



Worship and all that Jazz!

continued

churches, rather than trying to do everything in one service and provide a 'one size fits all' style of worship, we are failing both

the diversity of humanity in our churches, and also pleasing nobody. Is not the best battle to fight one of advancing into new territory by developing different opportunities at different times for people to worship? After all, over one third of the adult population work on a Sunday, and there are six other days in the week.⁶

Many churches are renewing worship through variety from Toddler Churches through to regular Hymns of Praise for the elderly and more housebound. These are not cute side shows to the main event, but need to be seen as of equal importance to a Sunday congregation. Neither should they be seen as 'feeders' to Sunday, but worshipping communities in their own right. St John's Hillingdon, London, offer a variety of worship opportunities non-stop from 8am to the afternoon. This is renewal through diversity and is widening the doors through worship for an encounter with the loving and living God. Not all churches will be able to manage such diversity of ten different opportunities, but there could be openings – which will probably be quite small – for creating and developing our variety.

3. Worship as Jazz

All of this can be summed up in the phrase 'Praise is Jazz'⁷. Whilst Jazz is used as a metaphor, it still serves as a good analogy for the diversity and flexibility which can be enjoyed in different context, provided there is a strong theme. That theme is our call to worship and our desire to express something of our inexpressible love for God in response to His for us. Jazz is never a mess (and can be trad jazz or modern!) but rather a crafted discipline where different instrumentalists improvise on this core theme.

To be renewed in worship in all its beauty and diversity is to have the 'Jazz factor!' 

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Mission Shaped Church*, CHP, 2004, p.81

² *New Patterns for Worship*, CHP, 2006

³ *The Isaiah Vision*, R Fung, p.13 WCC Publications, Geneva

⁴ From John Finney, *Emerging Evangelism*, DLT, 2004, p.135

⁵ Janet Hodgson *The Faith we See*, MPH 2006. A stunning collection of stories and images to help connect with who God is.

⁶ The issue of protecting the Sabbath is that we ensure people have one day set aside for worship and that day can be negotiated beyond our given Sunday. I am not against keeping Sunday special, I am more in favour of both making Sunday special and keeping a Sabbath holy.

⁷ David Ford and Daniel Hardy, *Living in Praise*, DLT, 2005

about the writer

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Photos: Jonny Baker



Jonny Baker offers some clues for renewing worship

Over the last 15 years the movement that has been called 'alternative worship' has ploughed a furrow in worship, coming up with inspiring new songs, liturgies, rituals, visuals, installations, artistic creations and worship experiences. I personally have found it incredibly exciting, renewing my faith and sparking my imagination in all sorts of ways.

When the movement began it was shocking. Visual projections, new technologies, DJ music, and so on, all seemed out of place in church. The re-theologising that went with it to contextualise the Gospel in a postmodern world was also perceived as threatening. However the climate has now changed and many of the discoveries made in alternative worship don't seem so shocking any more – many of the creative practices have crept into the mainstream and actually they hold some clues for how to renew worship in many of our churches. Alternative worship groups were simply early adopters on the front edge of what was to come.

False Dilemma

In worship there seems to be a choice between the liturgical tradition which is served up in a very similar fashion each week. Whilst it holds the potential for depth it can easily dry up for people and seem very samey. On the other hand the more charismatic tradition in worship has created space for free expression in singing intimate

songs of praise and worship, along with ministry. But this worship often dries up for different reasons – it lacks depth and has ended up being very predictable in its own way as well. The range of themes and language in the songs and prayers simply doesn't address all the issues of life. After a few years people want something more. Alternative worship looked for a third path that broke that false dilemma. In doing so it turned back to the liturgical traditions of the Church but reframed them often in simple but imaginative ways, making connections with everyday life and popular culture. This is why I think many of the groups found a home in Anglican churches, because they were finding ways to make the traditions live again rather than turning away from them. It is common to find groups working with the seasons of the church calendar, using basic structures of services as building blocks for liturgies, finding forgotten treasures in the tradition such as the labyrinth and reinventing them, taking communion back into the context of a meal and so on.

Creativity

At the heart of alternative worship is creativity and imagination. I am a member of Grace, an alternative worship community that is a congregation of St Mary's in Ealing. The creative ideas that have come out of a small group of people there is amazing. I so enjoy the creativity in the

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group. Our best worship services always have revolved around good ideas. Executing them is usually the easy bit. There are several myths around creativity. One of the myths is that it is a gift that some special people have. If we don't think we have the gift we shrug our shoulders and say: 'I'm not creative'. According to a survey the difference between someone who is creative and someone who is not is that people who are creative think they are! So one of the challenges in our communities is to encourage an environment where people believe that they are creative because they are made in God's image. This also has to be an environment in which failure is acceptable and we, as leaders, let go of control. If haven't got permission to fail, we won't risk being creative.

Participation

The root meaning of the word liturgy is 'the work of the people'. How can we recover the notion of worship as liturgy in this way? We live in a consumer culture and we easily get trapped in provider/client relationships in churches. We, the leaders, are the providers who serve up worship for our congregations. Alternative worship communities have shared out the production of worship in radical ways. To be involved means to participate and create. It's hard to just be passive. We recently had a service in Lent that was a 'bring your own station' service. We gave people the theme and some suggested passages such as Jesus' journey into the desert and people then had to come with something to set up in the worship space. In the end 14 people brought things ranging from an icon and candle, reflections for prayer, original film/animation sequences, readings, and so on. After a brief introduction and opening prayer, the worship service was simply to walk round and interact with the stations while music was quietly played in the background. We then concluded with a final prayer together. It was stunning. It could also have been a disaster if no-one brought anything and we genuinely had no idea what people were going to do in advance. Two people did things at that service who had never contributed before which was especially pleasing. Also in Lent we ran a Lent blog – a web site where a different member of the community can post a reflection each day to help us reflect on our discipleship through Lent. Both these things were highly participative. A key task of leadership is to

shape the cultural environment. How can we shape that environment to be one of creativity and participation?

Risk

I have learned that when we have a planning session with free flowing ideas it is often the most crazy ideas that end up being the best things we have done. I can think of a Grace meeting where someone suggested getting a huge block of ice to suspend off some scaffolding, or another where we floated the notion of text message confessions where people would send their confession as a text message and receive an absolution in reply, or the use of a parachute in worship or recording meditations for a narrated labyrinth journey where we gave people individual CD walkmans. All of these notions were absurd at the time but we ended up taking the risk of pursuing them and have done those and many more. Tony Campolo tells of a survey amongst old people where they are asked to reflect on their lives and think what they would do differently. One of the things that came out is that they would risk more. Our next worship service at Grace is walking an outdoor labyrinth – we have got to mow it in the grass at the front of the church. When we came up with this idea we didn't know how to mow a labyrinth and didn't have a mower. Now we have borrowed one and think we can do it with some careful planning with string, some tent pegs, and sticks, and fine weather – it should be fun. This is to celebrate the coming of the Spirit so we will anoint people with oil and pray for the filling of the Spirit in the centre. Then we are having storytelling around a firewok (a portable fire). It's a risk but I am sure we won't regret it.

SOME RESOURCES

Your imagination

www.alternativeworship.org

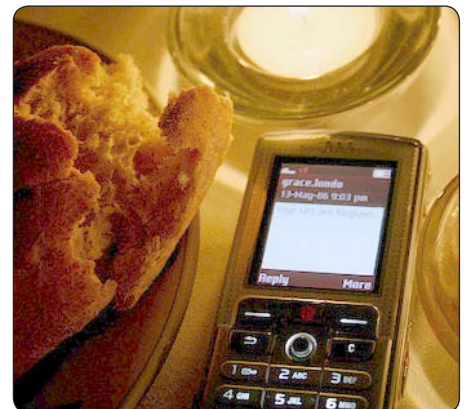
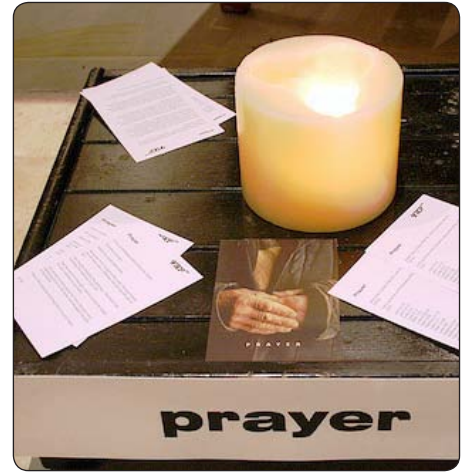
www.freshworship.org (grace site)

www.labyrinth.org.uk (online labyrinth)

www.smallfire.org (photos of alternative worship services)

<http://jonnybaker.blogs.com/> (see worship tricks especially)

Alternative Worship by Jonny Baker and Doug Gay with Jenny Brown (SPCK)



Engagement

One of the brilliant things about alternative worship has been its engagement with everyday life and popular culture. The music, images and rituals often make connections that engage in this way. A track played in a service may well be heard on the radio in the week. A visual projection (traffic for example) may remind you of the worship as you drive through the city. This incarnational instinct is really important in mission. Use the stuff of everyday life as the building blocks for worship. This brings the real world into our worship and enables God to be relocated in everyday life. The other aspect of engagement is to take the creative worship and spirituality out into the cultural market place rather than just doing it behind our four walls. Just recently I have taken part with some others in running a stand at the London 'Mind Body Spirit Festival' which has all sorts of alternative spiritualities. We set up some prayer stations and offered foot massage and prayer for healing with the >>