

Seek to be Changed

Reflecting on Worship, Evangelism and Change

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These papers express the experiences and reflections of one person, and do not reflect the statements or positions of our national church.

Our hope is that that they will stimulate discussion and reflection among your congregation about worship, evangelism and change.

May your conversations be rich, your relationships deep, and your ministry fruitful.



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1. Worship as Witness

“Communication occurs when a message takes up residence within a listener’s life and heart.”

Robert Webber

Worship is at the heart of our church, connected to every ministry.

The PCC *Mission Statement* tells us that an important part of our mission is “...to tell the biblical story in ever new and creative ways... to hear, respect, and cherish all God’s children... in a world of many nations, peoples, denominations and faiths, to learn from one another and work together for the healing of the nations.”

Even our PCC *Vision Statement* says, “We will seek to be changed, to be reformed, to take whatever risks are necessary as we learn to obey God’s will... we will integrate evangelism, social action, and justice ministry... as we continually witness to the Lordship of Christ over all life.”

However, many of us find that, its importance as a biblical imperative, evangelism is understated. We tend to let our deeds speak for our faith. That is legitimate witness, but our continuing membership decline indicates it may not be enough. Sociologist Reginald Bibby describes a sharp drop over the past quarter century in mainline church attendance.

This downward trend is not just among youth, but also young families and middle-aged adults. Of particular concern are people from families that were associated with our Church in the past, and congregants whose family members don’t attend.

The Church has grappled with this issue for many years. Our radically secular, consumer and entertainment oriented culture bears some of the blame. Should we hope that this trend reverses itself? Are we limited to hope and trust in God’s faithfulness? Or, do James’ words ring true for us still? Faith, without action, is dead (James 2:17). Our society is filled with examples of spiritual hunger. How can we serve this need?

Much of the Church’s effort to renew itself has been focused on innovative programming and mission projects. Social action and relevance are often seen as the keys to connecting with our culture. A lot of good work has been done, but it has not resulted in a significant reversal in declining membership numbers.

Past Moderator Hans Kouwenberg has commented on the amount of documentation at General Assembly relating to mission work, sometimes at the expense of discussion about worship and church growth issues. There are many secular organizations that people can join to help those who need assistance.

For all the important mission work the PCC does, church needs to be more than a social service organization. It is through worship that people come to understand the wholeness in life that is possible only through a community of believers in relationship with God. Why do so many people in our culture think that what we do in worship has no relevance to their lives?

In Acts, Chapter 2, disciples are called to speak so that everyone will understand the gospel. I suggest we look at how we *communicate* the gospel in worship. Meaningful worship will engage people with the church in a sustainable way. In addition to our programs, we need to hold public worship that allows a wide spectrum of participants to experience God's presence and be transformed.

Some of our energy and resources should be directed towards learning how to *effectively* proclaim the gospel to our complex and diverse culture. Our challenge is to find ways to reform and renew our worship practices in a way that maintains biblical and trinitarian balance and integrity, and is consistent with the Reformed tradition. It is not about copying successful contemporary churches, although we undoubtedly can learn some things from them; it is about defining and implementing authentic Presbyterian worship for the 21st century. I believe that we have been too slow in changing how we communicate the gospel in worship as our culture changes.

The reformed order of worship is a rich and adaptable resource. Not only does it have biblical roots, but it is also flexible. These papers are not about replacing what we are doing, but about reforming it. We'll ask questions like,

“How can we communicate the biblical story in new and creative ways?”

“How can we reach out to those who haven't heard the message?”

“How can we effectively witness the gospel and renew the work of the Church?”

Let's discover this together.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you rephrase the sections of The PCC's mission and vision statements.
2. What are some of the ways your congregation already shows love and engages in the mission begun by Christ?
3. What do these practices tell you about how your congregation understands Christ's mission?
4. What ages and ethnicities are in your local area (town, city, etc.) but are missing from your congregation?
5. How can congregational worship introduce these missing people to Jesus Christ?

2. Worship in the Vernacular

“the words and actions of worship must be understood by the people”

PCC Book of Common Worship

One of the greatest accomplishments of the Reformation was renewing the Church by presenting the Gospel in a language that people could understand.

Do we speak in the language of today’s complex and diverse society? Is understanding what is being said the same thing as understanding what it means?

African American theologian Clarence Rivers spoke of aesthetic incoherence. He described how some people can understand the words of many traditional hymns, but the style and context are so foreign to their everyday existence that they lose all meaning. In our 21st century culture, the vernacular is not just words.

Perhaps many of the coming generation find little meaning what we do in and so sought meaning elsewhere.

I believe that we should allow the message of Christ in worship to adapt to changes in our culture. This doesn't mean abandoning everything old and embracing everything new, but choosing wisely in order to speak the language of the people we are serving. Because Canadian society is a very diverse and complex mixture of sensibilities, this is a formidable challenge.

In 1996, the Lutheran World Federation produced a document that they believe outlines what Christian worship at the beginning of the new millennium should ideally encompass in relation to culture. Many theologians from a broad spectrum of faith traditions have enthusiastically endorsed the ideas put forward in the *Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture - Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities*.

The *Nairobi Statement* advocates healthy Christian worship that is ‘simultaneously and self-consciously trans-cultural, contextual, counter-cultural and cross-cultural’. We can worship using the essential universal elements of our faith in a way that puts us in relationship with Christians from many times and many places. This could celebrate the best and challenge the worst of the cultures in which we Christians now live. Our hope is that congregations will speak in a language that creates a deep understanding for *all* participants; worship will declare the good news of Jesus Christ in the vernacular.

What would it be like if we asked recent immigrants how they could best connect with our worship? What about talking with other generations about their experience with God, and how they can best participate in worship?

The reality is, the vernacular has dramatically shifted. Since the late 1960's, many people share a postmodern outlook, in varying degrees. Because postmodernity looks at the world through a different lens, the old ways of communicating are often ineffective.

Postmodern Christians understand through image, but do we worship in services dominated by words? They are eclectic, with less affinity for logical, linear discourse. Do

we emphasize rational argument instead of experiential encounter? They understand ideas presented through stories and are drawn to the mystical, the ambiguous, the ‘other.’ Do we insist on minimizing the Great Mystery in favour of our interpretation? They resist absolutes, especially those told by authorities. They do not challenge what is being said as much as how it is being communicated. Do we state what others should believe, or encourage them to share their perspective as we share the Presbyterian one?

Every minute of a worship service need not be meaningful for everyone. But, worship should be designed and implemented so that as many people as possible will find a time of meaning and connection with God. This makes room for the Holy Spirit to transform the hearts of people in all groups.

Robert Webber describes postmodern generations as valuing multigenerational contact. Creating a multi-generational, multi-ethnic worship service may mean some changes to how we’ve done things, but it can be done. It is possible to take into account the sensibilities of every age and ethnic group present, including, what Andrew Donaldson refers to as “those not yet in the pews.”

In our time, the Reformed are reforming. Like our forebears, we can craft worship in a language that others can understand, that reflects a beautiful diversity in understanding, ethnic groups, generations and individuals.

I believe that it is possible to ‘speak the vernacular’ in a balanced, biblical, Presbyterian manner.

Discussion Questions

1. Take a look at your favorite hymns. Pay attention to the words, images and poetry. How would you characterize these? Who might have difficulty relating to them?
2. Take a look at your order of service. Pretend that you know nothing about worship. Which elements might be confusing? How can they be made user-friendly for people who are less familiar with our worship forms?
3. Look around your sanctuary and church building. Pretend to be a postmodern person visiting for the first time. What impression do you have as you walk around?

3. Worship and Postmodernity

“This is not a generation gap, it’s a total paradigm shift - the immense change of one civilization to another.”
Robert Webber

We have already begun talking about postmodernity. Let’s take a closer a look.

In years following the second world war, a generation emerged that saw the world in a strikingly new way. The beginning of membership decline in mainline churches coincided with this generation reaching its teenage years.

At first, decline was rationalized as a generation gap that would eventually correct itself. When this didn’t happen, many commentators began to regard the shift not as a generation gap, but as a massive shift in worldview, commonly referred to as postmodernity.

Philosopher Paul Lakeland describes modernity as “the triumph of reason and the mastery of the human mind over the external world”. Robert Webber lists four excesses of modernist thinking:

1. Reason is superior to faith
2. Science will lead to morality
3. Progress is inevitable
4. Knowledge is inherently good.

Postmodernity, what comes after modernity, rejects these tenets and is often accompanied by a mistrust of authority and the institutions that held power in modernist society. The Church is one of these institutions. Institutional Christianity has lost credibility with many in the visual, non-linear, communalist, contrarian, rootless, and experience oriented postmodern generation.

Postmodern people struggle with absolutes but, at the same time, search for a coherent and cohesive meaning to life. They don’t want to be told by an authority what truth is; they need to be led and shown and to experience the truth for themselves. In order to reach people with a postmodern sensibility, we need to communicate many of the concepts of Christianity as our *beliefs* about what is, rather than a final statement.

It is a huge challenge for the Presbyterian Church, which was born and nurtured in the Age of Reason, to think outside this. We must remember that authentic Christian tradition encompasses (globally and historically) far more than this narrow European Age of Enlightenment. We need to begin thinking of church as a movement of faith rather than as an institution.

The issue is not how to make Presbyterian worship postmodern, but to acknowledge the importance of including the postmodern sensibility in our worship expression. Rationalist Protestant worship, particularly Reformed worship, tends to value cerebral, verbal, restrained, and linear communication. There is nothing wrong with emphasizing these traits, but if we ignore communication that is emotional, intuitive, visual, exuberant and non-linear, we will be worshipping in a way that excludes a very large segment of society.

It is possible for Presbyterians to maintain their distinctive interpretation of the faith while including those who have been left out of worship expression in the past. If our goal is to encourage all generations to worship together, we can keep the traditions that have biblical, not just cultural integrity, and ensure that we include other sensibilities. The challenge is one of communication, not content.

Discussion Questions:

1. Describe modernist and postmodernist perspectives.
2. How much of each is present in your worship service?
3. Write a prayer of thanksgiving, focusing on your experiences with God.
4. Look around your sanctuary. How are the senses engaged? How would these connect with postmodern people.
5. Consider your service order, including how the sacraments are administered. How does it communicate with postmodern people. If doesn't communicate, how could it be changed so that it does?

4. Authentic Worship

“Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”
Jaroslav Pelikan

What is authentic Presbyterian worship? Is it a balanced, biblical, Trinity-focused approach? Is it about doing things with decency and in good order? We can look to our Reformed heritage to work out how we can worship with authenticity.

Reformed worship is based in the belief that Christ is presented through Word and Sacrament, in a conversation between God and God’s people. From this perspective, inauthentic worship is that which is not biblically centred and does not have a balanced Trinitarian focus.

Being biblical means drawing on the scripture’s rich and complex mix of history and metaphor in describing humanity’s relationship with God. In each service, we are challenged to continue our conversation with God. While Christ and his gospel, the “God-side” of the conversations, has not changed, the human side has. We are continually challenged to communicating in meaningful ways.

Worship that uncritically embraces or rejects any specific culture is also inauthentic. The gospel is larger than any human, cultural expression. Richard Niebuhr speaks of Christianity being *in* the culture, not *of* the culture. We need to challenge those parts of culture that disagree with the gospel, and celebrate those parts that affirm the gospel. The gospel is voiced in each culture and living generation. Will we uncover it through discarding cultural elements that do not bring the life and wholeness of the gospel? Only in this way will we embrace the alternative spiritual reality called the Kingdom of God.

In the past, the PCC was part of the Establishment culture. Today, we are in something of a post-Christian wilderness, trying to find out where we fit in with contemporary society. If we simply reject or embrace contemporary culture, our situation will not improve. Postmodernity’s suspicion of institutions has led many postmodern Christians to believe that affiliation with a church is optional for believers. In order to change this misconception, we need to distance ourselves from our institutional mindset, and offer public worship that is both authentic and transformational to a broad range of sensibilities.

I don’t believe this is done through slavishly copying what ‘successful churches’ are doing, nor through embracing everything contemporary. But, neither should we reject new ways of communicating with our culture simply because these may be different from what was done in the past.

Our challenge is to define what is an authentically Reformed proclamation of the gospel, using the language of our culture in a balanced way that is fully biblical and Trinitarian. Doing so allows us to be authentic and so meaningful, effective and transformational.

One of the strengths of Presbyterianism is its sense of balance. We can use our balance and good sense in order to renew worship practices that remain consistent with the Reformed tradition and still effectively reflect our diverse and complex society. When worship communicates the gospel well, the Holy Spirit is invited to transform the hearts of all.

Ineffective communication in worship blocks the declaration of the gospel and the experience of God's presence. Some of today's impediments may have once been meaningful for past generations. Can we distinguish between what is Biblical and what is a just a generational preference?

An authentic Reformed worship service is one where the Scriptures are valued and a meaningful conversation is taking place between God and humanity. Our Presbyterian balance can be embraced to ensure that all groups, regardless of their age or origin, can find worship a meaningful experience.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you understand authenticity?
2. What do you think is needed for a worship service to be Presbyterian?
3. How does understanding Presbyterians as Reformed, with the Reformed value of scripture and conversation, change your view of worship?
4. What elements of worship are meaningful to you? To your family members? To people of other generations? To people from other countries of origin?
5. How can worship be adjusted so it is a meaningful conversation between God and a variety of people from many places and of many ages?

5. Transformative Worship

“It is one thing to talk about God. It is quite another to experience God.”

Leonard Sweet

In each worship service, our prayer is that we will be transformed by God through the Holy Spirit. This ideal is not necessarily realized every time we worship, and it is not continuous throughout worship. Yet, many of us are aware of times when God feels present and we are changed. In these times, our eyes are opened to a reality larger than ourselves, a new reality called the Kingdom of God.

It's human nature to be self-focused. Contemporary culture defines itself through the constant consumption of products and entertainment and reinforces our focus on self everywhere we turn. We are bombarded with messages telling us: ‘It’s all about you’; ‘you deserve it’; ‘your needs - your desires.’ It’s no surprise, then, that worship can become, for some people, about ‘my needs’, ‘my preferences’, and ‘my comfort’. The secular world reinforces our self-centeredness.

Transformative worship, where we are changed by a sense of God’s presence, will move people out of self-absorption. That is when people say: “Here I am! What can I do for Christ in my life, in my church, in my world.”

This moment rarely involves only the brain. While the mind plays an important role in our faith, faith affects us in a complex multi-level way. We discover God intuitively, emotionally and even physically. Our relationship with God is a mystery that is experienced differently for everyone. Every eras and cultures tend to experience God different. That is a good thing that brings a fuller appreciation for God as we learn from hearing each other’s experiences. This renewed emphasis on the mystery of God appeals to the postmodern sensibility, and can deepen each of our experiences with God transforming us through the encounter.

Worship leaders do not transform the worshippers, but they are important players in the process. Leaders are facilitate the transformative experience, using various art forms to nurture an environment where a conversation with God can take place. Presbyterians place emphasis on proclaiming the word, but in the most effective services, music and prayers help to nurture a sense of God’s presence. When we look out at the congregation on Sunday morning, we do not see a homogenous group. People come in different ages, tastes and temperaments, and are at different places in their journey of faith. This needs to be appreciated and the Holy Spirit entrusted to do the transforming. John Witvliet at the Calvin Institute says that leaders have to learn how to do their job and then get out of the way of the Holy Spirit!

Worship communication is most effective when it is what theologian Clarence Rivers calls 'performative'. Performance is not entertainment, and is not necessarily a negative connotation for worship. Entertainment is undesirable, focusing as it does on the congregation. Our congregations perform worship for an audience of One every Sunday. It is also different from church-speak, a stylized language or elongated tone of voice. Both entertainment and church-speak have become impediments to some people's transformative experience with God. Performative worship has theological and aesthetic integrity that moves us out of the mundane. It transcends the ordinary through using the best of language and art forms to hear from and converse with God.

God speaks to us and we respond. We speak with each other. listening and sharing, expressing our ups and downs. As this happens, our common struggle towards salvation moves from words to reality. We discover again that the wholeness and balance we yearn for in our lives can only be achieved through our relationship with God and through our relationships with one another. Through identifying with the brokenness we share, we can receive hope again and the healing that comes through a relationship with God through Christ. This is transformative.

Transformation is not a one-time event. The Apostle Paul said we were being changed into Christ's likeness in an ever-increasing way, from "glory to glory," oriented and re-oriented week after week. In worship our entire focus is on God and God's transforming deeds in history and in our day to day lives. We are equipped to find the balance in our lives that the secular world does not provide.

With this as our goal, it becomes essential that worship be an experience of conversation between God and many kinds of people, of many ages and from many places. Only in this way will our services be places where the hearts of many are opened up to God's presence.

The rest is in God's hands.

Discussion Questions

1. How are you different now from when you were younger in faith?
2. What role did worship play in that transformation?
3. What role has a faith community played in your faith journey?
4. What parts of the worship service reflect the differences between the people present?
5. How is the worship of your congregation relational, with God and with others?

6. Diversity in Worship

“One Christ has many faces... culture shapes the voice that answers the voice of Christ.”
Konrad Raiser

We are in an exciting period of Canadian history. Once, local congregations were full of people with similar ethnic background, economic status, or church denomination. But now, arising from dramatic cultural shifts and immigration from all over the world, diversity and difference are increasingly celebrated in our congregations.

Denominations mean far less than they once did. Our doctrinal distinctions are important, but in this post-Christian context all denominations, out of necessity, are drawing closer. Though what we believe is the content of our message, how we proclaim it is being cross-pollinated across traditions. We look to how others are worshipping and see windows on new ways of encountering God and incorporate these some into our worship services, giving them a flavor that is distinctly ours. Diversity is a wonderful expression of our Christian faith – many members, but one Body (1 Cor. 12). This is good! Christians don't want all churches to worship in an identical fashion, or to copy exactly what they did in the past.

For example, many Presbyterians find worship music from Africa as meaningful as traditional hymns and contemporary praise songs from the West. People understand that limiting expression is narrowing and ineffective when there is so much legitimate, authentic Christian expression out in the world. What is important is one core message spoken many ways.

Diversity of expression should reflect the diversity of God's creation. It does not mean uncritically implementing new ideas in worship expression without maintaining theological and aesthetic integrity. It is about discovering and incorporating things that are *good* in other Christian traditions and then creating an authentic balance of content, structure and style, nurturing an environment where many different people can converse with God.

The Presbyterian Church is challenged to find a way of embracing diverse worship expression that is consistent with our core beliefs and complements our emphasis. It is not easy, but we can learn from others in our efforts to create a worship experience that is meaningful for a variety of people.

In addition to ethnic, historical and generational diversity, we can become aware of different personalities, learning styles and communication modes. Using the arts and technology can help those who find his communication more meaningful than the written and spoken word alone. This changes how we communicate, not what we communicate.

Our identity has value. We are an important part of Christ's body, but not the *only* part. Bob Rognlien states in *Experiential Worship*:

“we must learn from each other and regain the full historical content of our biblical faith so that the Spirit might move dynamically through the various expressions of Christianity... The key is that each community of faith utilizes its unique combination of resources, context, and history to invite people into a more complete experience of God that is empowered by the various streams of Christian tradition.”

Some have said that the best way to embrace diversity is to create separate expressions such as traditional and contemporary worship services for different ways of understanding. Targeting tastes or generations has been done in a number of churches with varying degrees of success, but few writers think it is the best solution. It can divide generations, families, and congregations. If our goal is unity in Christ, then perhaps its time to embrace a postmodern, multigenerational sensibility. This accepts that not everything in worship will be meaningful to me, but will include ways to connect with each generation and ethnicity.

Sensitivity will be required, both to those without a church background and to those who have spent years in the pew, to those of European extraction and those from other places in the world, and to people of all ages. I believe we can approach this diversity if we teach all worshippers that tolerance of our differences is an act of love, and embracing those who are not like us is an act of obedience to the greatest commandment.

In considering how diversity will be accommodated in worship, may the great commandment guide us: “Love God with all you are, and your neighbor as yourself.”

Discussion Questions

1. How are people of other ethnicities and ages involved in your worship? Do the worship leaders reflect the variety in your congregation? Does it reflect the variety in your community?
2. How are non-verbal communication forms used in your worship?
3. Make a short list of commonly sung worship songs. Use the Book of Praise to investigate their place and date of origin (the tunes and lyric source is on the bottom left).
4. How is technology, including the musical instruments, used in your worship?
5. How would you describe the rules that are followed when a worship service is crafted at your church? Be frank!

7. Creativity in Worship

“Unless challenged in every generation by spiritual wrestlers, religious traditions grow rigid and defensive, devoted to self-preservation.” William Becker

Reformed worship is structured like a conversation, with God speaking through the scriptures and the people responding. With this emphasis, it is understandable that worship preparation in most Presbyterian churches is often word-driven. However, our conversational worship structure also lends itself to incorporating many creative aspects both as God speaks, and as we respond.

Creativity is not about elaborate production values, imitating what happens in the entertainment industry. Rather, we can take what is good in this cultural expression and use it to nurture the conversation between God and a 21st century sensibility. For example, we can experiment with making our worship fresh, evocative and even provocative as we hear God speak. We can adopt using contemporary and world music and instrumentation to facilitate our response. We can learn new ways of interpreting God’s voice in the drama of the biblical stories. We can learn from the broader culture without emulating it.

Thus, part of creativity is remaining open to what is good and meaningful, and searching for ways to incorporate that good into our distinctively Reformed interpretation. It allows us to remain faithful to the scriptures and echo our ancient beliefs. But beware: being creative can require investing time, energy, and resources into how something is communicated so that the message is not just heard, but is engaged. We want God’s word to take up residence in the listener’s heart.

Adopting a variety of creative media allows us to communicate the profound message of the gospel in ways that are clear and effective. We can enact the vision of God, sing the Christian perspective and invite others to experience Christ’s message, all without sounding authoritarian, judgmental or discriminatory. Telling stories invites others to consider where they might be in that story, and so whether the One speaking through the story is speaking to them. So often, words of explanation can follow the encounter that has taken place in music, story, drama, or visual arts. The arts become a medium for encountering God.

Jeremy Begbie writes: “In God given artistic expression, reflections of divine beauty become an opening for truth to penetrate the deepest part of a human being and bring transformation.”

The arts are not unique to the contemporary age, and so our search of relevant media should not be limited to what was produced in the past ten years. Robert Webber describes using the Christian Liturgical Calendar as a rich source for creative communication. It has a profound rhythm, and an alternative orientation. It is easier to incorporate the diversity of Christian worship expression when we align ourselves with these extended seasons of spirituality.

Creativity requires being deliberate about *how* things are presented as well as *what* is presented. For example, The Alban Institute advocates balancing the familiar and unfamiliar in worship to maintain a dynamic outlook. Planners can present elements that challenge as well as comfort intellectually and experientially.

This is made possible in part, through intentionally including elements that speak to a variety of people. A team might be helpful here, even in smaller congregations. As gifted lay and ordained worship planners work together, the service begins to take on a broader tone.

Perhaps there's even room to experiment with spontaneity. Taking some calculated risks, and guiding the congregation through the team's rationale for it, nurtures a congregation's tolerance of risk taking. This may develop a culture of tolerance and openness to experimentation and trying new ideas. A shift like this will not happen in a day, but a culture of openness to taking risks and trying new things can be nurtured week after week.

After all, renewal is more than just tinkering with the order of service. There are no easy answers, painless solutions or quick fixes. It is a work of the Holy Spirit as we remain open to it, and create spaces of openness in how we do things.

As our Presbyterian Church in Canada's *Vision Statement* asks: Will we "seek to be changed, to be reformed, to take whatever risks are necessary as we learn to obey God's will"?

Discussion Questions

1. How are the creative arts used in worship? How could their use be improved?
2. Who is involved in these expressions? Who is missing?
3. What elements from popular culture could be risked in worship? What elements from the Christian tradition?
4. How would team planning affect the worship? How is the minister supported when risking something new?
5. Develop a plan for risking something new in worship. Include
 - How it will be communicated to the congregation
 - The rationale for introducing it
 - How it fits with the conversation between God and people
 - How it will be evaluated