

Where I'm Coming From

There is very little truth in this book. There are certainly no absolutes. There are also no lies (that I'm aware of). Like all writing, this book represents the opinions of the writer. It is based on my perspectives, my opinions, and my responses to the situations I have encountered and the path I have stumbled along. It reflects how I see life, faith, and the church. My vision has been shaped by interactions with people who have generously inspired, encouraged, forgiven, and criticized me, but I take responsibility for what I have to say in this book.

I am writing primarily to those who can make a difference to the corporate worship that is rolled out in churches each week. I am also writing to those who have a nagging feeling that all isn't quite right with the current diet, to those who want to see worship engage people outside *and* inside of the church walls and church life. I write from my experience as a participant in the Baptist family of churches in New Zealand and Australia, but also from short-term experiences with churches and leaders of various stripes in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States.

I have been described as a depressed, melancholic cynic. There was a time when I wore that badge proudly. My response to my Pentecostal

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friends who wanted to cast out my “spirit of cynicism” was that if they did so I would lose my gift to the church. Cynicism isn’t always bad. It was—and to a large extent still is—the lens through which I view the life of the church, in general, and the churches of which I have been a part, in particular.

If I had to describe myself now I would probably use the words *concerned* and *grieving*. I’m concerned that it is so difficult to find communal worship that connects me with God. I’m concerned that I meet so many people—of all ages but particularly thirty plus—who consider themselves followers of Christ but can’t cope with church and find no nurture or sustenance in its institutions. I’m concerned that too few church leaders and so-called worship leaders have more than a single, narrow model for what they do in public, corporate worship. I’m concerned that they seem unaware they are boring their communities to death with shallow, bland worship. I’m concerned that many of these people have spent several years in theological training institutions that haven’t prepared them for the realities of worship and spiritual formation with a congregation. I’m concerned that my young grandsons won’t be able to find communities that will nurture their faith without them having to undergo cultural circumcision. All this grieves me greatly.

Yet I’ve also glimpsed new possibilities and been encouraged and inspired by those glimpses. I don’t believe the church as we know it needs to be thrown out. I don’t think it needs a new start. I’m not even suggesting that what you’re doing in worship should be discarded and replaced. Rather I hope you will be inspired to make the worship you are designing and delivering week by week, in whatever genre, even stronger and more effective in helping people engage with God.

This is a hopeful book, filled with possibilities and ideas that will stimulate your creativity, broaden your horizons, and enlarge

your gallery of connections and resources. It is meant to make you think, and reconsider, and imagine. I will talk about what I've seen, what I've tried, and what I've learned. But I tell you all of that not so that you will do what I've done, but so that you can see, and try, and learn as well. In that spirit, this book is descriptive rather than prescriptive. I divide worship into three categories, but that doesn't mean there are only three categories. That's just how I have made the division to suit myself—you might prefer two, or ten. I hope you find yourself disagreeing with me from time to time. I hope you question and challenge what I say.

Mostly, I hope you will contextualize what I say. Your settings for worship will be different from mine. Apart from the basic principles and ideas, very little of what I say will transfer straight across our differing contexts. If there is one single change in approach I believe can transform Christian worship in the West, it is that each community of faith do the work of reframing and contextualizing rather than just copying what has worked somewhere else.

I love the local church and have worked within its leadership structures for more than thirty years. It is my hope that this book will contribute to a discussion that provides the church with a greater awareness of what goes on in public worship. In particular, I hope it will change the way the church engages with artists and the arts, and with culture. I want to see a reformation of the church that leads its community of Jesus-followers to engage with God, with other people, and with the path of justice in the world. I believe that the key to this change is to begin seeing worship as an art form and understanding ourselves as its curators.

Welcome to the journey. I'm delighted to be able to walk with you.