How To Bring Your Congregation Forward In Worship

We all know the feeling. On any given week, the worship leader has invested hours of work preparing for that 20 minutes, 30 minutes, or 45 minutes of musical worship expression on Sunday. Themes have been chosen, songs have been selected, arrangements have been decided, and the band has been well-rehearsed. Then, Sunday morning comes.



The musicians are on time, the sound people are ready to roll, and the visuals – they are pristine in both beauty and the spelling of the words. Ready, set… wait… the congregation. Right. The *congregation* is the other element in the collaboration that is the worship experience – and perhaps the most important one at that. Last week there was little engagement, even though you did *everything* right. What happened?

They come in from scattered worlds – relationally, economically, and spiritually – to that Sunday gathering. You count in the first song this week, hoping the sound is good in the room, and watch for their response. While it's better than last week, it still feels like an "ouch." Hours of hard work later, you remember that the congregation's participation, or lack thereof, has everything to do with the experience.

Here are 4 steps that I hope can help you bring your congregation forward in worship:

1. Take Your Time

First of all, we must define what "bringing our congregation forward in worship" means to us. If our goal is simply to see more visible, outward expression in gathered worship – we may find ourselves on the wrong side of God. If, however, our goal is help the congregation experience a higher level of engagement in worship, then we have a worthy goal before us.

Change takes time. Like an ocean liner, needing to alter its direction, the best changes occur incrementally, over a long distance, and long period of time. Little by little, unfamiliar ideas become familiar. Over time, many little changes can yield big results. Be in this for the long haul, and for the good of your community. If you are in a rush –get off the stage. This may be about you. God's dream is for you to carry His heart as you patiently lead your group forward in worship. Don't push too fast.

2. Find The Sweet Spot

Who is your congregation? Every community has an historic way of expressing worship. In other words, people came to that church for a reason. They come in part because something about the worship environment drew them. What has connected them, and inspired them, to date?

Who is your congregation? Why did these people choose to come to your church in the first place? Knowing the answers to these questions can help you understand what small changes you can make to increase your congregation's engagement in worship. For example, a church familiar with hymns will resist a quick change to a contemporary sound. A church familiar with a contemporary sound will resist the interjection of too many hymns, too fast. Change their church, but honor their sweet spot along the way.

In other words, know the sweet spot, and work with it. Do hymns with a contemporary style and chorus to lead that first congregation forward just a step. In the second case, use hymns sparingly in your contemporary set for a time, until they grow on people and become a part of their worship language set. If it's a sound volume (worship accompaniment vs. worship immersion) issue, address it.

3. Model, Gather, Teach

There is no quick way to bring your congregation to a place of greater engagement, but all can grow. When we *model*, we embody the approach to worship we want to see replicated. When we *gather*, we create environments for fresh ideas. When we *teach*, we give a context for change.

Here is my 3-step process that may help you inspire your congregation to greater engagement along your shared worship journey.

Model the approach, attitude and engagement level you want to see replicated in your worshiping community. Choose people, even coach people, who will likewise represent that level of engagement in front of your church during worship.

Gather people to unique worship settings where you can experiment with fresh ideas and approaches to their worship experience. Manage their expectations, and physically say "We're going to try something new. Here is what we'll do." (Worship Circles can help.)

Teach about engagement with God through songs. Instruct people how to approach the worship time, the songs that have been chosen, and the heart behind why we worship together.

4. Listen To Their Journey

Knowing what to do next, and the speed at which to do it, is more about listening than doing. Put your ear to the ground in the community. How are they handling the shifts emotionally? Is engagement higher? Have you looked at the practical hindrances to engagement? Listen.

Put your ear to the ground, and listen to the emotional noise that goes on before, during and after each incremental change. Ask people how they responded to that "new moment" that was unfamiliar to them in that worship set. When people come to you with complaints, listen closely to what they are saying. You will often hear, behind their pain, a love for the familiar, and a longing for their sweet spot to get some air time.

Serve Your Church With A Pastor's Heart

You are there to pastorally serve your church in worship. Serve their discipleship, rather than pushing them toward the style of another church. As you listen, and make incremental changes, your congregation will move forward in their engagement during worship.

Question: What steps are you taking to move your congregation forward in their worship experience?

Resource: Here is my Whiteboard Worship Training video and color PDF version of this. These ideas are also in the Essentials In Worship course.

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About The Author: Dan Wilt is the creator of WorshipTraining's Essentials In Worship Video Training Course for worship leaders and teams. His worship leadership blog serves up weekly tools and team encouragements at DanWilt.com.