

Words on Worship from the Worship Travel Team

“Giving direction to worship at Asbury United Methodist Church”

- submitted by Pastor Ryan Christenson

Who/what is this “Worship Travel Team”?

Last spring the Worship Committee commissioned a small group of people to spend the summer purposefully reflecting and giving direction to the 11:00 praise worship service at Asbury. A group of people were selected from various ages, backgrounds, and worship preferences to articulate their own feelings and hear the thoughts of the others. Our charge was this: “to purposefully reflect on worship life at Asbury, asking how God is calling us to engage in authentic and meaningful worship”.

So for four Sundays this summer, this group of people traveled to another church to experience their worship service. We visited “The Bridge” in Johnston, First Presbyterian Church in Fort Dodge, Praise Community Church in Mason City, First United Methodist Church in Ames, and the “FaithSpring” worship experience at Collegiate United Methodist Church and Wesley Foundation in Ames.

Following each worship service, our team met with the worship leadership at the host church. Our discussion ranged from deeply theological questions like “How do you maintain a sense of unity in a church that has three different styles of worship?” to simpler questions like “What resources do you use to select your music?”

We would then go to lunch. After moving every table in the restaurant to our liking, we would gather around for a time of reflection. First, we would reflect on that morning’s worship experience. “How was this worship unique?” “How was this worship similar to Asbury?” “How would this shape worship at Asbury?” One of the wonderful aspects of having such a diverse group was having a time when people could hear and appreciate the opinion of someone coming from a very different perspective.

Each gathering, we discussed one of the four books chosen to deepen our understanding of “worship” and to offer us another voice. These books were: *One Church, Four Generations* by Gary McIntosh, *How Shall We Worship* by Marva Dawn, *The Future of Protestant Worship* by Ronald Byars, and *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World* by Tex Sample. These are great guides for worship, and so these books are available in the library for you to read and consider.

Our summer culminated with a day-long trip to Ames. We visited two churches, and worship book-ended our day. The time between worship we spent reflecting, collecting our thoughts, and moving with consensus on the following question: “What do we want to say to the people of Asbury?” It was a tough question, but the group was ready. Here is a collection of their thoughts, keeping in mind that many of the ideas are particular to the 11:00 “Praise” service but many of the thoughts are appropriate to every person no matter their preference of worship style or time.

What we have to say about worship to the people of Asbury United Methodist Church

“It’s all about God.” We worship most fully when we come to worship God. Time and time again, our reading and our reflection emphasized that our focus must be on God. We are all guilty of saying, “What do I get out of worship?” or “This is the way I want to worship.” Each of us must come with one primary purpose: to offer ourselves to God in praise and thanksgiving. We must lose our individual pride and come humbly before God. Why? Because it’s all about God.

“Different people worship God in different ways, and that’s ‘OK’.” Some of us prefer organ hymns. Others prefer the gospel sung in country and bluegrass. Some prefer Christian music played over today’s airwaves. Some of us connect with communal prayer when we all say a prayer together. Some people find prayer through music. Some pray only in silence. God’s creativity is nowhere more evident than in the diversity of people who gather to worship, and “worship” reflects this diverse creativity. Perhaps not every aspect of worship is “the way I would prefer”, but we are called to respect that other faithful Christians do prefer that particular style or aspect. Only together, can we reflect the fullness of worship God desires.

“‘Tradition’ and ‘Contemporary’ are important aspects of every worship service.” Sometimes we use the words *traditional* and *contemporary* to describe a style of worship. Sometimes these words are used in a prideful or derogatory manner reflecting our own preferences in style. As we reflected, we realized that both are essential to fully worship God. We must have Tradition—a sense of “who we are” and “whose we are”. At its best, Tradition is like a trusted conversation partner that gives us perspective for our lives today. At the same time, our worship must be “Contemporary.” At its best, this challenges us make sure that our worship is meaningful, applicable, and authentic to this people, in this time, and in this place. As such, we must strive for all of our worship services to be both Contemporary and Traditional no matter its style.

“We desire creativity as an answer to ritual boredom.” Ronald Byars describes ritual boredom as “the inability to connect with what’s happening in worship”. Perhaps this words describes more of us than we’d like to imagine. We believe that worship is a time where God and our God-given creativity may inspire our worship and “re-present” the glory of God to all who gather. In the coming weeks and months the people of Asbury United Methodist Church will be moving to reflecting the truth and beauty of God in our worship.

“God created all of our senses for worship, so our worship should immerse our senses in the reality of God.” Let that sentence sink in for a moment. All of our selves are created to glorify God. In centuries past, Protestant worship stripped worship of all of the “smells and bells”. More recent reflections, however, have thought that we are starving to experience God in God’s fullness. So then we asked how we might worship God through our senses of sight, of touch, of hearing, of smell, and of taste. We realized that Christian Tradition offers us a wealth of ways to worship God, and creative reflection provides faithful and fresh ways for today. Here is just a portion of the list we compiled:

- Sight: “Change the lighting for worship.” “Let the natural light of the sun or of candles light our worship.” “Let the color-filled light streaming from the stained glass windows dance over worship.”
- Touch: “We can hold hands during prayer.” “Perhaps some of us pray better when holding something that centers our prayer.” “A prayer shawl reminds us of the love of God and the prayers of the people surrounds us.”

- Hearing: “Let us expand our range of musical styles, accompaniment, and volume.” “Sometimes simple, soft melodies help us hear God.” “Sometimes it’s great to crank up the organ or the music to give a sense of the greatness of God.”
- Smell: “Scripture often references perfume and incense.” “How can we offer a hint of a scent to let people more fully know the glory of God?”
- Taste: (Ok, this one was tough.) “Let us vary the type and taste of Communion bread as appropriate.”

“*Baptism and Communion are central parts of worship.*” Few, if any, moments are as important in a person’s life and in the life of the Church as the Sacrament of Baptism. In Baptism, God offers love and grace in a way experienced at no other time in life or death. Likewise, baptism is a celebration for the Church as another child of God has come into Christ’s fold. It is also a time for each baptized Christian to renew her or his own vows to Christ and Christ’s Church. Baptism is a big thing, and our worship must reflect its importance. Similarly, Communion offers a frequent, repeatable, and real opportunity for us to receive God’s love and grace. As such, we will celebrate Communion every week. During the first week of the month, we will use the full Communion liturgy. Every other week, we will offer communion for those who wish to come forward during the closing song or after worship. At all times, “Christ invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sins, and seek to live at peace with one another.” Let us celebrate these great gifts of Baptism and Communion that God has given us!

“*People of all ages come to worship God. Let us communicate the good news to people of all ages.*” As we gather together in our diversity, we come as people who experience and communicate very differently. Perhaps you have heard, “children today are so different than when I was young.” That is true indeed—especially when it comes to communication. Consider the changes in communication during the last centuries. Hand-written texts changed to printed texts which were succeeded by radio and then by TV. Now we have internet and cell phones. As each new mode of communication comes along, we don’t get rid of the past means of communication, but the people who grow up in a particular “age of communication” reflect that mode of communication. For example, youth today (who grew up with the interactive internet and electronics) think, speak, and act in a more “interactive” way than their parents’, grandparents’, and great grandparents’ generations. That is, simply, the reality of who we are. Therefore, as we use new tools of communication, such as video, images, and internet we are not seeking to entertain anybody. Instead we are seeking to use the best human means to communicate the fullness of the good news of Jesus Christ. Again, one particular mode of communication may not come from your “age of communication”, but all of us have a duty to learn to communicate with each other.

“*We must come humbly before God and before each other.*” Again, worship is all about God. We hope and pray that each person can connect with God, with themselves, and with each other as we gather for worship. Still, what we want dims in comparison to our call to worship God as a community of faith. In *community* there is some give and take as we seek to live together. Don’t lose track of who you are unique and awesome child of God, but let each of us come humbly before God and each other.

A Framework for Worship

We composed a framework to guide our worship planning. Each week, our 11:00 praise service will use this as a foundation from which we build our worship service. Some weeks, we will include one part and not another. Sometimes, we will do the same thing but in a different way. And we hope that all of our worship will help people to grow closer to God and each other.

- *Before the Service* – a variety of CD music will fill the sanctuary to help move people to a time of worship. About 10 minutes before the beginning of worship, our video will change from announcements to meaningful images that draw our thoughts to worship. About 5 minutes before the beginning of worship, our praise team will sing a song to gather us all in to worship.
- *Words of Greeting and Gathering* – the pastor will offer words that help us to remember who we are, why we gather, and to welcome those who are guests among us.
- *Opening Songs and Prayer* – each song is purposefully chosen to help lead us into worship, to reflect the theme of the season or day, and to open our hearts and minds to the presence of God. Likewise our opening prayer invites God to move within us during worship and to help us worship in Spirit and in Truth. Each person is invited to move into a posture of prayer: standing with arms raised, sitting with hands folded, or, perhaps, kneeling in the aisle.
- *Centering Song and Prayer* – we will use a simple song or refrain to help us center our hearts and minds in prayer. The pastor will lift up prayers on behalf of the whole congregation, and we will join together in the Lord's Prayer.
- *Assurance of Forgiveness and Passing the Peace* – the pastor will remind us of God's forgiveness. Then as people who have been forgiven and reconciled with God we turn to "pass the peace" to others in worship. Passing the peace is more than saying, "Good morning," or "Hello." In passing the peace, we are seeking to say to each other, "May God's blessing be with you today."
- *Children's Sermon* – while we hope that children are engaged and involved in all aspects of worship, this is a time to communicate directly to them.
- *First Scripture* – this will be read by somebody who is not a pastor, representing that each of us has a part in the proclamation of the Word of God.
- *Chancel Choir or other Special Music* – people offer their music as a gift to God and as a means to draw us deeper in worship.
- *2nd Scripture and Sermon* – the pastor seeks to speak Word of God in meaningful and relevant ways.
- *Offering* – this is a time to reflect on the Word just spoken and an opportunity to return to God a portion of what we have received. This is another opportunity for people to "offer" their gift of special music. The ushers will bring forward our offering during the special music, and our offering will include bread and juice for communion. At the close of the special music, the pastor will say a prayer dedicating our offering and asking God to be active and present in the upcoming Communion. The pastor will also offer other ways that we can offer ourselves unto God.
- *Baptism and Communion* – these are two of the high points of the Christian worship and celebration. Our celebration will seek to incorporate Tradition and creative actions for today. Communion will be celebrated each week. During the first week of each month, we will celebrate the full Communion liturgy. During the other weeks, worshipers are invited to come forward to receive the Lord's Supper.

- *Closing Song* – we again lift our voices in song. People are invited to come forward to the kneeling rail to receive Communion.
- *Benediction* – the pastor speaks words of blessing and sends us out to be Christ in the world.
- *After Worship* – Music will continue in a variety of formats, and people are still invited to come forward to receive Communion.

What comes next?

Now that we've spent the summer reflecting and planning, what comes next? Well, you will begin to see our worship incorporate these suggestions (particularly the 11:00 service). We hope and pray that people are moved to worshipping God more deeply and, in turn, want to help plan and participate in the leadership of worship.

A Word of Thanks

A word of "Thanks" is most appropriate to each person who was part of this Worship Travel Team: Marilynn Grubb, Donna Foster, Gayle Anderson, Brian Cushman, Claire Corrow, Kory Lemon, Betsy Hoover, and Gary Scholtens. Each of these persons freely and faithfully came together to wrestle with how Asbury might more faithfully and more fully worship God.

Also, thank you to you, the people of Asbury United Methodist Church. You sent this group of people out on your behalf. Now, I invite you to receive their words with thanks. Also, I personally thank you for the freedom and flexibility to allow me leave from our worship services to lead this group.

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Ryan