

Visual Arts and Worship Seminar

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I. Introduction

Two facts of our present situation:

- a. The visual turn in culture, and the presence of people who are primarily visual learners (60% across cultures). This cultural context shapes the people who come to our places of worship. Yet the relation of word and image is still complex: TV programs and Movies still start with scripts!
- b. The inescapably visual character of worship. The space, and imagery of our worship does say something—it invariably shapes us emotionally. The question is: what does what we see in worship ‘say’? Does it enhance worship? Impede it?

--Note we are not taught to focus on the visual dimension of worship because we, Protestants at least, have been taught that the visual cannot be the bearer of independent meaning. It is illustration. But the medieval theologians knew we are what we see (what is the significance of the fact that we close our eyes in prayer?). It is important to bear in mind these traditional attitudes for they shape peoples’ expectation along with the broader culture (one of causes of failure in first call is not picking up with the culture of the church to which pastor goes).

Nouwen: Just as we are responsible for what we eat, so we are responsible for what we see. It is easy to become a victim of the vast array of visual stimuli surrounding us. The ‘powers and principalities’ control many of our daily images...Still we do not have to be passive victims of a world that wants to entertain and distract us... A spiritual life in the midst of our energy-draining society requires us to take conscious steps to safeguard that inner space where we can keep our eyes fixed on the beauty of the Lord.

II. The Visual serves the liturgy (which is the work of the people).

1. The narrative shape of worship is the fundamental structure of worship:
 - a. The gathering: God calls us to worship.
 - b. The word: we are shaped by hearing and responding to the Word.
 - c. The Eucharist: Offering, thanksgiving, communion (with God and others).
 - d. The Sending
2. Traditionally various symbolic elements are added to embody and express this shape:
 - a. Processionals carry in the word, often singing, sometimes dancing.
 - b. Responsive singing and speaking
 - c. Kneeling at prayers.
 - d. Scripture (Gospel) read in the midst of the congregation.

Historically these have stimulated the arts: drama, music, poetry etc. But the art is never gratuitous (or autonomous)—it always serves the action of the liturgy. Video and Imagery are mostly used badly, because we do not understand the essentially aesthetic character of worship, so it becomes teaching, art as illustrations.

III. Art has its own special ‘voice’ to bring to the liturgy. Bishops conference: “People have only their own arts and styles of expression with which to celebrate.” (in Chinn, 1).

1. Art and space. Our spaces are designed by architects presumably to encourage worship. But much can be done to imaginatively enhance these spaces: Redesign, banners and fabric design (Chinn et al).
Stress: Light/darkness; silence; color; movement/drama.
2. Electronic media. Video, abstract design and colors to underline and enhance the liturgical movement.
3. Using visual artists to create specific works of art.
4. What special gifts does art bring to worship: Making visible; making memorable; making symbolic (connecting).

IV. Process of using visuals is part of the larger process of bringing the community together to maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4). Nancy Chinn: “Our work is not so much to make the holy visible, as it is to proclaim that the Holy is present.”

1. Begin with the context: cultural, physical, liturgical, theological, pastoral.
 2. The role of artists. Not to be asked to do “something for next week” on Wednesday night! Not presumed to volunteer significant amounts of time when they struggle to make a living (issue of patronage).
 3. Pastor as coach, who encourages a process in which many voices are heard. Leads in outlining the special events of the Christian year.
 4. Community participation in which all contribute their gifts.
- Process gone wrong, see Chinn, p. 37, 38.

V. Conclusion: Art, decoration and worship.

Resources:

Fiona Bond. *The Arts in Your Church* (Piquant, 2001).

Calvin Institute of Worship (www.calvin.edu/worship).

Nancy Chinn. *Spaces for Spirit: Adorning the Church* (Liturgical Training Publications, 1998).

William Dyrness. *Visual Faith: Art, Theology and Worship in Dialogue* (Baker, 2001).

_____. *Primer on Christian Worship* (Eerdmans, 2009)

Linda M. Goens. *Praising God through the Lively Arts* (Abingdon, 1999).

Christ Stoffel Overvoorde. *So You've been asked to Design Visuals for Worship* (Christian Reformed Publications, 1999).

_____. *Passing the Colors: Engaging Visual Culture in the 21st Century* (Eerdmans, 2002).

Reformed Worship Magazine (reformedworship.org)

Quentin J. Schultze. *High Tech Worship? Using Presentational Technologies Wisely* (Baker Books, 2004).

Eleanore Feucht Sudbrock. *Seasons for Praise: Art for the Sanctuary, Ideas for Integrating Art and Worship* (Concordia, 2000).