

8 Tips for Using Visuals in Worship

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Visual images are powerful. We are surrounded by images used to influence our behavior as consumers. What is the role of the church in using images? More than five years ago I wrote about the connection between [computer icons and iconography](#). At that time I suggested using a [stained glass of the day](#). It's time for an update!

For the past two years I've been in many churches as a worshipper or guest speaker. I've seen carefully chosen images do many things well: create a mood, arouse curiosity about a subject, or help a worshipper enter into a biblical story by illustrating the climate, clothing, and topography of a place. Excellent!

I've also seen screens used to scroll church announcements or to project the words to songs. These uses have their place. But sometimes images are a bit like filler, a digital version of clip art. For instance, a picture of an offering plate or a generic cross on a hill with a sunset behind. These images remind me of the old-fashioned sort of kitchen wallpaper that features spatulas and rolling pins. Were we in danger of forgetting where we are? Just like clip art, these generic images feel like yesteryear and can actually diminish the worship experience by trivializing it.

I understand that choosing and using images can be yet another time-suck for people who already have too many things to do. Perhaps then the screens should stay dark. Don't let them become a negative thing, for either the worship leader or the worshipper. Worship is just too important for that.

EIGHT TIPS FOR USING VISUALS IN WORSHIP

1. Have an attitude of experimentation. Invite people to respond as to what is helpful and what is distracting.
2. Choose a few images carefully. Less is more. Try using a single image as a contemplation point or the "stained glass of the day."

3. If possible, let the edges of your image extend beyond the borders of the screen. Keep in mind that color tends to wash out in large spaces like sanctuaries, so choose images that do not depend entirely on color for their impact.
4. Mix it up. Use great artwork of past eras, stained glass images, icons from orthodox traditions, photos from late-breaking news stories, a child's interpretation of a scripture story, a classic Sunday School image, a photo of natural beauty. Avoid the cliché.
5. Try using a disturbing image as a jolt, but don't leave it up for a long time. Just make a point and move on.
6. Timing can be important, so become comfortable with the clicker, or work with the person who is changing the images.
7. Limit the amount of text. Too much text can be a trap for preachers, who often think in words. Putting a sermon outline on the screen is not the same as using visuals in worship. When using text, try white letters on a black background and choose a font with a serif. Use the largest font possible and pay careful attention to the line breaks. Check for typos, which are distracting.
8. Experiment with using an "Inquiry Image" for children's time. Show an evocative image that relates to the topic and ask the children what they wonder about. But don't answer their wonderings. Just let the questions gather speed. It will engage the curiosity of the adults as well as the children.

EIGHT EXAMPLES OF VISUALS THAT WORKED WELL

1. A photo of a dry, curling leaf as we considered a healing story, changing to a spring leaf as a closing image
2. A series of paintings of homeless children, women, and men, as we considered the "least of these"
3. An image of geese rising as we considered "the birds of the air"
4. Photos from my trip to the Mount of Transfiguration and Jesus' baptismal site, as we considered those stories
5. A DVD clip from "The Gospel of John" when the text was the raising of Lazarus
6. Images of women baking bread around the world on World Communion Day
7. The tool of Google Maps to zoom from the globe, to the continent, to the country, to the county, to the rooftop of our church as we considered Acts, a kind of reversal of "from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth"

8. A clip from “Doctor Who” as we considered in what way Jesus is a Time-Lord

I have not addressed the issue of copyright, which could be another blogpost.

What would you add to either of these lists?

Originally posted at [Love the Work \(do the work\)](#)