THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY

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Diversity. This is a word that has become as "diverse" in meaning as it has been in application! To some, "diversity" is a term that represents African-American people. To others, the term represents everyone and their own unique contribution to society. While I will not attempt to solve that mystery for you, I will share my experiences with diversity, and most recently the use of the term in worship. I will also share some of what I sense are dangerous value shifts that can be caused by the pursuit of diversity in worship expression.

What is diversity in worship? First we need to look at a few topics regarding diversity, or differences, in worship expression.

I think we could all add to the worship diversity list on the opposite page and never reach a consensus as to what elements make worship "diverse." So, I take the approach that I take in life. Become a bridge builder and be comfortable with the amount of resistance you will face in being an agent of change.

ONE APPROACH TO DIVERSITY

Rather than presume to speak for everyone, I would simply like to share my approach. I lead worship for about 5,000 people each weekend, and while our church is becoming more diverse, it is still predominantly white. Please don't infer that diversity to me is only about color. I need us to understand this in order for this approach to make sense. When I began leading worship in Cincinnati I followed a very gifted younger worship leader, named Robbie, who happened to be white. When I took over the team, I spent the first six months learning the song arrangements with which his band was familiar. It wasn't long before I found myself being approached by the African-Americans in our church about worship opportunities. When Robbie and I spoke about this later we were both a bit surprised. You see, I didn't bring a uniquely black sound or delivery. I was simply a black man on stage. All of a sudden, people of color felt that the worship stage was now open to them.

This summer I had a twenty-three year old female intern, named Monica, working with the worship department. Her father is white, and her mother is from the Philippines. She plays a mean PRS electric guitar, as well as anyone I know. I noticed that when services ended, she would be swarmed by both young women and young men. I received an email after she took the stage that read, "It's so good to finally see a woman on stage." What was peculiar was that for the past six years there has been a woman on stage, but only at the background vocalist microphone. When I put a female keyboard player on stage, the same thing happened. When I took the place of the previous worship leader, the very same thing happened. People of all colors would come up to say how happy they were to see more blacks in our church.

RECRUITING WITH DIVERSITY IN MIND

I spent seventeen years in the business world. If there is one thing that I know, people recruit those with whom they are comfortable. If your worship team is all white and over fourty, chances are that when you ask them to find you another electric guitarist, they will not find you a Monica.

I believe the fastest way to bring diversity to your church's worship expression is to bring diversity to your worship team. People connect with people. When your congregation sees someone that looks like them, old, young, overweight, bald, male, female, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Islander – you name it – they feel connected with at some level. The cultural history of everyone on your team will contribute to the diversity of your worship expression. Diversity will come through the styles of music they listen to, the musicians they emulate, the decades of influence that some will have had, and the newer instrumentation that younger musicians bring to the table. These marks of diversity will all leak into your worship expression.



BECOME A BRIDGE BUILDER

A DANGEROUS LEAK

This is where the danger lies. What is leaking into your worship team will eventually leak into your church culture! For me, the underlying value of worship is to connect people personally to the One who saves. I do this by selecting songs that are broad reaching, but share a common value. Those songs are giving people language to sing, or speak, to their Savior. Once that intimate time of engagement takes place I try not to violate that engagement. I believe that surrender, forgiveness, healing, restoration and salvation may all be taking place simultaneously in those moments.



Here is where I bring caution. One must understand one's community worship values before one begins to change them. The body needs all of its parts. The body does not need three heads, and only one finger. Find out what part of the body your worship is serving, and be the best that you can be at that part of your worship leading. My wife shared something with me recently

STYLISTIC DIVERSITY
+ + SOUTHERN GOSPEL
+ + BLACK GOSPEL
+ + CALIFORNIA SOFT ROCK
+ + PUNK
+ + GRUNGE
+ + RAP
+ + R&B
+ + METAL

INSTRUMENTAL DIVERSITY
+ + ELECTRIC GUITAR
+ + LOOPS
+ + ACOUSTIC GUITAR
+ + KEYBOARDS
+ + AMBIENT NOISE
+ + DRUMS
+ + HAND PERCUSSION

ARRANGEMENT DIVERSITY
+ + CHOIR
+ + SOLOIST
+ + LEADING FROM AN INSTRUMENT OTHER THAN VOICE

DELIVERY DIVERSITY
+ + 20 MINUTES
+ + 45 MINUTES
+ + WORSHIP AT THE BEGINNING
+ + WORSHIP AT THE END
+ + LIGHTS COLORED VS. WHITE
+ + ROBOTIC LIGHTS
+ + HAZE OR NO HAZE
+ + STAGE OR NO STAGE
+ + SHOW THE BAND
+ + HIDE THE BAND
+ + CONGREGATION STANDING OR SITTING

SONG CHOICE DIVERSITY
+ + PERFORMANCE PIECES
+ + COVER TUNES
+ + SEEKER-FRIENDLY
+ + HYMNS
+ + VERTICALLY-FOCUSED VS. HORIZONTALLY-FOCUSED LYRICS
+ + INTRODUCING NEW SONGS

that caught her attention concerning my role as worship leader. If the enemy can't beat us, he will join us. A simple shift in balance can dramatically change the effectiveness of a worship set. My concern is that far too often that we use the blanket of diversity in worship to implement these changes.

SO WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

What's the big deal? Diversity has to happen from the top down, and the bottom up. We have to be deliberate about who we put on stage, and in leadership. We also have to be clear what our values in worship are before we begin a process of shifting their focus. We must ensure that there is a mechanism in place for delivering those values to new members, to ensure that those values don't dissipate over time. We must uphold those values when we are interacting with those in leadership in our churches, and those that simply don't connect in worship through music. Most importantly, we must be intentional about maintaining the value of diversity. If you want to present black Gospel to your church, then partner with a church that does that music way better then you can – and invite them to lead your worship service!

If you want to show intentionality toward the Hispanic speaking community, then let someone lead worship in their language and translate for the non-Hispanic people. If you have a large deaf population in your church, meet with them and determine their worship needs. Those needs may include adding a subwoofer close to those sections of seats, and providing signing interpretation for that demographic. Deliberately seek out female musicians to play drums or bass, or pay them to come in and play. This will send a strong nonverbal to the church that says "All are welcome."

Recently we had a big event in the life of our church, and we wanted to dial up the worship part of the service. We also wanted to connect with our community, so we selected traditional worship songs that our congregation was familiar with – and we changed the instrumentation. We added a ten person black Gospel choir and a saxophone, and we gave all the traditional electric guitar breaks to the sax player. The choir added a really cool vibe to our worship expression. There was so much buzz you could feel it. Remove those two elements, and you would have had a traditional weekend at our church.

UNCOVER, RESHAPE AND PURSUE

What's the answer to building the value of diversity into our communities? I don't fully know. Personally, I would love to see a new form of music come from our efforts toward diversity in worship – a new style and sound that takes intimate worship into the next decade but is welcomed by the masses. We've seen this take place in other styles of music that were designated to a specific culture, and now are bought en masse by the most unlikely of target audiences. Why should we make an exception in worship music?

Uncover your values in worship, and then discuss the value of diversity and how you can be intentional about bridging those values with diversity – without losing either of the former values or the value of diversity. Worship is not a melting pot. It's a salad, and we need the flavor of each individual part to season the whole without changing everything. Bless you as you pursue the value of diversity in worship.



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