From the Dean – Carl Parks
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PHANTASMAGORIA OF THE 21st CENTURY:
PowerPoint® in Today's Churches

In the mid-1600s, magic lanterns were invented by Athanasius Kircherand and Christiaan Huygens. Such a device consisted of a lantern fitted with a candle and concave mirrors. Huygens' magic lantern has been described as the predecessor of the slide projector and the modern PowerPoint® projector of today.

Magic lanterns were used for phantasmagoria. This was a form of theatre that would often display frightening images such as skeletons, demons, and ghosts. These were projected onto walls, onto smoke, or semi-transparent screens. Often, they used rear projection. Some projectors were mobile, so that the projected image could move and change size. Multiple projecting devices allowed for quick switching of different images. Nowadays, that is all controlled by computer.

Shortly after the French Revolution, one phantasmagoria producer said "I am only satisfied if my spectators -- shivering and shuddering -- raise their hands or cover their eyes out of fear of ghosts and devils dashing towards them." In fact, so many people were convinced of the reality of his shows that the gendarme temporarily halted the proceedings. Many believed that he had the power to bring Louis XVI back to life. I suppose that was one type of spiritualism.

Back in the 1980s we had multimedia presentations, but these were generally used for special occasions and not for the actual worship. However, there were exceptions. I recall how the ushers would drag out a couple of Carousel projectors and display a show of slides, while the PA system would repeat over and over the same tired Christmas carol, played on an electric organ with chimes, every verse exactly the same. On other occasions, an usher would drag out the 16mm projector, the priest would lower the screen up front, and the faithful were treated to a movie -- about whatever -- in lieu of a sermon.

Now, enter the 21st Century. It seems like PowerPoint, Keynote®, and similar apps are with us wherever we go. This is especially true of church. There is a debate over whether PowerPoint enhances one's religious experience, or if it has become a sideshow and a distraction to worship. I suppose that all depends on how this is being used.

Drive up to a church, walk inside, look at the screens, and there is a good chance that you will see a picture of the same building that you just saw as you were pulling into the parking lot. There may also be reminders about upcoming birthdays, bake sales, concerts, and other events. That is well and good. Once the service begins, however, is it really necessary to run the darn thing nonstop?

Is the organ prelude or a well-rehearsed choir anthem enhanced by comical quarter and eighth notes dashing across an ever-changing spectrum of colors? Once the candles are lit, does there also need to be video of other candles burning? Should we cancel the traditional Palm Sunday procession because it would interfere with the PowerPoint presentation? Does the projection of just text encourage more vigorous congregational singing than a melody line showing people where the notes go up and down? Does "Follow-the-Bouncing-Ball" inspire? What should be the role of canned music, 1960s protest songs, and campfire songs? Do we even need a good singing congregation if somebody can simply crank up the PA system full bore to amplify one or two people slopping, sliding, and caterwauling like bad karaoke on a Saturday night?

In addition to being professional organists, we often take on other music ministerial roles as well. All too often, however, we shoulder the burden for things beyond our control. If we are presumed to be responsible for something, we should also be given the necessary authority.

Unfortunately, we will just have to soldier on and try to practice our art the best we can on whatever squawk-box or chest-of-whistles is placed at our fingertips – and toe-tips.