Thoughts On Advent Worship

BY DAN WILT

My dear fellow worship leaders,

Bless you and your family this Christmas season. It is a privilege for our family to partner with yours in the family of God, as we continue to lay hold of the prize for which we are called heavenward - to know Him as we are known by Him - in all His beauty, mystery and majesty.

I want to bring a brief encouragement to us as worship leaders, as we celebrate the Advent/Christmas season. These thoughts reflect as well on other seasons in the worship calendar, such as Easter, and I hope will spur you on to even greater faithfulness as one of God's creative leaders in His Church.

Seasonal expressions of worship and community devotional experience, such as the Christmas season and Easter season, evoke many feelings within the hearts of those in our congregations. Though we serve an audience of One, these men, women and children God has brought to us are the ones we lead worship for - the ones who have gathered around the common theme of desiring God.

We as worship leaders are here to serve this desire for God - to create a place for others to meet with God as well as for ourselves.

For some folks, years of joyful memories worshipping with the riches of Christmas hymnody are stirred. For others, Christmas can be a disturbing and isolating time - recalling less-than-pleasant family gatherings and years of loneliness and pain.

It is always amazing to me, however, that Sally - who was raised in a liturgical Church, Tom - who only attended Church on holidays while growing up, Sue - who was a devout pagan, and Brian - a street guy who knows church to be a forsaking and unforgiving place, are all united in some sense of agreement that Christmas could be, or should be, a "special" time of year. By special, I mean "a time to be focused on; a time to gather around a common experience that should be joyful." The Incarnation – our reason for the season – should be especially noted in the Church that loves Jesus and that Jesus loves.

In either case, the worship experience within any community can be enhanced by paying some attention to these seasons – seasons that many liturgical churches have traditionally focused on quite extensively. In my travels I've noted that, in many more "informal" churches, many people would have no idea that the

majority of the global Church community outside of their fellowship was united with the Church historic in celebrating the Advent of the Son of God, and His Incarnation, with traditional Christmas worship music and powerful liturgies of the heart - unless someone barged in and told them!

Hearing the band play hot worship tunes with a special "sleigh bell arrangement" just doesn't meet the heart cry to worship with the familiar hymns of Christmas - songs often familiar to both the churched and unchurched. To join in concert with the wider Church triumphant in our generation, is a good thing, and enlivens us to our connection to the community that is the wider Body of Christ. It also draws the hearts of our people together, in songs and words that resonate with holy familiarity.

Further limiting us, tradition, liturgy, familiarity and predictability are often used as derogatory terms in contemporary movements like the Vineyard. Our penchant for the relevant (which to us means innovative and new) and the recent (which to us means cutting edge and the "latest") can breed in us a subtle pride that cuts off both us, and our congregations, from the riches of our common musical and creative heritage as part of the Church trans-historic and trans-generational. In other words, tradition can either be marked by dead orthodoxy, or by a vibrant, spiritual, common language of the heart for those gathering to worship. Tradition can connect us, and give our congregation more ways, rich ways, to participate together in worship.

I want to encourage you to link arms with your pastors, and with the Church historic, and consider integrating Christmas carols/hymns into your worship sets, maybe even responsive scripture readings, or anything else you and your leaders agree would bring to life to your worshipping community this Christmas.

Use the leverage of hearts desiring to gather around the cadence of the yearly Christmas season to offer your church an intimate encountering place with Immanuel - God with us. Celebrate the incarnation - it's the pivot point of all history, and God's creatives should be the first out of the gate in embracing, invoking, and inspiring the wonder of such an incredible gift to humanity.

I pray that you personally would experience a fresh taste of God's nearness to you this season, and that you and your family would re-live and respond to the power of this message we both celebrate and carry into the world.

Much love to you and your family this Christmas,

Dan Wilt
St. Croix Vineyard, New Brunswick, Canada
Vineyard Worship Resources