

FINDING & EMBRACING THE WORSHIP VOICE OF YOUR CONGREGATION

by Mark Hayes

*Addressing the FirstLight Worship Conference July 20, 2002,
Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church
Washington, DC*

I am very excited about speaking to you today because we are involved in a one-of-a-kind, groundbreaking dialogue here at this FirstLight conference. This is the first time I've been able to address the theme, "Finding and embracing the worship voice of your congregation", and I don't know of any other church or conference that has approached the subject of worship and church growth in such a unique way. So I think we're making history here today.

As I have traveled across the United States and to other countries over the last 20 years, I've come to see that the Church is having labor pains. Churches are experiencing the birth of new forms of worship and grieving the death of old patterns and traditions. Change is definitely afoot, and with it often come conflict and apprehension. Independent church growth consultants urge us to do one thing while denominational leaders may have another idea. We as church musicians are often stuck in the middle because the Sunday morning worship service is thought of as the perfect arena for experimentation, that one-hour window to connect with visitors and potential new members.

I believe that every church has a unique identity which is comprised of many things – their history, their vision for the future, the socio-economic makeup of their members, their core beliefs, the personality of their leadership – just to name a few. Oftentimes this unique identity is given "voice" or expression through worship, through that time on Sunday when we gather corporately and say, "This is who we are, this is what we believe, and this is why we have joined together as a community of faith. Do you want to join us?" Unfortunately this voice becomes tired and grows stale. It dutifully conforms to the dogma of institutionalized religion or just as easily sells out to the hype and shallowness of our market-driven culture, stripping it of its power to be salt and light to the world. Our worship voice needs to be continually renewed so it can maintain its integrity and authenticity and be vibrant enough to contain the power of the gospel.

For the next 30 minutes or so I want to talk about identifying what our corporate and individual worship voices might be and how we can embrace those, realizing that there is potential for great growth as well as change. We don't need to go outside our church and hire a team of professionals to make our worship better. Each member has a unique and valuable contribution that is his or her voice. Think of it as your job description in the kingdom of God. Today we're going to help you discover more of what that might be and how that contributes to the corporate worship voice of your church. I want to talk a little about creativity because I believe each one of us is inherently creative. I'm going to talk some about the role of arts in the church and the tension between the arts and religion throughout history. We'll discuss the nature of worship and suggest ways to make it more alive.

After I've finished speaking, I'll have you break up into small groups so that you can do some visioning and identifying of what your worship voice might be. The bottom line is that I'm here to inspire you and to challenge you, but most of all empower you to be the extraordinary creation that God created you to be, to help you find the voice that is yours and yours alone.

Think about your congregation for a moment – its strengths, its struggles, your present worship environment, any baggage from the past that keeps you from moving forward, your vision for the future. Do you see any room for growth? Are you in the middle of a huge growth spurt or do you feel stuck? Let's consider this question. When you consider your current situation, what is a more important or life-giving alternative that you would go through pain to move and grow, even if it means enduring some conflict?

Change is inevitable in this life. Historically the Church has always dug in its heels when it comes to change. When people come to church they want to see authenticity. They want to experience worship that connects with them on the inside and is not merely a show. When you're hurting inside, you need an encounter with God, not religious platitudes or glitzy music. Are we willing to do what it takes to change? Are we willing to risk something new, to let go of something old that is familiar and comfortable, or maybe just sentimental? Are we willing to connect with our rich liturgical traditions instead of assuming that the best kind of music is only the newest kind? What is at stake is literally the health and lives of our churches. When we resist healthy, positive change because we're afraid, we may not see the consequences of our decision immediately, but trust me; you are saying "no" to growth.

Everyone has his or her own idea about what authentic, vibrant worship is, so let's talk about it. In preparing for this speech I came across these two quotes which I found rather telling. "To attend the typical Protestant Sunday morning worship service is to experience something odd, something like a charade...Lacking is a sense of the terrible mystery of God, which sets language atremble and silences facile chattiness...If the seraphim assumed this Sunday morning mood, they would be addressing God not as 'holy, holy, holy' but as 'nice, nice, nice'"¹

On the other side of this stylistic chasm is an out-spoken advocate of the church growth movement. William Easum, author of *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World*, and former United Methodist pastor "claims that the right method for arriving at a suitable style for church music is to determine which radio stations most of the 'worship guests' listen to. 'Soft rock' is usually the answer, he declares."² He further quotes John Bisagno, pastor of First Baptist Church in Houston, "Long-haired music, funeral-dirge anthems, and stiff-collared song leaders will kill the church faster than anything in the world...There are no great, vibrant, soul-winning churches reaching great numbers of people, baptizing hundreds of converts, reaching masses that have stiff music,

¹ Edward Farley, "A Missing Presence," *Christian Century*, March 18-25, 1998) p. 276.

² William Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993) p. 84.

seven-fold amens, and a steady diet of classical anthems. None. That's not a few. That's none, none, none."³

With extreme statements like that, it's tempting to either draw swords and prepare for battle or simply throw up our hands in despair. However, Frank Burch Brown in his book, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, has some assumptions that may guide our discussion of this matter. Let me quote just a few.

1. There are many kinds of good taste, and many kinds of good religious art and music. In view of cultural diversity, it would be extremely odd if that were not true.
2. Not all kinds of good art and music are equally good for worship, let alone for every tradition and faith community. In terms of worship, therefore, it is not enough that a work or style of art be likeable; it must also be appropriate.
3. Every era and cultural context tends to develop new forms of sacred music and art, which to begin with often seem secular to many people.
4. It is an act of Christian love to learn to appreciate or at least respect what others value in a particular style or work that they cherish in worship or in the rest of life. That is different, however, from personally liking every form of commendable art, which is impossible and unnecessary.⁴

I believe our job as worship planners and leaders is to create and hold a sacred container in which the Spirit can work and move. "Container" may seem like an odd choice of words, but it's merely a metaphor for the word "environment". All the elements of worship, from the size and design of the sanctuary, to the liturgical vestments or lack thereof, to the type and quality of music and every word that is prayed or spoken contributes to the worship environment. As creative people we want to make this invisible container a safe, nurturing and glorious place to meet God and experience the presence of Spirit. We can't make God "show up" on Sunday any more than we can make people worship or respond to the Divine. Our only role is to hold or maintain that sacred space through the use of our gifts so God can do what God will do.

Here are a few ideas I've gleaned from my years of leading and observing worship practices in my own church and others:

1. Worship that integrates both the left and right sides of the brain is more holistic. Wouldn't it be great if we could provide an environment where people can experience God through their emotions as well as their minds? Sometimes our resistance to an emotional style of worship has more to do with our fear than anything else. When we're in the presence of a loving God, fear has no place. Remember what John 4:18 says, "Perfect love casts out all fear."

³ Ibid. p. 85.

⁴ Frank Burch Brown *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 250-251.

2. Music should be continuous. It allows us to travel along one emotional road for a while, instead of changing directions constantly and being fractured in our focus. How is your mood when you walk into church on any given Sunday? Does it take a while to get focused? A medley of songs all on the same theme might help you center yourself.
3. We worship with our whole body, with movement. The Bible is **full** of references to joyfulness, shouting, rejoicing, clapping, and gratefulness, in regard to singing and praise. Music affects the emotions and we shouldn't be afraid of that. **Music is the avenue through which intellectual truths are personalized.**
4. People sing better when they're standing. Worship should have some times to sit and stand, some times for loud and soft music. It's OK to chart the emotional flow of the service.
5. We're always desiring for the "Spirit to reveal itself" because of our singing the right songs or doing the right things. Doing things perfectly does not invoke the Spirit. Our singing should be a response to the spirit brought into the sanctuary by each believer. As planners and leaders, we're just responsible for creating the best possible environment for people to get in touch with God's spirit that's already within them.
6. I'm a firm believer in service planning and using liturgies where appropriate, but we can still leave room for the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit. I know that is scary for many of us who like to be in control. Try giving up some of that control and let God guide you with comments from the podium if you are in a leadership position.
7. Music should be biblically based. There is no substitute for a good text. I realize there is potential entertainment value in every kind of music, but it should not obscure the text. People usually remember the lyrics to songs far longer than they remember what sermon the pastor preached. We often get more of our theology from song texts than from sermons or homilies. Pay attention to what you are feeding your flock.
8. Instead of focusing on diversity in musical styles or liturgies, explore how a worship style could express the many facets of God's character. For instance, characteristics such as God's might, power, lovingkindness, mercy, and tenderness could be effectively expressed in both formal **and** informal worship styles. But the focus is on God's character. **Everyone in the pew will have a different idea about what works best for worship.**

Many of these ideas may help you define your corporate worship voice. The way we language worship is another key part of that identity. How do you model inclusivity? If people looking to get involved in your church see someone in a leadership role or on stage with which they can identify, there's a greater potential for belonging in their minds. Think about what first attracted you to your church and then what caused you to stay? I bet you wanted to stick around when you finally felt like you belonged. When people first visit, is there anything familiar with which they can identify?

In your church is there room for children in worship leadership roles? What about women, seniors, teens, people with disabilities, people with different ethnic backgrounds

than yours, people with different sexual orientations than yours, people whose spiritual path doesn't look like yours? How we respond to these issues of inclusivity can really determine our corporate worship voice in far greater ways than whether we have a contemporary or traditional worship style.

At this point some of you may be thinking, "Well, some of these ideas make sense, but they wouldn't work in my church because our people don't respond to change well, or **I don't respond to change well.**"

I don't think change for change's sake is good. But I do believe it's important to evolve. Our culture is changing at an incredibly fast pace. However in many churches, little has changed in the way worship is experienced in the last hundred years. In a typical Protestant church, the word is spoken, the word is sung, and the word is read. Now we live in the age of the image, where television is constantly stimulating all of our senses. Does the church have a responsibility to change its worship environment to catch up with the rest of culture? I think the answer is different for each church. The way you answer these kinds of questions will help determine the worship voice of your community.

I would encourage you to consider the demographics of your congregation...age, education level, available resources, your physical plant structure with its pros and cons, musical tastes, location within the city...are you suburban, rural, urban, the ethnic mix, the age, emotional makeup and leadership gifts of your staff. What will best serve the needs of your people?

By all means pray and see what God is leading you to do. There are certainly mega-churches that are based on the seeker model. And yet in some cities, when it seems like everyone is climbing on that bandwagon, there are churches that maintain a traditional musical approach and they are thriving and growing.

National Presbyterian is a prime example of that, right here in your own city. This church is literally bursting at the seams with 3000+ members in multiple Sunday morning services. In fact they are looking to expand their present building, which is a glorious contemporary gothic structure. Earlier this year I attended a Lenten service at National Presbyterian and was overwhelmed with the magnificent sounds of the pipe organ, the stateliness of the sanctuary, the beauty of their traditional liturgy and the excellence of their choir. The choir was singing a Kyrie by a different composer for each of the Sundays of Lent. With all the pageantry and traditional liturgy, I experienced a profound reverence in the service that I don't normally receive. And yet there was a palpable joy and energy within the congregation that told me this church is alive! If this style of worship is of interest to you, you might want to attend the workshop this afternoon by Michael Denham, who is the Minister of Worship Arts there.

I have so many examples of churches that exemplify innovative worship from my travels around the country. On the other end of the spectrum from National Presbyterian is my parent's church in Missoula, Montana. This small Southern Baptist church of 150 members integrates all ages into its worship practices. It's not uncommon to see children

or teenagers on stage with adults playing cello or clarinet or trumpet obbligatos on hymns or praise choruses.

First Baptist Church in Curitiba, Parana, a city in southern Brazil, hosts a national worship conference every year called Louvação, which uses indigenous musical styles and instruments in very creative ways. Three years ago when I was there, they used The Battle Hymn of The Republic as the closing piece with the choir, band and congregation. It started out quite solemnly with the choir and organ, and then broke into a samba groove using the rhythm section and multiple percussionists. During each verse a trumpet player or sax player would take a jazz ride and then the congregation would join in on the chorus, while literally dancing in the aisles. For us, bossa and samba may seem like something we might hear in bad lounge act, but for Brazilians it is the music of their soul and they authentically and joyously worship God with it. It is part of their worship voice. They also have these big, hollow drums called *bandeiras* that they beat in complex rhythmic cadences. Over the top of the cadence there is a singer who sings a solo melody line and it's quite energetic. These groups are usually made up of street kids who have found God and want to share it in their vernacular. It's similar in concept to rap music and it truly moves Brazilian worshippers. It's also incredibly loud! Imagine a drum and bugle corps without the bugles marching and playing in your sanctuary, and you have an inkling of the sound.

This sounds not unlike the music ministry at First United Methodist Church of Hyattsville, MD. Sharon Starling directs multiple steel drum bands there and we hope to have one of them share with us tonight in our worship experience. She simply took the talents she found in her community and developed them into becoming a unique part of their corporate worship voice.

I had the opportunity to be at the cathedral in Coventry, England a few years ago and saw how they used their physical building to connect their rich liturgical history with worship today. In medieval times, troupes of actors would travel the countryside putting on "miracle plays" which re-enacted the life of Christ through drama and song. This practice has been revived and I got to see a presentation staged in the ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral. The original cathedral was built in the 12th and 13th centuries and was a glorious gothic structure. It was bombed and destroyed during World War II and a new cathedral was built in the 1960s. The walls of the old cathedral, the altar, and other architectural features are still standing. Within this ancient and sacred space, the audience stood, watching the actors, and literally following them around from scene to scene, seeing the life of Christ portrayed through drama and music. How thrilling it was to see this congregation embracing their history, even in its ruined state, and letting the timeless truth of the gospel ring out today in that same space just like it did 1500 years ago.

The church I currently attend uses very interesting worship music. It seems that there is a profusion of great jazz players and singers in our church, so we use a band every week that is truly about as good as any club band you would hear in the city. For our affluent, suburban, well-educated church family, contemporary music with a jazz flavor helps

prepare us for a worship time that is joyous and filled with expectancy. Our voice is one of positive spiritual energy and people are attracted to that expression of God.

Let me share a service that was rich in pageantry and symbolism from a church I used to attend in Kansas City - Broadway Baptist. The theme of this service was giving thanks to God for the abundance of life. We used the symbol of the banquet table to express this. Initially the communion table was bare and we sang songs that focused on barrenness in our lives, using Old Testaments metaphors of dry ground and fallow lands. Then the word of Lord was dramatically proclaimed, bringing with it the promise of streams of living water and abundance beyond measure. As the congregation sang songs of rejoicing and hope, dancers began to come from the back of the sanctuary bringing all kinds of props with which to “dress” the altar. First beautiful tablecloths, then pottery and flowers and food stuffs... baskets of bread, cornucopias of fruit and vegetables. We even had someone roast a turkey downstairs in the kitchen and bring it down the aisle on a platter, the aroma filling the sanctuary. This was our Baptist version of “smells and bells” I guess. This was all skillfully choreographed by our dancers and achieved over the course of 8-10 minutes while the congregation was still singing. When the dancers had finished, they had staged a gorgeous still-life tableau on the communion table that symbolized the banquet table of the Lord, to which we are all invited. This service happened at a particularly difficult time in the life of our church when many were in need of emotional healing. What God did that day through this sensory and celebratory experience was crack our church wide open so we could feel the joy and the hope and the thanksgiving we so desperately needed. What our church had as raw ingredients was the willingness to think outside the box and a creative worship arts team of dancers, musicians, and drama people. It was one of those extravagant gestures of God’s bounty to remind us of how rich we are in God. After the service, the prepared food was given to the needy.

Examples such as these are the very stuff of creativity. To be human, to be made in God’s image, means we are makers of things. We are inherently creative. If we don’t express our own ideas, don’t have the courage to create, we have betrayed ourselves. You are one of a kind. There is no one else like you. If your voice is silent, then we are poorer for it. We are literally missing a part of Christ’s body.

In his book, “Courage to Create”, Rollo May talks of different kinds of courage - physical courage, moral courage, social courage, creative courage. According to May, “Creative courage is the discovering of new forms, new symbols, new patterns on which a new society can be built.”⁵ And who creates these new symbols? It is us - the artists, composers, musicians, dancers, dramatists, poets... the saints, fleshing out our imaginations in these symbols. The artists among us give us a “distant early warning” of what’s happening to our culture through their symbols. We see art and hear music that expresses our society’s anxiety and alienation, and yet there is beauty amidst the ugliness, form in the chaos, and love shining through hatred. We, as artists, hint at the spiritual meaning of our culture.

⁵ Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: Norton & Co., 1975) p. 21.

But these creative acts are not without their tension. Art and religion have been in relationship throughout history, sometimes nurturing each other, sometimes in conflict. One has only to remember the Renaissance and recall the glorious art that adorned the walls and ceilings of cathedrals across Europe...all commissioned and paid for by the Church. However, after the Protestant Reformation, church fathers decided art was too sensual, art was too worldly, art was somehow not spiritual enough. It could lead to idolatry and so the pendulum swung back the other way for hundreds of years. The architecturally uninspired churches of today in many evangelical denominations are a sad legacy of that decision. Church music has not fared any better at times. For every sacred masterwork we cherish, there were just as many cantatas and oratorios that were criticized for being too avant-garde for the times or even heretical.

Creativity is an act of rebellion against the status quo, especially in religion. Throughout religious history, saints and rebels have often been the same people... Joan of Arc - burned at the stake, Jesus - crucified on the cross, Martin Luther King, Jr. - gunned down from a motel balcony. Countless other men and women like these have realized a great spiritual truth that did not fit into the religious consciousness of the day. They rebelled against the norm, risked and often lost it all to express their new vision of the truth, and today are recognized as saints for their contribution to our collective spiritual understanding. They are continuing to help us expand our outmoded concepts of the Divine, to embrace the unfathomable idea of God beyond God.

We, as artists, are uniquely positioned to create new symbols for the church. Why are symbols so important? Think about the abundance of American flags that are now displayed and flown after 9/11. Is that not a powerful symbol of our desire for freedom and pride in our country? Paul Tillich says, Symbols open up “levels of reality which otherwise are hidden and cannot be grasped in any other way.”⁶ Some things just can't be put into words, so we create a symbol that communicates that truth or mystery.

We should also realize that symbols outlive their usefulness and must be constantly transformed, especially within the church, so that their vitality is bold enough to carry the meaning of faith.

Worship arts such as music and dance can be non-verbal, which express our intuitive, non-linear, even non-logical way of understanding God. This could be called our “feminine” side in relation to the more “masculine” side, which can be linear, controlled, logical and analytical. Artists often speak of their “muse.” How interesting that this term comes from three women in Greek mythology! Euterpes was the goddess of music and Terpsichore was the goddess of dance. Creative people have long been in touch with their feminine side. If God is truly beyond our efforts to understand and describe, do we not owe it to ourselves to use **all** our ways of perceiving and knowing to draw people into a deeper experience? Women are such invaluable leaders when it comes to this way of perceiving.

⁶ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1959) p. 58.

The arts direct us away from a system of rational questions and answers and help us learn to live with ambiguity. A mature spiritual life is **not** black and white; it is not simple. But we can catch glimpses of the Divine, revealed through the creativity of our fellow seekers as they “work out their salvation” along side of us.

“The people in the Bible repeatedly discover that God is nearly always to be found in the unexpected place doing the unexpected thing.”⁷ We often discover our voice, while doing other things. Remember the story of Moses and the burning bush? This was a pivotal time in his life when he received his “call” from God. But he was not looking for a burning bush, a sign from God; he was tending sheep in Midian for his father-in-law, Jethro. How will you discover your voice, your gift? I know that as a composer and arranger, my ideas don’t always come when I’m sitting in front of my piano waiting on a great idea to pop into my head. I wish! They often come when I’m trying to go to sleep, on the treadmill at the gym, or driving in the car, not exactly times when I can stop and write down an inspired melody!

The process through which you give voice to your creativity won’t happen overnight. It will be hard work and you will undoubtedly experience failure at times. That’s part of learning and becoming. What happens when we risk and fail? How does that fit into our American “success is best” mentality that pervades even the church? Is failure a sign of God’s disapproval or success a sign of God’s favor? How do we hold open the space for people to experiment, fail and try again within our local church? Sounds like a set-up for lots of tension, doesn’t it? Or it could be an opportunity to show mercy, compassion and grace? Those are the qualities that the world wants to see.

Tonight we’re going to try a grand experiment. We’re bringing several churches and their worship teams together for the first time to lead in a worship service. Greg Finch, Bill Anderson and I put together a loose service order, but we will not have a chance to rehearse with any of the musicians until this afternoon, just a few hours before the service. Sound familiar? There may be things we have to cut. It will be a chance for me to demonstrate diplomacy and patience and flexibility as I work with people I’ve never met before. For every thing that doesn’t go just the way I want, it’s a chance for me to let go of my expectations and model grace and compassion. It may be a “working in the trenches” kind of time. But it is in those times that we find and develop our voice and learn how to embrace the voice of others, even when radically different from ours.

So what is your voice, your unique contribution to the worship life of your church? Let’s think big picture here. Some worship gifts are obvious because they play out in more upfront roles like choir director or vocal soloist. But there is a huge variety of talents and skills that are needed to make up a church and its corporate worship voice.

Here is the list I came up with. See if your personal “voice” resonates with any of these:

⁷ Judith Rock & Norman Mealy, *Performer as Priest & Prophet* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1988) p. 21.

Singers –soloists & choir members
Orchestral and Band Instrumentalists
Urban and Ethnic Instrumentalists (i.e. steel drums, Latin percussion, Spanish guitars, accordions, etc.)
Rhythm Section Players
Praise and Worship singers - ensembles
Bell Ringers
Accompanists
Vocal coach or teacher
Children’s directors and workers
Youth directors
Composers
Arrangers
Music Notaters
Film editors
Videographers
Photographers
Public Speakers
Liturgists – people who understand the vision and flow of liturgy and can create that
Bible scholars
Poets
Writers/Authors
Actors
Playwrights
Directors
Deaf interpreters
Producers – someone who can notice the details in a big picture situation
Choreographers
Dancers
Designers of liturgical garb, costumes
Seamstress
Weavers
Sculptors, Potters, Ceramic Artists
Stained Glass Artists
Designers– people with an aesthetic sensibility
Painters
Architects
Construction workers
Cleaning – maintenance
Visual Artists
Calligraphers
Graphic Artists and Designers – design bulletins, special service material, publicity
Sound techs
Lighting techs
Ushers/Greeters

Non-singing choir members – people who serve the choir without singing

Librarians

Computer literate personnel – design work, proofreading

Prayer intercessors

Dreamers – Visionaries

Organizers

Challengers

Mentors

Implementers – gift of helps

People with gifts of wisdom, discernment, creativity, service, administration, hospitality, helps, encouragement, faithfulness, evangelism

People who understand and can facilitate conflict resolution

Seniors, children, teenagers and their unique perspective based on their age and taste

Gift of ethnicity

Do any of those gifts resonate with you? I know it's scary to open your mouth and say, "This is who I am. This is what I have to contribute to the world." Your willingness to own your voice and your obedience to the call, in time, will produce incredible fruit that can bless your community.

Imagine if Moses had not responded to God's call to lead the Israelites out of Egypt or if Paul blew off his Damascus road experience? What incredible ministry is germinating in your mind right now that can bring people into a fresher, deeper experience of God?

I can't wait to find out!