

by Mike O'Brien

As the Christmas season approaches the demands for those overseeing the worship experience in our faith communities multiplies exponentially. Just like others our calendars fill up with parties, pageants, and family gatherings but unlike everyone else, as musicians, we are responsible for adding the soundtrack to the season. That means recruiting more volunteers, more prep time, more rehearsals, and more stress. If you are like me, EVERY Christmas in memory (since I was 5 years old) has some sort of production attached to the season. Every. Single. Year. This yearly rhythm can steal our joy and get us into a mode of just surviving the season.

For my first ten years in full time ministry I loathed Christmas. My language and face would "bring it", but deep inside I despised the songs, the goodwill, and the same old message. December 26th was the real celebration! The expectations of my pastor and staff were often too much to bear. The worship/music personnel always seemed to have to work so much harder as everyone else enjoyed the season. For years I would be the last one to leave our Christmas Eve service, locking up the building and walking to my car was so lonely. I felt used and abused. I was over it.

It should come as no surprise that during a Christmas season several years ago I had a breakdown. As a result, my pastor and I agreed some things needed to change. I sought counsel during that next year and was able to recalibrate my heart and mind to more sustainable pace. I had deep seated judgements and attitudes that were actually sinful and packed full of lies. I took that next year off of leading "Christmas"; it was incredibly powerful to just sit through the season and worship! Equipped with a fresh perspective and some tools, I returned the following year and actually enjoyed leading worship through the Christmas season. Here are some lessons learned in my journey that will help you not only survive, but thrive this Christmas!

Be a RECLAIMER

Instead of running from, or overreacting to cultures misappropriation of Christmas, spend your time and energy reclaiming the season for His glory. Reclaim the songs. Reclaim the monotony. Reclaim the focus. When you sing on Sunday, worship your guts out to the classic Christmas hymns. Teach your congregations to actually worship God, instead of just mindlessly singing along. You might need to use more cues or encouragements as you lead

like “worship Him!” or “lift your voice in praise”. Encourage your bands to worship fully with their bodies. Including scriptures and responsive readings will engage people into a deeper devotion. For those outside the Christian faith, Christmas might just be about holiday songs and gifts, but for those who have been saved, we know a truer meaning and purpose if the incarnation.

Worship Leaders, let’s be shepherds for our congregations; lead them to a rich incarnational worship.

Be PREPARED

As it relates to organizational planning for the Christmas season make sure that your pastor and staff work out all expectations ahead of time and commit the “who does what” to paper. Once a plan is set, these expectations will keep additional weight from being added to your workload as the warmth of Christmas turns up the heat! When the pastor’s aunt Carol (who sings a cherished version of “Christmas Shoes”) makes a surprise visit, there is less of a chance you will have to learn the song two days before she arrives if a solid plan is already in place.

Just as an examples, here is a list of what is expected of me this Christmas:

- Hang Banner on Front of Church
- Produce and Orchestrate Christmas Eve Service
- Lead some Carols on Guitar during the staff Christmas Party
- Pastor wants a special song during the Christmas Eve Service
- Pastor wants a choir during a couple services

Knowing what I am doing allows me to honor my leaders and my family as we get to crunch time. I know what the goal is and how I will reach it. Once the list is accomplished I can easily take on any additional unforeseen changes.

Make sure that you clarify *your* expectations as well. Ask for help and delegate. For instance, I ask that at least one staff member wait and help me lock up on Christmas Eve so I don’t feel so isolated in that critical time. I’ve asked our Kid’s Director to decorate the building since it drains me and she finds it very life giving!

Worship Leaders, prepare for the Christmas season by knowing clearly and owning the role you play in your church’s celebration.

Be A STORYTELLER

Worship leaders are storytellers. We tell of God's story of creation, incarnation, resurrection, and eternity. Leaving out a part of the story is just not a good plan! If we see Christmas as just the birth of Christ, we miss something truly beautiful. The weeks that precede Christmas are a precious time of longing and waiting. Just like the Israelites that were longing for a King, we re-enter into that narrative. Similar to Lent (the season before Easter), Advent is a time that we bring all our hopes and unfulfilled desires to God.

Advent is a crescendo. A stirring. A journey. Advent is not just a time to sing song cheery Christmas hymns, but it's a time to sing to the God that waits with us. You can come alongside those that are waiting for something. As a community we walk alongside those who long to be married, those struggling with infertility, the sick, the jobless, and the poor. We, like the Israelites are longing for heaven, longing for a King. Even though we already know the end of the story, it helps to retell it and to walk inside of it. As worship leaders, we write the and sing the soundtrack of this longing of the heart.

The slow rubble of the timpani gives birth to a crash and celebration of Christmas day! All that expectation makes day of Christmas a true celebration. We reach our destination on Christmas day and enjoy fruits of our newborn King for the season into the new year.

Worship Leaders, consider it an honor to tell the story of incarnation again and again. Remember that some are new to the faith and we all benefit from hearing it year after year.

CREATE for Christmas

One of the best ways to drive out the worship leader grinch is to create new art for the advent liturgy. For songwriters lyrical themes of longing, new life, and expectation work well in this season. In worship service prep, creating a new order of worship can help make you feel like you are contributing rather than just going through the motions. Try stripping down existing hymns to their basics and adding new instrumentation, readings or languages that will breathe new life into what is otherwise mundane. These new creations will inspire your bands and awaken congregation to worship afresh.

Several years ago our church produced a Christmas record. We now actually look forward each year to singing those original songs again! It's really wonderful to have a batch of songs that don't wear out as quickly because they are only employed 4-6 weeks at a time.

Worship Leaders, find something fresh to say each Christmas season that you play a part in creating.