Celebrating the Possibilities: Media Art in Preaching and Worship
By Michael Bausch

The perspective that I bring to this conversation is as a parish pastor with a long experience of using visuals and visual technologies in worship and preaching. During the 1960's and 1970's many of us tried using 35mm slides, record albums, and video tapes to offer what is now called "liturgical media art" in worship and education. Somewhere in the middle of the 1990's technologies changed, and it became even easier to bring pictures, music, and video into sanctuaries. It was during this time that I developed, along with teams of laity, a weekly media-intensive worship experience in a mid-sized Midwestern church.

During those years I also began to offer workshops on the use of media in worship to denominational gatherings, taught summer courses at a number of mainline seminaries, helped develop a doctor of ministry program in digital media and congregational revitalization, and wrote a number of articles and a book about screens, media art, and worship. All of this is to say that while I have long experience with using media in preaching and worship, I have also combined this with research in the field to better guide clergy and laity who are also interested in developing or improving liturgical media art in their worship and preaching settings.

It is not my purpose to define for you worship, preaching, and liturgy. I trust that you have your own understanding of their origin, purpose, function, and presentation as they happen each week within the life of your own worshiping congregation. Generally speaking, many of us would agree that what happens in worship is that people gather to:

> Come into God's presence,
> Engage the Word of God,
> Respond to the experience of that Word, and
> Be sent back out into the world.

Much of how this is accomplished is in telling the stories of faith. This is done through story-telling in many dimensions: the announcements of the congregation, where people are told what has happened and what is to happen in the life of the gathered church; the singing of hymns, songs, and anthems in which stories, scriptures, and theological lessons are presented; the liturgies of prayer in which life stories, plots, tensions, and resolutions are named; the reading of scriptures through which biblical stories are remembered; the preaching of sermons filled with illustrations, anecdotes, and stories organized to draw meaning from the scriptures.

Most of what I have described is familiar to worship leaders, and follows the structure of how this story-telling occurred in biblical times. The song of Miriam at the sea in Exodus 15:20-21 is a celebration and a testimony to the story of the deliverance of the Hebrews from the Egyptian oppression. Joshua called for 12 stones to be carried across the Jordan River and placed on the promised land (Joshua 4:4-7) so that children will see them and ask, "What do these stones mean?" in order that the story can be told. Jesus told parables which then raised questions in his listeners' minds, which stimulated further discussion, for the sake of a life lesson.

Songs, monuments, and parables all are means to tell the stories of faith. There is yet another way to tell stories, and it was used by the early churches when they painted simple pictures and symbols in the catacombs, and by later congregations as they added mosaics, stained glass windows, painted canvases, and fabric art to show the stories and their symbols in the worship sanctuaries. These media, put together into a harmonious whole (which is the art and science of rhetoric), helped tell the stories of faith effectively while inviting a worship congregation to remember these stories, apply the lessons learned to their own lives, and experience the catharsis of being grasped and pulled in by the story.

Today's presentation technologies make it easy to continue this long tradition of story telling in worship while increasing the options for doing so. As I have learned while developing weekly media-intensive worship services for eight years, this can bring changes to a worship community. What primarily started as a means of telling the stories of faith more effectively to a visual (and audio-visual) generation in worship by picture and parable from popular media, came to bring many unanticipated results.

Increases in worship attendance.

As with all increases in worship attendance, the increase was due to a number of factors. While the main factor for this was adding an additional worship service to the Sunday morning schedule, making the service visually centered and culturally relevant created an interest among those searching for something new and different. People started coming with the expectation that something new, different, and engaging would be presented as part of the worship service. More young adults and families with children started attending worship more regularly. They represented a generation accustomed to screens, relevant music, and film clips, but for whom the application of these materials to biblical story and theological theme became a draw. More men began to attend worship, partly as a result of the simplification of the liturgy by reducing the number of words that were read, increasing the number of pictures that were seen, and by reducing the number of hymns

that were sung. These increases also were a result of members inviting friends and family into the worship service. The media service created a new sense of evangelism. People who felt the multimedia worship experience met their needs through its attention-getting excitement and cultural relevancy became very comfortable inviting friends and acquaintance to this unique experience.

Increases in mission giving.

We came to see how effective visuals were for helping people better understand the mission causes the church was promoting through special offerings. Pictures of these appeals, and in some cases brief video clips, helped draw people into the story of the project and give to support these very specific needs. Thousands of dollars were raised for victims of Hurricane Katrina because we were able to show pictures of local people on site in Louisiana purchasing and delivering diapers, towels and blankets from the initial donations provided by our church. More gifts followed these pictorial reports. These emailed pictures helped dramatize the urgency of the situation as well as show the specific ways our congregation's donations were being used. In another instance, hundreds of dollars were quickly donated to help out a local family with expenses associated with the premature birth of twins and their hospitalization in a nearby city. We were able to show pictures of the newborns on a weekly basis and report their progress as well as highlight the amounts being donated by church members toward various medical needs. Having the projector, screen, and computer in place in the sanctuary made it easy to "think visually" and show the various causes we were supporting, thus making it easy to raise much-needed funds.

Increased engagement with the sermon.

Another response to the use of visuals in worship was the increased discussion and interaction with material presented during "visual sermons." With the addition of illustrations to a message, including symbols, diagrams, film clips, and photography, people could enter a message at different points stimulated by the visuals, reflect upon what they saw and heard through their own experience, and gain a memorable experience to talk about afterwards with others. Pictures made the preaching themes more memorable by adding an additional sense, the visual to the auditory. Besides the stimulation of dialogue about sermon presentations, there seemed to be more catharsis resulting from some of the powerful visual illustrations. We noticed that there were more tears in worship as a result of music combined with rich imagery and linked up with scriptural text and theological theme. Dramatic and emotionally gripping film sequences added to the catharsis in

unexpected ways. People were touched and drawn deeper into the sermon message through the use of visuals and audio in the sermon.

An expanded opportunity for preaching contemporary issues.

Those clergy wishing to preach contemporary social issues can find an easy alliance with visual media. All of today's social issues are communicated through popular media of film, television programs, books, newspaper and magazine articles and photographs, and in many songs. Preachers can select from a wide variety of visual resources to illustrate a topic and present an outline for understanding the issues involved as well as to demonstrate a theological viewpoint. In their preaching and during worship, church leaders can use the screen to more effectively communicate and promote theological, political, economic, and social issues. Poverty, war, racism, gender inequalities, consumerism, and global warming are easily illustrated with photograph, art, film clip, and animated graphics as part of a sermon illustration, prayer litany, or invitation to the offertory. Preachers and liturgists can visually show local, regional, national, and global church efforts to reduce the effects of poverty, to protest war, to dismantle racism, to foster cross cultural-communication and competencies, to educate about HIV/AIDS, to eliminate the death penalty, to mobilize efforts to face up to global warming and encourage necessary life-style changes, and to affirm a diversity of loving relationships and family systems.

As the Bush Administration developed its case to invade Iraq, we offered sermons about nonviolence as a Christian approach to international conflict. We found pictures to accompany the U-2 song "Peace on Earth" and showed Iraqi families in their homes and communities. Through this multimedia approach we hoped to put a human face on the Iraqi people. As part of the song we posted on the screen quotations from Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nietzsche, and Jesus about non-violence. We found old newspaper articles from the local community during the Vietnam War, where people questioned the role of God in times of warfare.

As our state was considering a constitutional amendment to define marriage as solely between one man and one woman, we provided a Valentine's Day sermon that featured illustrations from traditions surrounding the original St. Valentine, who was imprisoned by the Roman government for illegally performing marriages of soldiers who were not to be married while they served Rome. His was an example of affirming loving relationships even when the government had passed laws defining who could marry and when.

On a Memorial Weekend we juxtaposed patriotic songs about America with film clips from the film, "The Fog of War" (2003), featuring video and audio

tapes of Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara willfully deceiving the American public about sending more troops to Vietnam. This media vividly illustrated the vigilance people must maintain when governments wage war without much public accountability.

After a local clergy association expelled Muslim and Wicca members of the group (these clergy were chaplains in a state correctional facility in the community), we outlined the necessity of interfaith dialogue through onscreen images of newspaper headlines and articles about the local controversy. Scenes were shown from a PBS documentary about a similar controversy that was generated when a Lutheran pastor prayed with people of other faiths at a September 11 memorial service at Yankee Stadium.

On Mother's Day we showed photographs of a local dog who had adopted some orphaned kittens, and then used a song about a non-traditional family composed of two lesbians raising a child together, showing pictures of a diversity of family configurations, including multiracial and same-gender families, and more pictures of that dog mothering some kittens! This was to illustrate a message about the wide embrace and compassion we experience from many mothers, and how this is a call to all of us that comes from Christian faith.

In all of these cases, the screen was effectively used to show the issues being discussed through the use of photographs, artwork, quotations, and film clips. The screen became a new window in the sanctuary, a window where with imagination, creativity, and passion, a media arts team can boost the preacher's persuasive appeals from the pulpit.

Widespread involvement by members of the congregation in planning and presenting worship.

As much of our screened material was locally-produced, this approach created the need for more people to become involved. As people caught the excitement of what happened by adding visuals to worship, some of them learned how to share their own artistic sensibilities by combining imagery with music, or finding film clips of scenes relevant to theological discussion and preaching themes. While some people came forward through general invitations, others stepped forward on their own, volunteering to assist in small manageable projects. Those who were already involved and who had shared certain experiences could help bring others in and train them.

Further, this called attention to the fact that many people in the congregation had skills that were under-used by the church. By adding visual arts to worship we invited in the photographers, graphic artists, art

educators, artists, videographers, and latent media artists to share their gifts to illustrate and present various preaching and theological messages. This in turn served to reactivate inactive members. We found that the typical over-reliance upon musical arts in worship brings in musicians and singers of a congregation yet excludes many who are visually-oriented. Some of them are nominally involved in church because the church hasn't met their needs. They return when invited back in to share and experience worship with a visually rich environment. This participation came to affirm the continued use of visuals in worship. Such positive reactions grew a culture of expectation that the church would continue to use the screen in direct relationship to preaching and worship.

As youth and adults became comfortable developing PowerPoint presentations with original photography and appropriate music, a kind of cottage industry developed which provided limited opportunities for some part-time work. As more people caught on to the power of visual displays in special events such as weddings, funerals, and special worship occasions like confirmations and celebrations of graduations, they asked church members who knew how to do this to provide them with media art for these family occasions. Families hired young people to develop wedding and funeral presentations with their skills at camera work, video editing, and scanning and creating slide shows. This arrangement provided a source of income for some teens and adults who were able to develop the media art that fit these occasions.

Most Important Change: The Blossoming of an Interpretive Community.

Probably the most important unexpected change that took place as a result of the introduction of media arts in worship was the development of an interpretive community. As more and more people became engaged in direct experiences with creating "liturgical media art", they came to understand the importance of having theological conversations to link biblical text with cultural media productions such as film clips and pairing of images to music and lyrics. Rather than becoming recipients of someone else's messages about scripture during worship, they became direct participants with a stake in a creative engagement and application of scripture to cultural media. People developed a fluency with a kind of hybrid worship language from the creative interchange between cultural media and theology.

The interpretive community became widespread. Large numbers of people became involved in many different aspects of developing, preparing, and presenting liturgical media arts, or in becoming part of the milieu in which is was nurtured and shared. Small groups met regularly to study lectionary texts, select themes, and brainstorm film clips and music that could be used

to help illustrate those themes. The core team invited others in the church to find pictures, art, music, and lyrics that seemed to connect with various biblical themes and stories. Some watched films and found scenes with obvious connections to "churchy" topics such as prayer, forgiveness, sin, peace, love, and justice. Those who joined in these efforts developed the practice of drawing preaching themes out of cultural "texts" or finding "texts" to support preaching themes. Some people grew fluent in this process and suggested or developed entire worship services that focused on a theme of personal interest that could be easily illustrated by film and music. A group of nurses, for example, prepared a worship service around the relationship of health and faith.

Film groups, book groups, and bible study groups all fed into the experience of weekly worship. Photographers and painters saw the connection of their arts with worship. Trips to area art museums and international travel changed members' views of art and they returned with new suggestions for using visuals in worship. Some members enjoyed the solitary experiences of working with computers to artistically enhance and edit photographs and videos to provide original illustrative material.

This interpretive community extended to those whose involvement was simply a part of their attendance at weekly worship. Some worshipers reported finding themselves making connections with Sunday's message connecting the presented message during the following week when they encountered popular music and media. The media triggered for them thoughts of the message that had been illustrated by the media the previous Sunday.

As a result of these surprising and often unanticipated results of using liturgical media art in worship, I came to understand and develop what I found to be three principles of interpretive communities. These principles help answer the question why the blossoming of interpretive communities matters in our churches.

Interpretive communities center themselves around the scriptures.

Interpretive communities grow in relation to their mutual study of scripture together. They find ways to experience scriptural story and theological theme through commentaries, poems, novels, paintings, films, short stories, sculptures, fabric art, movement and dance. They expose their faith to the arts in all of its forms, and their conversations together create meaning through theological reflection. These communities come to understand their life and faith as lived in the midst of a particular location and community.

Interpretive communities equip one another to grow in understanding and participation.

Interpretive communities equip one another to construct, present, and interpret the messages of Christian faith through their educational, social, worship, and mission practice. They go to art museums and talk together about what they see; they attend concerts and films to experience, engage, and discuss with hearts of faith; they form book groups to read anything that informs hearts and minds about life, love, theology, critical social issues, or recent biblical scholarship; they select social projects and join efforts to identify systemic injustice, oppose war, eradicate poverty, dismantle racism, and work for gender equity; they develop, present, and evaluate worship experiences that build community, honor and worship God, and send people equipped with faith and purpose out into the world.

Interpretive communities grow over time.

All who join with a worship community participate in that particular community's history, tradition, and practice. This is a living process that evolves over a period of time. People have come and gone in the life of that community, and the community is always changing through births, marriages, confirmations, deaths, as well as through its participation in its entire social, educational, mission, and worship experience. People grow comfortable in these communities as they spend time with them. These communities of interpretation actively engage, interpret, and construct the meanings that a broken world desperately needs. As they join together to create and support artistic interpretations of biblical story and theology, they grow in trusting one another, they develop means for whole-brain learning through the use of multisensory media, and they formulate ways to engage the world through faithful witness.

Today's digital media technologies of screens, projectors, computers, and music playback devices make it easy and affordable for church members to create, store, and present attention-getting audio and visual resources for worship and preaching. In the hands of interpretive communities of faith, these technologies can contribute to a vibrant theological conversation that has the potential to make a transformative difference in the lives of those who participate. As my own experience has shown, these new media offer churches limitless creative possibilities for telling the stories of faith in engaging and memorable ways.

[This article by Michael Bausch, with the additional material below, is scheduled to appear in the May, 2008 issue of Liturgy.]

Interpretive communities need a ready supply of resources!

Listed here are three websites that continue to prove to be useful for creative worship preparation in interpretive communities. One site develops lectionary based resources, one engages film, music, and other products of popular culture from a spiritual perspective, and one provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how to use today's media to reach a digital media generation.

http://www.textweek.com

This website is well known to many clergy as a starting point for weekly sermon preparation. While organized by lectionary text, the site offers the capacity to search for specific scripture passages, making it helpful to those not particularly bound to using the lectionary. The website is full of resources including sample sermons, illustrations, stories, primary sources and bible translations.

Of particular interest to those using projection technologies are the art and movie concordances. Works of art are searchable by their connection to scripture passages and themes, and are presented in chronological order with the oldest art listed at the top of the page and the newest works at the bottom. This information is helpful for those looking for either more classical or more contemporary art, including that of artists from around the world.

The movie concordance also lists films and scene descriptions by their connection to lectionary texts and themes. Unfortunately with most descriptions there is little guidance for where to find the scene in the film. It is left to the reader to watch the film, find the scene, and preview the content for its suitability in one's worship setting. While this is not the best solution for those hoping for a reference to quickly-found DVD chapters and minute marks, textweek.com still provides a stimulating starting point for finding film clips appropriate to lectionary scripture passages.

http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/

This site affirms the presence of the gospel in today's films. Using the slogan, "Pop culture with a spiritual point of view," the website provides reviews of films currently showing at theaters as well as DVD's available for rental and purchase. Each review offers a synopsis of the film's story line and then adds commentaries from Christian writers sharing their perspectives and uncovering scriptural references, theological themes, and "what to look for."

I find the site very useful when I have a hunch there might be sermon material in a film that I am either looking to rent or going to the theater to see. For example, with the entire media buzz" surrounding a film like "The Da Vinci Code", HJ offered plenty of study resources and interpretive guidance. That said, the website is more than a film database. Dozens of reviewers discuss current TV shows, music, fiction and nonfiction books, and comic books, all with an eye towards their spiritual contribution. You can stay current by reading blogs, listening to podcasts, or getting RSS feeds sent to your email address. HJ is a great starting point for church leaders who wish to understand and to reflect upon the many messages communicated through today's popular culture.

http://www.marcprensky.com/

This website is helpful to those wishing to understand the impact of digital technologies on today's children and youth, and how teachers (and preachers) need to find new ways to communicate with today's "digital natives."

Marc Prensky is an educator who creates videogame-based training tools designed to teach today's technically fluent children, youth, and young adults. In his ground-breaking article, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants", Prensky coins the term "digital natives" to refer to those who are natural users of computers, video games, and the Internet. Those people not born into this digital world he calls "digital immigrants." Although they are using much of today's technology, digital immigrants retain an "accent" because they were born before the advent of home computers, cell phones, and the Internet. Prensky maintains that today's educational challenge is for the digital immigrants teaching in classrooms (and preaching in our churches) to find ways to effectively reach out to the "natives" in our midst.

At his website, Prensky offers downloadable versions of his many articles about today's youth and how they think differently, and how their brains are changed as a result of their use of digital technologies. When navigating his website, click on "Writings" to go to a number of his free articles, including those with practical suggestions for developing effective teaching and learning strategies.

Prensky has given us a way to understand the shift that has been taking place ever since the development of the radio, the camera, the moving picture, and television: those who use these media are affected by them. Prensky discusses how the"digital" world of technology is changing human brains. If brains are being changed, and if multiple generations of people are now shaped by electronically-delivered content, how does the church harness this force for the sake of the gospel?

Michael Bausch may be reached at mgb103@gmail.com