

# **Transformational Worship**

**Dr. R. Warren Lathem**

**District Superintendent      Atlanta Marietta District  
North Georgia Conference      The United Methodist Church**

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Recently I was speaking with a District Superintendent of the South Central Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church. In his relatively new role of supervision, he has been attempting to visit all the churches in his district to experience their worship life together. He shared with me how disappointing the experience of worship has been in a large number of churches. He asked me how the church, in particularly the role of the DS, can enhance the worship experience in his churches.

Therefore, I have decided to address the issue for the pastors of the Atlanta Marietta District (and others) and to do so before I have had a chance to visit in very many churches. In 2001 I had opportunity for four months to visit in any churches of my choosing. This was the first time in 30 years I had been able to do so. It was my experience that only about one out of four churches had the quality of worship that caused my wife to say when we left the service, "I could worship there."

Since I have not yet been in many churches of the Marietta District for worship, I want to give some of the insight others have given me through the years. You will know that these thoughts do not arise from experiencing your service of worship. I hope this can be helpful for you in planning and conducting effective, meaningful worship. It is my experience that those with a "teachable spirit" can learn from just about anyone, including me. May God grant you to hear what the Spirit will say through my imperfect observations and concepts.

One of the core values of the churches where I have been privileged to serve as pastor has been: Worship is the "hub" of the wheel of the entire church. As such, it will be God-honoring, Christ-glorifying, and Spirit-led.

There is nothing we do as the body of Christ that is more important than worship. Corporate Worship, Public Worship is at the very center of the life of the church. Our churches will never be any better than our worship experience together. Hence worship demands the very best we can bring to the task.

When I was in seminary in the 1970's it was popular to say that worship was the play conducted by the congregation for the audience and pleasure of God. This view made worship a very theo-centric experience. Since God was the audience, what we said and did had little significance except to God. Hence, whether or not it was meaningful to the participants was of almost no consideration. "Proper" worship was described and proscribed.

While this is not the sole reason for the decline of the United Methodist Church for the last 30 years, it has been a major contributor. Ineffective worship kills the soul of the church. When the church is ineffective at its center, its hub, it becomes ineffective in most, if not all, other ways.

In order to analyze the effectiveness of worship and proper ways to worship it is imperative that we clearly understand the purpose of the church. Our mission is to Make Disciples of Jesus Christ. Therefore, everything we do should contribute to and enhance the fulfillment of our mission. This is certainly true of worship. That which lies at the center of what we do and determines how we exist should very clearly have as its intent to Make Disciples.

This causes us to ask the question: What is the business of the church? The business of the church is transformation: transformed lives, transformed churches, transformed communities, and a transformed world.

If the business of the church is transforming lives, what is the essential ingredient in transformation? A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the means of transformation. It is as we are transformed by the grace of Jesus that we lead in the transformation of our churches, our communities and our world.

Worship, then, is an essential element in the work of the church in transforming lives through the grace of Jesus. Worship that wins, transforming worship, will have at least these characteristics:

### **1. Transformational Worship Experiences the Divine, Transcendent/Imminent God**

Much of our worship experience has been about God. We talk about God. We pray about God. We sing about God. We preach about God. We tell each other what God wants from us. Too little of our worship has been *experiencing* God. People who attend effective worship, transforming worship, often say things like, “You could really feel the presence of God in that service;” “God was present in our service today;” or “I experienced the power of God in our worship today.”

Every one of us has been to far too many services that were simply devoid of the presence and power of God. Too many of us have led too many services that were correctly performed but lacked the power and presence of God. Too many of our churches have for too long experienced worship that is missing the presence of God. We have almost forgotten the nature of vital worship. We think worship in which we rarely experience the presence and power of God is normative for the church.

Worship in which the worshippers experience the presence and power of God is so unique that we are compelled to comment on it even if our comments are negative and condescending. We have worked so improperly diligently at our “performance” of the worship service that any experience of God is outside the agenda. At those rare moments

when God breaks through, such as during a solo, a lay testimony, guided prayer or the occasional sermon, we are both surprised and wonder how that could have happened.

Effective, transforming worship begins with the genuine invocation of the presence of God. This invocation will vary with the style of worship in which we participate, but is indicative of the beginning of the service. We want, we need, we invoke God to be with us and to reveal God's very nature to us.

An old Appalachian folk hymn has these words: "All is vain unless the spirit of the Holy One comes down. Brethren pray that Holy Manna will be showered all around."

Early pioneer Methodists understood the absolute necessity of experiencing the presence of God in worship as well as the vanity of worshipping apart from that Divine Presence. We will recapture that awareness again as we discover anew the blessing of worship in which the worshippers experience the presence and power of God.

How does this happen? One of the critical needs for effective worship is the need for spiritual leadership from the pastor and lay leaders of the congregational worship experience.

On one occasion, John Wesley was asked why so many people came to hear him preach. His response was something like this: "God sets me on fire and they come to watch me burn."

Effective worship, transforming worship is led by people who have been set on fire by the power of the Holy Spirit long before they enter into the leadership role of worship. Rarely will a worship experience transcend the preparation and spirituality of the leader of worship.

I know what it is to be burning with the presence of the Holy Spirit as I step into the sanctuary to lead worship. I also know what it is to be cold and indifferent. Unfortunately, I have led far too many worship services in which I was unprepared to lead the people of God into the presence of God, for I had not been there myself.

Experience has taught me that the preparation for effective, transformational worship begins in the heart of the worship leaders. When we are unprepared to lead, ineffective worship, uninspired worship is the result.

How do we prepare to lead effective, transforming worship? By practicing the spiritual disciplines. Wesley understood and taught that the neglect of the spiritual disciplines leads to a coldness of heart which results in dead worship experiences. There is no substitute for the daily practice of the presence of God. There is no substitute for worship leaders also being spiritual leaders of their congregations.

In the early church, the people of Jerusalem took note of the apostles that "they had been with Jesus." Our people will know and our worship services will reflect it if we have

taken time to “be with Jesus.” There is no other substitute for this experience in preparing us to experience the presence of God in our worship services.