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Why Change?

When they said, “Let’s go to the house of God,” my heart leaped for joy. (Ps. 122:1, *The Message*).

I recently talked with a young woman who said she would often go home from church on Sundays and lie on her bed and cry because it depressed her so much. She went because she felt it was what a Christian should do, but it didn’t bring her any joy. Increasingly in the West, the kind of joy described in Psalm 122 is nonexistent, even among those who say they are followers of Jesus. I don’t think that’s what the psalmist, or Jesus, had in mind for us.

Perhaps Psalm 22 better describes our church experiences: “God, God . . . my God! Why did you dump me miles from nowhere? Doubled up with pain, I call to God all the day long. No answer. Nothing. I keep at it all night, tossing and turning. And you! Are you indifferent, above it all, leaning back on the cushions of Israel’s praise? We know you were there for our parents: they cried for your help and you gave it; they trusted and lived a good life” (Ps. 22:1-5, *The Message*).

I could quote statistics about the decline in church attendance in every country in the West, or decry the blandness of much of what is offered as public worship. But I'd rather give you a brief outline of the journey I have been on and raise the issue I want to focus on for much of this book—the need to understand worship as an art form.

I am, by vocation and experience, a local church pastor. I was raised in a non-church-attending family, which gave me a particular perspective on church life when I began stumbling along as a follower of Jesus at the age of nineteen. I needed to find ways of connecting my newfound faith with what was happening in my life and the lives of my friends. I assumed nothing and questioned everything. That perspective has fed a deep passion for connecting the life of the local church community—and its worship and mission life—with contemporary culture. Or more particularly, with the people who live and move and have their being in the contemporary cultures that form and are forming in our societies.

After a dozen years of being trained and shaped as a pastoral leader by three different, and very generous and tolerant congregations in New Zealand, I found myself wondering why anyone would want to regularly attend a public worship event. It wasn't that there was anything wrong or bad about the events I was part of—in fact some offered profound engagements with God. It was just that, more often than not, I found myself more interested in hanging out with the parents and children in the preschool than wanting to be in a pew.

Then I had an experience that changed my life.

I attended a high-school reunion. Unlike these affairs in the United States our reunions happen only occasionally and usually in honor of an anniversary of the school rather than a particular class. This was the first reunion I had attended in the twenty years since I'd finished school. I was delighted to find a good number of my previous classmates taking the opportunity to see each other.

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I'm an introvert, so initially I sat back and observed and listened to the stories being told. I was intrigued that many of the conversations centered on spirituality and faith, and that I was continuously drawn into the conversations. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Many of my old friends were on spiritual journeys—seeking to find answers that would bring meaning to the experiences and questions of their lives. It wasn't that they were unaware of the spiritual realm—some had experienced vivid and powerful demonstrations of the supernatural. What surprised me was that none of them had found what they were looking for in any church or Christian community. Georgina was involved in the occult; Karen had found her answers in crystals and other New Age options. Most had not even thought to look to the church for what they were seeking, and those who had done so had not found the experience helpful.

The killer blow for me was the realization that if they had come to the church I was leading at the time, they would not have found their answers either. In fact, their questions would have been foreign to and not understood by most of the people in my community.

My school friends all wanted the same things from life I did. They were ordinary New Zealanders wanting satisfying relationships, drug-free children who would make a positive contribution to society, fulfilling life partnerships, stable and satisfying work. We all had similar hopes and dreams and questions, yet I wouldn't want them to come to my church because I knew it would put them off instead of turning them on to Jesus.

Tears filled my eyes as I drove home from the reunion. I determined I would find some way to build a community of faith where people like my former classmates could find a safe and supportive environment in which they could find the spiritual reality they were looking for—the reality I knew existed in following Jesus Christ.

Several years later when the opportunity came to work with a very small and still-shrinking Baptist church in downtown Auckland, I took it. I had no idea what to do. I just knew I wanted a place to belong where the worship and the people enabled me to engage with God without having to step out of the culture I was part of or having to put aside the movies, music, ideas, and conversations that interested me. I figured that a small—and probably dying—church was a good place to start. Change was possible.

RESTORING ART IN WORSHIP

I had no artistic ability and had not been raised in a home that engaged with the arts in any way. (My father did play the mouth organ!) We didn't attend church regularly. I knew almost nothing about the arts when I began pastoring, but by this stage I sensed that the arts and worship needed to get back in bed with each other as they had in earlier centuries. My initial motivation to engage with the arts was to find vehicles for expression by the small but increasing number of artists and other creatives of all hues who were gathering at that small church, now called Cityside Baptist Church, where I was pastoral leader in the late 1990s.

Late at night on September 14, 1997, I wrote in my journal:

I'm beginning to understand worship and worship preparation much more as an art form than an organizational task. To see myself as a producer/preparer of worship for myself and others, as a worship curator—someone who takes the pieces provided and puts them in a particular setting and makes a particular arrangement of them, considering juxtaposition, style, light, shade, etc. A maker of

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context rather than a presenter of content. A provider of a frame inside of which the elements are arranged and rearranged to convey a particular message to the worshiper. This message may or may not be obvious, may or may not be similar to the message conveyed to/perceived by another worshiper.

Worship is art. Art can be worship.

I provide worship experiences for others to participate in.

I am an artist

 a framer

 a curator

 a recontexter

I have experience; I learn, I train, I improve my skills,

I reflect, I worship, I participate, I risk, I trust. . . .

The next decade saw many more creative people join and participate in our community, most with sad stories of how their craft had been ignored or abused or misunderstood by church communities or individuals. They found trust, openness, and acceptance at Cityside, as well as encouragement to participate and use their skills in worship and mission without necessarily having to include anything that was overtly Christian.

At that same time, I was on a very steep learning curve, soaking up all I could about the creative process and how artists worked, trying to figure out how we could provide sanctuary for them and still maintain a specifically Christian context for them and their work. They were, and continue to be, my teachers.

The projects we entered into were not without their critics—usually people outside our community and who were ignorant of the objects they were criticizing—yet we were seeing real transformation in the lives of our artists and those who participated as viewers or in

some other way. Running an art exhibition, a new media night, or an electronic music concert in themselves held little appeal for me as a pastoral leader. It was the formative power of art and its processes that I wanted to capture. While I always wanted what we did as a church community to sustain a *Christian* faith and spirituality, I also wanted spiritual depth and real connection with the emotions and realities of the stories of people, Christian or not.

I wanted what we did to have integrity. I didn't want art as a hook to draw people in, so we could then hit them with something else. Nor did I want kitschy art that reproduced biblical panoramas or Sunday-school-like works, regardless of how "realistic" they might be. My experience in churches had been that a painting about the crucifixion needed to contain three crosses on a hill with men nailed to them. The feeling was that nothing worthwhile (read *of value* or *Christian*) could be conveyed in any other way. But I had become convinced—again intuitively—that the more interpreted and translated a work was, the better it would connect with people who had never considered the Christian faith worth investigating. I felt strongly that there was a need for us to put some mystery back into the Christian story.

Quite quickly, it became obvious from comments made verbally and in writing that people who participated in producing and consuming some of the projects we put together were encountering God in some unexpected but significant and—to me—very rewarding ways. The question was, how and why this was happening? Was it random? Was it valid? Was it really God? I wondered how the experience of God differed depending on a person's experience or knowledge of the Christian faith. I worried it might be dangerous to sometimes present work with so little overtly Christian content—was allowing such a broad range of interpretations encouraging heresy? I questioned whether this stuff was even helpful in the journey of Christian spiritual formation or if it was merely froth and bubble as our critics said it was.

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Maybe the arts were just supporters of the real message that would come later in verbal form? Or could electronic music, video loops, and painting be beautiful and personally uplifting, *and* be appropriate vehicles for substantive theology and personal transformation?

All of this wondering led me to dig into everything I could find that talked about using art in spiritual formation. It turned out much had been written about how to use art in churches—especially about the dangers of doing so. I could find almost nothing that explored why such approaches might be of value or what was happening in these encounters between people and art. The arts were referred to only in relation to their helpfulness in accessing the culture, never for spiritual formation or worship itself. Many writers reflected deeply on the current and future shape of the church and its worship (among other issues) but made no significant reference to art in spiritual formation or as a medium for engaging God. In other words, at Cityside we were making it up as we went along.

The creative-worship projects at Cityside Church made it one of the first communities in the alternative-worship movement,¹ the forerunner to the emerging-church movement. Very little formal writing arose from and about the largely British-based alternative-worship movement—that which did was mostly of a practical nature, telling the stories of various alternative communities as a way of encouraging others to do likewise. In contrast, when things alternative hit the United States some years later, the printing presses could barely run fast enough to keep up with the volumes being written. From what I have read, these books often make worthwhile contributions to our understanding of the changing church context in which worship and mission take place. They describe what those activities could look like in particular contexts. They also encourage the use of arts in worship. Yet none that I have found go beyond an explanation and description of essentially pragmatic practices. I have been able to find very little

literature investigating or reflecting on how people respond in worship and what they respond to, and, therefore, how a worship event might be crafted or designed. We lack any developed theoretical framework to guide our worship design so we just repeat what we have always done, but louder or with more projectors or candles.

Nor have I been able to find any significant discussion of art *as* worship, or what it is about art that worshipers respond to, or how the arts shape worship or the faith journey of a community at worship. Timothy L. Carson has a very helpful chapter, “Betwixt and Between: Worship and Liminal Reality,” in his excellent book, *Transforming Worship*², but the chapter is less than four pages long. Len Sweet has provided us with his useful EPIC approach to worship—Experiential, Participatory, Image-Driven, and Communal—which he develops in numerous writings.³ Sweet states that the changing contemporary culture demands mainline Protestant worship move from providing rational responses to experiential ones, from a few representatives leading the congregation to broader participation, from being word-based to being image-driven, from isolated individualism to worship that promotes community. He clearly understands the milieu in which the church is currently operating and offers insightful perspectives on how the church needs to respond to and participate in that environment. But he doesn’t set out to help someone wanting to know how to grapple with an understanding of art and worship for next Sunday morning at 11 a.m. The intersection of art, worship, and pastoral ministry appears to be a rarely considered topic.

ABUSING THE ARTS

What is generally advocated in the resources I have seen is the kind of approach I found in the vision statement of a Melbourne church: “We will use the arts more,” or, as one recent writer advocates,

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“We must rely more than ever on art, music, literature, and drama to communicate our message.” This reflects an attitude that I find abusive of the arts and creativity. It sees them as little more than tools for evangelism and persuasion, and fails to appreciate the intrinsic value of the creative process. To limit the arts in this way generally results in the view that the work must include the name of Jesus or an image of the cross along with substantial text so that “the message” is stated without possibility of misinterpretation. Any sense of beauty, spirituality, creativity, deep engagement, mystery, the active presence of the Holy Spirit in a medium or work, or the idea that God could be encountered in a work is ignored or, worse still, denied.

Consider this critique of the abusive attitude on display at one megachurch that was using drama as its art form:

Drama is used to set up a pedagogic moment, servant to the pastor’s message; it is not intended to function pedagogically on its own, nor is it intended in any way to function in a sacramental mode. Drama is not considered a suitable way to preach the gospel when the goal is to raise a question and provide an answer that gives clear assurance and a “how-to” application; the drama sets up the problem, the message offers the solution.⁴

This is in stark contrast to the experience described by Mike Riddell on viewing *Black Phoenix*—an art installation using the full-size prow of a fishing boat ravaged by fire—by New Zealand artist Ralph Hotere:

This was resurrection broken out of verbal confines, bludgeoning the imagination and challenging any resistance. No sermon I have ever heard has

approached the power or lingering effect of that artwork. Here was no abstract discussion of rumours of immortality; this was immediate, visceral and inescapable. I was broken open by it, and left overwhelmed and exhausted. It was a religious experience, in the deepest sense of the term. How was it, I pondered later, that I had been moved at this level by an encounter entirely devoid of specific content? Why should the burnt-out hulk of a fishing vessel evoke such deep meditations on mortality?⁵

I believe art is capable of far more than communicating a message: it is capable of conveying the voice of God and harboring an encounter with God. In the West, we are in the midst of a massive upsurge in interest in “using” the creative arts in worship and mission. We need to undergird that interest with an understanding of what happens in the engagement with art, and reflection on the implications of that engagement for pastoral ministry and spiritual formation. Without this analysis, we are in danger of repeating the short-term and shallow responses of the past that relied heavily, if not entirely, on pragmatism. It’s time the church understood designing worship as an art, rather than a project, and especially not as a project that uses art. This perspective calls for a new way of thinking and talking about worship.

A VOCABULARY OF WORSHIP

There is no “one size fits all” when it comes to worship. Every person should be able to experience transformative engagement with God without having to adopt a new culture or persona. Encouraging this engagement is the role of the church, and it can take many forms. It is certainly not limited to a particular style of worship. So I am not proposing any one style, or even a raft of styles. I am proposing a new

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way of looking at the worship we design or lead, regardless of whether it is charismatic, evangelical, contemporary, liturgical, Pentecostal, high church, low church, or no church. I had two church experiences recently that will show you why I see the need for new ways of thinking and talking about what we do corporate worship.

I had heard a lot about a relatively new community that met in a warehouse space in the suburbs. They apparently do a lot with artists and the arts, so I was interested in checking them out. An up-to-date website gave me times, place, directions, so I set out to join them for morning worship. Signage at the main road and further down the side road directed me easily to the warehouse behind a shopping mall and sports grounds.

Then my discomfort began. Which door of three should I go through? There was no one at the doors to greet me or point me in the right direction. I followed several deaf mutes (or so I concluded as they never acknowledged my presence) into the building and sat at one of many small round café tables with four to six chairs around them. I chose a table with bags and jackets on a couple of the chairs on the assumption that someone was sitting at the table and would soon join me.

Ten minutes went by without anyone speaking to me or acknowledging me. The jacket and bag owners stealthily collected their gear and sat at another table. Sitting alone, I smiled across the room at a young baby draped over her mother's shoulder. The space was cold, and the bare concrete floor chilled my feet. The unlit gas heaters stood as sentries—guarding against warmth perhaps? The worship leader was pleasant to look at, and I couldn't stop looking at her because she never looked at me. In fact, she never looked at anyone—she had her eyes closed (in worship?) the entire time she was “leading” us. She only opened them to check the next song. The blind leading the blind.

I loved seeing young children wander freely from person to person, cared for by the community. I was delighted that two young people with intellectual disabilities seemed to be accepted and integrated into this community at worship. But my delight turned to anger as the service progressed, and these people became the brunt of laughter as they were allowed to wander around the stage and interrupt the song leader and preacher. They were used as light entertainment. I am a parent to an intellectually disabled son and feel this is nasty stuff. The sermon was long, rambling, and unengaging. I left having spoken only to the parents of the baby I'd smiled at. I was desperate to get to the heater in my car and defrost my feet.

That evening I made my way to a one-hundred-year-old Anglican church. It was easy to find my way inside, even in the dark and with no one at the door, as this old stone building was built and positioned to be welcoming. Central heating took the chill off nicely. It was an ambient, open-ended, fully curated, nonsinging, reflective service (by the end of this book you will be familiar with all those terms). The otherwise dark worship space was lit by thirty candles. Music was a free-form jazz/ambient mix of electronica, sax, trumpet, guitar, upright bass, drums, and percussion. The musicians played from the rear of the sanctuary, and, from time to time, I would turn in my pew to see them—the sound was more important than the sound makers. A small icon and incense bowl occupied the center of the space while a looped image of water flowing over rocks was projected on a screen behind the incense. A handout of thoughtful questions provided stimulus for my postsermon reflections. I left having met with God.

I ended the day wondering why anyone would attend a service like the one I'd gone to that morning. Why do we put the musicians on a raised platform at the front? Why do we insist on sitting participants at café tables? Why do we talk as if people are important and then act

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as if they aren't? Why do we assume that "if we build it they will come" and keep on coming, regardless of how badly we treat them?

I have often been aligned with the emerging church. That doesn't bother me—there are many great people in the same alignment—but I don't like the term much. I prefer to think and talk about what I do as being part of the "reemerging church." It seems to me that the former implies something new that will come in over the top of the old and push it aside, that new is better than old. Café tables trump pews. Musicians at the front trump the organ console at the back. *Reemerging* speaks to me of building on what has gone before, of discovering new ways of connecting with a changed and changing culture, and of using what we have learned from the past to become part of the future. It allows room for new missional attitudes to come from inside or outside of the inherited church, all seeking and needing new forms of worship.

Another way of looking at it is to say that the vocabulary is still much the same, but a new language needs to be made out of that vocabulary. So I'm not proposing that we ditch preaching, or singing, or prayers, or any other element of our current worship patterns. I'd like to give those terms some new content, suggest some different perspectives on them, and explore various new ways we could combine them in order to have people engage with God more deeply. I'd also like to look beneath the surface of the worship we design and see if we can find a way of talking about it that is transferable across styles and that expands our understanding of what, and where, and how worship might happen.

That's what this book is about.