

Inspiring Worship

People who attend healthy churches feel that their worship service is so wonderful that they would hate to miss it! Not surprisingly, *inspiring worship* is one of eight essential qualities of healthy churches described by Christian Schwarz in Natural Church Development. Kennon Callahan explains in Dynamic Worship that helpful, inspiring worship services strengthen our lives by giving us the power to move forward and grow, the grace of sharing in community, clarity about life's meaning and the hope to live richly and fully in this life.

Schwarz' study of more than 5,000 congregations proves that "whether our services target Christians or non-Christians, whether they celebrate in [formal or] secular language, or whether we worship using a liturgical or more free-flowing approach . . . are simply not the deciding factors." The dynamics of our particular worship services need to relate to our *mission field*, those around us we are trying to reach. We cannot just copy a model from another successful church, such as adopting a "seeker service" from Willow Creek. But we can improve our worship services with careful thought and experimentation.

Worship services are especially wonderful experiences because they present powerful opportunities to open ourselves up to the presence of God's Spirit. People are touched by the transition and flow of coming to pray, listening to the Word, reflecting on our lives, letting go of our failings and accepting God's peace, celebrating blessings and asking for help, turning to God in trust and with appreciation, inviting the living presence of Jesus into our lives and being sent into the world to love and to serve. A challenge is that our worship must happen on an individual level at the same time it happens at a community level and this requires some formation and understanding. To fully experience the power and movement of our worship, people need to understand what is happening, remain aware, and ask for God's presence with them. Worship leaders need to prompt, model and encourage us to see, feel, hear, know and respond to God in worship. Otherwise, our liturgy may become formalistic, boring and lifeless.

Vibrant worship depends on factors in addition to liturgy. Callahan identifies warmth, music, preaching and mission-focus as important factors and gives tools for evaluating and improving these factors. A worship service is warm and begins to feel like home when there is a hospitable welcome by greeters, the pastor and the community; shepherds and worship materials help make the service accessible; and children are cared for so parents feel at ease.

Music contributes *forty percent* of the worship service's power and impact. Important questions are whether we involve people in the music and whether our words and melodies share and celebrate God's living presence (positively and enthusiastically), give hope and meaning to our lives, and send us out into the world to serve and proclaim. Traditional, gospel or contemporary music (or a blend) can each do this, so style is often less important than participation and content.

Like inspired liturgy or music, preaching can greatly enhance worship. Important questions are: Does the sermon share the gospel and speak to what is happening in people's lives? Is it from the heart and soul as well as the mind? Is it life transforming by reaching out to people who are seeking or having trouble believing and by affirming people in their spiritual journeys? Does it go where Jesus is, where people are in need?

This last question is one of mission-focus. A mission-focus is a focus on the present and the future. It is strengthening our journeys with God so that we go where we can help others to find and journey with God in their lives too. Inspiring worship is not preserving a tradition or completing a duty; it is honoring God and transforming our lives to offer them in response to God's love.

A dynamic worship service touches people at many levels and balances simple (stirring, inspiring, emotional) and complex (profound, thoughtful, intellectual) experiences. Technical aspects are important because experiences of dead space, sound system glitches, long announcements, lack of continuity, unprepared leaders or overly lengthy services can hinder a free-flowing atmosphere.

Ultimately, however, inspiring worship is not what *we* do but what the Holy Spirit does. We need to make room for God's Spirit, as I Thessalonians 5:16-19 says: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit." In our worship we strive to remain alive to God's presence and to avoid extinguishing the Spirit's fire.