

Worship and the Creative Design Process
Elise M. Edwards
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This topic addresses the often separate, yet intertwined creative processes of worship planning and artistic creation. How can a collaborative, participatory process incorporate the skills and expertise of pastors and artists while also honoring the contributions of others in the church?

Introduction

About this series:

- It will be interactive: there will be opportunities for you to share questions and comments and you will be asked to stand behind your opinions
- It will be about big ideas. I do believe in sharing some practical application. But what I learned from my own teaching experiences is that I like to introduce a way of thinking, a perspective to approach a topic or issue before getting into specific situations and contexts. If you'd like me to do more "connect the dots" discussion, I'd be happy to share some of that in the Q&A or conversations.
- We will discuss worship. This series is part of a grant project called **Fueling Creative Convergence**, in which this church is exploring with you the artist's role in the worshiping community, provides a collaborative leadership role to believing artists in worship planning, and seeks to gain a deeper understanding of both the contribution and worship needs of the artist. Worship means a great many things to many people, and I'm sure there are different perspectives in this room. The working definition we'll use is given by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship: "The Bible talks about worship in three ways: as an act of **praise** and adoration, as a public **event**, and as **service** in all of life We will focus mostly on the second meaning: *Christian worship as a regular public ritual event in a community of believers*. But all three meanings help inform what we do as worshiping communities." In churches, these ritual events occur as "worship services" that usually feature prayer, praise and adoration expressed through acts, music and other artistic mediums, a sermon/message/homily, acts of communion or Eucharist and/or other sacramental rites, and some sort of giving (offertory, altar call). As we discuss worship, we'll talk about these events that usually happen on Sunday morning, but I want to acknowledge right at the outset that they occur at other times of the week and vary by what time of the church year it is. In keeping with the "big ideas" theme, we will not get

into issues particular styles of worship or formats of worship, except as illustrations. I think those types of issues are denominationally and locally specific to the context your church operates.

This evening, we are examining the often separate, yet intertwined creative processes of worship planning and artistic creation. How can a collaborative, participatory process incorporate the skills and expertise of pastors and artists while also honoring the contributions of others in the church? We will discuss:

- What role does creativity have in worship?
- Participatory planning and expert roles
- Principles for a participatory process

There are at least two underlying assumptions to this topic that I'll state at the outset:

1. Worship, as a public ritual event, should reflect the values and experiences of the community who engages in this worship.
2. Participation and reflection in worship is not a solo activity, therefore planning should not be a solo activity. "A generation or two ago most worship services were put together by one person, usually the pastor," write the authors of *Designing Worship Together*. "That is no longer the case in many congregations. Solo worship planning is no longer the norm; it has given way to a team approach, both to enrich the planning process and to create healthy and broad ownership of worship leadership. Since no one person is able to provide creativity, variety, and freshness on a continuing basis, collaboration with others becomes necessary." In that group activity, there are contributions that trained pastors and artists can bring to demonstrate the meaning and purpose of worship.

Opening Exercise (5 mins): Describe to the person next to you something you do in your family, your work, your church, your group of friends, or some other association that you do because you are good at it. This is not a question about tasks that have to be done (although they might), but what tasks you do because you have a certain skill or talent to do. (And you don't have to be the best for it to count.)

How does creativity factor into church life, and worship in particular?

Last week in our dialogue session, Lisa Hawkins suggested that faith relies on our imagination. What I believe she was conveying is that the God we worship is unseen. So to believe in this God requires a leap of faith that interprets the world as being created and sustained through God's involvement. This is an exercise in creativity because God is not presented to us in all God's glory, but is revealed through God's actions in history; through Scripture which is filled with metaphor, parable and poetry; through tradition which presents us with rich, multi-sensory liturgies and acts of worship; and through our own experiences. Our ideas, our memories, our understanding of life and its meaning is constructed out of images, colors, spatial relationships, smells, sensations, sounds as well as words ordered into phrases.

This creative ability to “connect the dots” and see God is not the same thing as artistic skill or talent. Based on my definition last week of an artist as someone who has exceptional skill or talent in some creative endeavor and has cultivated that through specialized training and practice, I'm not saying you have to be an artist to be a person of faith. (If you have a different definition, you might disagree with me on this previous statement.) But artistry does have an accepted, established role in worship. Eugene Peterson, who wrote *The Message*, described worship as “an artistic vehicle for inserting relationship with God into a community.” To do that, we need skilled people to translate and interpret ideas into perceptible realities and experiences. Pastors are trained to do this in churches. Artists are trained to do that in their work.

How does art factor into our worship services? Art leads us to a higher reality. Robin Jensen reflects:

“Art might reflect an artist’s values or commitments, and it might be intended to change perspectives or deepen insight, but true art is open-ended. Different responses are expected, encouraged, and allowed. Each experience, encounter, or interpretation is valid and spontaneous. Art that leads the viewer to draw only one conclusion or that is designed to elicit a particular response from the viewer is not art, but actually a ‘sign,’ a simple message, advertising or propaganda. An image that prompts me to buy a particular product, or to vote for a certain candidate, or even to perform a public service might be a good or bad thing, but it is not art in the true sense.”¹

¹ Robin M. Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and Christian Community*, *The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 21.

Jensen goes on to explain that although artists don't expect a single response, they do produce art to elicit responses, to change us and contribute to our continuing formation as people.

Unfortunately, the function of the arts in worship is often too vague. How is art intended to provoke responses in worship? The types of responses we are seeking in worship are not vague. After all, we are not just trying to elicit an emotional response, but a spiritual or moral one. Jensen suggests four areas in which the arts can be used for spiritual renewal and transformation: decorative, didactic, devotional, and prophetic.

Decorative

This is the aesthetic sense. When we speak of aesthetics, and especially of decoration, we are usually speaking about beauty. We tend to think of this as "something externally pleasing or lovely to the eye," so Jensen recommends we use the term attractive instead. "Attractive" better expresses the energy and power that we are talking about in theological aesthetics. Beautiful objects (and events) in worship are intended to attract us and then cause us to ascend to a more profound knowledge. So our concern isn't on "prettiness", but on drawing our attention so that we can engage it on several levels.

Artists have difficulties calling art "decorative" because it seems to trivialize it and minimize its impact. When we speak of ornament or embellishment, we are usually talking about something additive, not essential. But to recognize the aesthetic, decorative function of art is to speak of the necessity of beauty (attractiveness) in all its dimensions, not just the pretty ones. The use of decoration conveys the importance of visual metaphor, communicating truth to us through our senses.

Didactic

Art teaches us through color, drama, light, texture, and sound. In the church, it can convey Biblical messages and experiences of the people. But we have to remember that art teaches in a way that is different from a preached sermon or lesson. Art offers a point of view, dimension, and amplification of ideas that is not a literalistic rendering of its subject. It has its own integrity as an interpretive form. Sermons, too, have their own integrity as an interpretive form, and so do prayers. However, the interpretive skills employed in each are different and come as a result of

different types of training. Pastors are typically trained in hermeneutical methods that emphasize historical reference, etymological and grammatical composition, consideration of genre, and/or the response of the reader/hearer. Artists approach material in various ways according to their discipline, but they typically do not include all of the same things a pastor is considering.

To recognize the didactic purpose of art, then, is to acknowledge its communicative properties; its ability to give open-ended instruction, not indoctrination. Art at its best, in this use, interprets and inspires.

Devotional

Art can encourage us to enter a scene, to be a part of a story or setting that is not part of our own experience. In this sense, art translates others experiences – whether contemporary situations or Biblical accounts – into our own experiences. Through visual art, drama, dance, music, and written, proclaimed word, narrative accounts from different times and places become our own account in the time and place of worship.

In addition to this narrative devotional sense, art can become iconographic. Icons from the Greek Orthodox tradition, which serve as an aid to prayer, exemplify this. They are not portraits, but likenesses that direct a viewer to the model it represents. A viewer is not intended to look at the image and worship the image itself, but to look *through* the image, to the divine image beyond. This visual focuses the prayer and helps the viewer to feel the presence of the one to whom the viewer is praying. Crosses in our churches, as well as objects placed on an altar (a Bible, the elements of the Communion, even offering baskets) often serve this purpose, asking us to look through them to the divine reality beyond. Nonrepresentational art, can also serve this purpose, as forms that lead us beyond language, beyond symbols, beyond figures, to the mystery of God.

Prophetic

Art can deliver a message by depicting the human situation. It can convey ecstasy, tragedy, grief, loss, and discovery. It can call attention to individual and corporate evil and injustice, it can provoke empathy within us. Artists observe the world and often re-present it to us in ways that challenge ordinary modes of seeing and understanding it.

Each of these uses can reveal something about the God we worship or express our sentiments to the God we worship. If we focus on only one aspect of what art can do, we limit its power, and we muffle the voices of the artists who speak through it. Some of these may already be a part of our worship services, but if not we need to expand what we do. This is not innovation for innovation's sake, but allowing the full experience of worship to be enriched.

All of these uses of art in worship engage our minds in multi-sensory ways. We are used to information being presented to us in factual and journalistic forms. Therefore, when something is communicated artistically, it can either jar us into seeing it anew or it may fly under our radar. Therefore, to use art in worship will require some education about it – even our current practices of it. This education needs to be directed at the congregation and the leaders who plan church worship.

The collaborative planning process

I am advocating a collaborative planning process into which those whose gifts contribute to worship (pastors, artists, administrators, planners) are included. The collaborative model has not just practical benefits, but theological principles behind it. In worship, we are a community approaching community. There is an emphasis on relationship not only between members of the congregation and God, but relationship between members of the congregation, and relationship within God as communication between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In worship God is not only the holy transcendent One we praise, but also the Spirit at work in our hearts and the Son who perfects our imperfect praise. Our communication to God does not represent an “I” but a “we,” and to capture the voice of this “we”, the church needs to incorporate the diverse voices, talents, and concerns of the congregation. To hear God's communication to us, we need to be sensitive to the moving of the Spirit through multiple senses and persons.

How do the roles of pastor (theologian?) and artist figure into worship planning?

One role of artists in the church is as poets– those who “capture the rhythm and contour of the community's experience. Theologian Robert Schrieter says these poets can capture symbols and metaphors which best give expression to the experiences of a community. To this I'd add that

artists also give sound and movement and images that capture and communicate the community experience in worship. Artists of various media learn to feel *as* others as much as they learn to feel something *about* others. This is called empathy. The artistic ability to feel as others do is incredible powerful in worship, the “vehicle for inserting relationship with God into a community,” because the worship leaders guide our communication to and from God. Empathy becomes a way of relating to others and to God.

Another role artists have is the role of prophet. We’ve already discussed prophetic art, and we have to understand that there is a prophetic role that accompanies that. According to Schrieter, the prophet conveys the gospel message to a community. Prophetic insight articulates the needs of a community and often exercises judgment on the theology that has been accepted or developed by the community.

Pastors act as prophets, too. The church expects a pastor to deliver a message to the community. Because of their theological and pastoral training, knowledge of the congregation, responsibility for preaching, and the expectations of the congregation regarding leadership, the pastor will often play the lead role in worship planning. They often set the direction for worship by the selections made for preaching and worship emphases during the church year.

We must remember, however that these roles are flexible, and we have to be open to the contributions of artistically untrained people as well, because of our understanding of God’s activity in worship. As the Calvin Institute states, “The power of worship does not finally come from our own creativity, imagination, intellectual rigor, or emotional output, but from the Holy Spirit, who may choose to use any one of these things. Worship—even our own worshiping—is more like a gift to receive than an accomplishment to achieve.”

Artists and Pastores are only two roles required in planning. John Witlvet describes the roles as thus:

1. Pastoral Planners
2. Craftspeople (this is the category under which Artist-poets fall)
3. Directors and Coordinators
4. Performers (Presenters)
5. Spiritual Engineers (this is where the prophets are)

What does the worship process look like?

Designing Worship Together suggests a collaborative process that looks like this:

- Selecting Seasonal Units
 - Brainstorming/idea generation
 - Exploration of concept- study
 - Sermon text is written (often concurrent with the next step)
 - Selection and composition of music, other arts, prayer
 - Preparation/Rehearsals
 - Worship Walk-Through
 - Worship Service
 - Post-Service Review
 - Formal Evaluation
- } Constructing the weekly service

What does the creative design process look like?

The creative design process often looks something like this (based off an architectural model):

- Conceptual design- Brainstorming/charrette
 - Schematic design – outline, sketches, clarifying concept
 - Design Development – research, studies, refining concept, select resources
 - Implementation/Production/Rehearsal
 - Completion and Presentation
 - Reflection/Assessment
- } These are often iterative in the artistic process

How do they form one process:

The connections between them can be emphasized in 4 phases:

- Brainstorming
- Coordination
- Worship Service
- Reflection and Evaluation

By emphasizing communication at each phase, while also recognizing the authority (granted by God in the dispersal of gifts) of each role, the worship planning process and creative design process can exist with a certain autonomy that maintains its integrity and cohesiveness. This means allowing time for each phase in each process to occur.

One benefit to this model is that it does not *require* everyone to be involved in every step, but *allows* them to.

Principles for an artistic, collaborative process:

1. Worship of the God of Jesus Christ is a “first-person plural” experience. We are a community that approaches something more like a community of divine persons than an isolated and remote power.
2. Broad (lay) participation in worship planning and leading requires provision for training, learning, growth, and a shared commitment to the deep meaning and purpose of Christian worship. Worship planning requires more than good intentions.
3. Worship planners and leaders need skills and understanding of worship and pastoral virtues to demonstrate discernment and care for contributors and their contributions.
4. Artistic works decorative, didactic, devotional, or prophetic. Although there is much freedom, there are also constraints to liturgical art.
5. Worship planning should include prayer, scripture reading, and reflection on the needs of the congregation, and study on the nature of worship so that the *process* as well as the service can be edifying.

Dialogue Exercises

Yes/No/Maybe:

1. People no longer desire sameness in worship from week to week.
2. The pastor should be the primary (human) leader in worship planning.
3. Worship services should stimulate creativity.

Question and Answer

Resources and References:

books:

Jensen, Robin M. *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and Christian Community*, *The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004.

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websites:

Calvin Institute of Christian Worship www.Calvin.edu/worship

Convergence: A Creative Community of Faith

www.convergenceccf.net and blog <http://lisa-convergence.blogspot.com>

my contact info:

Elise Edwards

elise.edwards@gmail.com