

# The Use of Screens in Worship

A discussion paper by Angela Tilby

*Note: This paper was written for the Liturgical Commission by the Revd Angela Tilby, in discussion with the Revd Tim Lomax. For the Commission this is 'work in progress'; the Commission is making the paper available as a contribution to discussion within the Church.*

Since the development of inexpensive projectors in the mid 1990s many churches have come to use projectors and screens in worship.

This paper will look briefly at some of the practical uses of screens, and the opportunities they offer, summarise the issues raised for worship by their use and indicate some of the implications for patterns of Christian formation and identity which might be suggested, not only by the use of screens, but by a more widespread adoption of media techniques and values in contemporary Christian worship.

## *The use of screens*

Typically, one or more large screens may be positioned in front of the congregation. There may also be smaller flatter television size screens positioned near to each smaller group of worshippers. A digital projector linked to a computer or other device is then used in the following ways.

1. As a 'message board' providing welcome and information.
2. To project the words of hymns, worship songs and readings.
3. To project liturgical texts.
4. To accompany sermons or teaching sessions with slides summarising the content.
5. To project a close perspective on the action of the liturgy to those who cannot otherwise see what is going on, for example, in a cathedral.
6. To provide visual imagery or text to accompany prayers, aid meditation or reflection, or illustrate Bible passages .
7. As a means of personalising pastoral services, funerals, for example, where an image or pictures of the deceased may be projected during the service.
8. To introduce multi-media as the foundation and environment in which worship takes place by using video and movie clips, downloads from You-tube etc as points of engagement.

## *The advantages of such use of screens and projectors includes the following points*

1. Screen aided worship avoids the need for a number of books and service sheets which can be difficult to manage.
2. It is easier for some people with reading difficulties and for those with sight impairments to follow texts from a screen.
3. It enables the use of a wider variety of texts, hymns and songs than would otherwise be practical.
4. It encourages worshippers to 'look up' rather than to be focused on a book.
5. It encourages a spirit of unity and togetherness.
6. In very large churches and cathedrals it offers a closer perspective on the liturgical action for those taking part from a distance.
7. It is in tune with contemporary methods of teaching and presentation.
8. It draws attention to the day's events and highlights useful information and significant themes.

9. It resonates with a culture which is increasingly visually literate and image aware.
10. It can offer a 'seeker-friendly' environment for those not familiar with churchgoing.
11. It follows from the Common Worship policy of encouraging a wide variety of texts and styles of worship in which resources are adapted for local use.

*The use of screens and projectors raises a number of issues which need to be addressed by those who adopt them.*

1. Aesthetic issues

- a) Screens have to be located somewhere. With sensitive planning and imagination it is often possible to enable a contrast and mirroring between screen- projected images and architecture which adds new dimensions to the experience of worship. In pre-contemporary churches however, the introduction of a screen can sometimes detract from the architecture of the building in a way which is irritating for traditional worshippers.
- b) Even where screens are positioned with sensitivity to the architecture, the introduction of screens might be thought to encourage the idea that a church building is not itself an aesthetic statement, but essentially a functional shell without inherent symbolic or aesthetic value. There are those who would argue that this is precisely what a church building is, but it should not be assumed without awareness of the issues involved.
- c) A reluctance to go through the process of applying for faculties may encourage some churches to use removable screens which may be very badly, randomly or dangerously positioned.

2. Practical and pastoral issues

- d) The generation and manipulation of customised text and images is intensely time-consuming. The justification of this use of ministerial time can only be that creativity with words and texts is an important dimension of pastoral ministry. However, the issue must also be faced of whether it might constitute an agreeable 'escape' from the demands of a people-centre ministry. The same criticism, of course, might be made of clergy who spend a lot of time finely crafting sermons or service booklets.
- e) The running of the presentations during worship requires at least one person's full attention during the service. The practical management of running the presentation needs to be recognised as a ministry parallel to that of choir director, sidesperson, or organist; and raises similar pastoral issues.
- f) The changeover of text and images is not always well or effectively done, which can be distracting. Training, feedback and supportive critique for those involved in the operation is important.
- g) Once the expectation of a screen-led service has been formed it may prove difficult to go back to books, and may make it difficult for worshippers to appreciate worship where screens do not feature.
- h) Screen led worship can generate an expectation that worship will always be 'different'. Novelty and innovation (key values derived from media) take precedence over familiarity and repetition.

- i) The limited amount of text that is shown at any one time on the screen limits the freedom of the worshipper to look ahead and back, and to pick up resonances which are not pre-determined. This can be at least partially mitigated by the use of devices such as a 'navigation' bar which enables worshippers to know where they are in a Common Worship order of service rather more effectively than they might from a booklet.

*The issues involved here suggest further exploration of the implications of screen worship for Anglican formation and identity.*

3. Anglican tradition assumes that worship is formational of Christian identity. The building, the liturgy and bodily posture contribute by an interplay of listening, vocalising, bodily gesture, personal reflection and corporate response. Screen worship does not disable these responses but shapes them in novel ways. For example, it may enhance a sense of group cohesion and attentiveness. It may also enable individuals to express themselves more freely than in traditional worship in terms of gesture and posture in response to the screen. These developments may or may not be thought consistent with core Anglican values.
4. Using screens discourages and inhibits traditional 'formative' postures and gestures in favour of self expression. It could discourage the freedom of praying with eyes closed, or with eyes focused on something other than the screen. It contributes to the virtual disappearance of kneeling in many churches and makes it less likely that the conventions of corporate standing or respectful silence in worship are observed or understood. Again, these changes are both welcomed and deplored by those at different positions on the Anglican spectrum.
5. The eye is quickly distracted and visual media encourage a constant pursuit of novelty in text, music and image. Those who support the introduction of screens in worship are likely to interpret this as encouraging an openness to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and a readiness to accept innovation in worship as the creative work of the Holy Spirit. Others may note that it is likely to inhibit the memorisation and internalisation of scripture, liturgical texts, and hymns which, arguably, leaves the Spirit 'less to play with' in forming Christian identity.
6. The adoption of screens and other devices in worship may be suggestive of the emerging dominance in the Church of England of a kind of Christian identity which is inherently exteriorised while at the same time being non-physical and non-sacramental. In this sense screen worship could be interpreted as an expression of post-modernity, in which there is a movement away from interiority in our understanding of selfhood. On the other hand it is not surprising that screen worship has been most freely adopted in evangelical churches, which retain reformed and iconoclastic agendas. Many of the churches which use screens in worship have never been comfortable with traditional religious symbolism, postures, robes etc. On the positive side the introduction of screens has at least allowed for some imagery to be part of the worship experience.

*Worship as experience in a multi-media environment.*

7. The design and furnishing of a worship space carries an implicit understanding of God and of the nature of Christian worship. This understanding is provided by particular historical contexts and can be seen to have changed over time. The adoption of screens in worship can go beyond utility to encourage a much more radical transformation of worship which accepts multi-media as the

foundation and environment in which worship takes place. This has important theological and spiritual implications for contemporary worshippers.

8. Familiar historical combinations of liturgy with worship space suggest that to worship is to enter
  - a) the throne room of a king,
  - b) the court of a judge to whom the worshipper is accountable,
  - c) the temple of an invisible deity attended by angels ,
  - d) a lecture theatre with the expectation of being inspired and instructed,
  - e) a house of hospitality and welcome,
  - f) a venue designed for performance and participation.
9. Much traditional church architecture and liturgy assume that the worshipper comes 'from' somewhere (everyday life) and that worship involves a movement of attention, patience and effort, including the toleration of minor discomfort. This physical 'journey' corresponds to the spiritual syntax of traditional formal liturgy. For example, the BCP is suffused with an awareness of the dreadful majesty and righteousness of God being constantly overcome by the rediscovery of his mercy and faithfulness (a and b above). There is a constant movement between the two poles of awe and thankfulness; of strangeness and familiarity, of distance and intimacy. Traditional posture (sitting, standing, kneeling) is not designed for comfort, but to prevent sleepiness, reverie and inattention and to express the wholeness of life in a response which is both mental and physical. An element of *asceticism* is a necessary part of expressing that wholeness of response to God.
10. By contrast the architecture and furnishings of some churches and chapels are deliberately more imitative of the lecture theatre (d) where a central high pulpit evokes the authority of the learned teacher over the students, and the expectation of worship is that it is to inspire and transform by attention to the preached word.
11. In the Methodist tradition, the architecture typically combines (d) with the architecture of the music hall (f) where the gallery communicates the sense that worship includes the sacramentality of community singing, held together by the compering and commentating function of the leading officiating minister. The environment suggests leisure and togetherness. Worship in such a setting focuses on the evocation of personal feelings and convictions in response to scripture, song and preaching. The expectation of worship is that it will be inspiring and fulfilling and that God will be *felt and experienced* as present to convict, heal, restore and save.
12. A church which has become a worship space with screens, a stage for a worship band and other forms of contemporary technology is more suggestive of a contemporary concert venue, or a cinema (f). In contemporary society these are places of personal choice, expectation, entertainment and possible transformation. Attendance with others who have made the same choice to attend creates a form of participation which is an important step towards Christian 'belonging'. In some contemporary churches there is a deliberate emphasis on comfort with deep plush bucket seats encouraging the relaxed, looking-up posture of the movie house. Worship spaces that have deliberately styled themselves on cinemas and concert venues tend to eliminate

all religious symbolism from architecture, furnishings, windows and the clothing of ministers.<sup>1</sup> In this sense they tap into an iconoclastic strand which goes back to the Reformation. The iconoclasm expresses a profound distrust of particular objects being thought to convey grace or power. The evangelical tradition, while not consistently iconoclastic, is naturally 'restless' with over-prescriptiveness in worship, for fear, not only of idolatry, but of limiting the power of the Holy Spirit in an attempt to exercise clerical control over the responses of the worshipper. The transformation of the worship space into a media environment enables a free play of images, words and music which are expansive rather than constricting. Why have a real candle when the screen can produce thousands?

This said, as mentioned already, the use of screens has to some extent put the iconoclastic tendency into reverse – with many an evangelical church rediscovering and celebrating religious symbolism, even if it is on a screen! This might suggest that some evangelicals are more comfortable with mediated symbols than material ones. From a more catholic perspective this preference for the mediated over the material is potentially suspect, and might imply a rejection of the grace-bearing capacities of the material world.

13. What understanding of God might be evoked or assumed by total immersion in screen worship? Tentative suggestions might include a God chiefly characterised by overwhelming power, accessibility, novelty and immediacy. Such an understanding of God is very real and plausible to contemporary perception. The worship that reflects such a perception is not so much a preparation for heaven as present time participation in the eschatological feast. Healing, revelation, and personal transformation are all to be expected and welcomed as signs of authenticity.
14. It should be noted that the forms of worship associated with some of the most successful new community churches in the USA<sup>2</sup> are based on comfort, accessibility, digital projectors and music based modelled on entirely secular expectations. They work because they are true to their context and spring from the same roots as worshippers' everyday lives. This is a serious challenge to those who instinctively resist such innovations.
15. Such contemporary transformations in worship are welcomed by a number of contemporary theologians including Alister McGrath, who argues that they represent the ending of 'the Babylonian captivity of the thinking Christian' (where God is far away and inaccessible) and a 'return to Jerusalem, there to sing the songs of Zion in our own language.'<sup>3</sup>
16. McGrath sees what he characterizes as 'seeker-friendly' services as being the norm in the future and the only hope for the survival of mainstream Western denominations. Huge auditoriums, widespread use of video clips, short Biblical soundbites which are presented in paraphrase form; the entire worship experience can only be truly attractive and compelling when reconceived as a media event. The pastoral aspects of church belonging and the spiritual needs of individuals are

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<sup>1</sup> This sometimes leads to bizarre accommodations. There is a Baptist church in Cambridge where a stained glass window of John Bunyan is obscured by a screen permanently positioned in the pulpit. An image of window of John Bunyan is frequently projected on the screen. An implicit assumption behind this arrangement might be that for this particular congregation authenticity and authority can only be guaranteed when it is generated through an electronic media device.

<sup>2</sup> Such as the Willow Creek Community Church as described by Alister McGrath (see below).

<sup>3</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Blackwell Manifestos, 2002).

catered for within small tight-knit groups meeting apart from Sunday worship. These cells are the focus for support and learning, very much in the tradition of the Methodist adult 'school'.

17. It should be noted that even in traditional worship, the media-derived values of informality, intimacy and spontaneity are often regarded as the hallmarks of spiritual authenticity.
18. McGrath urges the Church to recognise (not uncritically) that consumerism and entertainment are the cradle of personal identity in contemporary Western society. The Church needs to take seriously the 'McDonaldization'<sup>4</sup> of religion in promoting more efficiently a controlled, predictable, friendly way of being Church which is easily to access and assimilate.
19. A critique of this approach is found in the work of Rowan Williams. In an informal and unexpectedly frank address to the National Liturgical Conference he questioned the *passivity* of much contemporary worship; the sitting-back and focus on comfort which encourages bodily disengagement and the expectation of gratification without any kind of effort or *ascesis*. Underneath this, he suggests, is the diminishing of the perspective that earthly worship is an anticipation of, or preparation for, the worship of heaven.
20. Elsewhere<sup>5</sup> he suggests that one of the most disturbing features of contemporary society is the way in which a consumerist culture has formed us to regard the human person as a bundle of needs and wants which demand satisfaction, or at the very least as well-fortified *site* on which all the good and desirable things and experiences that the world offers can converge.
21. Evidence in support of such a critique comes from evangelicals who are disquieted by the way in which new trends in worship, particularly in music, seem to be largely driven by business interests. The constant production, branding and marketing of new music not only feeds but stimulates a constant hunger for new expressions and experiences, with the attendant danger that what is thought to arise from the prompting of the Holy Spirit could be no more than the stimulation of 'spiritual gluttony'.

### Conclusion

The use of screens in worship is widespread and has been adopted both for utilitarian reasons and as part of wider agenda to make church worship more seeker-friendly to those whose everyday lives are permeated by multi-media. Faithful Anglicans are to be found across this spectrum. Practical and aesthetic guidance is already available and could well be developed for those planning to use screens in a conservative way, i.e. as a 'notice board' or for the projection of liturgical texts and music, or to enhance visibility in a large church or cathedral. Theological evaluation and critique is also available and can be developed for those experimenting with multi-media in more radical way.

It is also most important to affirm that there continue to be a great many churches where screens would neither acceptable nor desirable and there should be a continuing recognition of and sensitivity to the wide range of practical, aesthetic and theological objections to their use.

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase comes from George Ritzer in *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993) and was taken up by John Drane in *The McDonaldization of the Church* (2000).

<sup>5</sup> In *Lost Icons* (2000), especially p. 66ff.