

Media and ministry

Using modern means to communicate timeless truth

by Josh Cowing and Richard Brown –

Contrary to what most people might think, multimedia is not a new avenue for communication.

Today, rather than simply having a written or spoken word, technology allows us to enhance our message with graphics that grab, sounds that stimulate, and video that visually transports the viewer into the message.

Ease of use and lowering cost of technology have brought us to the point where any message can be accompanied with a PowerPoint presentation. The advent of web-logs, commonly referred to as “blogs,” and now podcasting have given even moderately tech-savvy people with something to say (and some with nothing to say) the means with which to literally reach a worldwide audience. Using all of these new advances in technology we can create a cornucopia of stimulation that makes people sit up and say “WOW, what a great show!” However, any time we put these tools to use, we run the risk of our message getting lost in the razzle dazzle of the media.

The best example

Even with all our modern advances in technology, we are still chasing the best example the world has ever seen of using multimedia to effectively deliver a memorable message. In spite of all our gigabytes of RAM, terabytes of memory, and high-definition video capabilities, we are even now trying to catch up with a pioneer who was clearly ahead of his time. This trailblazer in the field of communication knew how to deliver a message that would be remembered. His straight forward, uncomplicated method was to communicate through a symphony of the senses, creating a wonderfully crafted orchestration of sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste.

On one occasion he gathered his hungry students in a small candlelit room. As they sat in the warm glow of the illuminated area sharing in conversation, their eyes were gently drawn to him as he took a piece of bread and gave thanks. One by one, their fingers felt the ragged edges of the torn bread as he passed the broken pieces among them. Its comforting aroma encompassed them as they lifted it to their lips to savor. The composition of the message was made complete when his students heard him



say, “This is my body, which is given for you.” In the simple stillness of a small room, without computers, cables, or even electricity, a message was delivered that we still remember today, over 2,000 years later. That’s multimedia!

What is multimedia?

Most people are confused about just what multimedia is. Clearly, it’s more than just audio amplification and lyrics flashed on the screen. What we really mean when we say multimedia is “multi-sensory.” Each of our senses is like a receiving door, through which information is passed. Our senses are the only way we can receive information from the outside world; if something doesn’t make it through one of those doors, it doesn’t make it into our heads. Therefore, if we as communicators want to ensure the best possible chance that our message is retained, we need to target as many of those doors simultaneously as possible. Jesus knew that the more senses he included in delivering his message of hope for salvation, the more likely his audience would be to understand and accept that message.

The church today

This brings us to today’s church, and why we feel it’s so important that multimedia play a role. Let’s look at another example. Think for a minute about a TV commercial that you’ve seen recently for a hamburger. It doesn’t matter which one, as I’m sure you’ve seen plenty. Contained within any given hamburger commercial are several different forms of media. Sound and video, obviously; but in all likelihood, the commercial also showed someone picking up that hamburger, so you the viewer can remember what a hamburger feels like. Then the person in the commercial will no doubt take a big bite. This too is designed to help you recall the taste of a hamburger, in the hopes that you will then want to go out and buy one right now. If Smell-a-Vision had been invented yet, you can be sure they’d be taking advantage of your fifth sense, too! All these different senses are being accessed at the same time, all supporting their message: you want a hamburger. If so much care is taken to craft a message about a hamburger, how much more important is it for us, the church, to spend the same amount of time and thoughtfulness to craft our message—life’s most important message—for the world? If we as the church fail to keep up, we run the risk of becoming culturally obscure and irrelevant.

Multimedia as ministry

It was with this thought in mind that the leadership of the Western Territory set out to change The Salvation Army’s approach to multimedia on a territorial level by putting together the Territorial Multimedia Team. This is significant in that as far as anyone knows, this is the first time a religious organization has set about to improve the way multimedia is created and implemented on a corporate level. For rather than just being a production entity, hired to produce videos, audio recordings, and live events, the THQ Multimedia Team has much loftier goals. Not only does the team aim to help divisions and corps learn how to create and more effectively implement multimedia into their ministry, but they also want to help people understand that the creation and delivery of appropriate multimedia should be seen as a ministry. Just as playing in a band or singing in a songster brigade is viewed as ministry, so should the running of the soundboard and coordinating projection of video be seen as an opportunity for personal ministry as well.

To that end, the ultimate goal of the THQ Multimedia Team is to see a multimedia team implemented at each corps, which meets and is held in the same regard as any other group which contributes to the weekly worship services. Our hope is that by meeting regularly and being kept informed as to the kind of multimedia needed each week, worship services will run smoother, important behind-the-scenes tasks won't be left to whoever happens to be around, and people will be provided with opportunities for service that don't solely involve musical talent. Additionally, we'll be ensuring that our message of salvation is being delivered in the most effective and culturally relevant way possible.

Should we ditch the songbooks?

The THQ Multimedia Team is by no means advocating anything as drastic as the wholesale removal of Salvation Army Songbooks or Bibles from Sunday morning meetings in favor of projected lyrics and scripture passages. Quite the contrary, in fact. Often there is no better way to set the mood for a meeting than to allow people to be physically involved by reaching for their Bibles, feeling the tissue-paper pages between their fingers, and listening as those around them rustle the pages looking for a particular passage of scripture. That's all multimedia too, and as long as we're intentional about how we use it, there's no right or wrong answer for how to implement multimedia into ministry.

The good news is, there are many corps around the territory that are already taking steps in this direction. About half of all corps in the territory currently use a video projector in some capacity in support of their worship services. Still others use overhead projectors (and yes, that counts as multimedia too!). Many corps have a audio tape ministry of some kind, and a handful have begun podcasting the recordings of their worship services (see sidebar), exposing their message to a worldwide audience. Many also maintain their own websites.

Multimedia kitchens—resource to the field

The THQ Multimedia Team exists first and foremost to be a resource to the field. We encourage anyone, regardless of experience or expertise, who has interest in this area to get in touch with us with your questions, concerns, or multimedia needs. We are available to lead workshops or training sessions for groups of all ages and skill levels; we can provide consultative services for the purchase or upgrade of audio and video equipment in corps facilities; we'll do our best to answer any questions you might have, and if we don't know, we'll find someone who does.

Our aim in the next year is to conduct several "Multimedia Kitchens" in various locations around the territory. If you are interested in hosting one of these events, please contact us. Above all, we hope you catch the vision of our hopes for multimedia in the territory, and will continue to seek out new ways to deliver to the lost life's most important message.

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