

My First Celebration

Contributed by Andrew Merrett
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I have been leading worship in

The Community Church for a couple of years now, and generally it has been going very well, thanks to God and His Holy Spirit. This passage describes some of the things I learnt a while ago when I was asked to lead the band at the joint celebration meeting. These happen roughly every two months, and are a time when the three congregations which make up our church meet together.

I was honoured, and excited, to have been asked, but also a little nervous. Any time one is asked to do something that feels like 'another step up' the feeling comes on "Can I do it?". I have been used to leading a fairly small band in a congregation averaging 50-60 people each week; Sunday would be a large band in front of some 300+ people. I started thinking about what would possibly be easier, and what would be harder. I knew that I wouldn't have to do nearly as much work keeping rhythm or melody (I play the keyboard) so there would be more room for experimenting and improvising. In fact, I could probably stop playing for most of the time without much problem. On the other side, though, there would be more communications problems, and ensuring that it was done early enough for the drummer to plan his fills and patterns. The setup would be a lot different too. The whole setup is on a stage, rather than at the same level as the congregation, which I have not really experienced before, and the PA system would be much larger, and probably more unwieldy. Well Sunday came around, and I came prepared with a list of songs and a slight order, that I had prayed over. The setting up was actually quite enjoyable to start with. And then things started to go wrong. The PA was dying around us. And, additionally, in the time before the meeting started, a teenage drama group wanted to practice a sketch, and also needed the PA. It was looking like we were going to run out of time. I did a circuit of the musicians and let them know what was going on, and then I joined the vocalists in a quieter room to go through a song they were a little unsure about. We got onto the stage with twenty minutes to go, ready to have a practice. So I would have liked longer, but we were all ready - so I thought. The drummer could hear himself, not difficult really. The bass player and two guitarists all had amplifiers. The vocalists were waiting for the microphones to be turned on, and you can hear a violin when the violinist is standing right next to you. But my keyboard has no speakers. I need the foldback. Where is it? Problems continued. I decided to try to get the drummer and rhythm guitarist to play through one of the songs, and after a few false starts this seemed OK, so we sang and played with no PA for a bit longer. I did an impromptu description of my ideas for one of the songs, where I wanted to do a special instrumental. I couldn't let them hear how I wanted it to go so I hoped that they'd pick it up when we got there. Voila. The keyboard and microphones have been turned on! Five minutes to go, and we haven't had a full soundcheck yet. Quite a few people have started arriving for the meeting. Then it's a dash for one of the PA people between me and the desk (at the back of the hall) trying to ensure that I, and the band, can hear my voice, and the keyboard, in the foldback monitors. Well we got there in the end. By which time most of the church has arrived, so we do an unplanned song at the beginning, and everything starts to feel better! The main block of worship went very well. The band were excellent, especially given the circumstances, and things happened at that meeting. So, what have I learnt from this?

- God is central - Never forget, right from the start, that the reason you are leading a time of worship is to bring people into a place where they can worship God.
- Planning - Be prepared; and pray about it! Whilst there is certainly a place for being spontaneous, some level of planning is useful, especially when you are working with a large group of people.
- Know your music - Make sure you can play your songs well, and also that you can cover yourself quickly if you do go wrong! Also, have an idea of where you feel the song could go during a meeting. This is not to set down a religious "Verse, chorus, verse, chorus, chorus" or "three times through", as this often counters what the Holy Spirit wants to do; but it helps to understand the musicality of a song.
- Know your band - You don't always have the privilege of choosing your team (I did, which was excellent). But hopefully, as worship leaders and teams within a church, we should be building relationships with one another. The better idea of the strengths and weaknesses of your team, as well as yourself, the easier it will be to work together.
- Stay calm - as with life in general, things will happen (and possibly go wrong) whether or not you worry about them. Worrying won't make things any better, in fact it could make them worse. Remember that God is with you; pray with your team, especially nervous or inexperienced ones.
- Have fun - this might sound irreverent, but I do have fun in practices. It eases tension. It would have been easy for the team to fall apart, but it was held together through little jokes and laughter. Worship is not mutually exclusive to fun.
- Help the PA team - give them as much information about what equipment you need, what's likely to happen during the meeting, and what sort of sound levels you need. As the worship leader, especially, you will often be the main point of contact. Try to stay calm - the PA team are there to serve as well; equipment goes wrong, more severely at some times than others, and it isn't their fault. They are trying to do as good a job serving the church as you and your band are.
- Worship! - you are serving the church, so you can't do some things that you might do in the congregation,

but there is no reason why you can't worship God as you lead. Being aware of the direction of the Holy Spirit is essential to effective leading.

- Thank and encourage - at the end of the meeting, be sure to acknowledge the support of your team. You couldn't do it on your own. If things go wrong, then you might want to discuss them, though straight after a meeting isn't always the best time, even if you do it gently, and does depend on the person and the relationship. If things went well, then make sure your band know that. If someone did well, be sure to encourage them; through feedback musicians will have things to feel good and thank God about, as well as areas that they can work on improving. We all need constructive criticism, so...

- Be ready for comments - depending on how things went, and your relative experience, people will probably encourage and comment. Be ready to accept all words, even if they are uncomfortable. If I had never been given tips and ideas for improving my technique, I would still be stumbling around as a two-week old worship leader. At the same time, don't expect people to tell you everything. Ask people you respect (such as more experienced worship leaders, church leaders, other friends) what they thought. And remember that you will all be more open to one another, and less likely to be offended, if the relationships are good and strong.

- Thank God - He has given you the gifting and increased your abilities. Thank Him for allowing you to be used in service once more. And pray to Him about the issues that came up, both personally and for the team.