

In her day job Connie is no stranger to computers and especially to powerpoint presentations. She feels however that her local church is getting left behind when it comes to modern methods of presentation. As a local preacher in training she is keen to use her skills to enhance worship and deliver memorable sermons but feels that she is not receiving much encouragement in this regard from her local church.

She asks.....Why are some of our congregations not more eager to take advantage of new technology in Sunday worship?

Connie, I love the story from yesteryear about a small country church discussing the possible purchase of a candelabra. Eventually the society steward got to his feet and said he was against it for three reasons: firstly it would be too expensive; secondly if they bought one there was nobody in the church able to play it and thirdly what the church really needed was more light! Just goes to show that resistance to change in church life is nothing new!

It is, mind you, worth noting that historically speaking the Church has not always been slow to appropriate new methods. The printing press in the sixteenth century, radio broadcasting in the twentieth, and nowadays satellite TV and the Internet have all been taken up by visionary Christian leaders and made to serve in the spread of Gospel across the world.

Let's face it the last fifteen years have seen most of our churches transformed. Instead of debates about the relative positioning of table, pulpit and font we now seem to start with where the screens, projectors and sound desk should go. Where years ago a new hymnbook was a major event we now can have any hymn or song we like displayed on a screen (subject to copyright regulations of course). We have access to movie clips, powerpoint presentations, visual meditations and even whole sermons. My own church has a wonderful machine which can be programmed in advance to reproduce any hymn in more than two hundred different musical effects and arrangements. It would be madness to cut ourselves off from all the opportunities that such equipment offers.

Often, however, when it comes to worship, the reaction to all this amazing technology is hesitant and lukewarm. Some people can be seen defiantly singing from their printed hymnbook and pointedly ignoring the words on the screen. Sometimes a carefully chosen video clip or an audio visual on-screen meditation which has taken hours to prepare is only barely tolerated and receives very little comment. It may, of course, be an age thing. Some older people simply prefer to worship as they always have done and don't see the need for innovation. Much more likely, though, it is about how the technology is being used.

The golden rule here, Connie, is "less is more". Technology is a great servant but a very bad master. Many congregations have been put off by presentations that are so "all singing all dancing" they take over and detract from the message they are meant to convey. Then again everyone has suffered from those dreadful moments when something has gone wrong – a screen has frozen, a video has failed to load or sound has been lost. It doesn't take long for people to lose patience, lose interest, and worst of all to lose any sense of worship.

I know how competent you are, Connie and I'm not saying any of this to discourage your use of IT. Given your skills you have a wonderful tool at your fingertips – but one that needs to be used wisely. At the end of the day a service of worship is not about entertainment and a sermon is not a seminar. Preaching is not like making a presentation in your workplace. There you have information to convey and bullet points on a screen may well help colleagues who are taking notes and needing to record facts. It works well enough at that level although even there people often get bored witless by speakers reading off reams of facts from a screen.

Preaching is different. Yes, you want to convey ideas and information but you want to do much more – you want to connect with and speak into the hearts of the people in front of you. To do that you want to be able to look into people's eyes and have them look directly at you. That is when real communication happens. Bullet points on a screen may have their place but there is no substitute for what St Paul calls "the foolishness of preaching". For a preacher nothing compares with those special moments when you sense God is speaking, the screen is long forgotten and all eyes and ears are on you and far more importantly on your message.

But if it's not the master, technology is nevertheless a great servant. Remembering that "less is more", bullet points on a screen can very helpfully reinforce what you are saying and help folk remember it afterwards. A single picture on the screen to back up the sermon or the theme of the service can be highly effective. A series of images can help lead thoughts for prayers. A video clip can illustrate a point and drive it home. Just not all on one Sunday, please! It also goes without saying that whatever is used must work first time – and therefore must be practised and rehearsed well in advance.

I am sorry that you have encountered a bit of resistance from your home congregation. You mustn't be discouraged. Consider it a work in progress. As a local preacher, make sure you consult with your minister and have his or her support in all this. That way you will be seen to be fitting in with how local worship is developing and changing. Avoid flashy gimmicks. Bring in good material and soon you'll find that people are seeing past the method to the message and being blessed. Candelabras are so last century!