a ready storehouse of jokes and stories to share! People who say they "listen to the television" are auditory learners, while those who "watch TV" are visual learners. Those who listen to NPR or books on tape are certainly comfortable with auditory learning.

INTRODUCING MORE VISUAL MEDIA IN WORSHIP

What does this mean for those wishing to use more visual media in worship? It might mean starting a new service for your visual learners and to attract those visual learners who avoid worship because they do not listen or learn well by listening. Starting a new service gives everyone a choice and doesn't threaten the auditory learners and their worship service. Why force a predominantly aural congregation into having to look at visual illustrations when you can provide your congregation another style of worship at a different time? This additional worship service also may increase the number of visual visitors who are among your inactive members, those searching for a new church, or those who are craving worship that includes more of the senses.

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.

For those who can see and hear, worship will always involve both senses. With projection screens, projectors, computers, and surround-sound systems, it is possible to add more visuals to worship in ways that build a new tradition.

In the church I served, where we developed a weekly visually intensive multimedia service, we heard positive comments from many people over 70 years of age. One woman who visited with other family members 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. What started as an attempt to reach out to a visually-oriented generation of young people had unexpectedly attracted visual learners of all ages who had grown accustomed to seeing pictures in magazines and who have watched television and movies for most of their lives. Now they are getting the biblical text, sermon theme, and a memorable worship experience through both sound and image. Introducing visual 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, it can be done well. When such changes are harnessed to the purpose of worship—to experience and communicate God's word, spoken and visible—the change is understood as serving the heart and soul of the worship community.

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