

Effective Communication: A Guide for Congregations: Using Visual Media in the Congregation

Why use visual media?

People remember visual images longer than the written word. For most people in our society, electronic media are the primary means of mass communication. Using these for learning is an expectation that presents congregation leaders and educators with a new set of challenges. The majority of today's students do best when they interact with visually-oriented material. Some school and church administrators prefer print and auditory learning, which flows along in an orderly sequence of written or printed text, but today's students are working with electronic media as well as reading print and listening, often in disconnected sequence.

Educators know that visual media can help students interact with the text in new, imaginative ways. Communication which is both aural and visual is significantly more effective. Researchers tell us that we remember 10 percent of what we read, 20 percent of what we hear, and 50 percent of what we both see and hear.

How do we perceive reality? Albert Nehraban, a psychologist at UCLA, found that television viewers receive only 7 percent of what a TV newscaster says. "All the rest (93 percent) is conveyed by the newscaster's personality, 38 percent by vocal intonation and inflection, and 55 percent by facial expression and physical posture. Watching TV news is in no sense a reasoning process like reading a newspaper - the content may be the same as the content of the newspaper, but you receive it in the subconscious. Visual media convey information in exactly the same way it is conveyed when two people talk to one another," Nehraban reports.

The church and technology

Communication experts tell us that technology has reintroduced the conceptual age. Before print was invented people learned primarily through seeing, hearing, doing and experiencing. Then came the invention of the printing press, and written communications gained power for the next 500 years. With books and other printed materials, learning happened in logical, sequential,

left-brained ways, but today, once again, people are becoming more right-brained - that is, they prefer stories and parables, and seek experiential learning and entertainment.

For any cause to succeed or survive, it must learn to use the primary communication medium of its society. "To have communication power or influence, one must master the most powerful communication medium of the age," says Dr. Thomas Boomershine, professor of New Testament at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation the new printing press made it possible to communicate ideas quickly and concretely. Those religious groups, such as the primary Protestant denominations, which appropriated the printed page grew and became the dominant religions of the West. Those which resisted lost ground in the society. We know the technology phenomenon influences our congregations, homes and lives. How can we use these emerging technologies to accomplish God's mission in the world today?

Do you agree with Thomas Boomershine's statement that a major task of the church and its mission in every age is to master the most powerful medium of communication of that age? If so, we have only one choice: to learn how to use and not be used by the visual media revolution. The challenge before us is to keep our objectives clear as we make visual media serve our overall mission as a church, and not simply let ourselves be shaped by secular commercial use.

How are visual media different?

Visual media are communication tools - books, chalkboards, the Risograph machine and microfilm, as well as more technologically advanced tools. We use visual media in uniquely different ways as a part of the educational or communication process.

Strengths: Advantages in Using Visual Media

- Visual media are easy to use - almost foolproof, having been designed for the consumer rather than the technician.

- Visual media can be used interactively with other activities. To use visual media you need not darken a room. This allows visual media users to combine visual media segments with discussions, lectures, drama, printed pieces, demonstrations, and other educational activities.

- Today's visual media gives you control. The leader chooses which parts of the visual media to show. The medium can be stopped and started easily, allowing classes to discuss what they've just seen. There are no hassles with rethreading or recueing the program to the right spot.

- Good visual media is storytelling, and storytelling has been the most effective method of communication in the history of the human race. Storytelling holds interest and is entertaining and effective in reaching the subconscious as well as the conscious for viewers of all ages.

Cautions: Taking Visual media's Weaknesses into Account

- Visual images can sometimes overwhelm the core idea. When used well, video can focus on one individual or one idea. Take care not to be sidetracked by what looks good and exciting and miss the teaching point.

- Visual media can be a poor alternative to good leader preparation. Don't watch a video instead of dealing with a problem. Don't use visual media as a last minute alternative to teacher preparation.

- Visual media is not the best medium for every task. For example, print is the most effective and inexpensive medium for getting the message into the hands of every member.

- Visual media should not be used as the only element in a meeting. Rather, capitalize on video's strengths as part of a meeting plan with various activities. Don't let watching TV encourage passivity or kill community.

Guidelines for using visual media in your congregation

Carefully select visual media for your congregation in order to have them available for the widest use at the congregation and in homes. (Research shows that the subjects of family, youth, Christian life, missions and evangelism will be used most by Sunday school classes, small groups and families in your congregation. Resources that help people toward deeper understandings of faith are popular. Locate sources of quality visual media material and keep your leadership informed.)

Identify visual media for education or entertainment.

Use visual media with discretion: 15-20 minutes is probably maximum length for viewing in a group without stopping.

Use visual media as a teaching tool to stimulate viewers to share their life experiences which relate to the text or theme of the day. When using video stories, invite people to get involved by telling their own stories and experiences.

Enhance your congregational experiences by using visual media on any of many topics. These can provide the basic core of a retreat or be single components of workshops.

Remember that visual media can be especially useful in presenting and stimulating discussion about a current issue. Visual media allow the leader to lead a discussion without being forced into one side or the other.

Use visual media to introduce visitors, inquirers, new members and youth to your church's history and theology. Through visual media you can tell stories and provide basic information.

Copyright law and the church

One word of caution: many congregations have operated under the false assumption that as nonprofit organizations congregations can copy anything they want and furthermore use whatever visual media they want in any congregation setting. That is not the case.

It is illegal to use many prerecorded videos in any public setting, though most religious distributors (such as EcuFilm) grant a limited use license called "audiovisual rights" and their visual media can be used in any congregation setting. If you cannot find reference to the rights in the source or on the video, ask the distributor. Visual media rented from the local video stores usually are limited to "home use" only and have very limited legal use in congregational settings.

