7 Trends That Are Changing Contemporary Worship

And Why Every Worship Leader Should Be Aware Of Them

As I walk into my office each day, a quote greets me. I printed it out many years ago, and keep it on a music stand in my daily view. It is not a Scripture quote, nor is it a poster platitude meant to keep me encouraged. Rather it is a *command*; a call to *action*.



The quote is from author Seth Godin, from his book, Tribes. It simply says this:

"Paint a picture of the future. Go there; people will follow."

In our life's work helping people to enter into God's Story through worship, this quote reminds us that we can proactively work with the Holy Spirit in shaping the worship life of the Church both within – and beyond – our lifetime.

A Forward Looking Church

Most churches, and in fact, possibly most leaders, are not seeing beyond their next 5-10 years of vision – let alone beyond their own lifetime. This keeps us all living in a very small story, and obscures our vision of what is important in worship now that will impact the Church centuries in the future.

The Church, I believe, has a mandate and responsibility to be the most forward-thinking, trend-setting womb of innovation that exists on the planet – while always staying rooted in the most ancient of narratives and practices. In other words, we must always be looking forward, while reaching backward, as we live with passionate devotion to Christ in the present.

In practical terms, many of us need to hear again that 1970 was almost *50 years ago*. That's an entire half century. And times, as Dylan sang, are always changing.

We need to ask: "God, what are you doing now in worship – what must remain in our worship practices and styles, and what renewed forms of worship would you like to further reform at this time in history?"

The following is my attempt to ask that question, and to come up with some answers.

7 Trends That Are Changing Contemporary Worship

The following trends are those I perceive as I listen to the academic, local church, and popular voices to which I have access through social media, websites, books, and my relational networks.

I humbly offer 7 trends I see from my own limited vantage point. There may be more.

1. A Movement From Individual Experience To Individual + Community Experience

"Expressive individualism" is a term coined by sociologist Robert Bellah to describe the highest value in our culture today – that of people fully expressing their individuality without reservation (special thanks to Rich Nathan for drawing my attention to this idea).

Throwing off all shackles, the individual's desires and preferences are god, affirmed by our celebrity creeds about personal authenticity and our constant hunger to "do our own thing." No one should legislate any restraint that would limit any person's self-expression (unless, of course, they are explicitly harming someone else in a way we corporately agree is unacceptable).

In the Church, I sense us waking up to how deeply this prevailing cultural view has permeated the Church, and we are being pressed to action by the Spirit of God.

Instead of continuing to host worship services where everyone feels like they are in their own personal worship cubicle with God, "doing their own thing," the Body of Christ must reclaim our most high-participation, community-oriented practices in worship.

Singing is just one of them. The Eucharist, the passing of the peace, joining in responsive readings, and engaging in more roundtable approaches to teaching are all ways I see worship changing to confront the expressive individualism of our time.

People want to experience truly communal worship on a Sunday morning; not an education Christian show in which they've been invited to sing a bit. We have work to do here.

2. A Movement From Church Rhythms To Church + Personal Rhythms

Many Christians today are realizing that weekly church services, with a few community connections in between, are not teaching Christians to be self-feeding disciples.

Almost by instinct there is a recovering of our need to develop daily rhythms and spiritual habits in our lives. These habits leverage the neuroplasticity in our brains as we partner with God in the changing of our thinking on a day by day basis.

The resurgence of hunger for daily devotionals, for the daily office, and for more ancient practices such as pauses for prayer, mediation, and thanksgiving during the day – these are all examples of an instinctive need we have for daily habits to counter our frenetic, always-on, smart phone driven, 21st century way of life.

We must stop talking about worship in weekly increments, and start talking about worship in daily increments.

3. A Movement From Contemporary-Only Elements To Ancient-Future Elements

Younger Christians long not only for an imminent, or "now" sense of connection with God, on an individual basis. They are hungering for, and thriving on, a sense of connection to the ancient Church and the multi-generational Church in the midst of worship.

I humbly suggest that separating out all our age groups for their own personal times of worship may enhance our ability to serve them from points of preference (which I don't see as a problem, generally), but may also be damaging a Church that longs to worship with all generations in one accord.

We need to find ways to come together, while retaining separate environments. Music is only one option for this. the problem is, because many contemporary churches only have music as their primary worship practice, they try to create *all* of this connection through the music. How limiting.

More ancient communal practices bring us together in worship, in a way the music sometimes cannot. The musical experience in worship is no longer being seen as the only, or even primary, expression of worship, while the Eucharist is taking a fresh place in many evangelical churches.

Responding to this trend will cause to reflect on, and possibly change, our worship practices. But it is necessary if we want a historically rooted, yet culturally dynamic, worship discipleship. This is ancient-future worship.

We can all make small changes here, based on discernment in our local churches, as they will be vital to our future as the people of God.

4. A Movement From Experiential Worship To Experiential + Missional Worship

The movement of which I am a part, the Vineyard, was seminal in launching today's contemporary worship movements. Based on a more "frontier-model" of worship expression, people from many denominations began to experience the presence of God.

In the Vineyard movement we've watched God encounter people in worship, in miraculous, healing ways, for decades. This has fueled our faith to welcome God's intimate presence to shape what happens in the context of corporate worship, and has remained a value we hold high as we prepare worship experiences for the churches we represent each week.

Today, that same desire to experience God is high in this generation, but people are less and less content to go to church and to feel satisfied just having met with God. They want to *do* something with that encounter, with that overflow of love they have experienced in their hearts.

Many want to pour out that love through social means – caring for the poor, restoring broken elements in society, and living creational lives that see permeable lines between what we've called the sacred and the secular.

Cultivating this experiential and missional value in worship falls to the local church.

Planning worship must become more than selecting songs to which people will emotionally respond. Planning worship, once again, becomes the task of discipling our congregations through intentional and trained leadership.

5. A Movement From Emotional Expression To Emotional + Intellectual Expression

There is a wild push on, evidenced by the increasing hipness of taking pot-shots at the lyricism of many contemporary worship songs, to bring more theologically intentional and expansive worship expressions into the body of contemporary worship work.

This is a reaction to the "Jesus is my boyfriend" generalization to which many from more liturgical or academic worlds react negatively.

A *both-and* songwriting culture is stirring, where songs that are simple responses of love to God are being embraced as necessary and biblical, and yet songs that have depth and story are valued as welcome additions to the body of worship work of the 21st century Church.

In many ways, one could say we need worship expressions that give us "a little for the left brain, and a little for the right" (if that brain science is still current). This engages *everyone* in the room.

In my view, this both-and approach is what the Church, and the world around us, is longing to see – a people of the heart and mind. We should create, and incorporate, both kinds of expressions.

6. A Movement From Accompaniment To Immersion Environments – And Back Again

This is a challenging one for us today. The younger generation wants to feel surrounded by the music of worship, entering into a truly communal experience by sharing an encounter with God in ways that often involve more listening than singing.

Worship, in this setting, can seem to some to be a concert – but actually (as those that go to rock concerts know) this can be a highly communal, bonding experience.

Immersion environments have their share of problems, but they can also to serve a beautiful purpose when created wisely. Immersive environments are environments in which healing can occur.

However, accompaniment environments are enjoying a resurgence as a reaction to some churches taking the immersion environment to an extreme (lights, smoke, stages, and overwhelming personalities).

(I also note here that I see a trend toward wordless, healing expressions of music that don't put words or prayers in the mouths of the faithful. *Selah*.)

I further explore all of this here.

We must be alert to our need to create more "environments" that immerse people in a sonic, visual, and prayerful experience that gives the soul an opportunity to let down its guard for God to minister deeply to

hidden needs in a safe place. Silent, immersive environments are as important as musical ones. However, when immersion environments become too much, we need to get back to creating some accompaniment environments to re-engage the community and to counter any spectator mentality that has been nurtured.

7. A Movement From Narrating Our Story To Narrating God's Story + Our Story

The contemporary worship trajectory has had some real, helpful criticism aimed at its inherent suggestion that "my personal encounter with God" is the primary end goal of worship.

Thousands of years of church history, and voices like the late Robert Webber (and the Institute of Worship Studies that bears his name and work) call us again and again to remember that worship experiences are meant, from start to finish, to re-narrate God's Story.

God's Story sits at the *center* of the worship experience, from the time people enter to the time they leave. Musical worship facilitates this, but is just one way we narrate God's Story with Him, for the world.

However, our story within God's Story is diverse, beautiful, and challenging. Our human story continues to need to be narrated and framed for the world in light of God's story.

It's time for contemporary worship leaders to start caring about the story they are feeding the churches they lead in worship by asking: "Are we effectively narrating the Story of God in our worship expressions each week? Are we narrating our own story as human beings in our day and time in light of that larger, more primary, Story?"

Conclusion

This list is by no means comprehensive, but rather offers a few possible indicators that as the world around us is changing, so too must the worship directions of our contemporary churches.

The old is becoming new again, and what was new a few decades ago is taking its place as one transforming, vital part of the Church's worship work for the ages.

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Question: How is worship changing in your church, and do you see any of these trends at play?

Resource: I explore how these shifts affect pastors, worship leaders, songwriters, universities, the worship industry, and the radio industry in *Worship White Noise*.

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