Welcoming Worship:
Worship as Inclusive, Cross+Generational Faith Formation
Workshop at APCE 2018 (Louisville, KY)
Gregory Rawn (Publisher at Spirit & Truth Publishing)

Vibrant Worship Presentation

Let’s take a quick look at two different worship services.

At Pastor Andy’s church, the worship service is traditional, with the traditional order of service, the traditional hymns, and the traditional sermon. Pastor Andy makes sure to give a children’s sermon every week to include the kids who are in worship. The ushers and the worship assistant are institutions in the church. Everyone stands up when they are supposed to and sits down at the right time. Everyone tells Pastor Andy how nice his sermon was as he shakes hands when the service is over. People talk to their friends over a cup of coffee and a cookie before heading on home.

At Pastor Diana’s church, the order of service is basically what is traditional, but the language is simpler. The worship assistant jobs are divided up and given out to whoever wants them, whatever their age. At one service, an older gentleman works with a 3rd grade girl to give the call to worship. Some of the music is traditional, but care is taken to teach it to everyone. A mixed group of kids, youth, and adults pantomime the Bible passage as it’s being read. For her sermon, Pastor Diana has the ushers (one older couple and one family of a very excited kindergartner) pass out small oranges to everyone, and then asks everyone to open them up while she speaks about the sweet scent of our worship to God, and then talk in partners about how one aspect of the Bible passage connects to something in their lives. She has a hard time getting them to stop talking! The service ends with some of the preschoolers standing next to the pastor and yelling out “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord” (or mostly that).

What are the differences here?

- One is easy for a newcomer to fit in, the other is directed at people who have always been there.
- One is a rich, multisensory experience, the other is mostly the spoken word.
- One has many people of different ages participating, the other has a few, scheduled people assisting.
- One facilitates relationship building, the other does not.

Worship as Faith Formation
The title of this workshop is “Welcoming Worship: Worship as Inclusive, Cross+Generational Faith Formation.” So, we started at the end of that title by defining faith formation. I defined faith formation as “any act, relationship, or experience that nurtures a relationship of trust with God and shapes the way we see and interact with God’s world.” Faith formation encompasses learning God’s story, building relationships of trust, and spreading God’s kingdom in the world. We form faith in our homes, in our congregations, and in our work in the greater community.
We have to ask: is worship a faith formation experience? Well, I think the intent of any worship service is to nurture a relationship of trust with God, and shape the way we see God, ourselves, and the world.

- In worship we learn God’s story by reading Scripture, listening to the sermon, and often subtly through the liturgy and music.
- In worship, we are all present and the potential for building relationships is there.
- In worship, we are prepared to “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

Yes, it does appear that worship fits our definition of a faith formation experience.

And, in all but the most unusual congregations, the worship services are the primary congregating of the congregation. It’s the weekly event that draws the most people on the most regular basis. This makes them the largest, and arguably the most important faith formation experiences our congregations offer.

Vibrant worship defined
Going backward in the workshop title is “worship as inclusive and cross+generational.” In using both of these terms, my intention is to communicate that “welcoming worship” is worship where everyone is included, not matter your age, church experience, or anything else. This is also what I call “vibrant worship.” You might recall from our readings in Nehemiah and Joel that all of the people, all ages and genders were invited to come for the reading of the Torah and the solemn assembly. It was multigenerational, if not cross+generational worship. In my usage, “multigenerational” describes a setting where people of different generations are present, but not interacting. On the other hand, cross+generational (also known as intergenerational) describes a setting where not only are multiple generations present, but they are engaged in building relationships, learning from each other.

Now, how can worship be inclusive and cross+generational?

Characteristics of Vibrant Worship
Welcoming, or vibrant, worship will look different in different contexts, so I can’t just give you a “vibrant worship in 12 easy steps.” But, regardless of the context, it does share several overlapping characteristics.

1. Welcoming: The entire context of worship is designed to make everyone feel welcome.
The culture, the physical space, individual actions or inactions, the order and tone of worship elements, the explanations, and everything else that makes up the experience of corporate worship affects how people feel, and specifically whether they feel welcome or not. Do our preschoolers feel welcome in our time of worship? How about our elementary students? Youth? Young adults? Those in middle-age? Seniors? If we aren’t sure, then we need to ask a few people in that age group!

So, let’s take a closer look at some specific aspects.
- Culture- Are people friendly and willing to engage others, especially those who are new, young, or by themselves?
• Physical Space- Not something easy to change outside of a new building or remodeling project. However, is there clear signage on how to find things that newbies need to find? Fellowship hall, sanctuary, classrooms, bathrooms. Ask someone who is not familiar with your space (or any church) to try to find things.

• Order and Tone of Worship Elements- Is the service easy to follow? Are there clear transitions? Are verbal instructions easy-to-understand? Is the language of the service accessible to everyone? Does everyone understand what’s going on, to the best of their ability? Even in Nehemiah, the Torah was read with leaders helping the people understand.

2. Engaging: Worship is designed to engage people with their senses and for a diversity of learning styles.

Engagement is when you get someone’s attention, keep it, and offer a learning experience that fits with their way of learning. This is a basic goal for everything we do. If we’re going through the effort of planning and implementing an experience, we don’t want people to not pay attention or lose them partway through.

Think about your senses.
1. Hearing
2. Seeing
3. Touch
4. Smelling
5. Tasting

Learning styles can be categorized in several different ways. Many learning styles focus on a dominant sensory experience (visual, aural, kinesthetic) and others on process (verbal, logical, social, and solitary).

Go through your service and ask yourself how each of the senses and each of the learning styles are engaged, noting that many worship elements may engage multiple at one time. Not every sense or style will likely be present in each worship service, but over several weeks they should be.

You will find that despite the developmental differences between different ages, children, youth, and adults of each generation all benefit from this diversity.

3. Participatory: Worship is designed so that everyone can fully participate.

People feel welcome, and worship is inclusive, when they are invited and able to fully participate in the service. As I mentioned above, there are different learning styles, so there will be different ways people will want to participate. But, the goal to work toward is for everyone to be invited and able to fully participate in each aspect of the worship service. So, this doesn’t mean that children have the children’s sermon, youth have the worship band, and adults have everything else. It means that children have the opportunity to participate in worship from beginning to end, as do youth, young adults, working adults, seniors, etc.

Notice that I said, “Invited and able.” Some people will want to jump into participation right away, but others prefer to sit and observe before joining in a way that they are comfortable with. No one should be forced to do anything.
4. **Relational: Worship is designed to facilitate building relationships.**
The last characteristic of vibrant worship is that worship is relational. People need relationships and authentic relationships connect us together. When people come to church, sit with their families (if they have them at church), face forward, and then leave, no relationships are formed. However, building relationships with others in the community of worshippers helps us feel welcome, safe enough to participate, and be engaged. Inclusive worship provides opportunities for people to share and get to know each other, intergenerationally. Of course, it is unlikely that connection time in worship is going to be enough to build strong, authentic relationship alone, but it can provide the introduction by which relationships can grow outside of worship.

**Summary**
It’s important to remember that these four characteristics overlap. People feel welcome when they are engaged, invited to participate, and have relationships with others in the congregation. People are easier to engage when they feel welcome and can participate. They are more likely to participate in experiences where they are engaged, feel welcome, and have authentic relationships.

And, you will find that it’s not difficult to figure out how to include all ages as you are working to make worship more welcoming, engaging, participatory, and relational.

Separating these out helps us to ask questions and take an inventory of where we are and where we want to go.

**Practical considerations**
As you probably know, congregation members are often quite invested in keeping things the same, resisting change. Here are some specific, practical points to consider:

1. Don’t do this by yourself! The more people you can include in the process, the better! Get leaders on board, both official leaders, and the unofficial power players in the congregation.
2. Spend a lot of time explaining why change is good, necessary, and important. Start a conversation with those who don’t want to change and find out their reasonings. Work to address these concerns.
3. Examine your current worship service on who is being engaged or not engaged in each worship element. Refer to a list of generations, senses, and learning styles.
4. Pay attention to your context. How are things done here? What are the specific strengths and weaknesses?
5. Make a plan and take baby-steps! Figure out how to adapt the current service to be more welcoming, engaging, participatory, and relational. Think of the long term.
6. Take advantage of a natural change point like Lent, Advent, or the summer for an “experiment” with a specific end date. You can always do an encore performance.
7. Listen, and keep listening. What are people saying, and what’s going on beneath the surface? Acknowledge everyone’s feelings.
8. Build on successes, even small ones. Find what’s working and who is excited about it.

**Natalie’s story**
The Rev. Natalie Gessert Hall experimented with intergenerational worship at her congregation in the Pittsburgh area in 2014. She introduced a Wednesday evening summer worship service based on cross-generational principles. With the assistance of her worship team,

- She invited anyone of any age to serve as acolytes, readers, ushers, or communion assistants.
- At the beginning of each service, worshippers would gather in the front pews and talk about their previous and upcoming weeks. The conversations slowly spread among people of all generations.
- The service then moved into silence as candles were lit, then moved to a chanted compline liturgy.
- She based sermons on questions submitted by all ages in the congregation, starting with the youngest members.
- She invited others to preach, both in church and in their homes. Four people felt the call to preach in the service over the summer.
- During congregational prayer, worshippers prayed aloud for the people they had a conversation with at the beginning of the service.

The results? Worshippers mourned the end of the summer service.

One regular worshiper that summer, Debbie, was diagnosed with cancer and by the end of the summer, she could hardly get away from regular phone calls, meals, and prayers. Debbie had worshiped at this church for decades and was suddenly connected anew to both her peers in longevity and those who had only attended for a year or so.

Analysis

Let’s look at this using some of the characteristics of vibrant worship.

- She designed the service so that people felt welcome by starting with informal conversations.
- She encouraged participation for all ages as worship assistants, in her preaching topics, and even in the task of preaching itself.
- She encouraged relationship-building with conversation time and participatory prayer.

The result was an experience that fulfilled a need for authentic relationships of caring, even crossing generational lines.

Wrapping up

So, vibrant worship is the context and practice of worship where:

1. Everyone feels welcome.
2. All people are engaged.
3. Everyone can fully participate.
4. People can build authentic relationships.

To start implementing vibrant worship at your congregation:

1. Gather a team and get buy-in from leadership.
2. Perform an inventory of your current worship service.
3. Decide on which adaptations to start first, and take baby steps!
Other Resources

http://www.commongroundjournal.org/
“Intergenerational Worship,” Edward Seely in Common Ground Journal vol. 6 no. 1

http://www.reimaginefaithformation.com/intergenerational.html
“Case Study - Intergenerational Worship”
“Nine Tips for Designing Intergenerational Worship,” Joan Huvser-Honig
“Can a Congregation Imagine ‘Something New,’” Karen Geiseke

“Chapter 5: A Congregational Toolkit for Becoming Intentionally Intergenerational” Generations Together: Caring, Praying, Learning, Celebrating & Serving Faithfully, Kathie Amidei, Jim Merhaut, and John Roberto (