

ANDREW SMITH

BLOODSHED TO BEAUTY

How Creativity Is Healing A City's Soul

InsideWorship.com spent time with pastors Andy and Harmony Smith in Belfast, Northern Ireland this past spring. Their passion for Jesus, love for the Kingdom of God and heart to see their divided city healed of its wounds is profound. Here is one way they, and their church, are enacting the healing ministry of Jesus.

Our Capacity To Create

In the course of our journey as a church community, I have come to realize – and believe passionately – that creativity, and the capacity for it, is in all of us. It is part of the heartbeat of the Creator Father that followers of Jesus can feel pulsing in them as well. That gift is not limited to the visual arts, or musical worship types, but is in all of us in very unique forms. I used to think certain people were creative and some were not – but I was wrong. Our Creator God has hard-wired a capacity for creativity into every one of us, and wants to use it for Kingdom works and Kingdom worship in our churches and in our streets.

A Pastor In Process

Our journey began with the people God had blessed us with. There was a real hunger for creativity, blended with worship, in many of our people. They wanted more from our small church: more places to use their gifts, more recognition of creativity and its place among us, more ownership of our creative calling as a whole community. As a pastor, I felt intimidated and put under pressure by their requests. I valued what they wanted, I just had no idea how to do it, or how to pastor them through it. So I began to pray. I asked God to lead us into greater expression, and to let it birth real Kingdom ministry – not just creativity for creativity's sake.

I got my answer sooner than I expected, and in a way that I couldn't imagine. Belfast is a divided city, long troubled by sectarian conflict and violence. Much has been done to bring peace, but different parts of the city are still dominated by paramilitary-style gangs from both sides of the conflict (protestant and catholic). Our church currently meets in a community that is controlled by a loyalist (protestant) paramilitary gang. Nothing happens in the area without their knowledge or permission.

Healing Hatred With A Brush

All over the city, and on both sides of the conflict, the paramilitaries paint murals to intimidate the other side, and to mark their territory. They often depict violence, gunmen, and the troubled history of the divide in Northern Ireland. The paramilitary groups also use blank walls in the community to send messages and threats to anyone who dares to oppose them.

About the time I began to pray, some particularly nasty, anti-catholic graffiti had appeared on a wall facing the main road running through the community. Our church joined with some community groups to take a stand against it, and we personally began to meet with the local paramilitaries to negotiate its removal.

After much prayer and private dialogue, the paramilitaries agreed to remove the graffiti, and also agreed that a non-violent, non-sectarian mural should go up in its place. I approached an artist/animator in our church who had a heart and a vision to use his creative gifts to serve the Kingdom, and he agreed to produce a design and actually paint the mural on the wall. The whole church was able to participate in the prayer around it, and in the painting of the design. It jump-started something in our naturally creative people that spread to those of us who didn't even know we had the Father's creative heart in us. God had used creativity to do a real Kingdom work in East Belfast – a work that birthed real worship in our church, reclaimed territory from the enemy and blessed and spoke to all who pass by it every day.

Creation Liberation

God truly showed me the value of releasing creativity in the church, and gave me a longing to see more. I realized that I as the pastor had to embrace it if the whole church was going to "get it," and make it part of who we are as a community. We began to explore, and to try to encourage creative expression in many different ways. We had nights for artists and creatives, we had a weekend away for anyone wishing to pursue the creativity God has put inside them, and we even had a conference in March of 2004 dedicated to creativity and the Kingdom of God – an event designed to embrace anyone who feels God's creative pulse within them.

Our journey has had highs and lows, failures and successes, and we are nowhere near the end of it. We are simply a community of people who have seen God bring out the creativity



that He has placed in each of us, and use it to bring his Kingdom in Belfast. We are longing for more of that, and for more healing to come to our land.

Lessons From The Journey

Here are some things we have learned along the way:

Creativity has to be surrendered to Jesus. We all must be his disciples, and be stewards of the gifts and dreams he has birthed in us. He is the author and perfector of our creativity.

Creativity is not an accessory to, or a way to have, a "cool church." It is a powerful kingdom tool that God wants to use to deepen our experience of who He is.

We have come to realize that for many, creativity is the language of their souls; it's how they primarily connect with their Father. It is how He works most powerfully in them. Living and participating in a community that does not value creativity is like doing church without worship. In fact creativity is worship, the primary way many inside and outside the church pour out their hearts to Jesus. As a result, we have tried to change how we do church. We try and make sure all we do has the value of creativity intertwined in it; from the visuals used in worship, to the language we use, to how I preach, to the children's ministry, to the freedom we give to artists and poets to create during the service if they wish.

Not everyone will jump at the chance to release the creativity that God has placed in them. Some will need encouragement, permission, time and space to do it. I try and do lots of different things to encourage people and give them permission to go for it. I "commission" works during the sermon, calling out what God is doing in people and what He is stirring in them as I preach on a particular theme. Last Christmas, I was preaching on Luke 1:78-79, about the tender mercy of our God. In the middle of the message, I called for people to create, inspired by the tender mercy found in Jesus. Over the next weeks there were poems, paintings, short stories and spontaneous art works in the services. One woman was even was prompted to cook a gourmet meal and share it with her friends as a creative response to our creativity conference.

Don't try to do too much. We are a small church, still struggling with this and trying to live it out. We don't have endless resource to throw at it. We have tried to simply do what the Father seems to be doing at the time, and nothing else. Sometimes that's a lot, like the mural, or our conference. Sometimes, it is little things practiced in the life of the community. You don't have to do it all, or have it all, especially not at once.

Creative people are not there for us to exploit and use. This can never become about me as a pastor using creative people for my own wants and wishes, or exploiting the gifts God has given them so that we can gather more people, do the trendiest worship service, or "get noticed." This all has to be about what God is doing in the lives of the people, calling out the creative gifts to bring the Kingdom for His glory. The temptation as a pastor/leader to use and exploit will come, but it can never be about me. It can only be about what God is doing in the community.

Increasing creativity in your church has to come from the top. The senior pastor has to value it, and also not be afraid to take risks and grow in it themselves.

People need to be cheered on it, encouraged and valued. They need permission, time and space. Don't be afraid to fail, and take lots of risks. As a small church without our own venue, one way we give space to this is to have an area on our website dedicated to creativity. Poetry, art, creative writing and more can be put on the site and given the time and space it deserves. Praise all types of creativity, no matter how small. Anything from gardening, to writing, to mural painting.

Pray it in, and ask God to lead you in the journey.

Hang out with other creative Kingdom people who will push you and share ideas and their stories.

Go and see places where creativity is valued, respected, and on display. Get ideas and inspiration from many sources (preferably not all Christian expressions).



ANDREW AND HARMONY SMITH are senior pastors of the Belfast City Vineyard in Northern Ireland. They have a vision to build a church that follows Jesus, forms authentic community, and fulfills kingdom ministry. Mural design at top right is by artist Joel Simon.