

Inaugural Lecture, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership [Slide #1]

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February 8, 2010

Anne and Richard Mallaby came to Box Hill Baptist Church as co-pastors in 2004. [Slide #2] The church is located at a busy intersection in the Melbourne suburb of Box Hill. Soon after they arrived, Anne sat outside to count the number of people who walked past the building on a typical weekday. She counted several thousand people, and she wondered how the congregation could make connection with some of them.

In 2001, Box Hill Baptist Church had celebrated its centenary in the midst of a significant church conflict and declining numbers. As Anne and Richard listened to the congregation talk about the things that had energized them in the difficult years around the time of the centenary, over and over they heard a lot of energy about the makeshift art gallery the congregation had set up for the centenary. The worship space had been expanded to the back in the 1950s when attendance was high, and then later, when attendance fell again, that back area was turned into a storage room. For the centenary, that back storage room was turned into an art gallery and various kinds of art by congregation members was displayed.

Anne and Richard reflected back to the congregation the energy they heard when that art exhibition was talked about. The congregation decided to turn that back room into a permanent art gallery, and the Chapel on Station Street Gallery was born. [Slide #3] It has the theme “Creating a space for artists to invite people to wonder.” I’ll give you a brief tour: the entrance with crafts for sale[Slide #4, 5], the main gallery [Slide #6]. Arts have spilled over to the exterior of the building as well, with fanciful figures at one side [Slide #7]and a mural on the wall of the hall [Slide #8].

Anne wondered if she would be able to find artists to display their art in the gallery, but that has proved not to be a problem at all. The gallery highlights artists from inside and outside the congregation. When I visited the gallery, I saw an intriguing photo display by a man who is legally blind.

After the gallery had been in existence for two years, an artist came to Anne and Richard and said, “We need to encourage artists to think religiously.” So the congregation set up a religious art prize. Each year a theme is announced for the prize, and 70 to 80 submissions are received.

Art spills over into the life of the congregation. Richard works with the children, and he has engaged them in numerous art projects [Slide #9]. Anne almost always uses art to accompany her sermons. She likes to use original art, so on a Sunday morning there is often an easel at the front of the worship space with a painting on it. When I visited, a large marble sculpture sat on the stage [Slide #10]. The sculpture had been made in connection with one of the art festivals connected to the religious art prize. This art prize and festival had the theme “rhythms of life.” [Slide #11] A sculptor designed the sculpture, and encouraged congregation members and members of the wider community to take turns chipping away at the marble to create the design.

I visited Box Hill and other churches in Melbourne in October as a part of a University of Otago research grant that I received to look into visual communication and visual arts in congregations. I spent a week in Auckland in August, then two and a half weeks in Melbourne and Sydney later in the year. I want to tell you one more story from the research trip as I begin this lecture.

Also in Melbourne, I met a man named John O’Connell. John looks like he might be in his early 60s, and he serves as the coordinator of the arts ministry at a large Pentecostal church called C3 Centre. Some of John’s paintings with religious themes were displayed in the church building, and he often paints during the worship service. [Slide #12] He also brings visual arts

components into a variety of church activities, helping congregation members to express their thoughts and prayers through visual art.

As a young man, John trained as an art teacher and did a lot of painting. He felt called by God to be a missionary, and back then he knew that it would be a choice between art and missions. He and his wife spent most of their adult life serving as missionaries in Vanuatu. He always painted on the side, for personal enrichment, but his art and his ministry were always two separate things.

When they returned to Melbourne in 2003, got involved in the congregation, and began to lead the arts ministry he experienced the integration of his art and his ministry for the first time in his life. When he told me about it, he beamed. He said, “Artists from all over tell the same story. They couldn’t figure out how their art fit into their ministry. Over and over I’ve heard, ‘I decided not to do my art so I could become a youth leader or deacon or a service leader.’ Now they’re seeing how art fits into ministry.”

We’re seeing a significant increase in engagement with the visual arts and visual communication in congregations. I got interested in this subject because the church where I served as associate pastor in Seattle from 1997 to 2004 experienced an explosion of interest in the arts. When I did my PhD in communication between 2004 and 2007, I learned about the significant increase in visual communication in the wider culture. As a PhD student, I read Robert Wuthnow’s 2003 book, *All In Sync*, where he explores the role of the arts in congregational life, and I began to understand the significance of what I had seen in my own congregation.¹ [Slide #13] I am motivated by statements like this one from Jeremy Begbie: “Much cultural theory would suggest that in the decades to come, the arts will play an ever more active role in shaping the way we come to terms with the world.”² I’m interested in the impact on congregations of these two trends: the rise in visual communication and the rise in engagement with the arts, particularly the visual arts.

Cultural shifts

Let's spend a moment charting the rise in visual communication in the wider culture. [Slide #14] Think back with me to the year 1900 and the common forms of communication at that time: face-to-face conversations, letters, the telegraph, books, newspapers, magazines, brochures and pamphlets, the telephone. All of those forms of communication were largely word-based. Books, newspapers, magazines, brochures and pamphlets might have had a few illustrations, but many fewer than today.

With respect to visual communication, two things happened in the 20th and early 21st century. [Slide #15] First the addition of many new forms of communication that have visual components, such as movies, television, desktop publishing and the internet. And the 21st century so far, we've added digital cameras, cellphones with cameras, online photo sharing, Facebook, the iphone.

In addition to the addition of new forms of communication that are totally visual or have visual components, many of the older forms of communication became more visual. For example, the internet has shifted from a place to communicate with words to a place where we look at images on websites, Facebook and skype.

Magazines, books and newspapers also began to use more photos and graphics over the course of the last century. I recently looked at old issues of the Otago Daily Times. [Slide #16] In 1901, the first year for which microfilm versions of the newspaper are available in the University of Otago library, the front page of the newspaper does not contain anything other than words.

[Slide #17] To my surprise, the same was true in 1950, except one small exception. Just to the right of the name of the newspaper was a small advertisement showing a graphic of a canoe.

[Slide #18] In 1970 the front page had two big photos. [Slide #19] In 1990, not much had changed. [Slide #20] In 1995 the name of the newspaper had a series of smaller photos under it advertising articles on other pages, each photo in a neat box. [Slide #21] By 2000 the photos

that advertised articles on other pages were bleeding into each other. [Slide #22] The top of page one has changed very little since 2000.

Scholars have suggested a number of reasons for the rise in visual communication in the twentieth century. [Slide #23] Advertisers learned the power of images to elicit thoughts of beauty, luxury, and sexuality, and they learned that those kinds of images sell things. Research informed us about learning styles, and we understand more deeply the significance of visual and kinesthetic learners. Globalization has brought a multiplicity of cultures right next door to us, along with their various forms of visual communication.

One researcher has proposed the notion that a significant cause in the rise in visual communication comes from the availability of electricity. Think about it. Movies, television, computers, the internet, digital cameras all depend on cheap and readily available electricity.

This rise in visual communication has profoundly influenced congregations. More churches use desktop publishing to create their bulletins. [Slide #24] Just look at the number of graphics and fonts on the same bulletin I've shown you. The graphics and the fonts would have been impossible 25 years ago. More churches have data projectors and websites. More churches use logos and graphics to try to express their identity. [Slide #25]

In 2007, Leadership Journal reported on a survey of ministers and churches on the topic of visual communication in congregational life.³ The ministers reported an increase in use of data projectors to show movie and TV clips and homemade videos. The ministers also reported using more props in preaching and worship. (To illustrate the use of props in worship, today I'm wearing a dress from Africa that I've worn twice while preaching a sermon with a story about the Kenyan woman who gave me the dress.)

The ministers in the Leadership survey also reported using more images of visual arts on their data projectors. This is one of the places where visual communication and the visual arts

overlap. Art is amazingly easy to find online, and congregations are using visual arts images on their websites, worship bulletins, and data projectors.

Visual Arts

Let's shift from general visual communication to the topic of the visual arts in congregational life. I've just hinted that one of the reasons for an increase in engagement with the visual arts is the simple availability of so many images of art online. In addition, in the secular culture, artists are increasingly viewed as spiritual guides, and art is increasingly viewed as a place where spirituality is experienced. This has spilled over into congregations.

Let me tell you about some of the ways I heard the visual arts talked about in congregations.

Many of you will know Mark Pierson, who used to be minister at Cityside Baptist in Auckland, and who now works for World Vision. When Mark prepares a worship service, he views himself as a curator. He empowers artists to participate in creating worship experiences. Mark creates worship experiences that are visual and kinesthetic.

Cityside Baptist, along with St. Ives Uniting Church in Sydney, commissions artists to participate in an exhibit of the stations of the cross. [Slide #26] The minister at St. Ives church talked about the role of art to raise questions and encourage people to think deeply about what their faith means. This aspect of art to raise questions serves the wider community as well. People from all walks of life come through these stations of the cross exhibits, and relationships with the wider community are nurtured.

St. Paul's Anglican Church in the suburb of Sydney called Castle Hill has a creative arts team. When the pastors come up with a new sermon series, the creative arts team meets to talk about the ways they can illustrate the series. A graphic designer comes up with a graphic that is used on bulletin and posters. [Slide #27] In the case of a sermon series called "Stepping Up"

focused on the book of James, the graphic was a photograph of feet and legs walking up a flight of steps. Music and drama is planned for the whole sermon series. The worship space is decorated in a way that illustrates the sermon series. The music director at St. Paul's, Bren McLean, talked about the way the arts illustrate biblical themes. He also talked about the way the arts elicit emotions, and those emotions help us offer our whole selves to God.

You saw a bit of the art created by the children at Box Hill Baptist Church. [Slide #28] The ministers at Box Hill, as well as ministers at many other churches, talked about the way visual arts help to engage children.

Another St. Paul's Anglican church, this one in Auckland, hosts an arts ministry affectionately called SPAM – St. Paul's Arts Ministry. SPAM has sponsored several arts events where members of the congregation are recruited to create something artistic around a theme. [Slide #29] The cross hanging in the church illustrates this very well. Each person was asked to create a cross on a tile, and the tiles were assembled into a big cross. [Slide #30] These kinds of art projects powerfully illustrate the unity and diversity of the body of Christ.

In my interviews in Australia and New Zealand, as well as in conversations with American Christians, I heard stories about the use of historic art to nurture personal devotion. Paintings by the great masters, such as Rembrandt, [Slide #31] are increasingly used as an inspiration for prayer. More Protestants and Roman Catholics are paying with icons these days, an ancient prayer form of the Eastern Orthodox Churches. [Slide #32]

In my interviews I heard a passion for nurturing the spiritual life of visual artists, who have been excluded from leadership roles in traditional Protestant churches for so long. I heard people talk about the fact that artists, like everyone else, have gifts to offer congregations, and we will be richer when we allow artists to help lead us into connection with the First Artist.

One of the totally new themes I heard about on my research trip was the notion of prophetic art. You already met John O'Connell, of Melbourne's C3 Centre, the man who in his sixties is experiencing for the first time the integration of his faith, his ministry and his art. John paints during many of the worship services at his church. He paints what he believes God wants to speak to the congregation. At the end of the service, the minister usually asks John to talk for a moment about what the painting means. [Slide #33]

The paintings are for sale, and all the money goes to the congregation's ministry in Southeast Asia. Most of the paintings sell immediately. One of them was so popular that copies were made, and I got to see and photograph one of the copies. The painting showed honey running down a surface. The word that came to John as he painted was "sticky." He said the painting illustrates visually the fact that God wants us to stick close to him, but even more importantly, God sticks close to us. Like honey.

Toorak Uniting Church in Melbourne has an art gallery like Box Hill Baptist. [Slide #34] They used a fabulous old manse for the gallery. [Slide #35]. The minister, Anneke Oppewal told me that the gallery sponsors an exhibit once each year featuring Christian, Muslim and Jewish art. It has created wonderful interfaith relationships. One of the unique features of the art gallery at Toorak Uniting Church is a café with great food, which functions like a gathering place for the community. [Slide #36]

Anneke frequently uses art to illustrate or complement her sermons. She will usually choose a piece of art that will stand in the front of the worship space. She'll use the art on the front of the bulletin and also on the projection screen. Her use of art illustrates the connection between visual art as art and visual art as a form of visual communication.

Let me summarize some of the themes that emerge from these examples.

[Slide #37] Mark Pierson's work shows the overlap between the visual and the kinesthetic.

[Slide #38] Many participatory forms of worship have both visual and kinesthetic components.

[Slide #39] The stations of the cross exhibits show the capacity of the visual arts to raise questions and encourage deep thought. They also illustrate the fact that the visual arts can create opportunities to connect with the wider community.

[Slide #40] St. Paul's Castle Hill uses visual arts, sanctuary decorations, dance, and graphics to illustrate sermons. They also view the arts as a way to elicit emotions that help people give their whole lives to God.

[Slide #41] The visual arts are a way to engage children.

[Slide #42] Visual arts can play a role in nurturing personal devotion and personal spirituality.

[Slide #43] The visual arts can provide vivid illustrations of the unity and diversity of the Christian body.

[Slide #44] Artists, like all congregation members, need encouragement to serve the Christian body with their gifts.

[Slide #45] Prophetic art draws on the idea that God may speak to a congregation through art as well as through the Bible and other means.

[Slide #46] Toorak Uniting Church has experienced significant interfaith dialog through art.

This list isn't exhaustive in any way, but it gives you an idea of some of the themes that are swirling around in congregations as they engage with visual arts and visual communication. You can see the terrific opportunities to engage children, congregation members, members of the

wider community and people of other faiths. Steve Taylor believes that the visual arts will increasingly play a role in congregations that want to have a missional focus because the arts create so many kinds of connections between people both inside and outside congregations.⁴

Leonard Sweet, in his 2000 book *Postmodern Pilgrims*⁵, uses the acronym EPIC [Slide #47] to describe effective ministry in the postmodern era: Experiential, Participatory, Image-Driven and Connected. Many of the ways I have described the use of visual arts enable people to experience worship or prayer more intensely, so the visual arts in congregations can be experiential. Many of the ways I saw the visual arts used in congregations increased participation as well as connection between people. I believe the rise in engagement with the visual arts in congregations is proliferating so quickly is that it does indeed meet the profound needs of people in our time, expressed by Sweet's acronym.

[Slide #48] In the same book Sweet describes our culture as "imageholic."⁶ That word evokes some of the challenges of the use of images in our time. If we use images, are we pandering to one of the addictions of our culture? Are we simply caving in to what people want? This is only one of the challenges presented by the increasing use of images and the visual arts in congregations.

Challenges

These shifts in communication that's becoming more visual, and the engagement with artists and the arts create numerous challenges in the midst of all the opportunities. I'll list a few more of the challenges I've heard people talk about.

[Slide #49] The first is copyright. When I downloaded that Rembrandt image from the internet onto my computer, and then when I used it in the PowerPoint presentation accompanying this lecture, was I violating the copyright of the person who photographed the painting? I literally have no idea. I didn't take the time to investigate the website where I found the image, to see if

they discuss copyright issues on the website. We might think that an image of a painting that is several hundred years old would be in the public domain, like the words that Shakespeare wrote. But the image of the painting, the actual photograph, is not in the public domain because the photograph was taken by a human being who has the rights to that photo. The issues get even more complicated with art that has been created recently, where both the photographer and the artist presumably have rights. We will need much more exploration of how to deal honourably with copyright.

[Slide #50] Another challenge comes from the profound differences between Christians who engage with the visual arts. Some view visual art, graphics, and visual communication in general as a way to illustrate biblical truths, as a way to proclaim the truth of the Gospel. Some view the visual arts as a way to raise questions and get people thinking in new and creative ways. And yet others view the arts as a way for God to speak directly to humans. These views are not completely mutually exclusive, but they represent very different approaches to the arts.

[Slide #51] In a similar way, some Christians take joy in the fact that images and many forms of visual art are polyvalent, that is, they can have multiple meanings. What one person sees in a painting or photograph may be very different than someone else sees. This harmonizes well with the postmodern view that each person creates his or her own truth. Other Christians want to tie down the meaning of images. They want the images that are used to serve the words that are read or preached. It requires discernment to make an assessment of when it is wise to let an image stand on its own, with the potential for numerous interpretations, and when the image needs to be anchored with words. When should images serve words, and the Word, and when should images be allowed to speak in their own polyvalent language?

[Slide #52] One more challenge comes from the fact that Christians so often do visual communication so poorly. We are not visually literate. Our congregational websites are often ugly, our brochures look amateurish and kitschy, our PowerPoint presentations are one list of bullet points after another. We are not visually literate. We don't understand how to "read"

photos or visual art. We are so word-oriented that we aren't willing to invest the time it takes to find effective images and use them wisely. Mea, mea culpa. I've been studying visual communication off and on for many years, and I can only report how much more I have to learn.

[Slide #53] The last challenge I'll mention is closely connected to our lack of visual literacy. In Protestant churches, particularly in Reformed churches, we lack a historic literature that might help us understand the role of images in worship. We have emphasized words as the primary Christian communication strategy, at the expense of almost everything else. As N. T. Wright says, "The Word became flesh, said St. John, and the Church has turned the flesh back into words."⁷ [Slide #54] The reformers were greatly suspicious of images in worship, with varying views on how often images should be used. Calvin banned all images from worship spaces. For the past four hundred years, no one in the Reformed tradition has written very much about the role of images in nurturing faith, personal devotion or worship. In the last few years I've been stunned by the number of congregations in the Reformed Tradition who have dived into the use of images in worship seemingly without any theological reflection. The logic seems to be that the culture is becoming more image-driven, and we need to fit in, so let's get on with it. We urgently need to develop a theology of the role of images in the life of communities of faith.

Theologians such as Jeremy Begbie and Trevor Hart are showing us the way, helping us to discover, or perhaps rediscover, a theology of the imagination. [Slide #55] Hart writes, "What we dare not think is that somehow we have a choice—to use or not use the imagination and its media, images, in religion and in theology. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we have been employing imagination in our religion and in our theology, ever since we first became involved in these practices. It is a question, then, not of whether we employ it or not, but of how good, how irreproachable we can, by the grace of God, make our employment of it."⁸

Seeing is Believing?

[Slide #56] I want to conclude with a few comments about the title of this lecture: Seeing is Believing. Is it? Do we always believe what we see? I don't know how old that saying is, but it clearly pre-dates the proliferation of images we live with today. In an age of photo-shopped pictures, who can believe anything they see? As we grow in our ability to communicate wisely with images, symbols and the visual arts, we will need to grow in our understanding of exactly what images can do, and what they can't do.

I'm hearing increasingly from younger Christians that they are surfeited with images and wish that ministers would stop putting up image after image on the projection screen.

In an increasingly imageholic culture, where communication using images is increasingly sophisticated and strategic, should Christians stick to what we know best and hold onto words and the Word? Or do we need to step up and grow in our understanding of visual literacy? I don't know the answers to all the questions that were raised by my interviews, but I do know God is working through the visual arts in some exciting ways in congregations, and I do know we'll increasingly need to consider the role of visual communication and visual images in the life of faith.

[Slide #57] Olive Drane, in the book *Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples*, writes: "If we try to promote something merely because we like it, or because it seems trendy, it is easy for things to become a battle of wills between different pressure groups in the Church. But if it emerges out of an honest exploration of who we are, and who God might yet enable us to be, that sets the agenda in a different way altogether. It is matter of using the arts with integrity, rather than (as frequently happens) as a gimmick."⁹ What I heard in numerous interviews was exactly what Drane describes. Visual arts and visual communication in congregational life emerging from an honest exploration of who we are and who God is calling us to be.

¹ Robert Wuthnow. *All in sync: How music and art are revitalizing American religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

² Jeremy Begbie, "Introduction," in *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*, edited by Jeremy Begbie. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000, xiii.

³ Eric Reed, "Preaching by Faith and by Sight," *Leadership Journal* (Summer 2007), 25-27.

⁴ Steve Taylor, coursebook for PASX 311/MINX 407, Preaching and Communication in a Contemporary Context, University of Otago, 2010.

⁵ Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000.

⁶ Ibid., 92.

⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Clown and the Fire*, London: SPCK, 1992, 61.

⁸ Trevor Hart, "Imagination for the Kingdom of God," in *God Will be All in All: The Eschatology of Jurgen Moltmann*, ed. Richard Bauckham, Edinburgh: T and T Clart, 1999, 54.

⁹ Olive Drane, *Clowns, Storytellers, Disciples: Spirituality and Creativity for Today's Church*, BRF: Oxford, 2002, 156.