

Gaining Focus: Inspiring Worship

Worship is the most obvious connection many people have to the local church. These public gatherings help set the stage for the participants to live out Christian faith in everyday life. Inspiring Worship is one of eight characteristics of a healthy, growing church. Inspiring Worship takes many forms but has one essential result: worshippers know they have been in the presence of God!

Sometimes we erect barriers to Inspiring Worship. Some of the barriers I have noticed are profiled below.

1. Lack of a Worship Theme. When the parts of the worship service just do not fit together it is likely that there has been little forethought or planning for the worship event. While inspiring worship does not require the full choreography of a Broadway musical, careful attention to worship flow, dead times, seasonal themes, and time constraints will make for a much more effective and inspirational worship service.

a. Worship Flow. Have you ever been in a worship service where just after "Please be seated" the next person on the platform asked you to "Please stand"? The simple sequence of when will we stand and when will we sit can be identified in advance to allow a smoother flow.

Attention to worship flow can also eliminate worship acrobatics. Has this ever happened in your service? "Please turn to page 255 in your hymnal," the worship leader instructed, "and as we stand to sing the ushers will pass the offering plates to receive the morning offering."

While not entirely impossible, the scenario introduces a difficult set of acrobatics based on holding the hymnal, passing the plate and reaching for my offering while standing. Worship flow could be enhanced here by recognizing the simple dynamics that people sing best when standing and people give best when seated so if our goal is to sing well and give well we need to separate singing from giving.

b. Dead Time. Dead Time, those awkward periods when nothing is happening from the platform, often inhibits worship flow. Three blocks of time are often blank or empty and thus of limited inspirational value. Many churches have an unwritten protocol that the next leader does not begin his/her segment of the service until the previous leader has found his/her seat. A more seamless flow can be realized when one leader begins as the other leader finishes. Thus, when a central mic is in use, the second person steps up to the microphone when the first person leaves it. When multiple mics are available the sound crew insures that on one mic fades the other is brought up.

A second dead time block can often be detected when musicians or special music leaders are not in place. Folks who are providing special music do not always have to be asked to come forward from the back of the room. Instead they can be positioned near the platform for a seamless flow and almost no dead time. Many churches conclude their worship with an invitation time. Musicians and leader who plan in advance do not have to be reminded to come forward nor do they have to select music by hurried, whispered consultation.

A third dead time block often appears at the beginning of the worship service. This is more of a

lost time rather than a dead time as the stated starting time for the worship service can often be delayed. Countdown videos are helpful here if at the “0” of the countdown the worship leader actually begins the worship service!

c. Seasonal Themes. Haphazard worship planning limits the inspirational value of the worship event. When the pastor’s preaching themes are not reflected in the other components of the worship service or when the seasons are not in sync with the worship service, worship can be less inspiring than it would be if these two factors were considered. A quick look at the church year (Advent, Lent, Easter, Pentecost) and the civil calendar (New Year’s Day, Valentine’s Day, Mother’s/Father’s Day, Memorial Day, July 4th, Labor Day and Thanksgiving Day) can help the worship planner include these elements so that the worship service becomes more inspirational since it now provides value added features to elements of life that are common to our culture.

d. Time Constraints. In a smaller church and in a simpler day, everybody could do everything they preferred to do in the service and it was O.K. In those setting songs were routinely selected by the congregation as long as someone wanted to suggest another one. Special music lasted as long as there were people willing to volunteer (or be volunteered) to sing. Sometimes the preacher was limited to only a few minutes but most likely he took the time he felt was needed.

Every local church will develop its own worship culture as to what is an appropriate length of time for most worship services. Most General Baptist churches are comfortable with a worship service that lasts from 50—70 minutes although 90 minute services are routine in some settings and “going over” once in a while is acceptable in most churches.

The fact remains, however, that no worship service can include everything everyone would like to include every time the congregation gathers. Worship that inspires will therefore be worship that is planned to fit within the accepted time frames of the participants.

2. Small group dynamics in a large group setting. One of the most serious limitations on the inspirational quality of worship occurs when worship leaders, pastors, and the congregation at large lose the distinction between large group and small group dynamics. This is generally illustrated by:

a. too many announcements. Announcements to the large group should be limited to one or two reminders that have a broad application to the group that is present. When the meeting schedule of a small group of five participants is changed it does not warrant a public announcement; it does, however, warrant five phone calls from the group leader or five short conversations in the foyer before/after church.

b. verbal prayer requests. Prayer should be a central feature of worship but most verbal prayer requests are never clearly heard in the auditorium. Many times the nature of these spontaneous prayer requests are far removed from direct connection to the congregation and thus are never really part of the prayers of the people.

c. an assumed knowledge base. The trust level is such in a small group that the leader can say “I’m sure we all know the words to...” The leader probably already has the confidence that everyone shares that knowledge base and in an established small group if someone does not know the words they quickly speak up or live in ignorance knowing that they are still a valued member of the small group even if they do not know the words.

In the large group setting of worship, however, there is surely someone who does not know the words to or is not aware of the rituals of the congregation. If I am a newcomer or stranger to the group and I have no connection other than having arrived at worship, my connection is not cemented if I am being asked to know words I’ve never heard before or to engage in rituals that are strange to me.

Gaining Focus: Steps to Make Worship More Inspiring

1. Start with the sermon. Pastors may not have full influence in the worship planning but in a Baptist church they have full influence over what comes from the pulpit. Sermons that engage real life questions and issues with real life application help make worship more inspiring. Preaching to change lives can make a difference.
2. Involve more people. Worship is not just a spectator event. It is designed to engage all the participants. Members of the congregation can be intentionally involved in the worship event by planning for testimonies, encouraging a variety of special music, enlisting greeters and ushers, and arranging Scripture readers.
3. Visit other Churches. It may not be possible to close down a worship service to visit another church but everyone goes on vacation and that vacation time can be used to explore how other churches worship. Video technology is such that worship services from nationally known and regionally known churches are available for review. While every church is unique and no church should simply copy what another is doing, every church can learn from other churches what works in worship in their settings.
4. Look at the Music. Worship leaders are often surprised by how few hymns and songs are used when the list of music that is used is compiled over a year or so. While a steady diet of all new songs can be difficult, so can a steady diet of 10-12 hymns and gospel songs that are repeated throughout the year. Most churches these days will enjoy a kind of blended worship with some features of the past and at least a few features of the current music scene included in their worship to offer a balanced worship menu to the congregation.