Technology Thoughts for Worship

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Technology has given Christianity a voice to reach a world-wide audience. Historically there have been advances for Christianity when there have been advances in technology. Not all Christian groups have reacted to new technologies in the same way as for example, the Amish. In many cases the Church has been one of the first entities to adopt or benefit from advancement in technologies. Let's examine how technology has impacted the spread of God's world over the years.

The Pax Romana that existed at the time of Christ played a large role in the spread of the gospel. Technology that created good roads for transportation bolstered the strongest army in the world. That enabled them to enforce relatively peaceful times and a stabilized government for common laws, common language, and common culture. This allowed a small group of Christians to evolve into a large following in a single generation.

In the mid 1400's Gutenberg set up the printing press and published the first mechanically printed Bible. This was, in large part, a factor in the start of the Reformation. The printing press enabled ideas to flow rapidly in large quantities to very large audiences. William Tyndale translated the Bible into English and had it printed and distributed in the early 1500's. During the same time period Martin Luther was printing pamphlet after pamphlet in order to explain his views to an interested Europe. He also translated and printed the Bible in German for distribution to the "common" people.

In 1644 the English Parliament sought to censor printing because they felt it was necessary to repress certain dangerous ideas, especially regarding religion. John Milton argued passionately that ideas, even heretical ones, needed to be exchanged. Even 600 years ago the effect of technology on Christianity was a topic for discussion and debate!

Blaise Pascal, Isaac Newton, and Samuel Morse were scientists who held Christianity and the Bible in the highest regard. What motivated them was a confidence in the "rationality" behind the universe and the "goodness" of the material world. In 1844 Samuel Morse sent the first telegraph message which contained the sentence "What hath God wrought?"

In 1939 Theodore Epp started the radio program "Back to the Bible". Although this was not the first radio broadcast of an evangelical nature it was one of the most successful and is still heard today (with Woodrow Kroll). Around 1957 Billy Graham started World Wide Pictures as a complement to his Billy Graham Crusade organization. The Billy Graham Crusades, reaching millions of people via television, would not have been possible without the aid of technology. Earlier evangelists (think Billy Sunday and Dwight L. Moody) were more restricted in their outreach during their crusades because of the lack of technology in their time.

In 2004 two British men, Simon Jenkins and Steve Goddard, started an online church called the "Church of Fools" (It has since ceased to exist virtually). It was sponsored by Britain's Methodist Church. Both men were concerned about friends who were physically disabled and found it difficult to attend church services. Visitors created avatars to represent themselves. They entered a virtual church in which they could walk around, pray, socialize, and listen to sermons—or just sit and watch. They could kneel, bless each other, or raise their hands in a hallelujah gesture. Regularly scheduled sermons were delivered by ordained preachers.

In the U.S. today there are probably over 1000 megachurches. These are churches that regularly have over 2000 people attending services. Some churches in South Korea have reported over 250,000 attendees every Sunday. Many of these megachurches provide power and wireless access so worshippers can download sermon notes, presentations, and Bible passages. Alter attendants armed with technology collect prayer needs and new-member data to download onto the church server. The sermon is translated via wireless headphones into one of six languages. None of the above would be possible without supporting technologies.

Technology has been good for Christianity in a number of ways.

- First, It has greatly magnified the voice of those preaching the gospel. Instead of reaching hundreds or even thousands when preaching a sermon, a pastor now has a possible audience in the millions.
- Second, it has enriched the message of the Cross by providing more information to more people in a shorter amount of time.
- Third, it has increased the number of channels of distribution of the gospel.
- Fourth, it has provided help for the encouragement, the strengthening, and edification of the saints through technology tools and discipleship material.
- Fifth, it allows Christians to administer grace to a world that is distracted and burdened by using tools that people use in their day to day lives.

Most recently with the advent of COVID, live broadcasts, podcasts, social media, phone apps, and various forms of live and recorded worship opportunities have created a plethora of options for people to worship anywhere. The key to this new virtual worshiping world is to find balance. We need to hold the mirror up to ourselves and ask, "What does the Bible say about this?" or "Given everything we know of His nature, would this be pleasing to God?"

With that said we have the question at hand: How can we, in our small corner of God's world that is sometimes limited by a lack of strong internet connection, leverage the power of all of this technology to help support the various needs and demands of the Presbytery of Mackinac while not giving in to what has been deemed "Cultural Christianity" i.e. guarding against technology that would create a worship experience of isolation and entertainment rather than one of reverence and participation. We have to be careful to not let technology define us or set the standard, rather let God's Word set the standard and technology support us. Let us examine our Book of Order, the Presbyterian's governing document, to help guide us in our worship in a technology rich world.

Although there is nothing specifically referring to technology per se in the Directory for Worship, the underlying theology and principles guide us in rationale and practice. First, our reformed heritage calls us to be reformed and always reforming. From the Preface of the Directory for Worship in the Book of Order: "This directory presents standards and norms for worship in the congregations and councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As a vision for Reformed worship, it suggests possibilities, *invites development, and encourages ongoing reform." (italics mine)*

The years of the Coronavirus Pandemic caused us to think very differently about space; personal space and social distancing, prohibitions on gathering, and how as the people of God we could communicate, worship, pray and offer care when we could not be together in person. We entered, for better and for worse, into technological and virtual spaces, which allowed us to talk, pray, work, and sing together. It also awoke the deep longing we have as human beings to be physically present to one another. The technological and virtual spaces were, for many, deeply unsatisfying. And for many more, they were a lifeline out of isolation, sadness, and pain. And for a time, those spaces were "virtually" all we had.

Now, in a new time when we have access to both, we are called to equip the saints in every way possible. In places where there are no traditional elements, Christians use whatever they have. And in places where elements are not physically present or are banned, people have used their hands and bodies to act out the receiving of the elements. The bread and cup are no less broken and shared, by the grace of God.

In places where physical proximity is not possible, computers, screens, audio sharing, satellite transmissions and the internet provide a way to connect. Indeed, many of us use this technology daily without stopping to consider a cell phone signal that is bounced into space and returned in a matter of seconds.

The Directory of Worship says this about space:
W-1.0203: Space: Because heaven and earth belong to God, we may worship in any place. The Old Testament describes stone altars, tabernacles, temples, and other places where the people gathered and encountered God. The Gospels tell us that Jesus worshiped at the synagogue and temple, but he also worshiped in the wilderness, on hillsides, and at lakeshores, *demonstrating that God cannot be confined to any one place.* The first Christians worshiped at the temple and in synagogues, homes, catacombs, and prisons. *The important thing was not the place, but the gathering of Christ's body— the people of God—and the presence of Christ among them in Word and Sacrament*. Later the Church began to build special places to meet for worship. To this day, space for Christian worship is primarily established by the presence of the risen Lord and the communion of the Holy Spirit in the gathering of the people of God.
What if we were to think of the technological and virtual space as holy? We have seen the power of creativity in our physical worship spaces. During the pandemic, worshippers could listen to the offerings of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the Ebenezer Baptist Church Gospel Choir, organ recitals from St. John the Divine, to name just a few.

The Directory For Worship says this about the gifts offered in worship:

W-1.0204: Matter: We offer creative gifts in worship as well, including music, art, drama, movement, *media*, banners, vestments, vessels, furnishings, and architecture. When such gifts only call attention to themselves, they are idolatrous; when, in their simplicity of form and function, they give glory to God, they are appropriate for worship.

Finally, being reformed and always reforming calls us to reach out in ways that we have not yet begun to dream of. The gifts and limitations of technology are ours to use in a way that glorifies God:

W-1.0304: Culture: Christian worship is contextual—emerging from a particular community and incorporating the words, images, symbols, and actions that best convey the good news of Jesus Christ in that gathering of God's people. It is also cross-cultural—reflecting the diversity of traditions and cultures within and beyond the community of faith.
Christian worship is transcultural—proclaiming the universal message of God's grace in Jesus Christ and rooted in common elements of human life that transcend all cultures. . . . . Whenever and wherever we gather in Jesus' name, we join the praise and prayer of the people of God in every time and place.

W-2.0102: Form and Freedom: Christian worship has always been marked by a tension between form and freedom. Some traditions have emphasized established orders of worship, seeking to be faithful to the Scriptures. Others have resisted fixed forms of worship, asserting our freedom in Christ. *We acknowledge that all forms of worship are provisional and subject to reformation according to the Word of God.* Fixed forms of worship are valuable in that they offer consistent patterns and practices that help to shape lives of faith and faithfulness. More spontaneous approaches to worship are valuable in that they provide space for unexpected insight and inspiration. In whatever form it takes, worship is to be ordered by God's Word and open to the creativity of the Holy Spirit.