

Media in Worship

Thomas E. Boomershine

As the Church begins to explore the potential relationship between electronic media and worship, it needs to consider:

- the history of earlier media systems in Christian worship
- the relationship between communication systems and cultural formation
- an integral approach to electronic communication technology in Christian worship

In that context, the challenge of the use of media in worship can be identified.

A History of Media in Worship

When the history of cultural communication systems is seen whole, there are three basic systems that have emerged: oral, writing, and electronic. When a new cultural communication system emerges, the old system continues but is modified in the context of the new dominant system. For example, oral communication continues as a primary means of communication in the worship of literate culture, but the role of storytellers and the character of sacrifice is radically modified. The lector/preacher replaces the storyteller and the symbolic sacrifice of the Eucharist replaces the sacrifice of animals. The history of worship can be seen as a highly complex and varied integration of communication systems into the worship of God.

Worship in oral, tribal culture is centered in storytelling, festivals, and animal sacrifice. The oral memory of the people is steadily reinforced by participation in prayer and the recital of the central stories of the tribe. This happens in the daily worship of the tribe in prayer or ritual gestures in the morning, at meals, and during the regular storytelling in the evening. A central element of regular personal and corporate worship is the sacrifice of animals and agricultural products. These prayers and stories are chanted so that the sounds of music, stories and songs are the atmosphere of oral cultural life. The festivals of the yearly cycle are the occasion for the recital of the great epic stories of the tribe, dancing and feasting, and the sacrifice of many animals. Thus, oral communication-- face to face speaking, communal singing, ritual action--has always been the primary communication system of worship.

Since the development of writing in the fourth millennium, approximately 3900-3500 years B.C.E., the patterns of worship in oral culture have been gradually modified as different aspects of the communication system of literacy have been integrated into worship. At the core of this development has been the integration of books into worship. The reading of Scriptures, the singing of songs from hymnals, and praying with prayer books has profoundly changed the character of worship. Furthermore, the styles of worship have been dramatically altered according to the levels of literacy in the worshipping community. One can experience the different styles of literate cultural worship in the differences between the worship of pentecostal/holiness churches and the worship of Presbyterian/ Episcopal churches. In general, one can estimate the degree of integration of written media in worship by:

- 1) the number of books a worshipper uses during worship
- 2) the size and character of the bulletin

- 3) the number of manuscripts and books used by the leaders (liturgy, sermon, prayers)
1
- 4) the level of literacy of the preacher.

The buildings constructed for worship in literate culture have been altered from the open-air character of temples for the conduct of sacrifice to the book-centered buildings of sanctuaries and education buildings.

Worship music has been transformed by the integration of the new musical instruments that have been developed in literate culture. In oral culture the dominant musical instrument is the drum with some form of guitar and flute providing harmony and melody. In literate culture, the organ and the piano have become the primary instruments. The complexity of the music of these instruments is inextricably connected with the development of systems for writing and reading music.

Finally, images have become central to worship. In Orthodox and Roman Catholic worship, icons, stained glass windows, statues, and paintings have served as the means for telling sacred stories, centering prayer, and directing attention to God. In even the most iconoclastic Protestant communities, the images of the sanctuary, the pulpit and lectern, the table, and the Bible have been an integral part of the environment of worship. And in the majority of Protestant churches, stained glass windows, central images over the altar, and various symbols are important elements of the worship space.

When seen in this context, many of the major controversies in the history of the Church over the role of icons, organs, buildings, and books have been about the role of media in worship. The rich complex of worship styles in the various branches of Christian worship can be described in terms of the ways in which the communication media of books, images, musical instruments, and architecture have become an integral part of worship.

A dimension of the conflicts about media in worship has been the relationship of media and culture. Communication systems and culture interact to shape and form each other. It is possible to identify characteristic elements of oral, literate, and electronic culture but it is also clear that different cultures form and shape communication media in different ways. Thus, the Arab Islamic cultures of the Middle East have interacted with both literate and electronic communication systems in very different ways than the predominantly Christian cultures of Europe and the U.S. It is impossible to sort out the complex dimensions of cause and effect. Both communication systems and the various elements of culture, form each other. In the same manner, the roles of media in worship are both shaped by and shape culture.

The controversies about media in worship have often been intense sources of conflict and division in the history of the Church: e.g., the iconoclastic controversies, the conflicts over instrumental versus vocal music, the conflicts over whether or not to include clocks in sanctuaries. These are also controversies about cultural values and ways of being in relation to God. Thus, the characteristics of Byzantine culture--icons, large hanging lamps, ornate golden symbols, bearded priests in black robes-- that have shaped many of the Christian holy sites in Israel and the styles of worship there, seem utterly foreign and alien to western culture and its styles of worship. These complex interactions of media and culture are part of the past and the future of media in worship.

Integrating Electronic Media

The development of electronic communication systems in the 20th century has already had a significant impact on worship. Electronic sound systems have become an integral part of the sanctuaries of many churches. This has made it possible for women whose voices are generally softer and more difficult to hear in large spaces to become leaders of worship with a degree of effectiveness that would not have been possible in pre-electronic worship centers. Electronic organs, which are both cheaper and easier to install than the earlier technology of pipe organs, have made it possible for many sanctuaries to have organ music. Another function of electronic communications has been to place electric lights in key places where the preacher can see what time it is. The lighting of sanctuaries by electric light has had an impact on worship at all times of the day and especially the night.

However, at this point in history, the use of electronic media in worship has been limited to electronic extension of the voices of worship leaders, organ music, and candle and lamp light. This has been an extension of the predominant understanding that has shaped the use of electronic media by the Church. It has viewed media in worship as an instrumental means of extending a message or accomplishing a task. Thus, an audio amplification system or an electronic organ is an electronic instrument that makes it possible to deliver the same kind of sound as in the past --a voice or an organ--more effectively. And electronic light has many advantages over candles and kerosene lamps for the instrumental task of lighting a sanctuary for worship. In this understanding of media, the role of electronic media is to be the means for more effectively delivering the same elements of worship as in the past.

The history of media in worship makes it clear that this is only the first step in the development of the relationship between media, culture and worship. Over time, new technologies of communication and culture become an integral part of worship and reform the character of worship. These new technologies become, in turn, a factor in the reformation of culture. A clear instance of this is the reformation of worship that took place in the aftermath of the invention of the printing press and the media revolution of mass printing and distribution of documents. The centrality of the sermon, the emergence of congregational singing of hymns, and the use of prayer books were all an integral part of the new styles of worship that emerged in print culture. These developments in the worship of the Church also had an impact on the reformation of the economic and educational systems of feudal culture and on the role of printing and education in the emerging cultures of the 16th century.

In order to provide an integral context for persons who live in electronic culture to worship God, it will be necessary for the Church to integrate electronic media into its worship. And in order to maintain continuity with its traditions, the Church will need to do this in a manner that is in continuity with the traditions of the Church. Some of the central elements of media in the worship of the Church in electronic culture are new electronic technologies.

Screens

Just as placing the Holy Book at the center of the sanctuary was the symbolic center of media in worship in print culture, so also placing a screen at the center of the sanctuary will be an important symbol in electronic culture. The role of the screen will be to show images that are

related to the elements of the worship service. These can include the words of hymns, videos, film clips, photographs, icons and pictures from the traditions of Christian art, also computer generated graphics and images from the Internet. The graphics may be printed words such as outlines, definitions of terms, related biblical texts, and Hebrew and Greek words. But they may also be newly created graphics that will visually concretize or supplement elements of the sermon, the history or experience of the congregation, or the Scriptures that are being recited. The challenge is to use the screens not solely as an instrumental means for putting the face of the preacher or priest on the screen, but also as an integral dimension of new forms of the sermon and prayer. Screens can potentially be used as an integral dimension of every aspect of worship from the call to worship to the benediction: singing, prayer, scripture recital, sermon, Eucharist, post-communion meditation, mission connection, and announcements.

Music

Perhaps the most controversial role of electronic media in worship now is the transformation of congregational music. The "praise song" led by a "praise team" is a new form of congregational music. Accompanied by a band composed of guitars, drums, a synthesizer, and various solo instruments such as a sax, flute, trumpet, or trombone, this form of congregational singing is more participatory than the forms of congregational singing with the organ or piano. With the words projected on a screen, the congregation is able to look up and sing together without reference to a hymnbook. This music is very young and will hopefully develop a much more varied and more spiritually profound musical tradition. The challenge will be to integrate the organ and the rich tradition of the hymns and songs of the Church into an electronic worship environment. A further dimension of the new music will be the emergence of new forms of prelude and postlude music that will provide a context for prayer and meditation prior to and following the service.

Scripture Lesson

The Scripture lesson has become the deadest part of worship especially in high literate churches in which the disembodied reading of the Scriptures in a virtual monotone has become normative. The Scripture lesson in electronic culture worship can be the occasion for making the Scriptures a vivid and compelling dimension of worship. The memorization and recital of the Scriptures with accompanying images and music is a new form of the Scripture lesson that can greatly enrich worship. In effect, this form of Scripture lesson embodies the Scriptures and through the images and music, connects the original character of the Scripture with contemporary culture.

The Sermon

The sermon can be transformed by the integral use of electronic media. The exegesis of the meaning of the text in its original ancient context can be deepened and broadened by being linked to images and materials from the cultures of the past, the present, and the future. The meaning of the biblical tradition now can be made vivid by integrating clips from contemporary music, film, and TV. The sermon itself can be reconceived as both a time for teaching and as an opportunity to retell and connect with the central stories of the tradition.

Electronic culture is a secondary oral culture in which elements of oral culture such as storytelling can be reintegrated into worship.

Linking

With the possibility of direct linkage to the Internet, it is now possible to establish links in worship with congregations and mission projects all over the world. The worship of each local congregation can be connected with other churches around the world.

The Challenge

The potential roles of electronic media in worship are at an early stage of development. Most of the churches that are using electronic media in worship are culturally conservative churches using the media as a way of reinforcing the political and economic cultures of the 19th century. The liberal churches have been extremely conservative in their use of electronic media in worship. The challenge for the conservative churches is to utilize electronic media in ways that will help to transform electronic culture in healthy ways rather than simply to reinforce traditional culture. And the challenge for the liberal churches is to integrate electronic media into its worship in a manner that will preserve maximum continuity with the traditions of the past and help to form a new global culture of peace and justice.

At one level the challenge of electronic media for the Church is the need to sacralize this new technology by the transformation of its role in culture. As in the past, the integration of new technologies into worship changes worship but it also changes the technology.

Finally, however, the issue is whether we can find ways to offer our new technologies to God as a fitting and appropriate offering of ourselves. In as far as we are identified with our communications system as we clearly have with writing, the offering of our literary liturgical creativity to God has been both fitting and appropriate. The challenge for the future is to be open to the ways in which God may be seeking to enable us to do this with electronic media.