

Reaching Up & Out with Worship

Contributed by Krysia Lear
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The Israelites understood it. So did the medieval playmakers and early Salvation Army band leaders taking worship to the streets with music, movement and devotion leads people into God's Presence.

Today, as this old concept takes on a contemporary edge, it has gained a new name: "evangelistic worship." This may be the latest buzz phrase, but according to Andrew Smith, worship leader at the New Life Vineyard, Kelowna, B.C., the Lord is speaking "independently" about it to people all over the world.

Worship Attracts

Worship provides a double impact in outreach. Spectacle and joyful expression naturally attract people to listen and even participate. Think of the Marches for Jesus in our cities and towns -- teens caught up in the beat, shoppers asking what's up, and people stepping off sidewalks to join the parade.

In Taipei, Taiwan, this August Christians captured media attention with a parade. As part of the Youth for Christ International's World Convocation, 400 delegates carrying flags from 127 countries marched to the Presidential Office to pray for the youth of the world. The English-language China Post, as well as Chinese papers, gave the event generous coverage that clearly described the focus on Jesus.

After we get people's attention, our worship has the potential to make onlookers aware that we enjoy a personal love relationship with God. Those seeking meaning in life want something similar for themselves.

True worship, with its impact on all aspects of life, creates identity for Christians that in turn helps outsiders find God. Song writer and worship leader, David Ruis, notes that this inclusiveness sets us apart as God's people as it did the Israelites. They lived inside His Lordship in every area of their lives: to obey God's commandments was to worship Him. The pagans noticed this life of worship in the fields and markets and realized that God offered a unique relationship.

God Happens

But more important, when worship happens, God shows up.

If we long to see men and women encounter God, then according to worship leader David Ruis, it make sense to do the very thing that invites Him -- to worship in their midst, on the streets.

Ruis points out that the Bible is full of images of people responding profoundly to God's Presence: priests fell under the "glory," Moses took off his shoes on holy ground, women like Hannah performed extravagant acts of sacrifice and even angels cry out before the Lord.

This pattern continues today as God's Presence convicts even people determined to stay in sin. It can especially be put to good use in public settings.

A Pattern for God's People

Throughout history, declares Ruis, "it has been God's heart to establish a worshipping people who draw the 'foreigners' unto Himself in the midst of the nations (Is 56)." The Israelites' processions, dance and music did this.

In recent centuries Christians have capitalized on the public's interest in oratory and singing -- John Wesley preached and used hymns written by his brother, Charles, while Billy Graham works with music leader Cliff Barrows.

Yet some church people still hesitate at newer types of events. Ruis counters the tendency to keep worship within church walls by pointing to the inclusiveness of Israelite worship. In the Hebrew mind, worship reached beyond just singing in a group setting. It was integral to all of life.

He says: "We might therefore also ask, can worship happen outside church walls? The answer is a resounding, 'Yes' since true worship comes from the heart and reflects a life consistent with God's ways." When the key is not "doing worship" but being a worshipper, the place of worship becomes secondary to the one worshipping and the focus of his/her worship.

Paralleling this growing acceptance of an inclusive view of worship has been greater interest in the arts in our churches. Once oratory and musical performance drew people. Today the creative arts and inter-active innovative events reach the hearts and minds of those who enjoy our multi-media world. It also feeds their souls.

Four years ago Pam Steingard looked out in shock to see her church packed for a Good Friday dance dramatization, Scenes of the Cross. Having expected far fewer for the event she had organized at her church, Jubilee Christian Fellowship in Stratford, Ontario, she realized how hungry people were for creative expression that reflects their spiritual longing. Steingard, who lives in the home town of the Stratford Festival, now has a growing ministry giving pastoral oversight to a creative arts kinship group that she says "is really taking off."

On Canada Day in Langley, B.C., Christian Life Assembly is the "only game in town" according to pastor Brent Cantelon. Since 1987 the church has hosted a Canada Day party for the community: in 1996 the "entry-level" evangelistic event attracted from 10,000 to 12,000 people. Local papers covered it; other churches used it for outreach.

This summer more than 300 volunteers from this Pentecostal assembly demonstrated their love for the community and honoured God with their service. They ran a kids' carnival inside, played non-stop country music outside, marshalled a flag parade and checked handicaps on the mini golf courses. In the evening they welcomed guests to a concert of "listener-friendly" Christian music followed by fireworks bursting into the night.

During the concert Cantelon reminded guests that we must depend on God for guidance in Canada and in his five-minute talk invited them to consider Christ and the Church. In later months, he reported, many testify from the baptismal tank that they first came to the church on Canada Day.

A few years ago people at Spring Garden Baptist Church, Toronto, vied for tickets so they could invite friends to a contemporary musical, Chosen Voices. The writer and composer set the Easter conflict in terms the audience understood. As a mother, Mary sings her despair when God seems to have abandoned her and her son. In haunting lines, John promises to remember Jesus with "every meal of bread and wine, With each detail carved in my mind."

As a secondary benefit, churches that encourage innovation provide a training ground and hopefully, a safe place for people to experiment. In developing Chosen Voices, writer Trish Wilkinson and composer Alan Wiseman, also a worship leader for the Ontario Renewal Network, expanded their range: both gained directing and production experience. Wilkinson, who in many ways prefers the solitude of the playwright, says she has learned how to work with and get the best out of a team.

The most striking response to a musical production occurred in 1995 in Modesto, CA, where cars jammed the streets and people cooked hot dogs in the parking lot while waiting for a seat at Calvary Temple's production of "Heaven's Gates, Hell's Flames." In what became a powerful move of God, 33,000 came to the Lord in just over one month.

A huge production is not necessary for success. Mime artists and street actors stop shoppers and street kids on main streets from Halifax to Vancouver.

The informality possible in evangelistic worship suits many teens and young adults. Youth for Christ and YWAM both sponsor drama outreach groups.

In addition, the inclusive nature of worship honours the quiet contributions of those less drawn to spectacles. Silently blessing a clerk at a busy check out counter has as great an impact in its way as does a huge event.

Cultivating an attitude centred in honouring Christ is necessary though. During Chosen Voices, for example, the team encountered opposition and problems, some of which were resolved years later. But in the midst of these struggles the leaders focused on God and His resources.

Attitude also turns acts of worship into true worship. Ruis notes that "using the name 'Jesus' in a song does not automatically make it a worship song." Conversely, he comments, a song about life that doesn't mention Jesus but is consistent with God's standards and flows from the heart of a worshipper can be a worship song. "Such a song may never be sung in a church, says Ruis, but it may be sung on the street, in a concert, or in a club where it will evoke worship and cause a "pagan" to question.

True worship is inspired by a reality beyond ourselves and our circumstances. Whether one is leading worship, comments Ruis, or singing in a club, worship results as long as hearts are focused on Jesus. In the words of the Psalmist, "As they make music they will sing. All my fountains are in you (Ps 87)."

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