

# THE NEW SACRED SPACE – CRAFTING WORSHIP IN COMMUNITY

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**ALAN ROXBURGH COMPARES THE LINGERING CHRISTENDOM MINDSET AMONG RELEVANCE-CHALLENGED CLERGY TO A PLEASURE RIDE ON THE RIVER SEINE.** Picture, if you will, an ecclesiastical barge filled with greying church leaders, who – between discussions about historical criticism, incomprehensible invocations, and hopelessly obtuse prayers – nod approvingly as the edifices of Christendom's dominance pass blissfully by. Of course, this is a thoroughly virtual world, as virtual as any fabricated by Star Trek's infamous holodeck program. Nonetheless, it is a world that still persists in the minds and practices of many a church leader, despite decades of seismic change. As Spock would intone, "Fascinating".

Some of us were either smart enough or desperate enough to switch holodeck programs in the eighties and nineties. We figured our congregations wouldn't make it to the third millennium unless we did. And we were probably right, especially where worship practices are concerned. The problem is, instead of landing in the "worship here and now", we actually missed 2002 by two decades simply because our worship updates are either clones or derivatives of evangelical worship models that were freeze-dried and packaged some time during the mid-1980s.

Maggi Dawn claims, "You have to change to stay the same." In short, when we use the same form and language in worship, their meaning actually changes over time and becomes irrelevant. Dawn believes that the challenge for the Church is, "to engage thoroughly with the ancient and reinterpret it thorough the culture we now live (because) relevance is a thorough understanding of our tradition and a genuine 'placeness' in our cultural situation." But she cautions that this is no superficial task: "To be trendy has little or nothing to do with being relevant ... To imagine that we can marry objective truth together with a cosmetic, surface understanding of our culture is a recipe for disaster. We have to inhabit our culture (that's what being human is) to interpret the eternal truths."<sup>1</sup>

If we are going to help people to encounter God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier in 2002 and beyond, we are going to have to inhabit our culture at a much deeper level than has been suggested in the past twenty years. We will have to go much farther than pop praise choruses, sitcom dramas, token prayers, and how-to messages. Indeed, what Peter so naturally demonstrated in Acts 17.28 will need to become our norm: faith communities that are fully conversant with the poets, the stories, the films, the music, the aesthetics

and mindset of our time. Creating sacred space in our postmodern culture – a place of discontinuous change, deconstructed stories, decimated hope, knee-jerk irony, and ubiquitous self-doubt – will mean both unprecedented listening and uncompromising liturgy.

The entire fabric of the worship service speaks truth – permitting all of our senses to receive and respond revelation, not just the left side of our brain. And this shift is crucial, because we now live in a world no longer content to rationalise faith. The day after the September attack on the World Trade Centre, a street artist chalked (in minute detail) the revised New York skyline on an old brick wall. Immediately, this scene became one of the city's touchstones for its grief; an alcove with candles and flowers, and the tokens of attachment and loss spread before it like a sacred carpet.

To disseminate the Word into something other than music – into dance, film, story, poetry, monologue, sculpture, painting, and digital wonders – borders on heresy for some. It's important to think about what we are saying about the Word if we open Pandora's box, move it out from behind the pulpit, and start putting it in new wineskins. When we redistribute revelation, are we implying that revelation is not exclusive to the pages between our Bible covers? Are we implying that revelation is not over – that God is speaking and doing new things in the here and now? (Maybe I've just thrown some very dry kindling onto an already hot fire.)

Whatever our answers to those questions, there is no doubt that we are affirming God's sacred use of the communication conduits of our time – its learning styles, digital domains, and aesthetic expressions. In a postmodern culture worship has to become multi-sensory, holistic and expand the repertoire of engagement beyond print, preaching and music (I say the latter with some hesitation ... I am a trained musician, after all).

Creating sacred space for postmoderns (*those who have moved beyond humanism; beyond "either/or"; beyond print; and beyond information to experience*) means creating fully human encounters with God, "multi-dimensional meeting grounds" that express a wide-range of emotions, physical expression and spiritual response. Here's a cursory breakdown of those three areas and some questions we as worship planners need to ask:

1. *The emotions*: do we allow people specific opportunities to express lament, fear, regret and anger, as well as joy, praise, and thanksgiving?

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2. *Physical expression*: do we engage all of the senses, or have we made the mistake of imagining people are “all ears?” Do we invite worshippers up out of their seats to engage in fresh rituals, to enact devotion, commitment, dependence, joy and grief in new ways?

3. *Spiritual response*: at least once in each service, do we allow for a multiplicity of responses, giving several options of enactment? Most importantly, do we emphasise, at every turn, God’s faithfulness and sufficiency, or do people feel like they need to clean themselves up, put on an image, and otherwise act or “worship” their way into relationship with God?

If worship is to be the multi-faceted encounter to which postmodern people can bring *all* that they are – emotionally, physically, spiritually – then worship needs to be planned differently. No one person can possibly provide the richness of texture, theological perspectives, and the emotional, physical and spiritual range that the postmodern context requires. We now live in a connective, collaborative, post-individualist world. Worship that is the routine brainchild of the lone ranger pastor/worship director (sitting in a cubicle with a stack of hymnals, songbooks, and sermon illustrations) is not only an anachronism. It flies in the face of 1 Corinthians 12. Here’s my point: if we are going to create sacred space in the now, then we have to take absolutely seriously the “body of Christ” imperative. *Worship for the Body of Christ needs to be planned by the Body of Christ. Worship for community is always planned in community.*

But how do you do that? How do you change decades or, in some cases, centuries-old patterns? Who do you invite into the process? Could you even find one person who wants to help? Could you trust them if you found them? Doesn’t it mean giving up too much control? After all, you spent all that time in seminary. You are the “Herr Pastor”, the one who should know what worship is and how it should look, feel and sound! To open it up to the congregation – to the larger community – well, it would be like opening up Forrest Gump’s box of chocolates. You never know what you’re going to get! It is dangerous, it is chaotic, it is ... unbelievably exciting.

What is it like for a congregation to go from a top-down, lone-ranger approach to worship, to worship planned in community? In the case of a young, urban church, it did not happen overnight. Neither has the process finished. But the process has begun, and it is yielding some remarkable side benefits.

First, there was the Border’s bookstore “coffeehouse” group, an informal gathering of the assistant pastor and artists: a young designer in charge of graphics for a metropolitan magazine; a drama major with an additional talent for interior design; a theologian/bass player/storyteller; and an experienced worship coordinator. They met every other Tuesday at 4.30 p.m., arranging work schedules and braving rush hour traffic. The meetings began quietly, everyone sharing backgrounds, their own “state of our worship” comments, and finally, visions for a new future – for multi-sensory, participatory services that spoke clearly of “The God Who is Here”.

But, with each subsequent meeting, the creativity crescendoed. Border’s bookstore was more than obliging and it certainly beat the drab fluorescent-light-acoustic-ceiling office space. But it was time to get out CDs, light candles (yes, in the daytime), fix tea and munchies, and just generally, hang together in each other’s space. The group opted for a rotation of houses. Kitchen tables were expanded and cleared, living rooms sprouted floor pillows, and the group was up and running.

Soon, it became clear that more structure was going to be necessary. They needed to get their brains and hearts around the upcoming stories and seasons. They needed time to start to put the ideas into practice. The result? An initial plan of “four weeks out” (for this congregation of mostly twenty-somethings, that seemed like an eternity!): two weeks on intense, detailed work, and two weeks on active projects in the pipeline.

What also became clear was that the participants in the newly dubbed, “Sacred Space” team were going to need communities of their own to help plan and craft what they were imagining. Having begun as an informal gathering of four artists, the effort was now starting to take the shape of a web: four artistic communities – graphics (digital and non-digital), ambiance, music, and storytelling – linked together by shared tasks and the devotion of their respective leaders.

Of course, as an organic, relational system, none of this worked according to formula. The four-weeks-out trajectory was often whittled to two and three weeks.

When the main group could not meet for two consecutive planning sessions, planning for the current week was the best that could be done, but it was not ideal. There were dry periods and times of

#### NOTES

1 Maggie Dawn, in *The Post Evangelical Debate* (London: Triangle, 1997), pp. 39, 45.

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► discouragement. Some communities were more self-motivating and active than others.

The graphics group emerged early on as the most dedicated, “out-of-the-box”, and – interestingly enough – the most connected to the world outside church-land. Over half of the visual artists in this group had no church background. Most of them were connected to leading graphic artists, through magazine work or gallery showings in the city. Some had not even attended the congregation’s worship service before they started working on their first worship project. It was hard not to ask the question, “Is there some connection between the unchurched artists in this group and the group’s passion and creativity levels?” The answer was not clear, but a new dimension to worship planning was starting to take shape – evangelism. The witness of a living community, gathered around the common task of creation; Christians rubbing shoulders with non-Christians, inviting them – not to a production – but to a process. What had begun as a way to craft corporate worship was becoming a way to fulfil the 24/7 worship mandate of Romans 12.1 (“present your bodies as living sacrifices”). Worship-as-event was exploding out of the doors. It was worship-gone-missional – completely anti-intuitive in a church-world of mailshots, slick presentations, demographics, and “Come see what we created just for you” (even though we don’t know you and really don’t want to take the time to know you).

At the very least, crafting worship in community is an adventure. An indigenous, unrepeatable adventure that affirms that, yes, God does indeed work in the particular. God indeed forms communities of faith as unique as a retinal imprint. And God indeed goes before us, working way outside our plans and strategies. The challenge for all of us is to find out where God is working, and go there.