



Print or screen?

TN82 Training Notes series: Communication

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Only a few years ago many churches presented worshippers with a range of well-thumbed, hard-back books on a Sunday and the sermon was a monologue with no visual support (unless it was all-age and you had a flannel-graph!).

Then the need for greater liturgical choice and a sudden explosion of new songs led to the idea of printed sheets and churches' own songbooks.

Now a growing number of churches have no books, few sheets but one or more screens where everything for worship, teaching and information is projected.

Such changes in media raise issues of ownership, meaning, personal involvement, reality – and how we meet with each other to meet with God. So before we dump books and sheets and embrace screens, here are some thoughts to show that it is not quite as one-sided as some people make out. There are ten points on each side.

Screen snags

Some seem to assume that screen, whether projection or monitor, is the answer to everything in church life. But consider the following drawbacks.

1 **Limited field of view**

All you can see is what is on the screen. That may be no problem for images, but when you have words there can be no context, no wider perspective of how these words fit into something bigger. So when singing a hymn or song you see only one verse or just a few lines. You have little idea of how this develops from the previous section or what is coming next. You mouth the words but something of the understanding may be lost. If it is liturgy or a prayer, you may not know if this section is the whole or only one part of what is coming, although a screen time-line may help. A printed item lets you glimpse the bigger picture.

2 **Lack of clear visibility**

This may not be such a problem in a large auditorium but many church buildings were designed without thought for screen sight-lines. Pillars may get in the way, multiple screens add to the cost, some projectors are not bright enough in sunshine, and much may depend on the height of the people sitting or standing in front of you. Children will be at a special disadvantage here. In fact if a few people want to stand for the item in question, that often forces everyone else to do likewise. In a low-ceiling room the speaker may obscure part of the screen, but in a tall building those in the front rows get a sore neck! Some good fonts for print cannot be so easily read on a screen.

3 **Poor operator skill**

Much depends on the ability of the person operating the software. If there is textual liturgy which flows on from screen to screen, nothing is worse than screen changes that come two seconds too late (or five seconds too early for that matter). When operators are working blind without rehearsal many will get something wrong. But the real fun begins when the band decide on repeats as the Spirit leads them and the operator is left flicking through screen after screen to find where they have got to.

4 **Lack of co-ordination**

Nothing is worse than the congregation or audience being party to the stage directions going on between leader/speaker and operator. Continual calls for next slide (remember those Covid briefings on TV?), speakers without monitors who are forever turning to check what is behind them, requests to backtrack a couple of screens or omit the next one, only highlight the means being used and not the message intended to be put across. When speakers control the sequence themselves, this can detract *them* from what the activity is all about.

5 **Faulty technology**

No one should be focusing on the projection for this is only the means of communicating a message. But when the technology goes wrong, and it frequently seems to do so, it overwhelms the message itself because it is so visible. It is after all bright, large and up-front. Problems range from the blank screen or loss of sound ("Just talk among yourselves while we try to get our equipment to speak to each other") and the long pauses through to the exciting signals that flash up from time to time.

6 **Predictability**

PowerPoint or other multi-media software does not make a bad speaker good – and most business people are thoroughly bored by yet another predictable presentation by the finance department. If the speaker simply puts up his or her words on the screen, why bother to come and hear them at all?

7 **Nothing to take away**

When it comes to teaching, a screen approach is fine in immediate time-scale but gives nothing permanent to take home and ponder or keep for reference afterwards. Those who want a permanent record are copying down the notes on the screen instead of listening to the presentation. A printed set of notes provides a framework for the teaching at the moment of presentation and a record to keep and reuse at home.

8 **Cost**

Projectors, screens and their installation are not cheap and there is also an ongoing maintenance cost in terms of replacement bulbs.

9 **The celebrity culture**

Am I alone in feeling that where there are cameras trained on the speaker, leader or band the result looks impressive but runs the danger of pandering to pride? And the sound desk quickly becomes the central point in the room, replacing the pulpit. In a large auditorium it can be helpful to watch the speaker on large screens but in a smaller worship service I am not so sure, unless some of the congregation are completely out of sight. Live streaming is now commonplace and does not help.

10 **Time**

It takes time to put a multi-media presentation together and even slides for a simple worship service or sermon can take longer than first thought.

So let's give up and go back to print again. But hang on! There are plenty of problems here too. If the Promised Land isn't all milk and honey, don't forget that Egypt wasn't exactly ideal.

Print problems

Before we had projection and screens we had books and printed sheets. Of course, many churches are still using these. What could go wrong with such things?

1 **Welcome to our library**

On coming through the door of the church you are greeted by a steward offering you a couple of song books, a service book, a Bible, a printed notice-sheet and an order of service. Even if those items are mostly placed in the pews or chairs instead it still gives the impression of a word-based, middle-class culture. And the matter of carrying such items to your chair (especially for those with arthritic hands), and leaving half of them behind afterwards to be cleared up by someone else, can be troublesome.

2 **Find your way around**

For the newcomer the finding of the correct place in a strange book is enough to make them run for the door. Service books can be daunting, especially when the regulars know exactly where to turn and which pages to omit or where the service leader offers little guidance. Even hymn books are not always straightforward and finding the book of Zechariah in a heavy black volume can stump even a hardened church attender.

3 **Have a tatty sheet**

So, many churches have dispensed with books and gone over to printed service sheets. If these last from week to week (and many home-produced song books have to do just this) and are not laminated, they quickly become curled and dog-eared. The same of course can be true of books. Notice-sheets seem to have a habit of being printed on cheap paper, badly laid out (with too much on the page) and folded somewhat off true. Screen technology (when it works well) gives a different image.

4 **Can you see me?**

Many people find reading small print in dimly lit churches quite a strain, and a printed service sheet is often not as clear as a book. But for many older people it is the size of print that limits visibility – many such people welcome screen use, provided the projector has a bright enough bulb and the font size is large enough, because it is so much easier to see.

5 **Don't change your mind**

One obvious problem with any kind of print is that it is permanent: a book lasts years, even a service sheet allows no variation on the day. Screen technology allows the musicians to change a song, or reorder them, or add in something new on the spot. It enables the leader of a service to reconfigure the liturgy and bring in new ideas during the service. You can add video clips, different kinds of sound – welcome to multi-media. The medium is so versatile compared with print.

6 **If it was good enough for my grandparents...**

In an age where younger people spend most of each day peering at a screen, read books (if at all) on a Kindle and expect constant change, a book and print image of the Church is simply not going to appeal. At least a screen-based approach is now the cultural norm – nothing more than that. But the idea of books and sheets reinforces the view that church, and hence the Christian faith, is for a few old fashioned die-hards.

7 **Nothing changes here**

Who knows where the communications revolution will go next, but what is clear is that screen technology is part of it whereas print is not. Digital means allow churches to link to smart-phones and tablets, to take services into people's homes, to live stream and to go wherever tomorrow's developments will carry us. Books do not.

8 **Hands-full not hands-free**

The formal holding of books or sheets during worship services introduces an unhelpful formality which hinders the free expression of body that is both culturally normal today and, for many people, spiritually meaningful. Worship by voice projection alone ignores all the other senses and restricts enthusiasm.

9 **Let your mind wander**

With print you can easily be distracted by reading on ahead so you are not focusing on what the speaker is saying or where you are in the liturgy. A screen approach keeps you to where you should be.

10 **Time and responsibility**

It takes time to lay out and print service sheets and notices – and you use up the world's resources as you do so.

These notes need to be read alongside Training Notes TN52, *The perils of PowerPoint*, on this website which focuses more on the use of screen technology as a teaching tool and how to use it well – by means of a series of how-not-to cameos.

So there are some arguments that show both media have something going for them. My overall belief is that screen-based technology is where we need to be, but that print has its advantages too – so perhaps we need something of both. Or, next year, will everyone follow the service on their phones? And will single screens on the back of every chair replace the big one up the front? Or will screen technology seem so very dated, now we use *(word to be filled in in the future)?*

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN82.

See also Articles A29, *A basic guide to paper and print*, and A54, *How to get a message across*, plus Training Notes TN52, *The perils of PowerPoint*, and TN123, *Speaking-to-camera tips*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN82 under Communication.

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