



# HALLELUJAH!

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## A New Vision for Worship: Discerning a Path Through the Minefield of Change

by

Deborah Carlton Loftis

**Editor's note:** The following column is an abbreviated version of a paper presented at the March 8, 2008 "Jubilate, Amen!" Festschrift session in honor of Donald Paul Hustad delivered at the ACDA Southern Division Convention in Louisville, Kentucky.

In the course of my work, I often hear about congregations who are polarized over changes in worship. It seems that most of the emotion is focused on the style of music. Typically, someone says that changes are needed so that more people will be attracted to the church. Although worship changes may bring some different faces to the church for a while, the chances are that real growth will not be sustained if the congregation remains polarized into "we want" and "they want." Coming into a congregation where hostility is palpable is certainly less than welcoming. Leaders of such a congregation may feel as though a step in any direction might result in an explosion.

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This column is not intended to provide a blueprint of easy answers to the complex issue of congregational worship; those answers must be worked out in one's particular context with one's own people, over time, and with full discussion and debate among all constituents. It is my conviction, however, that real debate and healthy discussion can easily get derailed by unhelpful attitudes related to personal likes and dislikes. It is hard to get past "That's not my kind of music!" when the discussion starts with the topic of musical style. What I want to suggest is a process through which a congregation can arrive at the place where music styles can be discussed and decisions about worship can be made from the vantage point of congregational unity. The steps of the process are:

- Claim a common vision for the future
- Establish a worship committee to implement the vision
- Emphasize worship education
- Plan worship so that the pathway to encounter God is clear
- Choose music that helps the congregation travel the worship pathway
- Evaluate worship

- (Repeat the cycle!)

The process starts, not with worship where the conflict resides, but with finding common ground in purpose and vision. From that vantage point, the process moves toward increased understanding of the nature of worship. Only after sufficient time and discussion are invested in these early steps can the matters of worship style and music selections be undertaken.

The benefits from this process are not just the ability to make the needed decisions about worship; the process also results in better congregational communication in general and a deeper respect for one another. If congregational leaders can reframe the polarized arguments into healthier discussion, the congregation may find the pathway to more vital and, ultimately, more appealing and inviting ways of worship. The process invites us to step back and restart the discussion in a different place.

### Claim a Common Vision for the Future

When, as a congregation, we find clarity about our vision for the future and understand more fully what worship really is, I believe that matters of structure and style will fall more easily into place. No one

claims that this is an easy task or one that is accomplished quickly, but it is a process worthy of our time, energy, and patience.

If you are just starting to consider changes in worship, taking the time to explore a vision together may head off serious conflict in your congregation. Be proactive; don't wait for the arguments to start. If you are already in conflict, the process will be harder: people are polarized and on the defensive. In conflict, the focus is on "what I need" and it's harder to listen and value the needs of others. But this is what must happen in order to move through the conflict. We must find a means that enables us to put aside the polarizations, come together and claim a common vision.

One of the most decisive factors in the vitality of any church is whether or not it has a vision of the future and leaders who can help the congregation achieve that vision. In *Trouble At the Table: Gathering the Tribes for Worship*, Carol Doran and Thomas Troeger describe one way to begin the act of having a vision. The authors recount a daylong congregational retreat in which small groups were invited to draw their ideal vision of their church

at worship. Once everyone had a chance to explain their drawing, *most* of those at the retreat were able to articulate and move toward a broader and more flexible vision of their church and worship.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the process could not accommodate every need and every vision. As much as we might desire it, no single congregation can be all things to all people. That kind of unity is reserved for heaven.

The process of identifying the common vision should start with the congregational leadership and then fan out to include the entire congregation through multiple conversations and sessions in which they can develop a vision. The shape of each congregation's conversations will vary, but seriously consider including some opportunities for people to express themselves in ways other than words. Drawings—even very simple ones—or role-playing may reveal attitudes and information that would never come to the surface verbally. Take as much time as needed for this stage; everything grows out of the vision that emerges here.

### Establish a Worship Committee to Implement the Vision

The work of a worship committee, representing all facets of a congregation, is critical to leading a congregation in an intentional engagement with worship education and worship planning. Worship is the first and foremost work of the church—not evangelism, not missions, not spiritual formation. Evangelism, missions, and spiritual formation are all essential and very important work for the church, but the primary task to which we must attend is our relationship with God. That relationship begins and develops in our private and corporate worship. All the rest of the work of the congregation flows out of this relationship and our desire to give ourselves to God and to the world for God's sake.

### Emphasize Worship Education

We spend time teaching and preaching about the important tasks of mission and evangelism, and about how to live as disciples in the world. Do we invest enough time and energy into studying worship? Could our congregants define worship? Can we, as leaders, articulate our understanding of worship?

Though it is not a full and comprehensive definition, consider this aspect of our understanding of worship: *Worship is an encounter with God through which we are changed.* When we meet God and hear God's Word and call in our lives, the experience changes us. Think for a moment about the people in the Bible who encountered God. Moses, who encountered God in the burning bush, was transformed from a hesitant, stuttering man into a leader for his people. Jacob, who encountered God when he wrestled with the stranger, was changed from a schemer into one who could be reconciled with his family. After his encounter with God on the road to Damascus, Saul, the persecutor of Christians, became Paul, the apostle of Christ. How many more examples come to mind? Elijah, Jonah, Mary Magdalene, Matthew, Peter, Zaccheus—transformation is a thread that runs throughout Biblical accounts of being in the presence of God. Though our experience may not be as dramatic, the fact remains true: when we realize that we are in God's presence, the experience changes us.

### Plan Worship so the Pathway to Encounter God is Clear

When we come together to worship, God is already present—the worshipper's task is to become attuned to the Holy. The job of worship leaders is to remove the barriers and distractions and make the path clear for those who are gathered. We might think of worship as a journey. We enter worship at one point, move through



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the experience and come out somewhere else—with new understanding, new mission, and new focus for our lives. Worship leaders cannot guarantee that congregants will go down the path we create, but we can try to make the pathway visible and understandable.

There are many models for the shape of our worship, or the direction of the pathway, if you will. Isaiah's vision in the temple, however, recounted in the sixth chapter of Isaiah, is perhaps the most often cited model for worship.<sup>2</sup> Isaiah's story is clear; it is filled with action—by God and by Isaiah. There is movement and logical progression from one event to the next. Isaiah experiences first the awe of holiness


surrounding the presence of God and immediately is crushingly aware of his own limitations as creature in the presence of Creator. The assurance of forgiveness draws him into readiness to hear God's call. Through confession and forgiveness, the relationship between God and Isaiah is restored and strengthened so that Isaiah can respond to God's call with "send me," assured of God's continuing presence in relationship. This passage of scripture tells the story of Isaiah's encounter with God and how he was changed.

What kind of story does worship in your congregation tell? If you left out one part of what you do, would the story be incomplete? There are many kinds of wor-

ship orders, many models for Christian worship, but in all of them, good worship is dramatic in telling the story. Søren Kierkegaard's widely used analogy reminds us that the entire congregation are the actors in this drama and the ministers are the prompters for our story about God's presence and love and our response.

### Choose Music that Helps the Congregation Travel the Worship Pathway

Music is often the flashpoint for the conflict that arises in our worship. If we look at contemporary, traditional, liturgical,




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contemplative, or emerging worship—use any label you wish—we have basically the same components: scripture, prayers, offering, sermon or some kind of proclamation of the Word. The thing that is most obviously different is the music. Music is closely tied to our memory and to our emotions. It has a cluster of associations, some about church, some about family; some remind us of good times or bad times. With its associations, the song means more than just the words, notes, and rhythms, so we must handle our decisions carefully and not ride roughshod over the emotions of those with whom we gather to worship. When we have established a unified vision for the congregation's worship, it is easier to value and respect what is musically meaningful to others in the congregation.

Decisions about music are especially important for two more reasons. First, it is often the "glue" that helps to move our worship story along; it helps us reflect on what has just happened or prepare us for the next part of the story. Secondly, music is also an aid to memory. What we learn to sing we remember deeply. We have long understood the staying power of words and melody together. That is why children learn to sing their ABCs, and what advertisers count on with their commercial jingles. In our religious education experience, we often remember best the Scripture verses that we learned in a song. What we learn to sing, and deeply remember, shapes how we think about our faith and what we believe. Is what we are singing at church worth remembering?

Our decisions for choosing the music for worship should be based first on theological content, appropriate placement and function of the song. Once these matters are addressed, considerations of musical quality should be a focus. Singability, rhythmic interest, harmony and form cannot be ignored. Finally, we should seek a wide variety of musical styles. Thomas Long suggests that vital congregations "emphasize

congregational music that is both excellent and eclectic in style and genre." He points out that while there may be variety within one service, the eclectic spectrum is best viewed over time.

Variety for variety's sake alone is not the objective, however. Songs with sound theological value and functional appropriateness can be identified across a broad range of musical idioms. It is critically important to keep the congregational identity and vision in focus, for only through a commitment to the vision will the congregation be able to stretch themselves to embrace such a variety of styles. Out of respect for one another and out of an understanding of the nature and intent of our corporate worship, we can be generous in participating in styles outside our own preference. People need to be willing to sing music they do not necessarily like for the sake of the unity of the body. The serendipitous surprise is that exposure to a wide range of musical styles may yield discoveries of new favorites.

## Evaluate Worship

If, as argued earlier, an encounter with God results in persons being changed, then the clearest indication of authentic worship will be the evidence of change both in the lives of individual congregants and in the corporate life of the congregation. There will be changes in attitudes and perspectives, changes in the level of faithfulness and in service.

Identifying and focusing on the mission and vision for the future of the congregation has important consequences for corporate worship, but, in turn, corporate worship influences and strengthens the congregation's unity of vision. That unity is key to understanding the congregation as a body, a community of believers. A commitment to each other, recognition of their oneness in faith, a spirit of *koinonia*, is all evidence of authentic worship. Worship results in righteous, ethical living. Through

our worship we come to understand the scope of Micah's admonition to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

## Repeat the Cycle

Things continue to change—life never stands still. The process of creating and affirming the church's vision must be revisited as members come and go in the life of the congregation. Needs and ministries shift over time and the focus of the congregation shifts with them. With busy schedules and multiple ministries, it is easy to just keep moving ahead based on previous parameters.

Periodically, it is necessary to take time to reflect together, reaffirm old values, accept new challenges, and dream together. The congregation's vision of its identity and mission helps to shape its worship. Worship, in turn, changes and enlarges the church's vision. It is a cycle of growth and renewal as God works redemption in the lives of individuals and congregations.

## NOTES

- 1 Carol Doran and Thomas H. Troeger, *Trouble at the Table: Gathering the Tribes for Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).
- 2 For a thorough discussion of the Isaiah model, see Donald P. Hustad *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal*. (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1993), 102–103, and Deborah Moore Clark, *O Come, Let Us Bow Down and Worship: A Spiritual Guide for Leadership* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003), 16–21.

