

JUNIUS DOTSON

ALL ROADS LEAD TO WORSHIP

Worship is the single most important experience in the corporate life of a congregation. It is the place where the greatest number of persons associated with the church gathers each week. It is the goal of every effective discipleship system—to teach people to worship God in spirit and in truth. It is the catalyst for every act of community service done in Jesus' Name. It is the most creative vehicle for bringing to life and boldly communicating the church's mission, vision and core values. All roads lead to worship!

According to most statistics, eighty percent of people's decision in choosing a new church home depends on what does or does not happen during the worship celebration(s). Thus, in today's ministry context, the crucial questions about worship have moved beyond order and personal style. The question for today is, "What is most helpful in communicating the message of the Gospel for these particular people at this specific time?" Such an emphasis allows more creative and constructive conversation around worship elements that include music, drama, dance, multimedia and the visual arts.

It is helpful to have an overarching image to help guide the work of a worship planning team. The image that most resonates for me is that of *sanctuary*. Worship represents a sanctuary or a safe place from the pressures and negative influences of the world. Transforming worship beyond mere routine and memorized ritual helps people construct a new worldview following the principles contained in the Word of God.

In order for worship to remain culturally relevant to each generation it must constantly change. Thus, what is most

helpful in creating a transforming worshipping experience is not a discussion that decides "once and for all" what the style of worship is going to be, but rather a process that sees every worship experience as an opportunity to communicate a fresh anointing of God's Holy Word.

Such an approach takes us beyond a "winning worship formula" that soon becomes static and an end unto itself. Instead, it creates a culture of worship planning that anticipates and indeed *looks forward to* new and creative ways to proclaim God's Word and to invite people into a life-changing relationship with Jesus.

Transforming worship in multiple settings requires an approach that honors the uniqueness of each worshipping body. Experience-based worship is the order of the day. In this type of a worship experience, everything you do connects to the message. In multiple celebration settings, experience-based worship does not treat each worshipping body as a carbon copy of the another. I believe the days of carbon copy worship productions are quickly fading.

This approach to worship comes with its share of benefits and challenges. Let's start with the benefits expressed as principles unique to Saint Mark. We are committed to spirit filled praise and worship that is vibrant, vital and relevant in reaching pre-Christians and Christians.

VIBRANT: Just as it is important to offer a variety of times to meet people's needs, it is equally important to offer variety in the worshipping experience. Regardless of the reasons people choose an early, mid-morning or a late service, the result is that the people who gather will form a unique group, creating a very different feel at each worship celebration.

Each service has a primary constituency. Understanding who this constituency is and planning worship in a way that communicates effectively to them takes this reality into account. The result is a service of praise that is vibrant in its feel.

Vital: The goal of any worship experience is to connect with God. As a preaching pastor, I know that each week my message preparation brings a fresh awareness to the Word. I am seeking to help people experience the word of God in a new, fresh, relevant and authentic way each week. In so doing, I take into account the primary constituency of each worshipping body. Although the crux of the message is the same, the illustrations and delivery style varies. If we take the same approach to planning the entire worship experience, the result will be an authentic vital worship experience that connects to the participants each week.

Relevant: The Word must be relevant. Experience based worship begins with asking, "What does God's Word want to speak into the lives of God's people this week?" The whole planning process seeks to answer this question in a way that is culturally relevant. Worship should communicate the Word in such a way that people's lives are transformed.

Saint Mark strives to live out these principles in three distinct worship celebrations. The common thread that unites all of our worship celebrations is three principles: every worship experience should be celebratory, convicting and inviting.

We gather to celebrate the presence of God in the world. We gather to hear a Word that speaks to our life circumstance

3 DISTINCT WORSHIP EXPERIENCES

Every worship experience feels distinctly different. Although each service is high in praise, there is a different emphasis at each service.

Sunday, 9 a.m.: This worship celebration is comprised of a good intergenerational mix of people. Our most ethnically diverse service, it represents the most balanced and inclusive use of all of the worship elements mentioned. Message illustrations speak to a wide variety of life situations.

Sunday, 11 a.m.: The primary constituency of this service is persons between the ages of 15 and 35. We emphasize upbeat and highly participatory praise and worship, contemporary Gospel music and dance. Liturgy is used for the purpose of faith formation. Message illustrations speak primarily to experiences relevant to high school, college age students and young adults. We just recently began a children's church during this service that features a praise and worship team comprised of children and youth.

Wednesday, 7 p.m.: This is most commonly referred to as our teaching service. We emphasize the use of multimedia in this service. The message is highlighted via a power point presentation. We use movie clips, interview clips and animations to help communicate the message. This service which features the celebration of Holy Communion every week, draws an intergenerational and ethnically diverse crowd. It is also comprised of many former Catholics. **Ten percent of all first time visitors to Saint Mark come on Wednesday night!**

and invites personal and collective change. We gather to invite people into a life changing relationship with Jesus Christ. All of our worship celebrations are blended with hymns, contemporary and traditional Gospel music, liturgy, dance, drama, multimedia and visual arts that help to reinforce the message theme for that particular day.

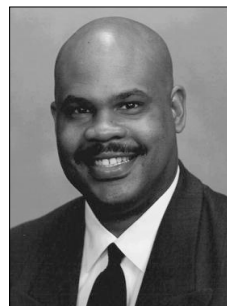
The greatest challenge in planning transforming worship each week is maintaining the energy and enthusiasm of team members. Weekly evaluation is very helpful in keeping people focused and excited about continuing to push the creative envelope. We are discovering that there is no shortage of creative and gifted people once we extend the invitation for more persons to be involved in the worship planning process. We are truly allowing people to exercise all of their gifts.

The second challenge in planning transforming experience-based worship is my own personal message planning. Because there are so many people involved, I must preplan every message in order for the rest of the team to adequately and competently do its job. This requires that they receive message outlines at least six weeks in advance. I must confess that this is an ongoing challenge

that has not yet been solved!

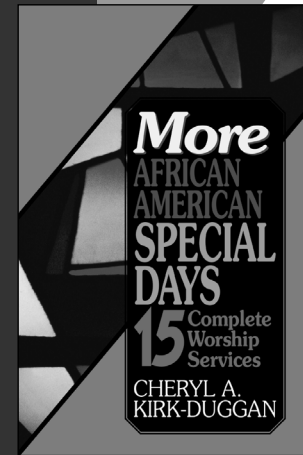
In the midst of our planning, we are always open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. During the actual worship experience we will always follow the Spirit's prompting to move in a new direction. Ironically, the more prepared we are, the more attuned we are to God's voice in the worship celebration.

Designing vital, vibrant and relevant spirit filled worship that transforms people's lives is worth every bit of energy we put into the process. When we create a process through planning that allows creativity as well as spontaneity in the worship experience, we ensure that worship continually responds to the ever-changing life circumstances. The ultimate results are lives filled with possibilities and transformation. □



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 Abingdon Press

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CIRP068401 PACP00257294-01