

Creative Media within Timid Churches

LEN WILSON



TECHNOLOGY HAS become impossible to ignore for all but the most unplugged churches. One of the major components of this church technological overhaul involves the installation of projectors and screens in worship. Many church leaders and laypeople have voiced concerns about this trend, for a variety of reasons. Among other things, these naysayers feel that to leave the comfort of established traditions in worship and church life is the equivalent to leaving the rapidly shrinking oasis of truth for a desert of worldly practice.

In reality, this oasis, though known and comfortable, is theological and methodological death. The challenge of change-minded leadership is how to plan and implement strategies that will navigate unwilling, ignorant, and fear-oriented people through a wilderness of change to a fresh and relevant place where worship both glorifies God and communicates to the people of the culture in their own language.

There are a number of strategies that change agents may adopt to ensure the successful implementation of media in their local communities. Following are eight rules for churches to avoid death by evaporation and journey to a fresh and relevant place in worship and church life.

#1: Demonstrate, Don't Debate.

Among naysayers, the shrewder have become effective at attaching theological significance to their concerns. It is tempting as change agents to adopt a strategy where the majority of precious time and energy is spent trying to rectify incorrect theology, particularly for agents who have spent time studying the theology of the issue and have a slew of valid reasons why it is necessary to use media. I know I have felt this temptation.



Getting caught up in debate reminds me of an incident that happened to my wife and I late one night at our apartment in Ohio a few years ago. I woke up to the sound of rushing water. Running downstairs, I discovered that a pipe in our rear storage room had frozen and exploded, spraying freezing water throughout the storage room. Water had begun to leak under the drywall into our kitchen. Although the only solution was to grit my teeth and shut off the water, it was tempting (and less chilly) to lay down towels to stop the water that was rapidly covering our kitchen floor.

Trying to implement change through theological debate is sort of like trying to stop flooding by damming the water. Although a proper understanding and presentation of the theological significance of media as a form for communicating God's truth is essential, ongoing debate won't change people's minds. I have discovered time and again that one finely produced, properly executed worship experience is more effective than a lifetime of roundtable discussions at demonstrating the power

of the screen at communicating the heart of the Gospel.

#2: Don't Give In to Naysayers.

Let's assume that you have experienced this catalytic experience in worship. There is a likelihood that, although many have "converted" to being media advocates, there are still those hardliners who refuse to give in, for a variety of reasons. Have you ever known people who, once proven that they are wrong, refuse to acquiesce defeat? I have known people who would rather enter into a realm of complete irrationality than acknowledge another ideological possibility. Regardless of what you do, some people will never accept your leadership, whether it is in the realm of media, preaching, or what section of the parking lot to repave. As my old boss Mike Slaughter says, "put it up for a vote, and the people will always vote to go back to Egypt."

As a leader in Christ's church, it is your job to give both compassion and love to these people while at the same time holding fast to the mission that you have been given. Remember that it is more important that these people stay within God's kingdom than your specific church. In Matthew 15, Jesus is confronted with a Gentile woman whose daughter was demon-possessed. Even as he healed her, Jesus was clear that his mission was to the lost sheep of Israel. He could not afford to spend his precious energy on Gentiles, who were to follow with the later mission of the church. Acknowledge that while each member of God's kingdom is precious, the time you have on this earth is as well. Stay positive to them, stay loving, and stay committed to your mission.

#3: Get the Church's Leadership on Board.

The senior pastor and the music leader are the two most important players in the worship design

process, and if either or both of these people aren't on board with media experiences, they won't happen.

The problem is that for people in these positions who have been designing effective worship for quite a long time, there is not a clear mandate to change. It is easy as a change agent to deride their efforts as out of touch and obstacles to creating a team-based, contemporary worship experience. But change agents first need to respect that these people have

been striving to create meaningful worship for a long time. That they continue to work as individuals reflects their training in models taught them by seminaries and mentors in ministry.

The goal of change agents is to demonstrate a new model through the creation of a team environment for every aspect of worship planning, including music, calls to worship, and even the sermon. It is only through jointly prepared worship at every level that truly transforming integrated media worship may occur.

One of the old individualistic models has been the preaching model of three points with illustrations. This model was still employed by Mike Slaughter, my old boss at Ginghamburg Church, when I first arrived. I vividly remember the first few

months at Ginghamburg, when Mike would call me into his office on Friday afternoons, sit me in a chair, preach me his sermon in its entirety, and then ask me what graphics I could think of to insert. Needless to say, that was a difficult environment. Being asked to be creative on demand, as one person, was often demoralizing.

After a few months we brought in two more people and the creative potential improved, but we still couldn't get past the model of adding on to his completed talk. (This is what I like to call the "AV mentality.") Then, after five months of creative anguish, we had an incredible opportunity: noted civil rights leader Otis Moss was in town for a theological seminary board meeting, and agreed to be

Creating Change

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- #6: BE EXCELLENT
- #7: BE CREATIVE
- #8: BE CONSISTENT

interviewed by us for use in worship. Because of his schedule, we had to do the interview on a Wednesday. After the interview had taken place, I roughed together some video clips and Mike viewed them on Thursday morning. Because of the power of the points that Dr. Moss was making on tape, he decided to write his sermon points based on the clips. So for worship that weekend, we used Dr. Moss and civil rights footage throughout and, combined with other graphics, a drama, and music, created our first completely integrated worship experience. It was powerful! After that we all had a deeper understanding of what it meant to be integrated, not as an abstract idea or something related to one or two elements in worship, but something we had actually implemented.

Even a pastor with creative vision can get stuck in a situation with seemingly little money, creativity, or desire for change. In this situation getting the program staff and lay leadership on board means nurturing progressively minded people to assist in the worship process. Just as in the Dr. Moss example, finding specific weekends requiring their assistance and planning will demonstrate to them the nature of the model. This will raise the enthusiasm for a large number of your intended team.

But bumps are inevitable. In spite of our collective experiences at Ginghamburg, we ended up going through a great deal of change in music leadership as we strived to integrate. Through every change in our worship planning team, we continued to try out various members, changing the makeup of our worship planning team, until it fell into synergetic place.

For more reading about worship teams and the Ginghamburg model, check out “Out on the Edge” by Michael Slaughter.

#4: Don't Spend a Ton of Money at First. (Show the need.)

It is not necessary to spend a lot of money to create a catalytic worship experience. The Dr. Moss weekend consisted of little else than “talking head” video and a few images of the civil rights era. Looking back, the production values were nothing to write home about. Yet the summary of the experience produced a synergy that went beyond its production values and the capabilities of our talent and equipment.

It is entirely possible to achieve incredible results with only two televisions hooked up to a single VCR, showing high-end feature films from

Hollywood. Such little pieces of media will demonstrate the possibilities of the medium, and don't require much money. Church media pioneer Dennis Benson once told me that money doesn't follow a budget line item; it follows vision.

Whether it be organizations or families, if a project is passionate enough, it is possible to find the money to make it happen. Passion is created through the excellent presentation of media's possibilities in worship (see above). A set of these experiences will begin to open doors for the money necessary to maintain a consistent presentation for the long haul.

#5: Start Slowly.

If a church has the people and equipment resources to put together a completely integrated weekend *sui generis*, or out-of-nowhere, then more power to them. A more common scenario for a novice church, and one that is less prone to screw ups, is one in which a minor amount of media is used with excellence. This is more feasible both from a planning standpoint and an excellence standpoint.

One small church I know set up two TVs to a VCR and showed a clip from *A Christmas Carol* one Christmas. This was innocuous enough that the congregation didn't feel threatened, it was easy to pull off, and it fit well into the context of that pastor's sermon. A few examples of this can have the effect of creating enthusiasm not from the leadership but from the laity. Instead of being a forced mandate, then, changes in worship become mandates from the congregation.

#6: Be Excellent.

As good of an idea as it was, there were two problems with their Christmas Carol clip. The first was that the audio was not wired into the church's sound system. Instead, they turned up the audio coming from the little TV speakers really high, which came out distorted in their acoustically inferior worship space. This was especially troublesome since the clip they chose was from a black-and-white era film that was difficult to both see and hear. Only choose media that works within your space. Try it out to see what the experience is like in the sanctuary, both in regard to video and audio.

As a rule, don't do anything you cannot do well. As stated in *The Wired Church*, excellence both applies to production values and to lucidity of mes-

sage. Speak something simply, so that everyone can understand, and use forms that are simply understood. Messages that come across muddled due to the choice of medium are more detrimental than messages with no creative presentation at all.

#7: Be Creative.

Do you ever notice how often it is the children's sermon that is the most energizing moment in a traditional worship service? It is the one time that most people, adults included, feel like lessons in the faith are presented in a way that doesn't require a seminary degree to understand. Whenever I am in a traditional service and see the congregation's face light up during a children's sermon, I am amazed at what it says about the ineffectiveness of most "adult" sermons at their intended job.

The point of using media is to energize worship through making connections to the culture in which we live. Using black-and-white film clips and out of date music as elements, which may have a point in the proper context, defeat the very purpose of media by being disconnected from present culture.

Creativity can be demonstrated in many ways, not all of which are directly related to screen use. One church in the Dallas area set up a chef in the sanctuary who cooked all morning while the pastor preached on the parable of the great banquet to which no one came. Both the visuals and the smells of the chef's presence made that morning a memorable one for that congregation. Further, screen use can tie together various creative elements. A simple banquet graphic a la Food Network would thematically reinforce the live chef element while providing ongoing visual art for the entire experience.

#8: Be Consistent.

The second problem with the Christmas Carol clip was that the church did little to follow up on the experience. An event like this requires strategic planning in order to lead to a more long-term complete solution. For example, the pastor should have included another film clip within three weeks, followed by a clip somewhere else in worship within a month. A series of events over the course of time gives the model legitimacy through its varied use. Rather than debating the presence of the communication form as a discipline that needs to be addressed rather than assumed, demonstrate its nature through a consistent presentation. Properly executed, a pattern of use will reveal that digital media and screen use are not simply "toys," or "entertainment," but a viable form for the presentation of the Gospel.

While these tips provide the basis for a change strategy that can revitalize a congregation, there is always the distinct possibility that no amount of mountain moving may lead them away from their shrinking oasis. The decision whether to "shake off your feet," or leave them to their own devices in order to salvage your own spiritual vitality, is one best left up to ongoing prayer and discernment with the Giver of your passions.



LEN WILSON is the author of the best seller, The Wired Church: Making Media Ministry, which church growth guru Lyle Schaller called "the most important book of the next three years," on its publication in 1999. Its sequel, Digital Storytellers: The Art of Communicating the Gospel, is due from Abingdon Press in the coming year.

To implement or revitalize your congregation's use of varying media types, contact:

Evangelism Ministry Team: 800.UCC.FIND;
e-mail <schoend@ucc.org>

Proclamation, Identity, Communications:
Ron Buford, 216.736.2105;
e-mail <bufordr@ucc.org>

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