

Rural Evangelism Network
A Workbook for Small and Rural Churches
Worship with small numbers

One thing that many of us, who lead worship and preach in small churches, like to do is lead a large congregation from time to time. However, for the majority of us, whether involved in Lay or Ordained Ministry, our call and experience is ministering with small groups and congregations, and for many it is to spend a lifetime of service in such situations. What we all know from experience is that small churches are different from large ones, not only in size but also in hopes and aspirations, history, attitudes and relationships.

What we do in worship and how we practice it, whether in small or large churches depends on a number of factors. For example, how many people are present and their ages, the presence or otherwise of children, the building, the music or lack of it, the willingness or unwillingness of the congregation to try new things, and the worship leader and preacher.

Most small churches are dependent on Local Preachers or Lay Readers and, whilst many may have formal Ministerial oversight, the Minister probably has a number of other churches in his/her charge and so does not appear very often. Most local preachers – and I am one – tend to play it safe, and be fairly traditional when it is not our own church. The result for our 'Free' churches is often a 'hymn-sandwich' - which can hardly be described as exciting or particularly inspirational, and for churches with a liturgical tradition a form which uses much the same wording week by week.

If we believe in a God who is creative – he did, after all, create the world in all its stunning variety, then maybe it is right that we should subject what we do in church on Sundays to a critical appraisal. Worship should reflect something of God's character as well as our faith, hopes and fears, and show something of his interest in us as humans. If God is a God of variety then our worship should reflect something of our understanding of that.

"Christian worship is giving back of all that we have and are to God, in response to his gifts to us in creation and redemption, and involves the whole life of the Christian"
(Barrie White:Regent's Park College, Oxford)

For many of us there is a healthy frustration about leading worship with small numbers. We desire to lead them into God's presence in such a way that they a fresh experience of his grace will lead them out in hope to the world where they live and work week by week. Always we envisage Sunday morning being vibrant, alive, full of the joy of the Holy Spirit, yet so often we go home feeling that we have achieved so little, and we wonder what it all meant to those who faithfully sit in the pews week after week.

I believe there are a number of things we can do to facilitate a more meaningful and life-enhancing experience of worship, even – perhaps particularly – with only a handful of worshippers. I therefore suggest the following areas ...

INVOLVEMENT BY THE CONGREGATION

For the past century at least, most congregations have been educated in the concept that worship is largely led entirely from the front. Is it too much to say that the result is congregations who remain largely uninvolved spectators watching and listening to someone else "doing it"?

The phrase 'priesthood of all believers' is a familiar one, and a significant biblical concept and principle, but if we believe it why don't we practice it?

With some thought and preparation we can involve people in ...

Praying together

All congregations always have people and issues for prayer. Whilst the worship leaders has responsibility for leading the people in prayer for issues and situations both near and far, the prayers of the church should also focus on the more immediate needs of individuals and community. Given enough notice and encouragement, some of those who may have never opened their mouths except to sing the hymns, will be willing to give it a try.

It doesn't have to be threatening. From experience I have found that there are things that work and suggest the following are worth trying ...

- Tell the congregation early in the worship that will be asking for prayer items. When it comes to the prayers ask for them. Write them on your order of service notes or, better still an overhead projector or flip-chart, then either lead them or encourage open prayer.
- Ask individuals beforehand to lead prayers of different types at appropriate points during worship, e.g. adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession.
- If the congregation is not very confident the opportunity to write short prayers. These can then be used personally or shared. Paper and pencils will need to be provided! Alternatively, post-it notes can be used, stuck of as board and then used by the leader.
- Sensitively use responsive prayers, either photocopied or on an overhead projector, are often a help to many people by enabling them to verbally express their own worship in a non-threatening way. A photocopied prayer also enables people to take it away with them for further reflection if they so wish. Of course, those who are used to liturgical forms of worship will be familiar with the use of responses.

Reading the Bible

Christian worship is, or should, very biblically orientated. The public reading of scripture in a corporate environment is a very important part of kingdom life. In 1 Timothy 4:13 the Apostle exhorts Timothy to "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching". A renewed emphasis on this is needed in many churches today. It is undoubtedly true that spiritual growth comes through the public reading of Scripture and its associated preaching. In many churches there are people who would like to read the Bible in church but have never been asked.

How then, might we encourage this to happen. Again, from my own experience I suggest that ...

- The Bible readings are printed out and volunteer readers are asked for before worship commences. There will usually be someone willing. The text can easily be accessed from Websites like www.BibleGateway.com and printed. It should be noted, though, that copyright law prevents photocopying directly from the printed Bible.
- It can be helpful to use different versions of the Bible. Most people today will probably be familiar with the New International Version but others can bring a freshness to the Word and allow it to speak in new ways. Although not all are exact translations, an unfamiliar version can be both ear-catching and

arresting. Using the Dramatised Bible can bring Scripture to life, particularly with the Gospels.

- If there is a small group of people who are willing, they might like to get together to learn to do it better. A good way to do this is to run a 'Reading the Bible in Church' evening when the group can practice pronunciation, putting the right emphasis on phrases and throwing their voices without shouting. It can be good fun as well as developing gifts.

MUSIC

Many small churches struggle with music for several reasons. The most common one is usually the lack of anyone to play the organ. Often not helping is the quality of the instrument itself. The singing ability of the congregation may also be influenced by numbers (the number of people not the numbers of the hymns!), and some people don't much like singing anyway. So, I suggest the following ...

- **Choose music carefully**

It is very important to consider what a congregation can reasonably cope with and what they can't. "For all the saints", for example, is not really suitable for a congregation of six! Nor are tunes like Diadem and the Londonderry Air. The important thing has to be balance – between metres, between contemporary and traditional, between quieter and louder.

- **Plan the place of music carefully**

Equally important is where music and singing is placed in the worship. For instance, other items such as Bible readings and prayers don't have to be separated by singing, nor does singing necessarily need to be separated by other items. Two or more short songs, carefully chosen, can be put together. Many churches seem to have a tradition of four hymns but there is no reason why we shouldn't do it differently.

- **Sing unaccompanied**

Many hymns and songs can be sung fairly easily without music. To my own surprise I have often found that when there is no musician the singing is actually stronger than when there is. Certainly without any musical accompaniment you have to concentrate more on what you're singing.

It might sometimes be appropriate to read a hymn together which otherwise it would be quite unreasonable to expect the congregation to sing, e.g. 'O for a thousand tongues to sing' (Diadem), or 'I cannot tell why he whom angels worship' (the Londonderry Air). Reading a hymn together provides a different, but often helpful, kind of participation in worship.

- **Use pre-recorded music**

Can we be more imaginative and creative?

Some churches have successfully used music that is pre-recorded and intended to be used as accompaniment for congregational singing. Apart from these there are many good Christian CDs available with which you could possibly sing.

Using recorded music – Christian or Classical – can add another dimension to worship and be a source of inspiration – maybe as a time of reflection after reading the Scriptures. Just listening to music with one's own thoughts and prayers can be encouraging, uplifting and a way of releasing people from tensions and allowing them to meet with God. Such music can be used before the worship to help set the tone and create the right atmosphere for people to meet with God. Likewise, used at the conclusion it can send people away feeling

uplifted.

THE ORDER OF SERVICE

Sometimes, as preachers, we are given an order of service. If you are told you can change it then do! It's good for people to experience something different for a change.

Sometimes members of Free Churches comment that liturgical churches "do the same thing every week." Actually, most Free Churches are not very 'free' because they have developed their own kind of liturgy by always using a familiar and well-tryed order of service. The trouble is, after a while that familiar pattern is not just well-tryed but 'well-tired' and needs refreshing.

Probably, in our experience of leading worship, we will have developed our own familiar pattern, in which case it needs to be varied, rethought and we need to ask ourselves why we always do it this way.

A basic question is: what is needed in worship to enable people to meet with God, to understand what he might be saying to them, and to respond to it in such a way that they can go out to do what they perceive to be God's will. The words of James (James 1:22) are pertinent: "Do not merely listen to the word ... Do what it says." It may be that our modern obsession with what hymns and songs we sing should be superseded with a greater concern for Scripture and Prayer as the vital elements of coming together in worship.

PREACHING

This is not the place to raise issues of what to preach but to emphasise that this is an area where sensitivity to the congregation is needed. The more the know about the congregation the better, but a word of warning – preaching needs to be relevant without being too personal. In preaching to a small congregation the biggest issue might be where to preach and lead worship from, pulpit or lectern? Another factor is where do the congregation sit? If they are scattered or near the back, can we encourage them to sit nearer the front and together? There is much more to be gained from a sense of fellowship and purpose if people sit together.

Small congregations are often discouraged because they have lived with decline and lack effective leadership and vision. Through preaching they can be helped to grow spiritually and in confidence. The essentials of preaching today must include: Bible teaching which relates to and is applied to today's life-situations; the building up of faith and biblical knowledge so that Believers know what they believe and tell their faith story effectively; encouragement; a Biblical response to social and moral issues; and, last but not least, a clear challenge to faith in Christ.

CONCLUSION

We don't have to do it the way we always have and we need to think carefully about two things ...

- What is appropriate and relevant for this congregation?
- What will enable them to give, in worship to God, what they are and have, and to use that effectively in the coming week?

There is a need for boldness, we should not be fearful of doing things differently, but as a worship leader and preacher trying to think through the issues there is a great need for sensitivity to the situation of the people we lead.

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