

TWELVE WAYS TO GROW RELEVANT WORSHIP IN TRADITIONAL CHURCHES

Relevance in your worship service is the point at which worshippers experience God. Research shows that most people, even regulars, do not experience God in the worship service. That means most services are irrelevant to most people.

It's a hard truth to hear. You can fix it if you want. The key is thinking about others, especially those that aren't connected to a church. That number is vast. Will you do whatever it takes to offer a worship experience to which they can relate? Your "yes" will uncover a world of meaning as you and your worship service change.

REALITY ONE: Guests decide to return to your church – or not – in less than 5 minutes.

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Improve first impressions

Most guests will come to church because someone invited them. Before they respond affirmatively, they'll visit your website. If yours is like most traditional churches, your homepage is information laden, with upcoming events and church business items crammed into small spaces surrounding a large photo of the church building.

Guests are looking for relationships, not information. Plus, it's hard to have a relationship with a building. Post pics of real people from your church doing real ministry, with fun captions and hyperlinks to the information pages, and a link to your facebook page. Now guests can opt-in to research what actually interests them. *Do* post worship times and what you have available for kids during worship on your homepage.

Getting from the website to your front door can be overbearing even with MapQuest, since most older church buildings are buried deep in residential neighborhoods or other unusual locations. Invest in directional signage to make the trek more pleasant. Set them up before the service and take down after (each week!) to mark the main routes to your campus.

You also need:

- A parking lot ministry, to deal creatively with contextual issues like lack of space, and to welcome guests with the first smile they'll see as they arrive.
- Connectors in your lobby, who meet guests and help them connect to others
- A well-run, clean and safe nursery with paid staff
- Visible directional signage in your lobby that point guests to the nursery, snacks and bathrooms
- Pre-recorded, mostly secular background music playing in the lobby to fill up the silence, which can be deafening to someone new to your environment

REALITY TWO: The five-minute window often begins at the start of the service.

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Start off singing.

Guests running late will barrel in and slip into a pew, only to find a talking head giving announcements. Even regulars tune out. Guests do so for good.

The worship service is not the time to try to get sign-ups for what are often dying ministries. It's for experiencing God so that we return to our every day lives as changed people who give away God's love to others. If we lose people during the first five minutes of the service, we lose a partner in the journey to transform the world.

Your denominational hymnal has a basic order of service with five main categories: *Gathering, Praise, Proclamation, Response, Dismissal*. The first five minutes of the service occurs during *Praise*. Sing at least two songs or hymns that have energy. Let guests see regulars praising God together. It opens hearts.

REALITY THREE: All worshippers need a window into church life.

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Focus on mission.

Every week, after your praise set, have a member of the congregation come up to welcome worshippers. This host should *not* be the lead pastor of your church, though it

could be someone on staff. Train up several hosts to welcome worshippers, review the building layout, and feature *one* missional activity from the church calendar.

So what *is* your church doing to reach out in your community? Are you: serving meals at the homeless shelter; keeping your community clean; praying for the community with other churches in the area? If your church isn't actively engaged in mission, there will be nothing to talk about.

The welcome takes about 3 to 5 minutes tops. Move other announcements to an information page on your website, or to your facebook page. Post e-addresses in your bulletin, and have the host remind people to check them.

REALITY FOUR: People ignore talking heads

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Use pictures

If you have a screen in your sanctuary, chances are it's misused. I often see titles of hymns with page numbers but no lyrics; and wordy announcements (that don't match what the announcer is saying), or long scripture passages crunched in to one slide that no one can absorb.

One picture is worth a thousand words. When talking about the meal you served at the homeless shelter last weekend, show a picture. If you don't have a screen, use a prop, in this case, a place setting on the altar. Refer to it when talking about the experience.¹

¹ Read, "*The Tremendous Staying Power of Image*,"

<http://www.churchleaders.com/worship/worship-articles/160960-the-tremendous-staying-power-of-image.html>, by Jason Moore, to understand the importance of

visuals.

REALITY FIVE: Prayers of the people are connecting points for everyone

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Position joys and concerns early in the service

Most traditional churches place joys and concerns at the middle or end of the service, and prayers of confession at the beginning. For increased impact, position joys and concerns right before or after the host's welcome, since everyone comes to worship with something on their mind. Move the prayer of confession toward the end, since God needs to soften our hearts for us to admit our stubbornness.

Don't pass the microphone around the room to get worshippers to spontaneously talk about their needs. It is too hard to control, and participation is limited since most people won't talk in public. Create contemporary prayer liturgies. See NetResults from last month, *24x7: Worship in Real Time*, by yours truly. Examples are also on my website.

REALITY SIX: The right music for your service is that which regulars and guests like.

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Get to know your mission field.

The trend in Christian music is secularization. Note the reduction in God-language in many contemporary Christian songs. The trend in secular music is spiritualization. Case in point: Mumford and Sons. There are numerous options for familiar music to play and sing in your service, in addition to your normal fare.

The problem is that most pastors are not spending time getting to know the unchurched population that is right outside their church building. If pastors don't know them, neither do their parishioners. Now we won't do whatever it takes to increase relevance so that everyone can experience God, because we don't have a heart for the mission field.

It's the heart that encourages even the most traditional regulars to find meaning in *Roll Away Your Stone* for example, especially if it's led thoughtfully and contextually. It's the leading-of-it-part that presents a steep learning curve for traditional churches, and usually requires coaching to ascend. The result of that investment can be miraculous.

REALITY SEVEN: Transitions in the worship order represent key opportunities to form relationships between worshippers and each other, God and the church.

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Simplify

The public worship service is filled with transition points, which come off clunky and awkward during most traditional services. It's very difficult to impart how to make them better without direct interaction and specific, contextual examples.

In lieu of an on-site consultation, return to the front of your hymnal to identify the five main parts of the worship service. Now you have only six transitions to address: before the gathering, between each big block, and after the dismissal. Music, poetry, personal testimonies, prayer – even planned, “led” silence can help you move gracefully from one part of the service to another, while simultaneously encouraging worshippers to receive more of God.

Some might suggest you change your order periodically, even weekly. I disagree. Have you ever seen David Letterman do the TOP TEN LIST in a new spot, ever? Yet the list is always new. Keep your order the same each week, and focus on one transition to do differently for creativity. Worship is liturgy, and the repeated order has its own power. It's also much easier to produce.

REALITY EIGHT: Worship leaders usher others into God's presence

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Grow up-front worship leaders

Everyone that leads someone else into God's presence is a worship leader, by definition, since worship is our relationship with God. The host is a worship leader. Worshippers in seats are too, as their public praise endorses the reality of God for others. Remind the gathered community each week of their calling.

When it comes to music, there is a difference between a song leader and a worship leader. Take some time off from your own church to visit some evangelical and non-

denominational churches to see how. Then develop worship leaders in your midst who reflect your values and context.

REALITY NINE: Creeds can punctuate faith

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Set them up

We often hear how young adults like ancient rituals of faith, including creeds, so we're seeing a resurgence of them in worship services. But they seem random or rote because they have no context.

Instead, the worship leader can say a few words to tell people why you're reciting the creed together, and perhaps even tie the creed to what you just did and / or what you're about to do in the service. A good place for a creed is in the proclamation section, between the reading of scripture and the pastor's message. The worship leader can tie the creed to both. Then you can say the creed every week and it's always fresh.

(PS, creeds are meaningful to all generations, if led thoughtfully)

REALITY TEN: The message is stronger when the pastor doesn't speak until the sermon, and when he or she talks about real life experiences in the mission field.

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Spend time in the mission field and don't speak publicly until the sermon!

In a magazine interview I once read with Tim Keller, founder of Redeemer Presbyterian Church on Manhattan Island, NYC, Keller said that pastors should be talking about unchurched people during their sermon so that regulars can see how the church interacts with them. It's hard to talk authentically about what we're not doing.

Pastors must get outside the church building and start inviting others into conversations about faith and into the life of the church. Then they can talk about it from the pulpit, and also during meetings.

Of course, most worship services are the “senior pastor show.” The pastor gives announcements, leads the welcome, then the call to worship ... lots of talking by one person. That waters everything down, especially the sermon. Pastors *must* raise up other up-front leaders. It will powerfully impact every aspect of your service.²

REALITY TEN: The time after the sermon is for the congregation to choose to act.

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Lead a discernment prayer of confession

Pastors, at the end of your sermon, ask your congregation: *what are you going to do when you leave this place?* Start out with a prayer of confession, either pastor led or congregationally said. Confess that we don’t always do what we say we will when it comes to inviting others to meet Christ. Then ask God for guidance. Sit in silence for a minute to listen. Then encourage worshippers to write down their responses on their bulletins or in their phones. Have them text their commitments to the worship leader, and read some without revealing the source.

REALITY ELEVEN: Relevance increases when worshippers invite others to church

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Form a prayer team

Whenever church people tell me their worship service is dull, I ask them if they’ve invited anyone from outside the church to attend it. They tell me they wouldn’t invite people to that service, or that they don’t have any friends that don’t go to church. Both rationales are excuses. We experience worship very differently in light of invitation. And we change the service to welcome those we’re inviting.

The missing piece is prayer. Research proves a direct link between spiritual practices and invitation. Forming a prayer team is a good place to start. This is not a prayer chain, which exists to address emergencies among the body. Prayer teams serve the purpose

² Read anything by Tim Keller on preaching. For more ideas on getting out into your community, see this month’s column, *24x7: Worship in Real Time; START GROWING YOUR WORSHIP SERVICE THIS SPRING*

of encouraging others to pray, through their own prayer practices and through teaching about prayer, during the service and during the week. The more you pray, the more you experience God in your own life, and the more you open your mouth to talk about faith with others. Invitation naturally follows suit. You can't help yourself!

REALITY TWELVE: We live in an interactive culture, so the infrastructure that supports your service must be too

TO INCREASE RELEVANCE: Organize Loosely

Relevant worship is built upon an invitational infrastructure. Community is the value that drives it, because community drives our 21st Century world. What you do behind the scenes comes through in the worship service. But how do you organize community?

It isn't through committees, which are very task oriented. And it isn't through teams, which require that the same people work together over time to produce a high quality product. The team values efficiency, not relationship.

To begin to capture community, ministry leaders are networkers that teach their followers to be inviters. Networkers invite their connections to be part of community life through their relationship with them. In the worship area, those relationships center on the arts. The arts express the relationship and influence the development it. But it's not about the arts; it's about the relationship.

The symbiotic nature of community makes an infrastructure built around it messy and unpredictable. Wrestle with it to grow relevant worship in your traditional church.

Go to www.townleycoaching.com for additional resources. You can purchase Cathy's book, *Missional Worship: Increasing Attendance and Expanding the Boundaries of Your Church*, and watch or purchase teaching videos and find free downloads that include:

- *How to Improve First Impressions in Your Church*
- *How to Invite Your Neighborhood to Church*

- *How to Select the Right Music for Your Worship Service*
- *How to Increase Worship Attendance in Your Church*
- The Hospitality Check List
- *Host Pastor demo*