

Church History as an Indispensable Source of Wisdom for Contemporary Ministry

How to Implement Changes in Worship, Without Losing Your Congregation in the Process: Lessons from Reformation Geneva

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Top ten suggestions/ lessons learned from dramatic changes in worship in Reformation Geneva, a city of around 10,000 people that moved from being Catholic to being Reformed in the course of a decade:

1. Focus on the fundamentals and integrate these into worship services: to assess whether Genevans were taking in the basics of Christian belief, the Genevan church leaders insisted that everyone – male and female, young and old, should be able to recite from memory and off by heart the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles’ Creed. Understanding the texts and their meaning was a second step, but the first priority was to have people memorize these texts: all three were also regularly recited during weekly church services.

2. Set the fundamentals to music – if you want people to learn new things, set them to music to aid memorization and recall, and use it in worship. The Genevan Psalter included not only all 150 psalms by 1561, but also settings of the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Ten Commandments, all set to music, and all regularly used during worship services.

3. Use your young people! Genevan school-boys had an hour of psalm-singing a day as art of their curriculum, and quickly gained familiarity and confidence – so much so that they were asked at times to lead the congregational singing, to help everyone get to grips with this new practice.

4. Explain what you are doing and why you are doing it – reading over the liturgies of Geneva for a regular Sunday service and for the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper can be a dry business – the pastor seems to spend as much time working through an explanatory preamble as he spent actually saying the words of the liturgy – but week by week, and month by month, people heard the pastor explain why infants were to be baptized, and why the Lord’s Supper was to be celebrated, allowing these teachings to take root.

5. Encourage worship practices in the home – the Genevan catechism taught the fundamentals of the Reformed faith in a question and answer format, but also included a section of prayers for use at home: when getting up, before and after meals, before going to school or work, before going to bed – everyone in Geneva had the same

catechism, so everyone had the same prayers. Help congregation members feel connected to each other through their home-based worship during the week.

6. Be flexible when necessary. Calvin wanted to have the Lord's Supper celebrated on a weekly basis – the Genevan magistrates, wanting to make a greater distinction between the Reformed Lord's Supper and the Catholic Mass, said no: four times a year was their preferred option – in this instance, Calvin was willing to shelve his wishes and not insist on having his way.

7. Retain older traditions if these are helpful and do not go against any core teachings: the key one the Genevans retained was the practice of having godparents. The practice goes back to the early church, where sponsors would provide spiritual support and mentoring for baptismal candidates. By the middle ages, the practice was enshrined in the church, ensuring both spiritual guidance and practical support, especially crucial in an era in which people died young, and children may well grow up without one or other birth parent. Calvin himself served as godfather to numerous children baptized in Geneva during his time in the city.

8. Don't move too fast or make too many changes at once – Calvin's first stay in Geneva only lasted just over two years, from 1536 to 1538, at which point he and his ministerial colleague Guillaume Farel were exiled from the city. Part of the reason for their sudden dismissal was political, but part of the problem was due to the two pastors' rigid insistence that every Genevan had to swear individual agreement to a new confession of faith, and to their determination that only pastors could regulate admission to the Lord's Supper. On his return to Geneva in 1541, Calvin quietly shelved the idea of the individual confessional oath swearing, and asked for and helped create a mixed body of pastors and elders – who were all elected magistrates (known as the consistory) to oversee church discipline and admission to the Lord's Supper.

9. Work as collaboratively as possible. Contrary to some assumptions, Calvin did not rule Geneva, nor did he set up a theocracy in the city. The Company of Pastors (all the pastors of Geneva and the surrounding countryside), and the Consistory (all the city pastors, and twelve elders) worked together to set up and oversee Reformed worship in the Genevan churches.

10. Be patient: it took nearly a generation for the majority of Genevans to accept and internalize the dramatic changes in worship that had taken place during their lifetime. Many older Genevans were very attached to the traditional rituals and practices of their Catholic faith, and saw little need to give these up. Are you trying to introduce new music to a reluctant congregation? Are you trying to bring in liturgical dance, or reconfigure your worship space? Be patient! Understand that those who voice opposition are implicitly telling you something about what they value, what anchors their worship practice. Try to find common ground, and remember to focus above all on your common commitments to faithful servant-hood and following Christ. Thank you.

