Worship as Community Missional Practice

Introduction

The Gospel taught by Jesus was about re-defining our focus. So our worship should provide the space for us to do just that.

A presenter on worship once suggested true worship is a dangerous and subversive act. She went on to share how true worship compels participants to re-orient their lives to encounter God in the unfamiliar. When that happens, we can no longer go through the motions of worship but are challenged to participate in the ongoing discovery of the power of the Good News all around us. We are then challenged to embody this Good News in communities that reflect the coming Kingdom of God.

Worship is not only about location but it is about authentic relationships with God, one another and our neighbors. What cultivates true worship is not the beauty of the building or the aesthetics of the location, but the fact that each person has a place.

People sit in the same pew or space Sunday after Sunday, not because it is assigned to them, but because in the uncertainty of life, they desire to have a place where some security and consistency is found, where they belong, where they are accepted, and where they are reminded that God is present with them.

A local pastor while visiting with an elderly person about why she sat in the same pew each week, discovered that coming to church each week and sitting in the same place served as a reminder that she was secure in God. People worship God because they belong and they are a part of the church. They worship there because a crucial part of their own life story is written in the walls of the church. They have shared in significant experiences of life like marriage and blessings, and baptisms. They have grieved as they buried their dead and the familiar helps ground them when most feel lost in unfamiliar space. For many, the church is more than a building, it is a history book, that reminds them of God’s activity within their lives and their place as the body of Christ.

Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass, in the first chapter of the book Practicing our Faith say, “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world.” (pg.5) Practicing our faith is in response to God’s activity in the world and in our lives.
Missional Worship is about reentering God's unfolding story in the context of our personal and congregational story and sending us out to “live into” that unfolding story with our neighbors. In other words, “we write the story not heard before” in partnership with one another and God.

The Samaritan woman, who enters into a simple conversation with Jesus and begins to develop a relationship with him, understands this: worship is about relationships. Something profound is revealed in their exchange and she perceives that he is the coming Messiah. As a result of this transformative relationship she is compelled to share what she’s experienced with others. It is in her everyday walk to the well for water that she experiences true worship. It will change her life forever and she can do nothing else but share her encounter with others. In this encounter at the well we have all the elements of missional worship.

Worship is missional when it is centered in Christ, grounded in scripture and leads us into deeper relationships with God, one another, and our neighbors.

Worship in congregational life is a communal practice that occurs on a weekly basis. For many it has become the only time we gather in our buildings and the primary focus of our energy. In a missional context we are invited to explore how worship is a daily missional practice and how all our worship is about relationships and mutual interaction. Worship is not an escape from life but it is a constant call to reorient ourselves to where God is moving. It is a call to a new awakening and awareness of what is going on around us. It is a call to then challenge cultural, religious, and political systems where there is injustice, exploitation, and brokenness.

In a world of constant change we long for stability. We are tempted at times to keep God in a well defined box and then respond based on our own carefully defined notions about how God works in our lives. The same can be said about worship: in some ways we have gradually behaved ourselves into a well defined box about what constitutes legitimate worship. As a result many congregations are locked into one particular form of worship that fails to connect with the diversity of ways people could encounter God in worship (see “Planning For Encounter in Worship” for help in planning worship).

We are also tempted at times to use the entire worship outline suggested in the Worship Resource Book instead of intentionally discerning and then planning a worship experience. We often exhaust ourselves trying to plan and conduct weekly worship experiences that are not consistent with the gifts of our people or how God may be calling us to enter into a deeper relational experience. It is time we seriously reconsider how we are approaching and planning worship!

It is also important to recognize that worship does not require preaching as the only medium for conveying the living Word. However, our efforts in worship planning normally assume preaching is the central element of the service outline. There are many ways the living Word can be conveyed through scripture, sharing of testimony, music, nature, video, drama, prayer, dance, and many other ways.

If congregations do not provide preaching as a central element of the worship service that does not mean congregations have failed in worship. This is especially important if congregations do not have people
gifted in preaching; it’s more of a harm to have poorly presented or theologically unsound sermons than to identify alternative ways to convey the message.

**Missional worship is about creating opportunities to encounter God in relationship with others not adhere to rigid forms of worship.** It is about creating an environment of expectation that God is welcoming us, shaping us, and sending us. If we are open to the leadings of the Spirit it will not be the same experience every time. If we are open to how God is seeking to shape us, it will not look the same each time we gather in community for worship. If mission begins with encounter and it is about relationships, we are called to experiment with elements that lead us into deeper relationships with God, one another and our neighbors. This will require us to move beyond the traditional hymn, prayer, sermon, and hymn prayer format (see “Sample Missional Worship Outlines”).

Every Pastor Leadership Team should ask two essential questions with respect to missional worship is:

1. **How do we intentionally plan worship experiences that are centered in Christ, grounded in scripture, and lead us into deeper and new relationships with God, one another and our neighbors?**
2. **How do we intentionally plan worship experiences that uphold the gifts of our priesthood and members?**

**Missional Worship and Diversity**

Corinne Ware has written a text that helps us understand the different ways people encounter God. Her book, *Discover Your Spiritual Type*, helps identify four types of spirituality: Head, Heart, Mystic, Social Action. It is equally important to consider both the gifts of those sharing in worship and the ways worship participants specifically encounter God. It is highly recommended that the Pastor Leadership Team and congregation read and discuss Spirituality Types. Included in the LCM Field Guide under the Tools Tab you will find “Planning For Encounter in Worship”. This resource will twill be helpful in planning worship experiences that connect with diversity of worship preferences you have in your congregation.

Planning worship experiences week after week is part of the gift of hospitality. It is about how we welcome one another; gather in expectation that we are in God’s presence and then how we are sent to live Christ’s mission in our neighborhoods and everyday life.

As the Pastor Leadership team considers the best way to approach missional worship planning, consider the following questions:

1. **How can the PLT model missional worship for the congregation?** (Consider planning an experience once a month for the congregation)
2. **How can missional practices be included in each experience of worship?**
“Everything. That’s what is at stake in worship. The urgent, indeed troubling, message of Scripture is that everything that matters is at stake in worship. Worship names what matters most: the way human beings are created to reflect God’s glory by embodying God’s character in lives that seek righteousness and do justice. Worship turns out to be the dangerous act of waking up to God and to the purposes of God in the world, and then living lives that actually show it.”

(Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God’s Call to Justice*)

It is not about a moment of worship on a Sunday but moments of worship through all our days. As such, missional worship is about active participation in all these relationships: God, one another and our neighbor for the sake of our world.