

Screen time

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [September 30, 2015](#) issue



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I've been screening churches in my new city of Vancouver, and I guess you could say they've been "screening" me. Almost every church I've visited uses a screen in its sanctuary during worship. In the 1980s or '90s this might have been a signal that a congregation had taken a side in the worship wars. Now it's just a sign that a church is open and functioning.

One congregation showed a funny video of Canadians singing an ode to Canada Day (replete with a poke at American politics). Another screen featured a long clip from the movie *Frozen*. What all this had to do with Jesus was not clear. The video clips were pleasant distractions, brief entertainment in the context of worship.

But other uses of screens struck me as more theologically intentional. One congregation featured background images of the city of Vancouver. These appeared before and after worship and during announcements. The images were not just beautiful. They announced that this was a church not only in but *for* a city. God's kingdom always comes in particular settings, and the church is called to love its

neighborhood, as God does in Christ's incarnation. This same church asked its preachers to say, "You can follow along as I read in your pew Bibles, or the words will be on the screen . . ." I noticed nary a Bible opening. All heads were up.

Something may be lost here—fewer of us can flip through a Bible to find a passage. But shaming somebody at that particular moment is probably not a way to reverse this trend.

One clear winner for use of screens in worship is its effectiveness in conveying song lyrics and announcements. Having everybody looking up instead of down with their noses buried in their books helps us sing out, see one another, and generally stand up straight. Scrolling announcements before and after church and during the offering helps deflect the zombie-like way announcements have of reappearing in the liturgy. The screen might be one more scythe with which to clear them away.

At a Pentecostal church, the minister was preaching a series on "Who Is Jesus?" He played a video of Bono being interviewed on Irish TV by a seemingly annoyed host who couldn't believe that Bono prayed to Christ as God. Bono stood his ground and bore witness to his faith in a way that inspired confidence. If a rock star can do it, who can't? The congregation burst into applause. The clip was short, punchy, well-introduced, and on point. It didn't leave me saying, "I wonder what that had to do with the price of tea in China?" but rather, "Am I ready to bear witness if a camera is rolling and an interviewer is sneering?"

I started using screens myself in worship during my four years as pastor in Boone, North Carolina. Images on websites like textweek.com became another form of commentary, especially on narrative texts that had traditional fine art images.

At first I flashed up too many of these, but later I'd use only one or two and comment more extensively on each, sometimes with a faux art history professor laser pointer. Inspired by Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and his commentary on Rembrandt, I built whole sermons around single images. I also flashed long quotations from the Bible and other sources. These quotations can fly by hearers if there's no visual reinforcement—with it you have more of a chance of connecting. I e-mailed the preacher of a screenless church here to ask for a copy of a poem he'd used in worship. I was almost annoyed when I couldn't see it as he was reading it.

The best use of screens is to offer testimony: put one of God's people in front of a camera and have that person talk about God's work. Preparation time allows tight editing and puts the speaker in the best possible light. In Boone we had professional videos made of ministry events held outside of Sunday morning, then showed them in worship. Videos of a mission trip or tithing testimony were kept short, set to music, and edited for humor and theology. They *worked*.

Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox Christians have always had their "smells and bells," things to taste and see in the context of worship: candles and crosses and bread and wine and chalice and font. Lower-church Protestants seem to have dived into the use of screens as if we've been missing something. The good news is there's good news here.