how to



HOW TO: HUMANIZE A WORSHIP SPACE

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Have you ever intentionally transformed a physical space for worship? Evidenced in the building of Europe's great cathedrals, each taking a community several generations to build, the Church has historically placed a high value on creating sacred spaces for worship. This desire for sacred space in which to meet with God transcends every historic period and culture, and many beautiful examples of architecture exist worldwide as a result of this deep, human drive. In the modern Western context, many of us have turned away from building the community cathedrals of old, and have turned inward toward ourselves and our own families, sacrificing costly amounts of time, resources, and care to create places of sanctuary within our own homes and offices.

Whether by choice or by necessity, for reasons practical (maximizing the use of a costly space) or ideological (choosing to invest in people over a building), many church communities now meet in spaces that are transitional, temporary, and multi-purpose. The challenge is to create worship spaces that humanize; that reinforce the worship team's declarations of God's faithfulness, His permanence, and His steadfast love in the face of worship environments that are often industrial, alienating, impersonal, and impermanent. Some of the following ideas and suggestions may help your worship community in addressing environmental obstacles to worship, making it easier for many to encounter God in your community's worship space.

1. REMINDERS OF EARTH.

Interestingly, it seems that many experience a profound awareness of heaven in a place or a moment where they connect with the wonder and beauty of earth. Often our places of worship are a far cry from any sort of natural environment, and some can be very industrial and alienating. Having tangible, even living, authentic reminders of God's creation incorporated into a worship environment can ground individuals in the awareness that creation and everything in it is made and owned by God. The tendency is to put such things "up at the front" wherever your "front" happens to be. If our desire is to draw a community into a worship space, rather than to draw more attention to the front, perhaps we should consider extending these elements out into their midst as well.

2. DRAWN TO LIGHT.

I read in a national newspaper recently that humans are physically drawn to light as an ingrained biological response. People are sensitive to light, as I imagine that anyone who has participated in a time of worship under the flickering, sodium glare of gymnasium lights can identify. Sunlight is always welcome (at least to those of us who spend almost half the year immersed in the darkness of winter), but not always predictable or convenient. Candles are also friendly on the human eye, are easily incorporated into an environment, and seem to encourage hope as their physical presence is steadily converted into light. Personally, barring fire codes, I have never heard anyone criticize a space for having too many candles. Try experimenting with different types of eye-friendly light as a tool to focus worshipers' attention on key elements in your worship space.

3. TACTILE TEXTILES.

I work in a building where the main room and central staircase are coated, floor to ceiling, in plush, red, velvety, fuzzy wallpaper. No one can tell me that the thick band of missing fuzz where years of hands have run while passing up the staircase is just a coincidence. Environments with surfaces that are hard, cold or that have many sharp edges trigger physically defensive responses from tactile people – and impact their worship experience. Textiles on walls, floors and seating that seem inviting to touch encourage a sense of comfort and vulnerability among the same lot.

4. POWER IN A FACE.

Few images have the power to capture our attention and humanize a space as images of the human face. Portraits of the beautiful and the broken, in all shapes and sizes and colors, engage us and remind us of a humanity in God's Kingdom that is so much more broad and diverse than ourselves – we are all His image bearers. Consider incorporating the faces of image bearers in places where less personal landscapes and images are usually applied, such as overhead projection, handouts, and wall art.

5. POWER IN A SPACE.

According to Oberlin College's Environmental Studies Chair William Orr



(Summer 2006 edition of *Geez* magazine), William Churchill observed in 1943 that "we shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." This does not only apply to exteriors, but also to interiors and concepts as simple as arrangements of seating and human traffic. In the same magazine article, Frank Lloyd Wright also speaks to this, claiming "...that he could design a house that would cause a newly married couple, madly in love, to divorce in a matter of months." All of this is to say that how people enter into a worship space (how the seats are arranged, whether in rows, in a circle, or otherwise; whether close together, far apart, or in clusters) and how people are directed to move through the space by the placement of objects, can have significant impact on the experience.

6. EMBRACE INTELLIGENT ASYMMETRY.

Ever visited a relative whose home was immaculate, every item perfectly positioned, straightened and symmetrical? Did you feel comfortable, relaxed and put your feet up, or did you sit up straight and try not to break anything? Careful symmetry is an ingrained tendency for those of us with Western heritage, and creates a space where the more formal versions of ourselves are encouraged to shine. If, however, the goal is to create a more relaxed space where people are inclined to be vulnerable, the formality of, say, the Parthenon, may be contradictory.

Conversely, have you ever been in a space where there was so much clutter and visual chaos that you found it hard to think? (If not, I could show you pictures of my apartment). Spaces that are visually chaotic reflect our own inner turmoil back on us, and discourage a sense of peace. I will even confess to once spending an entire sermon trying not to notice a very crooked object hung on the wall behind the speaker. Consider arranging chairs, objects, and people in ways that are neither rigidly symmetrical nor chaotic, but that, like nature, flow as asymmetrical patterns. Consult with someone who you believe may have an "eye" for this concept if you find it difficult to implement.

7. LATERALLY RETHINK THE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE.

"If my worship set was a tree...." Similar to the musicians on your worship team, all environmental elements are not there to distract worshipers, but to serve by drawing worshipers in further, each element in its own way affirming the message being communicated about who God is. This humble resonance of agreements can be very powerful, especially for those who have difficulty encountering God through shared musical experiences alone.

Perhaps you can start by asking yourself some wacky "lateral thought" questions like, "What would the essence of this worship set communicate if it were a smell? As a physical arrangement of people? Is there an object or image that is closely connected with this idea for me or for my community?" And so on.

Another way of asking these questions is this: "What part of God's Story is it that we are telling here, and what is the ideal setting or backdrop for telling that part of the story – and for helping it to come alive here in our community?" If you can't answer any of these questions, ask a "lateral thinker'" you trust.

8. DELEGATE THE SPACE CRAFTING.

The worship leaders that I am familiar with are generally under a fairly hefty load of responsibilities and demands. Seek out the "artsy-touchy-feely" people in your community who are gifted in these areas of sensitivity, who are good at organizing and creating human-friendly spaces, and who have the humility and character to serve. Tell them what you are trying to communicate through the worship set, share any vision you have for the space with them, and then wind them up and watch them go!



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