

Using Technology for Ministry: Trends, Principles, and Applications

by Alfredo Vergel

ABSTRACT: This survey of developments, guidelines, and uses of technology by congregations and their leaders offers an overview of the topic and points to sources for further study. As technology plays a larger role in religious communities, there is a need for guiding principles for its use. Congregational leaders do well to engage technology reflectively while staying informed on its possible applications in ministry. While this article is of primary interest to those in leadership positions at the congregational level, it can also serve both as a primer to seminary students and as a tool for librarians providing reference services on the topic.

INTRODUCTION

The use of technology to increase effectiveness is a pervasive and in many ways welcome trend. The focus of the current article is on the place of such technologies in the work of churches and their clergy, a sector that has not been surveyed as often as others. I will first map out a landscape of current trends in the use of technology by congregations and ministers. This will be followed by a discussion of principles to guide the appropriate use of technology. Finally, I offer an annotated inventory of technologies for use in various aspects of church and ministerial work.

TRENDS IN THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR MINISTRY

One dramatic trend in American congregations during the last decade has been the increased use of computer technology, described in detail by the June 2009 report of the National Congregations Study,¹ a longitudinal survey of a large array of congregational characteristics and activities in America.² These findings point to the pervasive adoption of technology in American religious communities, even though the study looks only at three specific implementations: visual projection equipment, websites, and e-mail applications. More specific surveys of technology use in congregations have been conducted as part of the Center for Congregations' "Computers in Ministry Initiative."³ These studies provide evidence of a wide use of office suites, i.e., software employed in tasks such as scheduling, record keeping and publishing. In fact the documented increase in the use of visual projection equipment in congregations may be construed as a hint of another trend, i.e., the increased use of presentation software. Some of these applications have displaced previously used office tools such as typewriters, ledgers, and personal organizers. Others have eased the production of common congregational communication tools such as visual aids and print publications, e.g., church bulletins.

¹ Mark Chaves, Shawna Anderson, and Jason Byassee, "National Congregations Study: American congregations at the beginning of the 21st century," Duke University, http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSII_report_final.pdf.

² Duke University, "About the National Congregations Study," Duke University, <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/about.html>.

³ Center for Congregations, "Computers and Ministry Initiative," Center for Congregations, http://centerforcongregations.org/blogs/initiatives/archive/2007/02/26/Computers_and_Ministry_Initiative.aspx.

Alfredo Vergel, Public Services and Special Collections Librarian, Chan Shun Centennial Library, Southwestern Adventist University, Keene, Texas

Beyond these “generic” office applications, however, there is the phenomenon of Congregational Management Software (CMS), bundled database tools customized for tracking members, visitors, and finances. Such software is being widely adopted⁴ and seems to be evolving in the direction of a web platform that can be integrated with a church’s website.⁵

Surveys exploring the use of other types of technology by congregations would be helpful in gaining a more complete picture of the use of technology in ministry. Such studies could give careful consideration to the use of hardware and software to create digital audio, photographs, graphics, and video, as well as “Web 2.0,” i.e., newer social networking applications.

As it is, inferences on the adoption of these other digital technologies can only be made from extrapolations or anecdotal data. One example is the increased use of tools to create and process digital audio, images, and video. This in turn feeds into a new level of content both for websites and for more dynamic settings such as Facebook.

Web 2.0 applications, with their characteristic focus on interactivity and user control, may have great appeal for religious communities seeking to extend their influence to the Web. For a sense of how congregations and their clergy are using Web 2.0 applications, it is worth looking at their use as reported in both the general and religious news media. “Our Father, Lead Us to Tweet, And Forgive the Trespassers,”⁶ an article published last summer in *The New York Times*, illustrates this trend. Attitudes across religious bodies toward the use of technology to further their message and connect with followers differ widely. They range from recoiling at the thought of inappropriate responses to an eagerness to embrace new possibilities in order to engage more people. Often the target audience is the young, those who are geographically remote, those with limited mobility, or those otherwise not within easy reach of religious communities. The interactivity of this kind of technology is both its appeal and the reason for caution among religious communities who find reason to be uncomfortable with unbounded interactivity.

GUIDELINES FOR APPROPRIATE USE

The ever-changing landscape of digital tools can serve as an enticement for the adoption of technologies without first giving careful consideration to what constitutes appropriate use. Addressing questions such as why technology should be used in ministry, what its proper place is in the work of congregations and the clergy, etc., can all prove useful in the course of successful implementation.

Philosopher Albert Borgmann⁷ has theorized that technology is meant to ease human burdens and has the capacity of shaping cultures and life styles. Devices are equally capable of wasting our time or making our use of it more effective, thus altering traditional practices.⁸ For example, the presence of a projection system in a place of worship may unintentionally undermine a worshiper’s imagination, simply by presenting “pre-fabricated” images on the screen. By the same token, an excessive amount of time spent on visual presentations *may* eat up time needed to prepare the content of a sermon. According to Borgmann, contrary to its perception as a mere tool, technology is not neutral. Rather, it is persuasive, and can have a way of insinuating itself into routines mostly as a way of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Nancy Armstrong, “A New Way of Thinking: Innovative Web-Based CMS Focuses on People,” Center for Congregations, <http://centerforcongregations.org/files/folders/448/download.aspx>.

⁶ Paul Vitello, “Our Father, Lead Us to Tweet, And Forgive the Trespassers,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 2009.

⁷ David J. Wood and Albert Borgmann, “Prime Time: Albert Borgmann on Taming Technology,” *Christian Century* 120, no. 17 (August 23, 2003): 22-25.

⁸ Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1992). 112.

making life less strenuous. Because of this, technology sometimes has a tendency to creep into areas where it is not actually needed, displacing human activities that, while seemingly burdensome, are helpful in maintaining a centered focus in life. Such activities involve an engagement of one's mind and body as well as engagement with others, and participation in such activities is the result of a commitment, preferably shared with a community. One could argue, for example, that broadcasting religious services may eliminate the community involvement aspect of actually attending, or that displaying scriptural passages used in sermons on a screen discourages congregants from looking up those texts in their own Bibles. What this means in the context of ministry is that technology can easily and subtly displace practices that are central to a congregation. The perceived benefits gained by the use of technology in accomplishing church work could sometimes be far outweighed by the undermining of established practices that help congregants connect with God, one another, and themselves.⁹

To avoid this pitfall, religious communities do well to identify and affirm their commitment to their focal traditions, "creating the positive conditions in which technology becomes less compelling and different kinds of engagements thrive and flourish."¹⁰ For example, I remember leading a youth group in a one-week television "fast" several years ago. Participants were encouraged to partner with others in finding ways of filling the apparent gap left by the absence of TV time. This led them to rediscover the value of simple activities such as reading and talking. Unless congregations are intentional in their attempts to curb the allure of technology, they may find that it absorbs time and attention that might be better devoted to focal traditions.

While this approach to technology assigns to it an appropriate role in the greater scheme of congregational life, pressing countertrends call for even broader technology adoption. For example, Americans are increasingly using the Internet "for faith related reasons" according to the last Pew Internet & American Life survey on the subject.¹¹ Congregations can therefore have a quite legitimate interest in using the technologies available through the Internet to reach their communities.

Any consideration of technology implementation in ministry, therefore, should balance a reflection on the mission of the congregation with the cultural realities in the greater society. In Christian communities, this entails not only a review of pertinent texts and proven wisdom on the nature and purpose of the church, but also an assessment of the local culture of the congregation.¹² Other relevant guidelines may include 1) provision for ministry to reach those who have the least access to technology;¹³ 2) the avoidance of models and approaches to communication that emphasize catering to the audience's perceived needs solely in order to muster popularity;¹⁴ 3) preventing technology from becoming indispensable and disruptive of the congregation's restful communion with and dependence on God;¹⁵ and 4) avoiding overhyping the importance of technology in religious communities.¹⁶

⁹ David Giuliano, "Our Ambivalent Relationship with Technology," *Clergy Journal* 82, no. 3 (January 2006): 15-16.

¹⁰ David Wood and Albert Borgmann, "Prime Time: Albert Borgmann on Taming Technology," *Christian Century* 120, no. 17 (August 23, 2003): 23.

¹¹ Lynn Clark, Stewart Hoover and Lee Rainie, "Faith Online." Pew Internet & American Life Project, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2004/Faith-Online.aspx>.

¹² John Jewell, *Wired for Ministry: How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other New Technologies Can Serve Your Church* (Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2001): 44-50; Constance E. Stella, *Wiring Your Church for Worship* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2007):13-15.

¹³ Ian S. Evison, "The Digital Revolution: Changing the 'How' of Ministry, Not the 'What,'" *Congregations* 27, no. 3 (May 2001): 21.

¹⁴ John MacArthur, "A Challenge for Christian Communicators," *Master's Seminary Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31-34, 68-69.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-38, 42-43, 62-64.

Guided by these critical reflections, congregations can better engage in successful planning for technology use. Specialists in the integration of digital technologies recommend that this planning process be in the hands of a technology team (or rather, ministry) made up of a variety of stakeholders, and charged with an ongoing process of needs assessment and prioritization, followed by the development and monitoring of timelines for implementation and maintenance.¹⁷ The Center for Congregations also recommends the judicious use of professional help in combination with the assistance of volunteers.¹⁸ The growing number of technologies of potential use in congregations and by the clergy, the steep learning curve required to master some of them, and the cost-prohibitive nature of others all dictate the kind of team approach described above, which will allow congregations to implement applications that meet their needs.

TECHNOLOGY APPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

The following offers brief descriptions of technology applications, along with some possible uses, and sources for further information.¹⁹

a. Church Management Software

The use of applications to track members, visitors, finances and scheduled events is well established. Packages customized to the needs of congregations are available and widely used. However, some congregations and clergy still use generic office suites, such as Microsoft Office applications, and finance software like Quicken or QuickBooks. The Center for Congregations has provided statistics on the rate of use of various products and has made available information on developments in the market for the customized packages, which are now moving to the web and interfacing with church websites.²⁰ The near future may bring web-based software that allows congregants to edit their own church records (e.g., contact information) as well as integration with systems used for making contributions online.

b. E-mail and Desktop Publishing

With the rise in the use of websites in congregations, it is reasonable to infer that more are using their own domain name for official e-mail, with generic tools such as Microsoft Outlook used to handle it. This is a major step beyond the use of personal e-mail for church communications, which may dilute the congregation's brand. Desktop publishing has been used to create brochures, flyers, worship leaflets, bulletins, signs, etc. Microsoft Publisher was reported to be the most widely used title in the last Center for Congregations' Desktop Publishing Survey. Congregations desiring more professional-looking publications may consider products such as Adobe InDesign or QuarkXPress, which are standard for commercial printing, but require more expertise.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 79-82; Constance E. Stella, *Wiring Your Church for Worship* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2007), 13-15; Nancy Armstrong, Brent Bill, and Aaron Spiegel, "Best Practices for Using Computers in Congregations," *Clergy Journal* 82, no. 3 (January 2006): 4-5.

¹⁸ Nancy Armstrong, Brent Bill, and Aaron Spiegel, "Best Practices for Using Computers in Congregations," *Clergy Journal* 82, no. 3 (January 2006): 4-5.

¹⁹ It is beyond the scope of this article to compare specific application brands so I refer to applications by their generic name and may mention brands that are recognizable examples.

²⁰ Center for Congregations, "Computers and Ministry Initiative," Center for Congregations, http://centerforcongregations.org/blogs/initiatives/archive/2007/02/26/Computers_and_Ministry_Initiative.aspx. Nancy Armstrong, "A New Way of Thinking: Innovative Web-Based CMS Focuses on People," Center for Congregations, <http://centerforcongregations.org/files/folders/448/download.aspx>.

²¹ Center for Congregations, "Computers and Ministry Initiative," Center for Congregations, http://centerforcongregations.org/blogs/initiatives/archive/2007/02/26/Computers_and_Ministry_Initiative.aspx.

c. Technologies for Visual Presentations

Common uses of presentation software include the display of lyrics for congregational singing, and images or text to induce reflection and illustrate or highlight oral presentations. Reviewers of this type of application unanimously express caution about possible excesses in its implementation.²² Visual presentations can also include video, which may stand alone or be embedded in a presentation application. This requires the use of a digital video camera and possibly video editing software. Five minutes is the recommended maximum for video presentations during worship, with one minute being the norm.²³

d. Congregational or Ministry Websites

It is unclear how many faith community sites are created and maintained using text editors, specific web development applications (such as Adobe Dreamweaver), customized content management systems, or professional web development services. Congregations looking for continuity in their websites do well to carefully decide on a way to create and maintain it. This is important, as it will ensure that the site remains manageable and fresh. Each method has its pros and cons,²⁴ but content management systems specifically designed for churches may offer the best balance of flexibility, affordability, and ease of use.²⁵ Nevertheless, even home-grown sites that are well thought out can make a positive impact, whereas a professionally designed site that does not take into account the particular ethos of a congregation may not meet its expected potential.

e. Webcasting and Podcasting

Both of these media technologies can be used to make church programming available online. Detractors of this use of technology describe it as yet another way of cultivating “celebrity-driven church cultures,” discouraging the development of the gifts of preaching and teaching in the congregation and reducing evangelism to providing information.²⁶ To be sure, religious radio and TV broadcasting can be described the same way, but the user control inherent in webcasting and podcasting has made it easier than ever to follow one’s favorite preachers. Proponents argue that these technologies are “a blessing to those who cannot attend church,” and extend the influence of the congregation across denominations and geographical locations.²⁷ Weighing both sides of the argument is essential for congregations deciding on implementing these technologies. Balanced scenarios may include encouraging the audience to link with a local congregation and involving listeners and viewers in the creation of the content itself.

f. Web 2.0 Applications

The potential of Web 2.0 applications for enhancing human connections is often with an appeal to their characteristic emphasis on interactivity and user control. These applications include blogs, social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), video-sharing sites (e.g., YouTube), RSS (used to feed content to subscribers), and combinations

²² Debra Dean Murphy, “PowerPointless: Video Screens in Worship,” *Christian Century* 123, no. 15 (2006): 10-11; Philip A. Quanbeck II, “PowerPoint in Preaching?: no!,” *Word & World* 28, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 420; Andrew Root, “PowerPoint in Preaching?: Yes...But!,” *Word & World* 28, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 421; Robert R Howard, “The Electronic Pulpit: a Cautious Cheer,” *Encounter* 68, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 33-50; Mark E Yurs, “The Use Of Technology in Preaching,” *Clergy Journal* 85, no. 4 (March 2009): 9-11.

²³ Constance E. Stella, *Wiring Your Church for Worship* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2007): 14-15.

²⁴ Bill Nix, “Church Websites Made Easy,” *Your Church* 51, no. 2 (March 2005): 46-49.

²⁵ Ibid.; Mark Stephenson, “Church Snapshot: Becoming a Web-Empowered Church,” *Clergy Journal*, (January 2008), 3-5.

²⁶ Sarah Pulliam, “The Art of Cyber Church,” *Christianity Today* 53, no. 9 (September 2009): 52.

²⁷ Derek J. Morris and Delwin Finch, “Preaching to the World: How Web Church Can Extend the Impact of Your Preaching Ministry,” *Ministry* 79, no. 7 (July 2007): 9-11.

thereof (e.g., Twitter), among many others. While the possibilities for communication are obvious, these applications may extend the reach in time and location of a congregation's message, give a voice to previously underrepresented views, make possible more interaction between preachers and their audiences, and engage younger generations more effectively. The abundance of media reports and literature covering the subject attests to the interest raised by these applications.²⁸

CONCLUSION

The use of digital technologies by congregations and the clergy continues to evolve. Appropriate reflection on the proper role of technology and its inherent pervasiveness is necessary for congregations to use technology effectively while taking full advantage of its unique ways of engaging people in centering spiritual experiences. This requires careful planning, imbued with wisdom in order to implement with discrimination those technologies that fit the congregation's mission and culture. A fine balance between the use of technology and the preservation of integral practices should help congregations and their leaders continue to reach others with their distinctive ministries.

Libraries, which for many are almost as much a part of life as home, school, work, or church, may be in a strategic position to help their users both have access to technology and to affirm traditional practices, such as reading, reflecting, and gathering in community. This will require a concerted effort to prevent technology from displacing library services and programs that help people connect with themselves and others—think of story time being displaced by a video presentation. Theological libraries in particular may provide information on technologies for ministry to congregations and their leaders, but would also do well to model a balanced use of technology in, for example, the way facilities and devices are laid, and in programming that involves face-to-face interactions.



²⁸ Three articles describing these applications and their possible use in ministry are Susan Ebertz, "Technology for Ministry: Ministry 2.0," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 62 (2008): 316-323; John R. Throop, "Church 2.0: Use the Internet to Boost Your Community-building Efforts," *Your Church* 53, no. 6 (November 2007): 34-38; Andrea Useem, "The New Connectivity: How Internet Innovations are Changing the Way We Do Church," *Congregations* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 22-28.