

Jeffrey Clouser  
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## **Creating Vital and Faithful Worship for the Intergenerational Church**

Most churches follow a liturgy (worship acts that the assembly follows in a worship service) based on the Gospel Model.<sup>1</sup> The assembly gathers, receives the word of God, responds to the word of God, most often by communing together, and then goes out into the community to serve God and others. These liturgies and worship resources were transformed into something fresh and exciting in the mid to late sixties as a result of the Second Vatican Council deciding to conduct their masses in the vernacular of the people they served.<sup>2</sup> Protestants followed suit by incorporating the common Christian heritage of worship as found in the third-century era of Bishop Hippolytus.<sup>3</sup> The traditional liturgy of the gathering, word, meal, and sending was respected and cherished. However, as the culture began to change so did the minds of those who may or may not have experienced the traditional liturgy. The religious terminology, unfamiliar hymns, and irrelevant sermons appeared to make the traditional institutions of faith un hospitable and mystifying. As a result, those seeking something more relevant to them chose to attend churches such as Willow Creek with exciting multimedia visuals, upbeat music, contemporary language, and dramatic skits.<sup>4</sup> This “new” church was entertaining.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright and Tucker Westerfield, Karen B., eds. “The Oxford History of Christian Worship.” New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G Long, “Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship.” The Alban Institute, Inc. 2001, p. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 6-7.

However, Thomas Long, the author of *Beyond the Worship Wars*, discovered that those who were drawn to the entertainment factor of the Willow Creek church still longed for some of the Christ-centered elements found in the “traditional” church thus a “third way” to worship was developed by the “vital and faithful churches.” Vital “because they are an active and growing church,” and faithful “because they remain true to the heritage of the church.”<sup>5</sup> According to Long, vital and faithful congregations:<sup>6</sup>

1. Experience the mystery
2. Show hospitality
3. Display the sense of drama in worship
4. Embrace and utilize a variety of excellent music in many styles
5. Creatively adapt worship spaces
6. Connect worship and local mission throughout the service
7. Employ worship elements and responses that are ordered and known by heart
8. End worship joyfully
9. Have strong worship leaders/pastors

This “third way” to worship really speaks to the intergenerational component of many congregations today. Intergenerational congregations have a membership that consists of two or more generations which participate in activities that make them aware of different perspectives. There is an increasing interaction and cooperation among the generations to achieve goals that bring about change in the church.<sup>7</sup> In this paper I will review these nine characteristics which illustrate how church musicians and worship leaders can create vital and faithful worship that ensures success in the current intergenerational context of worship services.

## **1. Vital and faithful congregations experience the mystery.**

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 11-13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> American Choral Directors Association. “The February 2017 addition of the Choral Journal,” [http://acda.org/files/choral\\_journals/CJFeb17.pdf](http://acda.org/files/choral_journals/CJFeb17.pdf)

Long believes authentic worship meets people's needs because people need worship. We need to join with others in our worshipful acts of devotion, praise, obedience, thanksgiving and petition.<sup>8</sup> Long states, "Worship is what happens when people become aware that they are in the presence of the living God."<sup>9</sup> We need to be in a right and loving relationship with God and join ourselves in community with others when communing with God. We come to worship because we want to experience God. Our experiences with God are not something we can control; however, we can create a worship experience that invokes suspense, mystery, and intrigue indicating that something important is going to happen during worship. Leaders should be reverent, the space intimate and simply adorned, and time allotted for silence. Allow the congregation to become aware of the presence of the mystery. In the words of Barry Liesch, "Set aside our preferences and traditions in order to allow God to work freely."<sup>10</sup>

## **2. Vital and faithful congregations show hospitality.**

Humans not only desire to commune with God but we also desire the companionship of others and long to be in community with others who also hunger for God. Thus, worship not only needs to be God directed but also needs to be people directed. The church should be a place where people are known, welcomed, and loved through the use of name tags, easy to sing hymns and songs, and prayers from the heart.<sup>11</sup> The focus should be on relationships and intimacy before religious commitment

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Barry Liesch, "The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church." Michigan: Baker Books a division of Baker Book House Co., 2001, p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas G Long, "Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship." The Alban Institute, Inc. 2001, p. 28.

and membership. Congregations must welcome the stranger with diverse theological perspectives, think deeply, and accept questions and doubts as essential to faith formation trusting that each person has something of value to contribute to the understanding and practice of the faith.<sup>12</sup> Welcoming the wisdom of the stranger will remind us that we are a faith, active in love, seeking justice and joy; compassion and peace, for all of God's creation. Christine Pohl states, "A life of hospitality begins in worship, with a recognition of God's grace and generosity. Hospitality is not first a duty and responsibility; it is first a response of love and gratitude for God's love and welcome to us."<sup>13</sup> We can extend this welcome through helpful greeters, clear signage, comfortable spaces with room for conversation, and above all a congregation with a spirit and attitude for welcoming all of God's people by name. Most importantly, we must recognize and receive the gifts that people bring to our church body and allow them to participate in all aspects of the worship experience.

### **3. Vital and faithful congregations display the sense of drama in worship.**

The telling of God's story, through the use of the Gospel in the bible, evokes a worship experience that involves word and gesture; movement and narration, with the help of prayers, hymns, and recitations.<sup>14</sup> Worship is a play. The worshipers are the

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<sup>12</sup> Palmyra Church of the Brethren website history page, <https://www.palmyracob.org/about-us/history/>

<sup>13</sup> Christine D. Pohl, "Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition." Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999, p. 172.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas G Long, "Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship." The Alban Institute, Inc. 2001, p. 43.

actors and God is the audience.<sup>15</sup> Everyone in the congregation participates as they strive for excellence, not perfection, in worship. The order of the service provides the narrative that shapes the worship and gives it meaning, thus it must be logically constructed to ensure proper flow and pacing. The possibilities to enliven each scene of the service, gathering, word, meal, and sending, are endless so every congregation should ask themselves how each scene can be more visible, clear in its meaning, and invite participation. Keep in mind, worship is an active lifestyle involving a task to do and a service to render. For this reason, worship must be rehearsed and practiced.<sup>16</sup> The end result is a worship service that is offered and performed for the church body. To perform is to serve and minister by carrying out an action or function. Thus, worship is a performance that involves the skillful action of the gifted church body that takes into account the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup>

#### **4. Vital and faithful congregations embrace and utilize a variety of excellent music in many styles.**

In our diverse communities we see how our diverse musical interests conjure up a variety of emotions for all of us. For many, those emotions run deep and are tied to memories and experiences that only they can feel and remember. That is why musical decisions in a church need to be made thoughtfully and respectfully for all that worship there. It is often the music that carries the theological message that worshipers can

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> Barry Liesch, "The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church." Michigan: Baker Books a division of Baker Book House Co., 2001, p. 127-131.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 133, 138-139.

recall when outside the four walls of their worship space.<sup>18</sup> This theological message conveyed through music has to reach across the generations that are gathered together in worship and this is achieved by engaging the congregation in the use of excellent music that allows them to “express the thoughts and feelings of their worship”.<sup>19</sup> The variety of music styles incorporated during worship engages the assembly enhancing these thoughts and feelings. It is safe to say that not everyone likes every style of music but we must be willing to, and might I add be committed to, singing the music that we don’t like for the sake of remaining a unified church family.<sup>20</sup>

Constance Cherry explains how church musicians “need to consider the quality of theology, words, and music when choosing songs for worship.”<sup>21</sup> This means we must discern what is most appropriate in the context of our worship setting when choosing the hymns and songs we sing and ensure that they glorify God in spirit and in truth. Careful attention must be given to the songs we sing so that they are beneficial to the spiritual formation of the congregation. In *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice*, John D. Witvliet states, “Pastoral musicians have the important and terrifying priestly task of placing words of sung prayer on people’s lips....[They] have the holy task of being stewards of God’s Word.”<sup>22</sup> God has entrusted musical leaders to make sure the music of worship is of God and from God.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas G Long, “Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship.” The Alban Institute, Inc. 2001, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Constance M Cherry, “Selecting Worship Songs: A Guide for Leaders.” Indiana: Triangle Publishing, 2016, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> John D Witvliet, “Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice.” Michigan: Baker Academic a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2003.

Barry Liesch points out that these songs and hymns need to be singable, participatory, and impart musical shape and variety by using different vocal and instrumental techniques that vary the musical expression.<sup>23</sup> He also notes how acoustics and amplification make all the difference in congregational singing and a good worship experience so be sure to “seek for your sound booth a person who knows the sound board technically and has a musical ear.”<sup>24</sup>

Music transforms lives and it is important for church musicians and leaders to remember that each congregation is different and must find its own voice when making music together. Always reflect on the music’s ability to shepherd God’s abiding presence into worship and let the songs provide opportunity for prayer and meditation.

## **5. Vital and faithful congregations creatively adapt worship spaces.**

Vital and faithful congregations have created and adapted their spaces to allow for gathering and movement which accommodates the congregation, choir, altar, baptismal font, and pulpit in a more intimate way. According to Long, “Vital congregations have made their ‘houses of worship’ more humble. They have opened the doors on the gathering space and made the congregational space more hospitable.” In so doing, they brought “God closer to the assembly through color, art, and movement” which instills an excitement in the assembly that stirs “praise, devotion, surrender, and service”.<sup>25</sup> Long points out that “Christians want the arrangement of

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<sup>23</sup> Barry Liesch, “The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church.” Michigan: Baker Books a division of Baker Book House Co., 2001, p. 106-113.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas G Long, “Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship.” The Alban Institute, Inc. 2001, p. 76.

worship space to communicate not only that worship happens here but also what kind of worship takes place”.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore he says “A worship space is a physical expression of what the worshipers here believe about the nature of God and the character of faith”.<sup>27</sup> Lastly, Long explains “A church should not say ‘Look at this building; this is the church,’ but instead, ‘Come inside this building to be the church; enter this place to act as the church’”.<sup>28</sup> In just the short four years that I have been serving my congregation I have seen the worship space transform and become more hospitable. Pews have been removed, a welcome center has been established, technology updated and new signage created. And what they lack in a conducive space for intimate worship they sure make up for by the welcome they express to strangers every week.

## **6. Vital and faithful congregations connect worship and local mission throughout the service.**

Vital congregations have a clear congregational mission and a vibrant energy for action and service that impacts worship. Service and worship complement each other and can be seen and heard as a result of what is being done in worship. Songs build community, connect us to the global church, tell the stories of God’s faithfulness in challenging times and enhance the words we use in worship. Music also provides comfort, brings us hope, and guides us in service to our community. Our songs should support and affirm the mission of the church and how the church lives out its faith in the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

community. As a result, the congregation's enthusiasm for mission will span the number of activities they participate in throughout their community and beyond which gives them their identity.<sup>29</sup> People want to come to church to join with others in offering themselves and their service to God. Be mindful of the fact that congregations are usually part of a larger denominational framework. Do not allow the beliefs, policy, polity, and mission of the denomination to cloud your judgment of a particular congregation and its mission. Many congregations within a particular denomination do not necessarily conform or adhere to all the policies of their denomination and instead choose to follow their God-given conscience. Carefully consider what each congregation is doing in their community to determine if it is a safe and inclusive space for worship open to the work of God and the Holy Spirit in and among their diverse neighborhoods.

Hymn composer David Haas confirms, "We are called to act with justice, we are called to love tenderly; we are called to serve one another; to walk humbly with God."<sup>30</sup>

## **7. Vital and faithful congregations employ worship elements and responses that are ordered and known by heart.**

Worship done by heart is effective because there is a "stable order of service that is meaningful and suspenseful and is in the memory bank of congregational responses."<sup>31</sup> Worshipers gravitate toward repetitive patterns that remain fairly constant

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 78-83.

<sup>30</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas G Long, "Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship." The Alban Institute, Inc. 2001, p. 87.

over time and that are also filled with action and drama which moves toward resolution. These events in worship contain actions and words which the congregation has committed to memory allowing them to focus their attention on the Gospel and on God. A congregation that knows the motions, knows the words, and knows the songs by heart is free to devoutly worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit alongside the others gathered there. However, keep in mind that on any given Sunday you may have visitors in the assembly who are not familiar with your repetitive order of service. Remember to be hospitable every Sunday by offering direction and guidance as you progress through worship. Treat every Sunday as if it is a new experience for everyone that is assembled there. To help with this, churches may want to consider using screens or monitors to project parts of the worship service. Responsive readings and prayers as well as song texts and music can be projected freeing up the assembly to engage as one body without having to page through worship guides and hymnals.

#### **8. Vital and faithful congregations end worship joyfully.**

As stated before, most churches follow a worship structure in which the assembly gathers, receives the word of God, shares a meal, and then is dismissed to serve God and others. This pattern of worship has movement that gets us from here to there. Symbolically, we are in the kingdom of God at the great banquet table sharing a feast with the saints and heavenly hosts and then blessed and sent out to love and serve the Lord.<sup>32</sup> Moving towards a place of joy and thanksgiving in worship involves a mix of soft and somber music selections along with joyful and upbeat pieces. The pastor ends the sermon with a glad affirmation of the Gospel, and the worshipers are invited to partake

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

in the meal by coming forward to the communion table. There is a time to celebrate and rejoice through music, singing, and dance because the good news has been made known. Long explains, “By moving along the pilgrim way in worship, the congregation will arrive at the place where they can glimpse their destination, and nothing can hold back the celebration.”<sup>33</sup>

### **9. Vital and faithful congregations have strong worship leaders/pastors.**

According to Long, the Christian church gathers around the presence of God in Christ, not around a pastor or other human being. The role of the clergy in a Christian community is to serve and enable the congregation to exercise its discipleship. The church belongs to Christ, and the Holy Spirit empowers all of its members to be ministers. However, the skills and the gifts of pastoral leadership do matter.<sup>34</sup> What the leadership of the church does or doesn't do has a direct correlation to the quality of congregational life, the spirit of worship, and the appeal of the church to visitors.

By virtue of ordination, clergy have the authority to bless others, are willing to lead and serve, and create hospitable worship that allows for the sharing of gifts. No matter their credentials, skillful and gifted church leaders establish and maintain positive relationships with those they serve. They are kind and show a genuine interest in the lives of those in the assembly. They lovingly encourage the best from their congregations and invite them to put their gifts and skills into service. They share the leadership of worship with others and are aware of God's presence during worship which shows in the way they act and speak with the assembly. They handle the elements,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

objects, and symbols of worship with a loving and calm reverence as they speak warmly with spirit and invite the congregation to worship.

When exploring the possibility of revitalizing worship in your intergenerational church setting, Long suggests you keep the following in mind:<sup>35</sup>

1. Worship renewal requires strong leadership from the pastor who must take charge in directing the change and implementing the vision.
2. Change will cause conflict. Be prepared for the complaints as you graciously lead the church to a new and significant place in worship without arrogance.
3. Involve the key leaders of the congregation as you seek input and guidance about your vision for change. Educate the leaders on your vision and allow them to help plan and implement the changes in worship with the help of the congregation. Remember, people like to join with others in offering themselves and their service to God.
4. Publicly educate the congregation about the vision and changes in worship through articles in the newsletter, morning announcements, letters, emails, Sunday school curriculum or in the context of worship during a sermon.

Vital and faithful worship is designed to set your congregation up for success. No deed in worship is unimportant so remember to affirm the skills and gifts of the assembly as you enable your congregation to worship more faithfully. As we create vital and faithful worship in the current context of intergenerational worship services, let us aspire to live and love like Jesus as we work towards a world restored by grace and peace.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 107-110.

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