

The Invisible Line

In planning and leading worship, be careful if you cross the line. There is no doubt that the lines are there, even if only visible in the eye of the beholder just *after* his or her tolerance for change or diversity has been surpassed.

It is no surprise that praise of God, confession of our sins, intense encounter with the Word, and fellowship with the Holy Spirit call forth our strongest desires, deepest thinking, and fervent affections. And whether it is a function of commitments to a tradition, the power of repetition, being shaped by cultural patterns, the result of thoughtful decisions, passionate attention to providing hospitality to strangers, or delight in new forms that open hearts and minds, we all have strong preferences.

I feel let down and disappointed when worship practices seem jarring or flawed. I have a friend who gets angry when his sensibilities are trounced or ignored. Talk with anyone whose commitments and affections are substantially different from your own, and you may uncover an intensity and level of certainty of what is “right” and “good”—in the other person and yourself—that seems impervious to rational discussion.

At a time when there is a good deal of interest and experimentation in a variety of ways to worship, I empathize with pastoral leaders who struggle to calm fears or resistance in their communities—and even within themselves. How do you pray, think about, and lead to fashion worship that is vibrant, challenging, enriching, and evocative?

There is an obvious and necessary relationship between the convictions of the leaders and the experience of those gathered to honor God and commit to faith-filled living. I have worshipped in cathedrals and open fields, in various languages and in silence, with praise bands or a single acoustical guitar, with Pentecostals and stiff-upper-lip Anglicans. Here is all I know: whenever the leadership team is acting out of a clear sense of God’s call, with loving care for God’s people, and rooted in a biblical vision for the future, the gathered community finds an authentic and resonant voice to sing *alleluia* and *amen*.

Our prayer is that it be so in the places where you lead and serve so that more people will come to know and be shaped by the love of God in Jesus Christ.



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