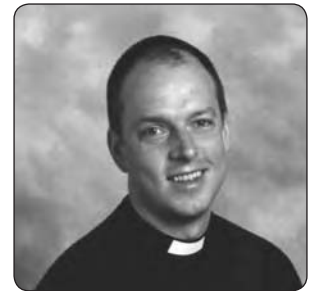


‘Worship lies at the heart of a missionary church, and to know and love God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is its chief inspiration and primary purpose. It worships and serves a missionary God, and understands itself to share in the Divine mission. All of its life and activity is undergirded with prayer’¹



Tim Sledge writes

At a recent mission training event, some thought was given to following up some evangelistic events. The suggestion was that they should be invited to the next major Sunday service at the local church. The reply by one of the more committed church members was: ‘Well I am not sure I would want to invite anyone to what we do on Sunday – it might put them off’.

What is worship?

Worship is the cornerstone of our lives. In worship we find our sense of being and living. In worship we offer to God all that He is to us and as a response to His generosity to us. It is our primary activity. Worship is who we are. As the Westminster Catechism famously says in answer to the question: ‘Why were you created?’ – ‘To worship God and enjoy him for ever.’

It is worth considering what happens in the absence of worship, best expressed by Peter Schaffer in his play *Equus*: ‘If you don’t worship you will shrink. It’s as brutal as that.’ Worship is at the heart of the renewal of all of our lives.

Worship is so much more than what we do on Sundays or in the week, and yet how can we have renewal in the worship we offer across the Church? I hope that in the rest of this article we can look at how renewal can come to the Church through a variety of different forms of worship including the recovery of traditional ways of worship, as well as the development of new ones.

However, before you read on, we need something of an honesty check! In Yorkshire there is a well-

used phrase, ‘I like what I know and I know what I like’. Good worship is notoriously difficult to define and quantify, but good worship is not ‘what I like and know’. There may be many defining characteristics, but that is not one of them. So if you think you know what good worship or the epitome of renewed worship is, for the purpose of the next few minutes whilst you read this, I think it will be helpful to lay aside basic personal preference and reflect on some of the key characteristics of renewing worship.

Worship is the cornerstone of our lives. In worship we find our sense of being and living. In worship we offer to God all that He is to us

The Worship Molecule

There are two key features of renewal in worship and they are to do with developing what I call here ‘The Worship Molecule’. The Worship Molecule is made up of two atoms: Humanity and Divinity. Worship, which is human, recognises our shared humanity and celebrates it. A church which is human welcomes well and has, for example, people sitting together who know each other and talk together. A church which is human takes the ‘après worship’ seriously. When I was a curate in Huddersfield, I was struck that the church commissioned a new altar at the same time as new coffee machines. For them, the community after the service was as

important as the Communion service itself. This humanity also extends to the connections made during worship. For example, a recent statistic cited that over 50% of church attenders had never heard a sermon related to their work lives. Humanity means connecting with the lives people lead. But if that is the whole content of our worship then it can easily deteriorate into fireside chat religion or entertainment without substance.

Hence we need the second aspect of the molecule: Divinity. Divinity is about creating a sense of wonder

and awe. Divinity is about creating a space and the sense that worship takes us out of the ordinary into something so much deeper. As in one church where visiting school children asked the vicar why they used incense. ‘Because they don’t have it in Woolworths’ was the reply!

The Lord is here!

Divinity is about something of the otherness in worship – it is about a ‘wow’ factor – whether at high decibels or the groaning silence into which the word made flesh is born within us. Divinity is about boldly proclaiming ‘The Lord is here!’ and knowing, believing and sensing that He is! Divinity is about silence where words are not

enough. I was particularly struck by an interview with the great composer of the 20th century, Olivier Messiaen – himself a devout Roman Catholic. Asked to describe why in a piano piece depicting the Revelation of St John, the music suddenly stops and there is prolonged silence he replied: ‘Sometimes in music, I run out of language to express the glory of God and only silence will do.’

It is no mean feat to balance this heady concoction of humanity and divinity in their fullness, but it can be done. If we are to be renewed in worship for mission, then we need both. A concentration on one to the exclusion of the other is unhealthy as it misses out on so much of the nature of the God whom we seek to glorify.

Worship is a door to our hearts open in obedience to God. He commands us to worship in spirit and in truth. We respond to the overwhelming majesty of His beauty revealed in creation, to His overwhelming love and grace revealed in His word and in His Son.

How can we have the kind of worship to which we are not embarrassed to bring our friends and partners. Indeed, how can we have the kind of worship that may expose others to an experience of God.

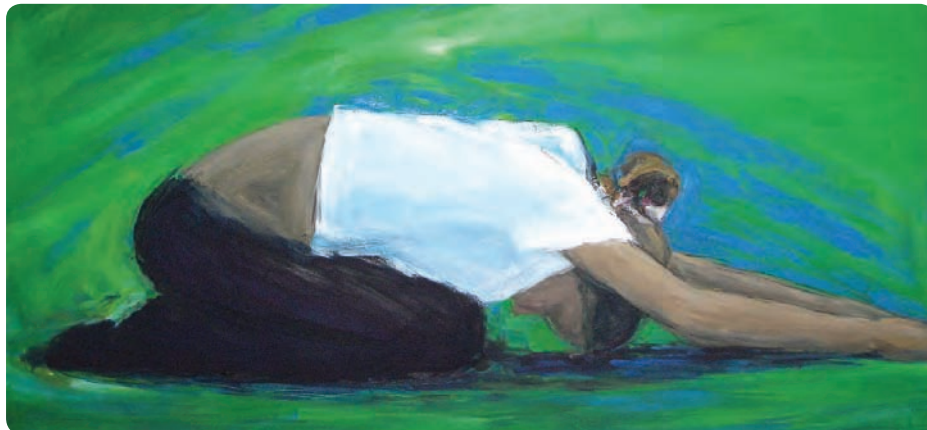
And as we worship, we are changed.² Is this our experience of worship? This is a picture of renewal. It is a picture of reconnecting with God, but also of being open to the streams of living water which flow from God to refresh and renew us. How can we get somewhere near this, using the resources and imagination that we already have?

The key question for those who lead and participate in worship is posed wonderfully by Raymond Fung in his book *The Isaiah Vision*.

‘The revitalisation of worship is high on the Church’s agenda. . . How can we have the kind of worship to which we are not embarrassed to bring our friends and partners? Indeed, how can we have the kind of worship that may expose others to an experience of God?’³

I want to suggest three practical ways to address this question, together with some examples:

Paintings by Louise Taylor. Opposite and front cover: *Awesome Light* and on this page: *In the stillness I bow down*. The first expresses an awareness of the light and warmth and goodness of God as we worship. The second concentrates on being still before God. ‘Sometimes the only response to His presence is to bow down and sense His Spirit. at such times He meets us at our point of need and we are changed’, Louise says. A mother of two teenage children, Louise, lives in Oxfordshire and paints in the little spare time she has when not being a busy mum. Both paintings are available through Veritasse Arts. To see other work by Christian artists see their website: veritasse.co.uk or telephone 0845 123 5884.



1. Worship Enrichment

This is about ‘sexing up our Sunday dossier’. Worship enrichment challenges us to use all our senses. It begins to address the question posed by the evangelist, Ravi Zacharias: ‘How do you reach a generation that listens with its eyes and thinks with its feelings?’⁴

We live and respond to a multi-media, visual and sensual world – and God’s creation is exactly the same.⁵ How much of this do we use in our worship? Consider the use of smell, and visuals and physically moving. After all, in worship we are a pilgrim people on the move, travelling light to our onward destination. Too often we are encumbered by the left luggage and life rafts of endless wordy liturgies. This is not to say that words are not important, but they are only one way of expressing our adoration to God. Worship enrichment means looking at all the tools we have, music, silence, image, word, movement, extremes.

Liturgy is not a handicap to freedom to worship but a real help in it. Liturgy means ‘the work of the people and the work of God’.

Worship enrichment means starting again and looking at all we have as part of the talents of the communities we serve and using them well and wisely. Worship enrichment is not about adding a few more songs or visuals to our existing worship in a feeble attempt to ‘make it more relevant for young people’. Worship enrichment is concerned with, like the good chef, not just knowing our ingredients, but knowing what to do with them. Any good chef will know what to put into a dish and what to leave out so that the flavours come through. It is not that the Church is dying of good taste, it is dying of no taste at all! We are often guilty of serving up a bland, over cooked, regurgitated, badly prepared diet and we should be ashamed often of defaulting back to the recipe we have always used because it worked back in the 70s – or worse still, attempting to clone something we experienced at some national conference or jamboree because ‘if it worked there, it will work here.’

Which brings me onto a word which has been

much maligned by those involved in renewal. It is the use of the word liturgy. Liturgy has been seen as something of a strait jacket or a bucket of cold wordy water to pour on the fires of a vibrant music celebration. Liturgy is not a handicap to freedom in worship but a real help in it. Liturgy means ‘the work of the people and the work of God’.

Matthew is seven years old. Every night he insists on lighting a candle and goes through a ritual of prayers of thanks for the day, a sorry for what he has done wrong and prayers for different people. All the time, he is transfixed by the candle. This whole liturgy was created by him. Matthew is a creature of ritual. Like many children he enjoys routine and takes security from it. So there is a balance to be made between ritual and freedom.

There are in the Church now swathes of liturgical resources. They are a key ingredient in the renewal of our worship. But often less is more! Above all we are involved in creating a context in which people can meet God. That is why there is still great value in enriching the key areas of worship such as Gathering, Adoration, Breaking open the Word in creative ways, and sending out, renewed in our worship and in confidence in God.

In Peterborough Diocese, we run a regular Critical Mass – a Eucharistic celebration for young people aged 12 and over. Here we mix a variety of worship songs from both New Wine and the Catholic renewal movement with symbol, movement and exploration (and food!) in a way that has, in God’s good grace, ‘hit the mark’ for many young people and adults alike. What has been particularly interesting in putting on these services is that adults and young people are renewed not by observing good music and liturgy, but by being involved and learning and worshipping through doing. Renewal in Worship begins by asking how we can turn observers into participants. In Critical Mass, there is no sermon, but different ways of engaging with the living Word of God through image, writing credal statements and discussion.

2. Worship Diversity

The chancel steps of many churches are metaphorically stained with the blood from the battles between organist or worship leader and minister.

This is usually as a result of trying to introduce new worship songs or just a music group. Is this a battle worth fighting? I wonder if, as in many >>



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

The Revd Tim Sledge is Mission Enabler for the Peterborough Diocese and one of the leaders of the 'Leading your Church into Growth' course and co-author of *Youth Emmaus*. Before that Tim served in the Wakefield Diocese as Vicar of three parishes near Halifax. Prior to ordination, he ran music and arts festivals in Yorkshire.



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