

**Mediated Worship:
The Emergence of Digital Technology and its Impact on
Performance and Reception in a Rural Mississippi Church**

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In this article I examine the impact that digital technology has had on the performance, experience, and reception of worship at a Baptist church in rural Mississippi. Whether or not one espouses the use of technology in worship, it is a truism that how performances are transmitted influences how they are received. When these performances are mediated by technology, both “actors”¹ and audience engage with them in order to ameliorate, or indeed maximise the experience of worship. Nonetheless, the technology, whether manipulated by believers or non-believers (sometimes members of the congregation are versed sufficiently in IT to be able to perform this service for their congregations, at other times outside help, often not of the faith of the congregants, needs to be bought in), increasingly affects the experience of worship.

Clear Creek Missionary Baptist Church

This article is based on fieldwork that I conducted in Mississippi in 2012, coincidentally three decades after my first fieldwork foray there in 1982, but drawing additionally on services from 2015. As, however, I have published extensively on this earlier work (see as primary resource, my book on the subject (Smith 2004)), suffice it to say here that when I conducted fieldwork in Mississippi in the 1980s and early 1990s, Clear Creek Missionary Baptist Church (hereafter M.B.C.) in northern Mississippi, had a part-time pastor—the Rev. Grady McKinney (1971–1991)—which would have been quite usual in this area of Mississippi, with

¹ While this word sits uneasily in this context, I use it advisedly in the sense of an individual committing an action, as opposed to implying any sort of make-believe. In this regard, see Baumann 1986.

services held only on first and third Sundays of the month. Mississippi is historically the most economically depressed state in the United States, and African American communities in the state are more disadvantaged than other ethnic groups. As a consequence, many African American churches in Mississippi in the 1980s could not have afforded a full-time pastor. Services were held, therefore, on alternate Sundays, the congregation travelling to other churches (often related to the home church, perhaps through a prior deacon at Clear Creek M.B.C. having progressed to pastor at another church, or through other familial relations) on Sundays when services were not held at Clear Creek.² The church was, at that time, comprised of a small, mainly familial membership of about 180.

In the last decade or so, however, Oxford, and as a consequence the surrounding satellite communities (of which Clear Creek is one), has experienced significant economic growth and prosperity.³ Four-lane highways have been constructed for the first time in this part of northern Mississippi, and this has, naturally, greatly influenced both mobility and trade. Whereas the population of the Oxford area in 1990 was about 10,000, today it is closer to 40,000; roughly 17,000 of those associated with the University of Mississippi (traditionally one seat of the Confederate South, and therefore inescapably associated with white supremacy).⁴ The demography of the area has similarly changed. Whereas in 1990 I recall there being one Mexican restaurant (but little else in terms of “international” cuisine), when I visited in November 2012 there were three Japanese restaurants, one Indian restaurant, one

² On fifth Sundays, which occur about four times annually, several related congregations would come together to hold service under the umbrella organisation, the Tallahatchie-Oxford Missionary Baptist Association.

³ Oxford, Mississippi is overwhelmingly a “white” town, and while recent decades have seen increasing inter-racial interaction, African American communities generally do not live in the main town, but in historically removed satellite communities, several miles out of town along the highway. Here the setting is more rural and isolated, and when I was there in 1992 children at Clear Creek M.B.C. stated to me that they had never been to a white person’s house, nor had they had a white person come to their house prior to my arrival. When I attended service at Clear Creek in 2012, despite overall improvements in inter-racial relations, I and my two white hosts were the only white people in attendance at the church: this notwithstanding the fact that the “parent” Clear Creek Baptist Church (from which the African American church split in 1877) is but 100 metres further up the road.

⁴ Despite significant progress in race relations, and inter-racial activities, Mississippi is still the only state in the USA to incorporate the flag of the Confederacy in its state flag (as of the time of this writing).

Middle-Eastern restaurant, two Thai restaurants, a Portuguese Bakery, countless numbers of other Asian restaurants, Chinese and Malaysian, and of course (given Mississippi's relative proximity to Mexico and consequent Mexican-American population), many Mexican restaurants. Both to accommodate and as a result of these developments, numerous new housing subdivisions have been built in outlying areas: some modest, others very extravagant (with some of these latter inevitably suffering as a result of the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the United States).

Clear Creek M.B.C. has also been transformed. The church now has a full-time pastor—Eddie D. Goliday Sr (May 1998—present)—which has resulted in many more weekly church activities. The membership has grown from 180 to about 800, a new sanctuary (roughly four times the size of the previous one) was built in 2002, and this contains a Baptismal pool with a glass front set relatively high into the wall of the church behind the podium (much like the one that I previously described for Main Street Baptist church in Kentucky: Smith 2004, 53), so that the membership no longer has to travel to a local outdoor pond during the summer months to conduct Baptism, but can do so any time. While this might seem on the surface to be a relatively inconsequential development, outdoor Baptisms had previously occasioned some considerable anxiety, particularly amongst the Baptismal candidates. At this most important of performances—entry into the communion of saints (there is little compromise here, as one is either a saint or a sinner, saved or damned)—when candidates and their families dress up in party clothes (as is the custom in this tradition) there was, of course, the rather mundane inconvenience of trekking across the fields to the pond. These treks inevitably resulted in torn stockings, broken heels and tousled hair. More crucial, however, was the possibility of slipping on the mud at the bottom of the pond during Baptism, as Baptism in this tradition is by total immersion, and, given the very real potential

presence of venomous snakes (water moccasins, a variety of pit viper), the danger of critical bodily harm (see Smith 2004, 53–57).

Other developments within the church have facilitated increased access to worship: a bus was purchased to transport members in need of it to church events, the church has a website, email contact, and a radio ministry (WOXD FM 95.5 each Sunday 4pm–5pm, for which international access is unfortunately limited) and recordings (both CD and DVD) are made of each service and may be purchased from a designated deacon.

Given the rise in church membership, and the attendant necessity to increase dramatically the size of the church building, the physical distance within the church sanctuary is now much greater. As a consequence, close-ups of individual “actors” (again I use the phrase as defined by Richard Baumann, indicating someone committing an action)—prayer leaders, soloists, preachers, deacons—are projected onto two large video screens, as are such things as relevant quotations from the Bible (this is a fundamentalist, Bible-based church, taking as literal everything that is written in the Bible). But there is also a deliberate statement in the transformation of the church sanctuary. The original church building (which consists of both the sanctuary on the left, and church offices to the right, the latter to facilitate church lunches such as those at Harvest Celebrations) has been retained to accommodate church offices and catering facilities. The presence of the new church building on this rural landscape, however, far exceeds necessity in terms of volume, and insists on a physical presence that asserts ownership and belonging. (See below a photograph that I took in November 2012 which features a view of the original building to the left-hand side, and a portion of the new sanctuary—it was impossible, given its size, to get the full building in frame—on the right.) Moreover, whereas the original church building had been topped by a relatively modest spire and white cross, the current church spire soars many more metres into

the air and the church itself is clearly visible from the highway, which it had not been previously.

*Clear Creek
Missionary Baptist Church,
November 2012*



Substantial changes in the performance space, as well as in the technology of how performances are transmitted, have unquestionably affected the experience of worship at Clear Creek M.B.C., but despite all of these material changes, Sunday services continue to be traditional and Spirit-filled. Rev. Goliday Sr is a powerful preacher, and the music ministry continues to be strong, although the pivotal musicians of the 1980s and 1990s are no longer there, and there seems to be less improvisation.⁵ One other significant musical change is that a drum kit has now been officially installed close to the other instruments: previously, partly because of close association with blues and “Devil’s music”, drums made only occasional appearances at Clear Creek M.B.C., and several members then expressed reservations about them to me. The guitar, that quintessential antiphonal instrument for the blues, has yet to make an appearance.

⁵ Several of these musicians moved to Atlanta, Georgia, in the 1990s, with Atlanta’s rise to economic prosperity and the possibility of better paying jobs.

Clear Creek M.B.C. Morning Worship Service, Sunday, November 4, 2012

Detailed examination of “snapshots” from the Sunday service of November 4, 2012, will explore some of the transformations in performance, and thus the experience of worship, occasioned by the introduction of digital technology at Clear Creek M.B.C. With the slight exception of an earlier start—10.45am, as opposed to 11am, as it used to be—this service proceeded as previous ones that I had experienced, that is, the Call to Worship (projected onto the video screens, on which the pastor instructed the congregation to focus) was read antiphonally, and the congregation settled down for what might be expected to be about a two-hour period of worship.⁶ This opening of the service was followed by the Devotional—a period of prayers and songs, called up spontaneously, but led by the Devotional team (it had previously been led by the deacons). In the case of the songs, particularly where a soloist was involved, s/he was projected in half-body shot onto the screen. This resulted, however, in attention being drawn not only to the soloist—in the case of this particular service, Jackie Vaughn—but also to whatever or whomever was in the background. This was, unfortunately, on this occasion (as on others), and less desirably, to a young boy fidgeting in the background.

The boy was not the least bit engaged with the “Witnessing” that was being expressed in the sung performance, but was pursuing his own concerns. (He had a book, or diary, which he flipped through during the course of the performance.) Because the cameras recorded and projected close-ups of the soloist, they also recorded and projected details of background activities of which one might not otherwise have been aware. Thus, in this context, technology did not meet Quentin Schultze’s criteria for effective use: ‘fitting use of presentation technologies ought to improve the assembly’s ability to see and hear without

⁶ Churches vary quite considerably in the temporal duration of their services, as indeed in the duration of the same services on individual Sundays. In my experience, Sunday services at African American Baptist churches vary anywhere from one-and-a-half hour’s duration to (at the extreme, and generally in the case of special celebrations) three hours or more.

distraction and unintelligibility’ (Schultze 2004, 75). On the contrary, in at least some parts of this service, technology influenced the perception of performance, not because details of the environment had changed, but because the technology itself indiscriminately presented a two-dimensional image of performance that the human eye would automatically have edited in order to foreground the most important features.

In this performance, however, despite the enlarged presentation of the soloist on the screen, I recognised her (as with many other church members) not through appearance, considerably altered in the last twenty years, but through her singing voice. The sanctuary is now so large that I was too far away in any case to see her closely, and I did not recognise her image projected onto the screen, but when I talked with her after service we recognised each other instantly, despite all those years.

The effect of the extreme close-ups of individual “actors”—prayer leaders, soloists, preachers, deacons—projected onto the two large video screens both intensifies the “action” or emotion of any performance, because church members are so much closer to details of deportment and physical expression—but also puts that same “action” at one remove, because they are watching the screens as opposed to the “actors”. Thus, technology does ‘not so much help the faithful to relocate in reality as much as it further fragments congregants’ lives’ (Schultze 2004, 75), or at least fragments their experience of worship.⁷ While there are undoubtedly socio-economic and political factors that contribute to how “performers” present themselves, it is indisputable that, faced with the prospect of oneself being presented twenty times larger than life on a video screen, and with the additional advantage (or disadvantage, depending on one’s perspective) of being empowered to re-view every performance,

⁷ While the use of technology in worship has not received extensive academic attention, there exist many lively forums on social media that engage quite critically with its use, and several theological seminaries, particularly in the United States, have held successful conferences on various aspects of the effects that the use of technology exerts on the worship experience (sometimes in the context of Big Business and Mega Churches). Technology and its effects on performance are also, of course, very much to the forefront in Media and Communication Studies.

projection of performances influences how performers perform, and how they manage how they are viewed. Choir members now wear relatively elaborate robes (not unusual in African American Baptist churches, but not previously present here), and makeup and hair styling (as well as French manicures to hands that hold microphones) are ubiquitous. Dramatic expression (or acting out) of the emotions contained in the lyrics of a performance are also much more prevalent, enlarged on a screen for all to see.

The most significant impact of digital technology emerges, however, in the context of the central genre of the service: the Sermon. Clear Creek is a fundamentalist, evangelical church, placing all primary tenets of faith on the inerrancy of the Bible, i.e., regarding every word in the Bible as literally true. All church members own and bring to church their own Bibles—which may have been passed down through generations—and the physicality of those Bibles is critically important for the church members, nowhere more so than in the case of the text-and-context sermon. In this genre, the preacher selects a passage from the Bible from which he draws the theme for his sermon, wherein he contextualises that passage with other witnesses from the Bible and with everyday events from the members’ lives. On Sunday November 4, 2012, the sermon, or “Spoken Word” as it was designated in the bulletin, was, as is customary, preceded by a song of praise (although choral as opposed to congregational, as it had always been in my previous experience) and followed by the “Invitation to Christian Discipleship”.

Pastor Goliday took his place at the podium and requested that the congregation read with him his text “from the screen”—this instruction was repeated twice, i.e., stated three times, as many members (and indeed deacons) instinctively turned to their Bibles: Psalms 22, verses 12 through 16. Because of the pastor’s insistence that the congregants read the relevant quotations not from their Bibles, but from the screens, forcing the choir members and deacons to turn around and look awkwardly over their shoulders, “The Word” was thus

placed at one remove from the physicality of the member's Bibles. The discrepancy between holding the "Word of God" in one's hand, a text on which one literally builds one's life, reading it as generations of one's family had before, and reading it from a disembodied screen, where everyone is focused on an external source, outside of personal experience and control, cannot be overestimated. While on the one hand it could be argued that collectively reading the relevant Scripture from a screen unites the congregation in focus on a single source, it also fractures or dis-unites them, as it places focus outside of the group on an inanimate object that has no personal history or connection. This is the text for this particular sermon as Pastor Goliday and the congregation read it:

Many bulls have surrounded me,
Strong bulls like Bashan have encircled me,
They gape at me with their mouth, like a raging and roaring lion.
I am poured out like water
And my bones are out of joint.
My heart is like wax, it has melted within me.
My strength is dried up, like a pot shard
And my tongue cleaves to my jaws.
You have brought me to the dust of death.
For dogs have surrounded me.
The congregation of the wicked has encircled me
They pierced my hands and my feet.⁸

From this reading, Rev. Goliday then announced his theme: 'for a very short time today I would like to talk about "Surrounded by bulls and dogs",' and the congregation responded appropriately with verbal statements of encouragement and agreement. Then, before proceeding with his sermon, he announced that he had been asked by a member who was hospitalised to sing 'I'm So Tired Lord, My Soul Need Resting'. This performance revealed

⁸ While the psalm verses appeared as I have printed them on the video screens, below is how they appear in the King James Bible, which is the version that the Clear Creek membership have used since I have known them.

Psalms 22, verses 12–16

12 Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bāshan have beset me round.

13 They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion.

14 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.

15 My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death.

16 For dogs have compassed me; the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me; they pierced my hands and my feet.

him to be a fine singer: his rendition was largely unmetered and melismatic for the verse, and more metered and less embellished for the chorus, and provoked considerable positive response from the congregation.

After applause and several congregational “Amen’s” and good wishes to his hospitalised parishioner, Rev. Goliday returned to his sermon, and the service proceeded as one would expect. The sermon was masterfully delivered, and resulted in considerable response from the congregation. While it never resulted in the poetic, sung performances that Rev. McKinney had regularly delivered, the performance of the sermon appeared to satisfy the congregation (as evidenced by their responses, essential in this tradition) and was, by all estimations, successful. At the conclusion of the sermon, the service moved (as is customary) to the Call to Discipleship, drawing considerable response from the congregation.⁹

On the occasion of this service in 2012, it was possible for me both to attend the entire service and to review recordings (both audio and video) of the service in the quiet and comfort of my home upon return to Ireland. These modes of viewing result, inevitably, in quite different experiences. There is, of course, no substitute for attendance at a service as it unfolds, but viewing digital recordings of a service occasions a quite distinct experience, sometimes more detailed (as when close-ups of actors that fill one’s viewing screen give a much more detailed experience than would have been the case at the service itself), at other times more general (pan shots of the congregation, for example, while not projected onto the video screens in church, are included on the DVD recordings, thus affording an overview of the congregation that would not have been available to any individual congregant in attendance). Having access to both modes of performance is probably optimal, as each results in qualitatively different perspectives.

⁹ For a much more detailed analysis of this sermon see Smith 2015, especially 556–65.

It has not been possible for me to return to Mississippi since November 2012, but I am grateful to the Pastor and congregation of Clear Creek M.B.C., and in particular to Eulastine and Leroy Thompson, for continuing to send me a variety of recordings of a selection of church services. These, in conjunction with other digital technologies, have allowed me to stay somewhat current with the church membership, albeit at one remove. But there is, undeniably, no substitute for being “in the field”, experiencing performances as they unfold.

To conclude then, the use of digital technology at Clear Creek M.B.C. has had several effects. Undoubtedly facilitated by new-found prosperity, a full-time pastor, and the construction of a larger church sanctuary, increased distance within the congregation has necessitated the adoption of new means of bringing the “actors” to the congregants, and the church members “into the action”. This technology has also facilitated greater outreach through radio, digital recordings that may be bought by members who cannot attend a particular event, and web and email access. But this technology has also introduced distance—physical space and screen focus, as opposed to closeness and personal interaction—and has in many ways removed “The Word”—the Bible on which the members build their lives—from the highly personal physicality of one’s own Bible, to the impersonal and untouchable neutrality of screens. We live in an increasingly visual and depersonalised age, but, with all its outreach potential, one has to question what is gained through this technology, and, of course, what is lost. Performance, whether one chooses to attend a “live” concert, or listen to the “superior” fidelity of recordings, is undoubtedly influenced by how that performance is delivered and received. This is nowhere more critical than in the sacred sphere, where what is being performed transmits fundamental ideas about how we view ourselves, our destiny, and our place in the world.

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