

Effective Communication: A Guide for Congregations

Still Photography

Photographs can communicate powerfully whatever story you are telling. As a congregation photographer, your story is the Gospel. Your images of people, places and programs point toward the God in whose image we are created.

With so much competition from other sources, the images we use in our church publications are crucial, and often determine the impact our stories have upon the readers. Most internal church print publications are black and white, whereas brochures, Web sites and other external publications utilize color to full advantage. The challenge is to capture the heart of a story in a still photo; good photographs convey strong emotions and drama, and may tell the story by themselves.

When planning your photographs, ask yourself what sets this person, program or congregation apart? What would capture the imagination of the reader? What photographic image would establish the uniqueness of this particular story? The essence of a photograph, which conveys emotion or something which is unique or different, can draw a reader eagerly into the story. Photographic images not only inform the reader, they also evoke emotional responses by focusing on the human element of the story. Here are some tips for capturing the soul of a story:

- Look for strong emotions in your subject, and don't be afraid to move in close enough to capture the moment. Facial expressions communicate with more impact than words alone.
- Use sequence shots. Three or more photos taken in succession can tell the story from beginning to end. Readers can experience the beginning, the middle and the completion of the action.
- Use the surroundings. Check the background for elements which will help communicate the message: buildings, people, banners, signs, equipment, etc.
- Establish a relationship - between parent and child, an individual and a group, between an individual and an inanimate object.
- Look for the unusual. The surprise element will capture the reader's imagination. The visual question, "what's wrong with this

The primary challenge of still photography is capturing life or action with a click of the shutter.

picture?" often conveys what is different or unique.

Types of Photos

Faces

Frontal shots of the subject's face put an image with a name and connect an impersonal story to a human being. Emotions can make an enormous difference in the effectiveness. Try a new twist: have the subject looking off camera, with their face turned in the direction of their eyes. A spontaneous shot of the subject speaking also works well. When using a frontal shot, try to capture the emotion appropriate for the article. Remember, a smiling face is more appealing than a dry, emotionless expression.

Grips and grins

The congratulatory, hand-shaking photograph is overused and lacking in originality. It's been used so often that readers tend to overlook it. Try a different angle or view, showing the action from a seldom-seen vantage point. Capture the action while it happens; don't try to stage it afterwards for the photo. Try to establish the relationship of the recipient and the presenter through visual interaction, by their expressions or through the actual presentation of the award.

Group shots and backsides

Try to avoid using photos that show too many people from the rear. A group photo of people facing each other is better taken from the side, so at least partial faces show.

"This is our church" shots

Your members are your church! Photos of your congregation's chancel with the communion rail closed and no action at the altar need to be avoided, exterior photos with the doors closed likewise. If you want to present your congregation as a welcoming place, photograph your Sunday morning greeters in place, or everybody singing a hymn or the pastor distributing Holy Communion.

Freezing motion for moving pictures

It requires a trained eye and the quick reaction of a photographer who may have only a split second to

record an image before it vanishes. An action photo (with movement, activity and nuances) makes the reader feel they are taking part. It can elicit feelings of vicarious participation in people half a world away.

Be prepared. Prior to an event, think through the elements of the story. Plan ahead: imagine the conditions, the lighting and the positions of the subjects, and arrive early enough to check out these important factors.

- Make sure you have all the equipment you'll need. Plan for all potential photographic situations. If possible, look over the setting a few days in advance, to determine the type of photos you will want to take.
- Pay attention! Take into account the totality of the situation. Keep an eye on the bystanders, too. Watch for the unusual, the unexpected, and be ready to capture it. Don't be so surprised yourself that you miss a good shot.
- Move quickly. Unique moments happen only once, so you must prepare for the expected and the unexpected. Some of the best photographs are simply a matter of being in the right place at the right time and could never have been anticipated, but preparation is the "insurance" that when the extraordinary happens, you'll have the correct photographic tools at your disposal.

Composition and publication

Take a good look through the viewfinder before taking the picture. Concentrate on the background: is that flag pointing out of someone's head? Use the surrounding elements: perhaps a banner alone would tell part of the story.

Determine the focal point. Is it the subject, or are other elements competing for the reader's attention? Frame your photograph for added appeal.

Composing a photo with an element on one or both sides of the main subject often makes the difference between an average photo and a really good one. Put the main subject a little off dead center. The photographer's formula is to imagine your image in the viewfinder was divided by two horizontal and two vertical lines to make nine equal rectangles. The four spots where the lines intersect become ideal places to locate the primary subject, with the help of framing. In today's digital world, it is much easier to reframe photographs after they are taken, but it helps to have the basics in mind when the photo is first taken.

Generally, the bigger the photo on the printed page the better. Nothing communicates more effectively than a good photo that is crisp, easily-recognized and boldly printed on a newspaper page. Placement is as important as size. A photograph should "move into" a page, rather than lead the reader's eye off the page. People should face into the page rather than facing out of it. If, for example, the subject or action is moving to the right, the photo should be placed in the middle or on the left-hand side of the page.

Equipment

Serious photographers today will have on hand both film and digital cameras, but for most congregational photographers the most usable will be the digital single lens reflex camera. Simpler "point and shoot" digital cameras are less expensive and easier to use, but have less flexibility and more limited lens settings. Digital cameras mean no more wasted film, as disks are erasable, saving only the material you actually can use.

Digital photographs are measured in pixels, the minute squares of light sensitivity that make up a photograph. The more pixels in a photo, the higher the resolution - more detail, clarity and sharpness. On the other hand, the higher resolution photos will take more hard disk space and more time to open and manipulate.

When you purchase a digital camera, you will get software to load into your computer and some sort of connection so you can move the photos from your camera to the computer. It is helpful if you have software in your computer to edit your photographs. A popular version of such software is Adobe's Photoshop, which can be pricey for the whole package, but which offers a simpler, inexpensive version called "Elements" from www.adobe.com.

Photos to be used for print publication are better saved in TIFF format at 300 or more pixels per inch. Photos for Web use may be saved as JPEG or GIF files with a resolution of 72 pixels per inch.

Read the instructions that come with your camera, but the best way to get to know it is to use it frequently and play with the images; remember, no film will be wasted in today's digital photography atmosphere!

