

Shaping Creative Worship on a Very Limited Budget



God, What *Can* I Do?

Dottie Escobedo-Frank

Creative worship is nothing new. It is an old, rich tradition that began with the Israelites carrying around a holy tent with an arc of the covenant, and stone tablets and regular “stuff” that carried sacred meaning and holy memory. Every time we sing or use instruments in church, we are worshiping God with our creativity. We are making an offering of music, song, or dance. We are offering up the best of ourselves for the God who gave the best for us. Here again, the history is rich and the tradition deep. David called for the most proficient musicians and the court’s most skilled dancers and the sought-after artisans to create a sacred space for worship so that people could enter into the Presence of God. We humans have been doing creative worship for our Creator God ever since we found our voice and noticed our bodies.

Creative sermons are not new either. Look at the prophet Jeremiah. He used creative venues to get the message across to a people who seemed to be hard of hearing. Jeremiah did things like uncovering a buried linen belt that was mildewed and falling

apart, or smashing a clay jar, or wearing an oxen yoke (and those babies must weigh a good bit) just to get across a message. Ezekiel had a creative message when he lay in the dirt and built a battle ground, and was tied up for 430 days.

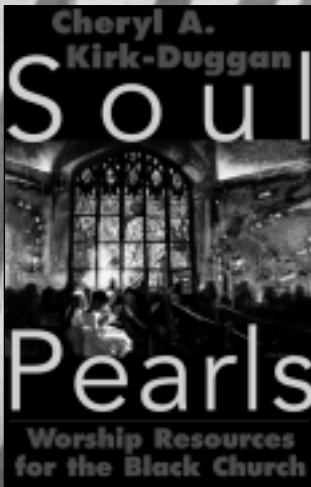
Rich, deep recesses of creativity. We serve a Creator God, and we are formed as “creatives” in the image of the Creator.

I think about two people here. One is John Wesley who said, “I set myself on fire and they come to see me burn.” He was the pastor who couldn’t fill the pews but found a way to take the gospel to the streets and to the fields and was amazed by the crowds of people who came to hear about God’s love. He found his voice of passion and he found those who would listen, and he moved himself out of his comfort zone into passionate preaching. Look what happened. You are here because of him.

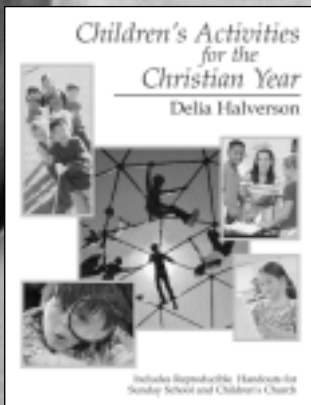
The other is Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act* who bemoans that she just wants to “get some butts in the seats.” She saw what wasn’t working, remembered her former skill, and worked out of



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her abilities to bring a church to meet a Savior she so desperately needed. All for the glory of God, and to save her own butt... Sometimes it works that way.

John Wesley and Whoopi Goldberg both found ways to be so passionate about the gospel that people were compelled to hear and, hopefully, to respond to God's grace.

When I served at Mission Bell United Methodist Church in Glendale, Arizona, I was searching for ways to make the worship and the message unforgettable. If the gospel was meaningful, then it must be delivered in a way that would be memorable. So in taking a high view of the good news of Jesus Christ, I searched high and low to bring creativity to the Word. What I found was artists in my community that could help deliver or shape the word. For example, a potter threw a pot while I preached on Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house. Or the teens danced the message in their own style, making meaning for their generation. Or a musician wrote words and music to add to the message. Or a painter, or a firefighter, or an actor, or a mime artist... you get the picture. What I found was that creative souls were everywhere and community-driven worship was so much grander than hidden-in-the-tower worship. When all of God's gifts come together to shape and form worship, then our offering of praise takes on the effect of a harmony.

I also found humor, and surprise, and interruptions, and layering. Humor gets to the deep emotions that we can tolerate and helps us to go deeper with emotions we shun. Surprise catches us off guard with the gospel message and brings new light to an old story. Interruptions act much like surprise but bring us to a place of "pause" or "reset" and therefore give a fresh start to our wrestlings. Layering is when we keep adding new forms to the delivery of the message...like when we start with words, add music, then add lighting, then add movement on the screen...then take it back down to words alone. It has the effect of keeping us moving forward with the message and it takes us to a place of deeper connections.

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Right about now you might be thinking, "But I don't have the resources to make all that happen!" I know that thought. All this creativity stuff came out of attending a conference at Community Church of Joy. I was amazed and delighted by the worship but went home so discouraged because I didn't have the resources CCOJ had. I didn't even have a video projector or computer. We were still working off the old-fashioned projectors with typed words or glued-on images. Kindergarten stuff. And at that time, we

didn't have the resources to buy equipment or to hire staff to run it and create it. And, so in a moment of complete desperation, I said "God what CAN I do?" And I met the potter, Roy, who helped me form a message. The rest is history. I just kept trying things out and learning what people responded to and kept stretching my understanding. Oh yeah, and I failed miserably along the way too! It wasn't always easy. The risk of failure was great and I hit a time or ten of sheer folly, but I had a forgiving church who knew how to laugh at me and still love me. And I knew that the risk of failure was greater if I did nothing different. So, I kept on trying, sometimes looking quite the fool, often feeling uneasy, but watching the Messenger work through my attempts at "setting myself on fire."

Now I am cataloging creative sermons and creative worship services so that I can keep fresh and keep growing. My file is filled with ideas. My resources are expanding as I allow God to enlarge my thinking and to free me from my boxes.

I am often asked, "How do you come up with the ideas?" To be honest, when I am looking for something it often evades finding. But instead, I get distracted with the other stuff of life, like watching the kids play sports or jogging or listening to a rap artist or attending a Suns game...and while I am doing the regulars of life, irregular ideas pop into my head. I write them down. I connect the ideas I have to the scriptures I have been reading. I try to see if those ideas really work themselves out in my own life. I test them against other scriptures. And then I talk with my team. Usually by the time I talk with the

worship team the idea is fully formed, but they have a way of making it better with their input. Then I try it on for size in a sermon or in a gathering. This is the moment of truth and I am often brought to my knees in trembling and fear before I put the message out there. Here's where I cry out to God, "Okay God, maybe this was a stupid idea after all, but please show up and speak through me anyway!" What I find is that God seems to rescue the message and the Holy Spirit often transforms my attempts into His whisperings. And that is really wonderful.

Sally Morgenthaler describes the new way of church as "the postmodern art of pastiche: creating something unprecedented out of the pieces at hand."¹ A "pastiche" is a mixture of creative works much like a medley that borrows from many songs. A pastiche takes what you have in your setting, and creates something brand new in its communication form, all the while borrowing from the "what is" of your cultural setting. A pastiche tells the old story out of the heart and soul of the borrowed pieces of your church and community. It is "mosaic" in third dimension.

Now that's the essence of creativity. It is mixing up and borrowing and "conglomerating" from the bits and pieces that God gives you. It is letting God take the stuff of your lives and make the message that transforms a community into "heaven on earth."

The gospel is rich and it is ripe for the telling. Creativity is nothing new. Creative worship and creative sermons are at the finger tips of your imagination. When we free ourselves from forms, and when we let the Holy Spirit lead us, the sky is the limit in what God can do in our midst.

You are made in God's image. Take God's creativity to your worship setting and have the time of your life! □

¹Sally Morgenthaler, in *Exploring the Worship Spectrum 6 Views*, p. 225.



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