
A Difficult Assignment: Suggestions for Leading in the Sanctuary

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I. Introduction

Let me begin with an obvious observation: worship leading is a difficult assignment. There is nothing self-evident nor easy about putting language, score, music, and liturgical form in practice – all in the effort to direct our communal desire to love the Light from true Light. Not only is our charge made the more difficult because we are doing a work that has been practiced for nearly two millennia, and yet the best wisdom and practices of history barely get a wink in favor of the fads and fashions of last weeks opinion survey. Not only is our assignment made all the more challenging because we practice this work in a context where the default assumption of aesthetic discernment has been reduced to personal preferences, shaped more by brand loyalties at the mall, than the holy commonwealth of the saints. All of this leaves the Church's aesthetic life sacrificed on the altar of consumer autonomy. In such a context, our work can feel like we are being asked to make more bricks from less straw. We are called to create something serious and beautiful in the honor of our King, but to often for a people who lack the necessary discernment, aesthetic insight, or worse, with those who treat the church like a voluntary association, where they feel free to drop in and out, rather than understanding themselves as a people whose identity is sealed in the deep waters of baptism and sustained by the sacrificial feast at a Table, where covenant fidelity mark us as a people of communion whose desire is prepared to sojourn along the long roads of eternity. All of this contributes to our difficult task.

But there is another, more fundamental, reason, our work is difficult.

Ours is the work that never ends. Week in and week out, month into years, years into decades, decades into millennia. We particulate in a reality that is larger than what we can see – yet ours is a work that is precisely designed to help offer an alternative vision – to feel

– to believe – to enter into the mysteries of grace too deep for words. This mystery we can't get to on our own. It requires another's work – God's! This is why our work is so difficult. Our work is difficult because it depends on grace. Grace is not ours to engineer. Grace is always, and ever, the gift of God. The gift can only be received and unwrapped. Worship is the context where we unwrap this gift. Worship, we might say, comes to us by grace, and as one writer reminds us, "grace comes by art, and art does not come easy."¹

Art does not come easy, because it is not a formula. Worship leading demands a desire disciplined to respond first and always to what God has set in motion in the person of Jesus Christ. In Christ, we are called into the commonwealth of saints to use our gifts to usher others into the presence of a God whose Spirit is breaking in upon us. This is nothing easy about what we do. It requires that we, every week, publicly ready our souls to testify to the divine glory in word, music, and every sign. All this to say, you are not imagining it, our job is difficult!

I am using *our* – a possessive adjective - liberally (but for reasons I will explain in a moment), in that I am not a musician. In full disclosure, I am a pastor. This work calls me to be a preacher, a theologian, a poet, and cultural observer and critic. I have no musical training, nor competency to speak of. So I come to you humbly, as a one of no consequence to your respective and profound gifts of offering. I want to thank you for inviting me to speak tonight. I am humbled by this invitation, and it is my hope that our time together may inspire good conversation, wise thoughts, and at the end of the day, the desire to participate more faithfully in the grace that comes to us by an art that does not come easy.

Why am I here before you – an association of professional musicians – if I am not part of your guild? I imagine that part of why I was invited was that I am the kind of person many of you want to understand. I am a species that you often work with, but maybe find alien, bewildering, or frustrating – or feel that people like me are often frustrated, bewildered, or perceive you as the alien. As one who works closely with emerging adults, as well as framing a worship experience for a college community, I am charged to invite all into a living

¹ See Norman McIlain, *A River Runs Through it* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) 1. The full quote: "My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him, all good things - trout as well as eternal salvation - come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy."

history through word, scripture, music, and liturgy; yet, while at the same time, I am willing to sing a new song. I am here because I am someone who bridges divides – maybe chasms. I am here to see if we can't begin to see how to build bridges that span these chasms together.

What I want to do this evening is i) suggest a brief diagnosis of why this work is hard within our cultural moment, ii) suggest why I think Christian worship is an antidote, and iii) to offer some concrete suggestions as to how we clergy and musicians can better work together to inspire a worship life that helps others to unwrap the gift of grace.

III. Cultural Atmosphere

To begin, it is important for our work to understand a basic assumption: nothing grows in a vacuum. Everything that has life is shaped by the environment it exists within. In other words, life is formed by its atmospheric conditions. If this is true, we have to ask a fundamental question: what is the atmosphere in which the worship of the church takes place? What are the environmental indicators that encourage or diminish our worship life?

In answering this question, however, I have a working assumption. This assumption has been informed by my study of late-modern culture, and from personal experience. The assumption is that our cultural moment is toxic. Worship is suffering due to pollution that is being pumped into the atmosphere like carcinogens from smoke stacks. The consequence is that the church, and her worship, is withering like a forest under the constant drizzle of acid rain. This acid rain is the consequence of a culture that cares more about expediency and pragmatic consumption than an economy of life that conspires health and wholeness.

With those with an eye to see, or more accurately, an ear to hear, we know and feel this reality to be the case on the ground. But before we ask what is the antidote, I would like to name one significant contributing carcinogenic that factors into our discussion.

A. Cultural Context: The Triumph of Subjective Dissolution

There are powerful cultural conditions contributing to the spiritual erosion of our worship life in late modernity. There is *the triumph of the therapeutic*, the *triumph of popular culture*, the triumph of the Protestant liberal ethos of *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*. What I want to highlight as significant for us, just briefly, is what I am calling the *Triumph of the Subjective Dissolution*. It is this triumph that contributes more than anything to the erosion of meaning, by waging that behind our words, there is no reality at all. If there is no reality beyond us, there can be no meaning, and then why would we care to sing at all?

One of the formidable challenges we have in directing Christian worship in our cultural atmosphere is the sense that our words, and consequently our music, are actually pointing to any reality outside of our own subjective experience. Our atmospheric condition is dominated by the subjective “culture of dissolution.”² This shaky confidence in a reality (what I call an ontological condition) that can be known apart from our own feelings, makes the plausibility structure of worship suspicious at best, and at its worst, untenable. One of the most significant diagnosticians of this culture of “dissolution” is framed by philosopher and literary critic George Steiner.

In his book *Real Presences*, Steiner argues that, in the most rudimentary way, our civilization – and the communities and traditions of which it is comprised – is above all else a civilization of the word.³ Meaning, our world is made intelligible because of our words. Steiner argues that a human being is a “language animal,” a being “in whom the isolating privilege of speech...is definitional.”⁴ The most elevated example of this speech, he argues, is music. All of this, of course, is commonplace. However, what is less obvious is the implicit trust that underlies the language of historical civilization. Meaning, civilization has always believed that our words corresponded to some external reality. “There would be no history as we know it,” Steiner contends, “no religion, metaphysics, politics or aesthetics as we lived them, without an initial act of trust...this instauration of trust...is that between word and world.”⁵

² I am borrowing this phrase from James Hunter’s book, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 204.

³ See George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁴ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 89.

⁵ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 89.

Here's the problem. The modern, and late modern world of which we live, by its very nature, questions if not negates the tacit trust that commends human discourse between word and world. In its mildest expressions, our cultural assumption questions the adequacy of language (consequently its music) to make the world intelligible. In its more aggressive expressions, however, it fosters a skepticism, or profound doubt, that whatever is spoken, or sung, has anything to do with what exists as a reality "outside" of ourselves. In such a world there can be no possibility of transcendence, and without transcendence there can be no revelation, and without revelation there can be no gift of grace, and without grace there can be no art, and without art there can be no embodied worship. And without worship, the people perish.

As the sociologist James Hunter writes, in his book *To Change the World*:

In a culture in which the covenant between signified and signifier, word and world is broken, words are emptied of meaning. The forces of dissolution, then, lead us to a place of absence, a place where we can never be confident of what is real, what is true, what is good; a place where we are always left wondering if nothing in particular is real or true or good.⁶

We are left wondering, as a culture, if anything particular can be real or good! What I want to suggest is that this carcinogen of "subjective dissolution" has found its way into the atmosphere and seeped into the ground water of our baptism identity. In other words, the suspicion that there is any correspondence or confidence between the word and the world has permeated our assumptions and expectations in worship. When we no longer have confidence that words correspond to the world, that our signs can signify reality, then it is impossible to impute any meaning or truth at all. If our words can mean anything, then they mean nothing. In the culture of dissolution, words wager no intrinsic truth that corresponds to a communal meaning; for there is no fixed point of reference outside of us.

Why am I bringing this up today? When my students are singing they are looking for an experience, because experience is the only solid ground for gaining any insight or perspective for truth. This is what they have been taught – often unwittingly – by us. If our language

⁶ James David Hunter, *To Change the World*, 206.

does not correspond to reality, we don't need to pay attention to the words of what we sing. What we tend to focus on is the mood – the feeling it generates. Our feelings are not insignificant of course. But what Steiner is suggesting, is that this context, where word is divorced from world, is a new historical moment. If our worship music is not the kind that is a passport to God's immediacy, understood by our feelings, then the music is frustrating. For worship leaders, musicians, and preachers like ourselves, this culture dissolution between word and world puts us in a precarious position. What do we do? How does one combat acid rain?

B. An Antidote: Christian Worship

One of the antidotes to this cultural phenomenon is Christian worship. Despite a polluted culture, we are called to be a people who keep worshipping, and worship with a dogged cheerfulness. Worship implies that there is a correspondence between our words and the world – for the world was created by the eternal Word we gather to worship. To worship, then, is to reclaim the wager of transcendence. It is to suggest, if even in whisper, that what makes meaning intelligible is the God whose Word makes reality we can know and understand: “And God said, let there be light, and there was light.” (Gen. 1:2).

This is why worship is so important for cultural and social life, as well as for the life of the soul, and why there has never been a better time to be good at what we do. Corporate worship is the antidote for a culture withering under the steady rain of “subjective dissolution.” Worship, by its nature, by focusing on the object of our worship, wagers on the direct reality between the word and the world. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” As the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz writes in the opening verses of his poem, “Either/Or”:

If God incarnated himself in man, died and rose from the dead,
All human endeavors deserve attention
Only to the degree that they depend on this,
I.e., acquire meaning thanks to this event.
We should think of this by day and by night.
Every day, for years, ever stronger and deeper.
And most of all about how human history is holy

And how every deed of ours becomes a part of it,
Is written down for ever, and nothing is ever lost.
Because our kind was so much elevated
Priesthood should be our calling
Even if we do not wear liturgical garments.
We should publicly testify to the divine glory
With words, music, dance, and every sign.⁷

To worship is to participate in a counter-cultural wager where we publicly testify to the divine glory, with our words, music, dance, and every sign. This is what you do! Rather than capitulate to what Charles Taylor calls “the secular age”, you use your gifts in worship to invite others into a sacred age. This is God’s age, where history is holy, and nothing is ever lost. An age made possible when the Word made flesh in the world, stepped out of the tomb and into the bright light of a fresh world inaugurating the epoch for a new humanity. (Just something to think about the next time you get that complaining e-mail about the song we sang last Sunday!)

Every time we gather in worship we are invited to join the communion of saints, instead of a life of subjective dissolution. This is a communion where the past is living, where the Word speaks with a living voice that guides and shapes our hopes and expectations. It is for this reason, I can think of few activities that are as significant to counter the culture of “subjective dissolution” than Christian worship. Which is why, as I have said, I believe there has never been a better time for us to be good at what we do.

IV. Five Suggestions for Leading the Sanctuary

This raises an important question – this is a question that gets at why we are here – or at least why I am here: what does it mean to be good at what we do in worship? Specifically, how can you (a society of professional musicians) better partner and conspire with lay leadership and clergy (like me) to promote worship music that is meaningful, beautiful, and authentic, when so much of what is promoted (and demanded) these days is trite, bland, and

⁷ Czeslaw Milosz, “Either/Or” in *New and Collected Poems, 1931-2001* (New York: Ecco, 2003), 540.

derivative? What does it look like to work off the same page together – and bring word and the world into some coherence?

For the remainder of our time, I want to name five suggestions, that are intended, not to be exhaustive, but as a primer for reflection, and hopefully to provoke conversation. I want to suggest 1. An Identity; 2. A Mindset; 3. A Plan; 4. A Resource; and 5. A Habit.

1. An Identity

One of my fundamental beliefs is that identity precedes activity: if you know who you are, you know what to do. This is why the apostle Paul, at the beginning of every epistle, reminds the churches who they are – they are *saints*, or *in Christ*, or *holy priesthood*. Before Paul launches into a pastoral diatribe, he reminds his people who they are in Christ. I think this is interesting. I think, for us who lead worship, it is something we need to take seriously.

Identity informs how we go about and understand the tasks that are given to us. My question for you is “who are you?” How do you understand yourself deep at the water-table of your soul? What metaphors, images, associations do you use to describe yourself to others, or to yourself? How do other people see you and understand your role?

I want to encourage you in your work to practice and lead out of the identity of a pastor: a worship pastor. What’s the difference? The difference is huge. If you see your identity as primarily as playing music, this is going to impact how others respond to you, and fundamentally how they follow your lead. How you understand your identity in worship shapes how you understand what music is for and why we play it. If you understand yourself as a pastor, you are going to root yourself in a parish, in its particular story, and your playing music is going to be done in the context of relationships.

This is why I used the word possessive adjective “our” to describe our work. Though I am not a musician, together we shape an aesthetic experience between the liturgical movements of worship in word and music. To see your identity as a “pastor” – one whose work is to be lead and love the people of God impacts how we go about our work.

My encouragement is obvious. To your people you have an opportunity to be more than a musician, you have the opportunity to be their pastor. Whether people know it or not, they need, and desire, a good pastor – one who takes them and their families seriously in God. As a pastor, music may be your primary pulpit. But what a pulpit! I wager if others see you, know you, and relate to you as someone who is praying for them, caring about them, the dynamics of the conversations you will have will alter dramatically. People want good music, but what they want even more, is a sense of connection, a sense of shared identity with the leadership of that music. If they know you love them, they will sing with you! Live into a pastoral identity.

2. A Mindset

The pastoral mindset within late modernity needs to be missional. The cultural capital of Christianity has long been spent. We can take nothing for granted, that people come to us with a biblical base, a sacramental sensitivity, or an appreciation of a liturgical life. The sacred canopy is lifted, and it is not coming back.

To lead worship in our cultural moment requires us to come to grips with the fact that we are within a mission field, and as pastors we need to develop a fresh missional mindset. To that end I want to make two suggestions inspired by one of the last half-century's most reflective missiologist. Andrew Walls, a former missionary to Sierra Leone and currently Professor Emeritus at the University of Edinburgh. As an expert missiologist Walls has written about the importance of the *indigenous principle* and *the pilgrim principle*. These two principles I attend to regularly when thinking, planning, and partnering with musicians in worship.

The first principle is called the *indigenous principle*. This is the principle that recognizes the impossibility of separating an individual from his social relationships and the culture that shapes them. God faces us as we are, not as we will be. As Walls writes:

We are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by ‘culture’, in fact. In Christ God accepts us together with our group relations: with that cultural conditioning that makes us feel at home in one part of society and less at home in another.” This leads to one unvarying feature in Christian history: the desire to ‘indigenize’, to live as a Christian and yet as a member of one’s own society – “to make the Church” *a place to feel at home*.⁸

This is a principle that may help us think about what is going on in some of our more tense conversations regarding our worship. I often think people are trying to exercise an *indigenizing* principle – however, ill thought out – or executed. This principle may serve as a way to reframe the conversation. The Christian faith is the fastest growing religion in the world precisely because it promotes indigenization in various cultures. Unlike Islam where the Quran cannot be translated, the translation of Christian Scriptures is encouraged into the vernacular tongue of a people. This happens with music as well. There is an indigenizing principle going on. We want to press the gospel into aesthetic expressions of faith that reflects and respects the culture we are speaking into. This is the mission of God in the world: “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:14)

What is particular about our cultural moment is that our churches reflect not homogenous culture, but culture(s). These competing cultures are often generational, and the differences of these generations are often reflected in aesthetic palettes. Those of the greatest generation, who grew up on big band music, have a different taste to those of the boomer generation that grew up on Beatles, which is different from today’s emerging adults whose listening preferences are influenced by the range of options on I Tunes – (and so on and so forth.) Of course people within the church have different tastes. My point is this, that to practice the *indigenizing principle* means, as pastors, we need to know what culture(s) are reflected in our church.

In my world, I pivot between the culture of emerging adults, an academic culture, and a business and administrative culture. With the missionary mindset I need to understand what

⁸ See Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 2007), 7.

culture I am engaging and what its influences on people are. I have to know this or I am going to have a difficult time translating a message from an ancient text into today's world. I have to practice an *indigenizing principle*.

One practical suggestion to practice the *indigenizing principle* is for you is to take people to lunch. Every one, no matter what culture, has to eat. Go to lunch with the elders, the leaders, those who sing the music you play for them. Get to know them. Ask a lot of questions. Everyone likes to be taken seriously. Why do you like to sing this song? What does this song mean to you? (We'll talk more about this in a bit.) This is what a pastor does. This will help you live into your identity as a worship pastor.

The second mark of a missional mindset is what Walls calls the *Pilgrim Principle*. This principle goes something like this: God in Christ does not only meet us and take us as we are – God takes us in order to transform us into what he wants us to be. As Walls writes:

Along with the *indigenizing principle* which makes his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the *pilgrim principle*, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system.⁹

Just as the *indigenizing principle*, itself rooted in the Gospel, associates Christians with the particulars of their culture and group, the *pilgrim principle*, puts the Christian in tension with the indigenizing instinct. Associating with assumptions and attitudes, with experiences and people outside the culture and group of one's backyard, is in some respects a *universalizing* factor. Every Christian has dual nationality, and has a loyalty to the faith family which links her to those in other groups opposed to that to which she belongs by nature. The Christian, when baptized, has an entirely new set of relationships, with other members of the family of faith into which she has come, and whom she must accept, with all their group relations (and "disrelations") on them, just as God has accepted him with hers.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

One of the ways the church practices the pilgrim principle is in worship. Yes, we want to meet people where they are – yes, we want to translate the message – and embody it in a way that has resonance in culture; but there is more – we want to bring people into the collective commonwealth of saints that can transcend our particular cultural norms. This is best done in worship. Worship is also a place where we enter into the universal catholic faith and there are some things that Christians do everywhere, at all times, and in all places. The *pilgrim principle*, when applied to worship, means that we have practices, and consequently, our music needs to connect to the larger church.

How do we practice the *pilgrim principle*? Again, the missionary mindset is one that is patient. Think in decades, not in months. Which also requires you to think about what Eugene Peterson refers to as “a vow of stability.”

You have heard of the worship pastor who wanted to move the old-up right piano to the other side of the fellowship hall? When he suggested moving the piano at the consistory meeting, he was met with a grimace and a nod. No, Mrs. Wezeman put that piano there. This is Wezeman hall. It has to stay right where it is. Well, the pastor took this advice, and over the next six years, the worship pastor moved the piano one inch at a time. Until it was over on the other side of the fellowship hall. This is the pilgrim principle in practice.

When I started at Hope College in 2005 we had a live and full worship life. But it was anarchy and chaos. There was no real liturgy to speak of. Our service was some songs, the sermon, a spontaneous invitation each week to the table. It was a context where authenticity equaled spontaneity. Students loved it. What young person doesn't love the sense of immediacy that this genre of music delivers? It feels from the heart. Well, I am a pastor and I made a pastoral decision. I was going to move the piano to the other side of the fellowship hall. But I was going to have to do it one inch at a time. So each semester, I dropped one new liturgical movement into the worship life. I just wasn't going to call attention to it. Not right away. I was just going to quietly move the service inch by inch. The first semester I did the boldest move.

For the invitation to the table I memorized the great thanksgiving prayer and started orally doing this every week. It felt odd at first, and they had never done it, but I was insistent. Over time it gave the table some stability. The next semester I began with a consistent call to worship that began with a Trinitarian greeting and the lighting of a Christ candle. The next semester I worked in a communal benediction we do through singing the doxology accapella. Then we added a prayer of confession and words of assurance. Then we got students to start writing prayers of the people. Then we worked on prayers of illumination. Each semester, and year, I added a new movement.

With each liturgical move, our communal worship culture slowly changed. As it changed, so did our capacity to connect with the universal practices of the Church. Without them knowing it, I used the liturgy as a way to connect to the pilgrim principle. What this allowed, over time, was that our aesthetic taste and range were developed and deepened as a community. For example, before I started this work, it would have been impossible to think about writing a prayer – students now are writing the most beautiful and soulful prayers you can imagine. What this did, was also lay the groundwork for adding different styles and genres of music. When I started it would have felt odd, out of place, and emotionally strange to play the organ, now the organ is a regular instrument of service in our worship feast.

This was made possible by *the pilgrim principle*. I love my students where they are; but I love them enough not to leave them there. But to practice this principle you must have pastoral patience – you have to pick your battles carefully, and have a plan. Which leads me to a third encouragement.

3. Have a Plan

One of my leadership philosophies is that plan beats no plan. You don't get to say no to my plan, just because you don't like it. If you don't have a more compelling plan, with reasons, or more thought-out plan to beat mine – I win. Having a plan first means you have a vision! Tell others what it is – argue for it – practice it.

I use this with my staff – and it helps: a) it calls each of us to think about why they are doing what they are doing and b) and it also allows them to know they can change my plan if they can articulate it better. I want to encourage a culture of participation, because a fundamental rule for any leader is that people support what they help create. The more ownership one has in the process – the more people understand the vision and the why behind it – the better traction you are going to get.

Sit down and articulate as clearly as you can an aesthetic vision for worship and why it is important. Then sit down with your pastor, your elders, the lay leadership, anyone who has a stake in the game, and present it to them. Develop a consistent rationale of what you are trying to accomplish. Doing so may help you avoid being treated like the proverbial jute-box, where the leaders push B8 to hear their favorite worship ditty.

I will caution, sometimes to execute the plan, you may have to be patient. I didn't explain to everyone what I was going to do at Hope. My staff wasn't with me yet. I had to earn the right to speak. I had to respect the DNA of the place I was in, understand its history, and figure out a way to use that to leverage a larger and more interesting vision. I had a plan, but I had to practice it, trust it, let it develop, because some people would have killed it right away. The luxury I had, which I am guessing many of you don't, is that I was in charge. Also I have a quarter of my population leave every year – which means that the historical memory is thin, and works in my favor. That's why you need to sit down the pastor – and develop a common vision – so you can work it together. If you do it will be more fun.

Having a plan for an aesthetic vision of worship and communicating will also help ideas to be encouraged. Invite people to join. Talk about it when you take them out for lunch. People support what they help create. People will be inspired to think about how to join you. This will encourage a spirit of invitation rather than a spirit of defensiveness. No one – I mean no one – likes to hang out with a cynic – not even other cynics. A plan is a hopeful vision that serves as an invitation. It gets energy moving forward. A plan is constructive in that it helps move past “I like this” or “I don't like that” kind of reductions.

Have an aesthetic vision – have a plan on how to achieve it – and communicate the vision to the right people at the right time. Let the excellence of your work be your protest. There are pendulum swings. Take comfort in the knowledge George Steiner highlights when you get tired: “No stupid literature, art or music lasts.”¹⁰

4. A Resource

A fourth encouragement is using an important resource. That resource is what I am calling *narrative thinking*. Meaning is not best communicated in abstractions. It is best felt and experienced in story. There is a reason that the way the church learns the mystery of faith: the life, death and resurrection of Christ is through the genre of gospel – a story of good news. Form matters. “Tell the truth,” says Emily Dickinson, “but tell it slant.” Story has a way of getting inside of us through the backdoor. As you think about how to best invite your local congregation into your aesthetic vision I want to encourage you to think in narrative.

What does this mean? It means that our work as worship pastors is the work of story telling. We tell the story of God’s redemptive history in the world through word and music. This story is told in the context of other stories. Our cultural story, our local community’s story, the story of this particular church, as well as the stories of the people who make up these churches. The more you know and can tell these stories with your music, the more people will lean in and trust and follow you.

There are many ways to do this. When you are at lunch with someone, ask him or her what is a favorite song and why? What hymn do you remember singing when you were a kid? What was their favorite hymn of a parent or grandparent? Nostalgia is fragile, but it is potent. Singing the songs of faith is an antidote to the feelings of isolation as it unites us to others across great distances. The right song, at the right time, can transport us across time and space and unite us together.

¹⁰ Steiner, *Real Presence*, 11.

Come with me. I'm thirteen years old. I'm standing next to my Grandpa Johnson, a large Norwegian logger they called the *Swede*, as he sang with eyes closed, but with full voice, in a shanty clapboard sanctuary in the Pacific Northwest. We are singing, "*For the Beauty of the Earth*." Though he has passed away, I believe, that in the mystery of our faith, in the currency of the Spirit, we still sing together. Sing it with me now...

Take advantage of the stories in your church. Ask your pastor, that before you sing a song, to tell a story about it. Take advantage of the dead. At funerals learn what are the favorite hymns of the person who passed away or of the family. Bring these songs back into the rotation. Develop an internal catalog of songs with stories behind them. For example:

One of the things I did at Hope was send an e-mail out to faculty asking what their favorite hymn was and why. I got a few responses. Then I let them know what days we were going to sing this hymn in worship. Before we sang it, I told them the story of why this was a favorite hymn of Professor Husbands. Put your song in the context of a narrative, and let the narrative do the heavy lifting. When we sang the song, everyone leaned in, because we were singing it for Mark – their friend and their professor. Don't be afraid to tell the stories behind the songs. It helps create connection and emotional resonance. Framed the right way, this is a powerful way to advance your aesthetic vision for worship.

5. A Habit

As we have suggested, one of the reasons our work is difficult is navigating divergent or irreconcilable aesthetic tastes or preferences. These can be sometimes reduced to, but not limited to generational divides, cultural experiences, educational background, and musical competency. For example, tensions between generations can be negative and contribute, for example, to so called "worship wars" between traditional and contemporary music. However, these tensions can also provide positive intergenerational creativity and a ministry opportunity. It is by honoring and respecting these divergent preferences that can help a worship leader cultivate what I call the habit of "hospitable taste."

What is hospitable taste? *It is the ability to cultivate a taste and appreciation for other forms of perception, enjoyment, and judgment that are able to do three things.*

First, to recognize and enjoy other kinds of aesthetic experiences without feeling like they are alienating. Our tastes are all a part of us. We each have them. And in this room right now there are a wide variety of tastes when it comes to singing (I'm just spit balling here). It is hospitable to enjoy sounds and songs that Christians sing around the world, and from the past without regarding them as permanently alienating.

Second, *hospitable taste* seeks to discern as an act of love what others find delightful and meaningful that has little appeal to you or your preference. Again this requires the heart of a pastor. You have to enter in and learn why a song or sound is meaningful to someone. It does not mean you have to like it, but you do need to understand why another likes it.

We might call this a kind of aesthetic empathy. So we are here singing a song...maybe a new praise song and Jim just can't stand it. Well...someone else, Joe, listens to this same song and it's really meaningful. In the same way, we play a hymn and use an organ and Joe just can't handle it – it sounds dissonant like fingers on a chalkboard. Joe needs to learn to listen with Jim. I preach at Hope the importance of cultivating a culture of hospitable taste. Nowhere does the bible prescribe one sound, one genre, and one instrument. The kingdom is large and it has a large catalog of music. We are growing to be World Christians and we will sing like World Christians. We will sing with hospitality. Frank Burch Brown writes, in *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, that “to enjoy another’s enjoyment is an act of love.”¹¹ You and me enjoying each other’s enjoyment can reframe the soul of worship. This can only work if we all practice it. Hospitality cannot be downloaded. It must be lived into and practiced by each of us at the level of the soul.]

And third, *hospitable taste* notices points in life and in worship where aesthetic aims and religious aspirations (or aversions) are wedded to one another, and thus to see how spiritual growth can have a properly artistic and esthetic dimension subject to criticism, cultivation,

¹¹ See Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). 23.

and education. This kind of theological exploration of the aesthetic dimensions of faith and spirit can be profitable, however, only if our notions of art and taste are refined and deepened. In other words, calling people to take seriously and practice a culture of *hospitable taste* sets you up to articulate and educate your aesthetic vision. This habit will encourage you to invite others to learn about music – and why this piece is best fitted for this moment – and not another one. It can give you some needed categories to work with, as well as building communal trust to advance your plan.

If you cultivate a culture of hospitable taste, I think you and your church will experience a fuller, more authentic, and soulful worship life. And a life that is expanded in worship is the life that has the strength to resist the soul reductions of the secular age.

How do we better partner together: 1) an Identity; 2) work with a missional mindset that follows the principle of *indigenization* and *the pilgrim*; 3) plan an aesthetic vision others can be invited to participate in; 4) use resources of built-in stories of your people to deepen; 5) cultivate the habit of *hospitable taste*.

Conclusion:

Allow me to close with this thought. Worship music is not just about the music. It is about the end of our worship – that end is communion with the Triune God of grace. The worship pastor who can use music to point people to this reality, again and again, week after week, will be the one who has the trust to push people out of the aesthetic world in which so many are trapped and so desperately want to leave. If you can claim your identity as one whose work seeks to encourage a deeper relationship with God and with each other, you will help create an ethos of beauty and transcendence in your music leadership. You will encourage what Augustine calls a double love – where worship calls us out to love God and to love our neighbor. If people know – I mean really know – that you love them, they will sing with you. If they know you love God, and are not just using God to love music, than worship is pointed toward its proper end, and in that end, we also find a new beginning. Amen.