

Multimedia in Willow Creek Community Church¹

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Introduction

Willow Creek Community Church (WCCC) was established in the early 1970ies. It was founded on a vision of enhancing the personal relevance of the Christian message for postmodern “unchurched” people. This should happen by making the service exceedingly ‘seeker-friendly’. People, with limited or no former knowledge of Christianity, are to be addressed and challenged by culturally relevant preaching and the use of modern media such as video, drama, dance, music etc.

WCCC experienced an explosive growth, and today nearly 19.000 persons attend the weekly services. This apparent success has created huge interest in the communicative methods of WCCC: *Why do communications at WCCC apparently work? Does the use of post-modern media take away the attention from the Christian message?* The second question is motivated by the traditional position, which holds the verbal (i.e. often oral) message as the foundation in all Christian communications.

Functional multimedia

The use of different media categories such as video, drama, contemporary music, dance, storytelling, symbolic event and preaching together constitute the flow of the seeker-services while these these media categories are sparsely used – if at all in traditional services – they must be considered part of mainstream communications in secular culture.

In this paper we argue that the combination of multiple media categories in the services constitute functional multimedia, seen as a distinct postmodern media. This definition is not unproblematic as we have little or no user interactivity, and as digital compilation of media elements is done only subsequently. Nevertheless we find that the use of multiple media together offer advantages in communication that are only compatible with the functions of multimedia.

Why do multimedial communications at WCCC seem to enhance communications?

To answer the first question, we have examined existing theory on multimedia learning² to find out which advantages normally are found by using more than one communicative ‘channel’ (verbal and visual). All consulted theories supports the idea of a combined visual and verbal cognitive ‘system’, which, used properly, can supplement each other leading to more efficient communication. In fact, an important observation in cognitive research is that the visual sense is accentuated before the auditory sense. Learning is simply more efficient if the visual sense is active in a learning situation. Of course the efficiency depends on the proper combination of the verbal and auditory. And in fact, the use of multimedia can be an unintended hurdle for efficient communication if not used properly, e.g. if the visual and auditory input promote contradictory messages.

Cognitive research further brings us to the observation that the use of multimedia is most efficient in learning when the recipient has *little knowledge* on the subject, or when he has predominantly

¹ The article is an abstract of a paper in Danish on the use of multimedia in Christian communications, submitted to the University of Aalborg, Denmark, May 27 2004. The full text (in Danish) can be downloaded from the digital library of University of Aalborg at http://projekter.aau.dk/PDB/projects/Multimedier_i_Willow_Creek_Community_Church.

² Works cited are: Jean-Francois Rouet, Richard E. Mayer, Roxana Moreno and Jeroen J. G. Merriënboer, Keld Fredens, Frank L. Borchardt and Wolfgang Schnotz.

visual learning preference. As human beings we learn in different ways, some prefer visual communication, other auditory communication.

This fact is probably the answer to our first question. The communication at WCCC services is efficient, because the combination of verbal and visual elements means that everyone attending the service, no matter level of former knowledge on Christianity, gets and understands the message.

Another observation is that WCCC by using multimedia brings 'public arts' into a 'private art' partition. Religious expression is normally defined as belonging to 'private arts', that is communication requiring a special foreknowledge or special cultural adjustment. By using 'public arts' in the communication, that is communication using common accepted expressions, people no longer understand the communication as foreign and irrelevant, but *relevant* and *familiar*.

Besides the use of multimedia elements, a specific way in which WCCC communicates in 'public arts' is by using *topics* in seeker-services. Our post-modern culture thinks in topics, and the services of WCCC find their starting point in commonly recognized problems or topics³, and through these they lead the participant to a deeper knowledge and integration of Christian beliefs.

What is in focus?

How, then, is WCCC using multimedia? By studying the resources available on WCCC's website,⁴ one will soon observe a typical composition of the seeker-services at WCCC. Our observation is, that the services are constructed according to the classical narrative model. Services find their 'point of no return' in a creative, visual element, while the verbal message represents the 'climax'. Our conclusion is, that the visual element has the function of: 1) introducing and illustrating the current topic and 2) preparing the participants for the verbal message. The logical conclusion is therefore that the continuous focus in the seeker-services is the verbal message.

Regarding the seeker-service as narrative, we have also observed, that the seeker-service is narrative in a post-modern way, because the sum of elements in the services leave *vacancies*, in which it is up to the participants to bind the connections between the different elements. The service is not in itself an ended narrative, but is highly dependent on individual reception and interpretation. The service does not have a complete ending, but leaves it to the participant to let the message change his life. Most services include some sort of challenge. You may go home and everything will be like before, or you may accept the challenge and let the message encourage you to explore a growing relationship with God.

This outspoken challenge is a characteristic of American theology (evangelical/reformed theology), but in the seeker-services this challenge has a renewed, central function in postmodern sense.

Conclusion

Our conclusion is therefore, that the use of multimedia in Christian communications has significant advantages in making the Christian message relevant and receivable to recipients with no or little prior knowledge. But also people with a high-knowledge and a visual learning preference do benefit considerably from multimedia communication.

It is a challenge for the church to bring a proper use of 'public arts' into Christian communications in order to make the message relevant and homelike for people. At the same time it is important to keep the Christian message clear and as the actual object to communicate. It is our conviction that this is to a large extent achieved at WCCC.

³ The services explored have the topics: "Fathers Day", "Security" and "Christianity: Boring, Untrue, Irrelevant?"

⁴ <http://www.willowcreek.com/servicebuilder/servicepages/seekerindex.asp>