

WORSHIP WE WORK ON TOGETHER

When we gather as church and worship together, we build relationships with one another and deepen our relationship with God. It is something we do together: we work on it together during the hour or so we set aside for it. That's if it is worship engaging the whole person and the whole congregation. The more we work together in preparing the service, and the more we include opportunities for people to engage on their own terms, the better.

Think about it. What is Church? Talking together in your group there will be a variety of answers but I think the predominant theme will be *community*. Worship is an activity of church as community. It is communal. It is open and invitational, drawing people in to find their points of meaning. Who are the people? That question points directly to the importance of knowing who your people are, of building relationships and planning worship in terms of those relationships.

Next we need to ask: what is the gospel we want to share? Again, talking in your group will bring different words of response, with a likely shared theme of being Christ-centred. It is a gospel that takes hold of us, reshapes us, and sends us out on a mission – God's mission.

In all, worship feeds the life of the faith community; it feeds to life of faith of the people of the community, teaching, nourishing, and offering those occasional gems called “thin places”. Worship offers *liminal moments*, sitting at it does at the limen, the doorstep, between the everyday and the holy.

THE WORSHIP LEADER AS CURATOR AND TEAM LEADER¹

Imagine....you are responsible to set up an event with the theme “Praise God”. You are like the **curator**, that is, you select and arrange the items for the event. You make your selection and arrangement so that people will be able to come to the event and enter into it. Just as happens with a well prepared, well-located, open and engaging art exhibition.

Perhaps it helps to think about what can make an art exhibition *not* work. If it's difficult to find or off-putting in its advertising and in its entrance way. If it's unclear where to go once you walk through the door. If it's cluttered, with too many exhibits, or too empty and echoing. If the lighting is poor, if the meaning of exhibits is too obscure. If the staff overdo the welcome and assistance, or alternatively make visitors feel out of place.

When we relate this to worship, we can see that to curate a worship event that works has a number of recognisable, and achievable, characteristics.

1. Participation

Church has a congregation, not an audience: the gathered people are there to take part together in worship. Ways of doing this are many and diverse, from the familiar singing of songs and hymns to times of silence with the invitation silence brings for each person to be part of the experience, equally and in their own way. Participation also comes with the involvement through the senses, the usual vision and hearing, with possibilities also using touch, taste, and smell. Communion sure involves all. Participation also comes by involving particular people in aspects of the service, building from traditional involvement for readings and prayers to getting the reader to choose a hymn or song and introduce it, to using particular skills to do a hands-on telling of a biblical text (e.g. the parable of the yeast), to a feature that invites a person to bring something from their experience and relate it to God's presence in their life. Responsive readings trigger some participation, as does memorised verbal participation (things we say or sing regularly – with a back up on the screen or service sheet so no-one need feel a stranger). Continuing the conversation opened up from the Bible texts through the sermon (kept short) creates an *open floor* and an

¹ For this concept of the worship leader as curator, see *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader*, by Mark Pierson, Sparkhouse Press, Minneapolis 2010. This book is well-worth reading.

environment that recognises that interpreting the gospel and acting on it is a task that belongs to all of us.

2. Open-endedness

This is the work of the Spirit of God in our worship. It's up to us to give space for it and not crowd our event with constant activity and planning to the last detail. What helps is a willingness to raise questions without always having answers; and willingness to be surprised – and puzzled – by other people's responses. A motto we have operated with is “thinking allowed; thinking aloud allowed”.

3. Slow worship

Worship is *not* fast-food, that is, standardised, rushed, and gobbled up. While not locked into tradition, it is not impatient with the ways handed down and therefore is able to grow. The food of worship is savoured and chewed slowly, and therefore feeds us as whole people, not just the part of us looking for instant gratification. Slow worship builds community; enjoys hospitality, encourages creativity, and is committed to long-term goals of justice, peace, well-being, that is kingdom goals.

4. Integrity

Worship is for the people, and it therefore must be by the people and of the people. The person who is leading/curator worship is one of the people and must not pretend to be someone other than the person they are. Nor should they imagine the people are other than the real flesh and blood, weak and strong, old and young people that they know as fellow members of their faith community. Be yourself as leader and congregation be yourselves as the people you are.

5. Failure

Pierson quotes German philosopher Rudolph Bahro who wrote: “When the forms of an old culture are dying, the new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure.” Making mistakes, trying things that don't work as expected, goes with the territory of curating worship events that bring diversity and engagement. Making mistakes and learning from them. A congregational culture that affirms occasions of growth and uses “failure” moments as a trigger for good ideas for a future time is itself a fruit of diversity in worship and surely a work of the Holy Spirit.

6. Questions

If we wonder about the place of questions in worship – shouldn't we be providing people with the answers! – an observation of Pierson's is apt. Apparently, in the gospels, Jesus asked 180 questions and answered just three.

What better sign of engagement is there than people going home from worship mulling over a question that the conversation with the Bible text has raised with them. What better indicator of diversity is there than people going home mulling over different questions, picked up from the same text and same shared conversation.

A FRAMEWORK FOR GATHERING

This is a different approach to structuring a worship service, that can feel familiar yet take you into new experiences. I am grateful to the Rev Dr Rod Mitchell for introducing me to this kind of framework and I hope he will forgive me for my adaptations of his idea. Bringing together Mark Pierson's and Rod Mitchell's ideas, think of yourself in preparing worship as the *glue*.

I operate week by week with four stages, or stations, in the worship service. There is a spatial element in this as well as a movement in time. Imagine that we start by coming in the door and into the back left quadrant of the worship space. This stage has a theme of welcoming and belonging. It includes the informal part of arriving, welcomers handing out service sheets, watching for new-comers to offer a no-fuss easy entry to the space, and people generally connecting

with one another and finding their space to settle in. With the time of welcome this informality moved to the formal with prayer and song, whatever may help us plug in, so to speak, to God.

The second time and space could be imagined as in the front left quadrant, with the Bible the point of focus. The text is read and interpretation offered. The primary purpose of this stage is to learn from the text, as if we are sitting at the feet of the Master himself, and reconnect as disciples. The means of reading and interpreting is often with spoken word, with other options including mime (particularly of well-known texts), dramatic reading, interpretation through dance, drama, or hands-on demonstration, etc. Whatever will help clarify our purpose is the key to this stage.

The move now is as if to the front right quadrant of the worship space, with an imaginary table that we all sit around for open table conversation. Continuing from text and interpretation ideas come from different ones around the table, and new questions might be asked. This is also the time and environment in which to pray together, prayers of thanksgiving and intercession in traditional terms, prayers that connect faith with our experiences and concerns. Around the table we are show ourselves to be Christ-shaped people, looking for ways to be part of God's mission.

The last stage is back by the door again, in the right rear quadrant, ready to act. Rod Mitchell speaks of “acting up” which prods us to recognise that this is not just doing something, but doing things that will be at odds with what is generally treated as normal. As Jesus' people we too will be confronting powers and systems that do harm. We make our commitment and give and receive encouragement to continue on the Christ way, knowing that we go from worship carrying healing and hope. As church, as body of Christ, that is who we are and what we do.

THE FRAMEWORK IN SUMMARY

I'll conclude with a summary of this framework for worship, giving for each stage a range of words for describing what is happening which can be also clues for you as curator. What will you select, what words, what music, what objects, what actions.

PLUGGING IN

WAKING UP to God's presence: connecting to impulse (cf. electrical current); sensing the Spirit; feeling a belonging.

CLARIFYING OUR PURPOSE

GROWING UP: reading the texts and listening to their voices; nurturing our spirits; teaching and learning the kingdom way; (re-)claiming the gospel mission.

CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE TABLE

SHOWING UP as Jesus-people in our own time: making links with contemporary concerns; talking together about how issues look through the “window” of the kingdom; praying with confidence in God's power to give life.

SENT TO CARRY HEALING AND HOPE

ACTING UP against powers and systems that do harm: giving from our resources; encourage one another for the week ahead; being empowered to stay true to the kingdom way.

Robyn McPhail

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