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Dennis Connor

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Meaningful Worship in the Small Church

By Dennis Connor

Some are standing in the hallway as time for evening worship approaches. One of the gathering worshippers remarks, "It's been a great day, hasn't it? The service this morning was really uplifting."

Two couples are seated in Burger King after Wednesday evening Bible study discussing worship. One church member remarks that he can never recall being truly affected by a worship experience in the congregation in which he grew up. Another across the table says that he can recall feeling moved on occasions as an adult, "But before coming to this congregation, it has been a long time since a worship assembly has stirred me." Since coming here it happens regularly, he says.

For most of a decade, we have had raging controversy and meaningful discussion in our fellowship regarding worship renewal. Large-membership churches have led the way in newly emerging worship styles, perhaps leading some to the mistaken conclusion that soul-stirring worship is best experienced in those larger settings. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As the two foregoing conversations confirm, meaningful worship can happen in small-membership churches. In fact, meaningful worship has little or nothing to do with the size of a congregation or its talent pool. It has to do with a congregation's heart. If anything, the small-membership church is uniquely suited for fostering a sense of intimacy and family.

But how does a church nurture its heart for worship and, consequently, its heart for God? Are there measures we can take to promote meaningful worship in the small church without succumbing to manipulation or cultural whims? Our answer from the Yadkinville church would be an unhesitating, "Yes!"

The Yadkinville Church

Located in rural Yadkin County (population 34,000) in north central North Carolina, Yadkinville is the largest town in the county, with a population of 2,600. The church was planted in 1979, and in 1986 Sunday morning attendance climaxed with an average of 64. A period of decline set in shortly thereafter, and in 1996 the average attendance was about 34, occasionally dipping into the mid-20s. When a congregational crisis occurred in 1995, the membership responded with a commitment to corporate prayer and a renewed emphasis on excellence in worship. Attendance for the first quarter of 1997 was 37; by the first quarter of 1998, it had grown to 64. We experienced a net growth rate of 55 percent for 1997, much of which we attribute to a renewed commitment to worship excellence.

Our experience is proof that stagnation and decline need not be the norm for small churches. However, growth does not happen by accident. It is our conviction at Yadkinville that worship is the very heart of a

congregation's life. Vitality in mission and ministry is the outgrowth of vital worship.

So what can smaller churches do to nurture meaningful worship? The following is what our experience has taught us.

A Strategy for Worship Renewal

When I speak of worship renewal, I do not mean modifications of biblical teachings on worship but rather a renewed emphasis leading to a renewed heart. In Yadkinville we now do things differently—we deliberately broke through the hedge of congregational traditions and complacency that had engulfed us.

We did not have a clearly defined strategy when we began, but our initial determination to pursue worship excellence to the glory of God soon led to one discovery after another. What follows is a workable strategy for meaningful worship that glorifies God and edifies the church without compromising biblical teaching.

First, *prepare the soil*. Stale worship will not be transformed in just a few weeks. In most small churches, it will be the preacher who initiates and leads the preparation. The wise preacher will establish credibility with the congregation before encouraging change. If the church does not trust him, any significant changes, no matter how harmless, will likely be met with suspicion and criticism. Too many preachers have unwisely initiated changes too soon after beginning with a church. Many of us enter a ministry with our agendas clearly set, determined that the church will follow our utopian vision, at times running roughshod over congregational sensibilities. Patience is an absolute must.

Part of the preparation is to seek consensus before initiating changes. Although this step is emphasized in virtually everything written these days about managing change in churches, it is still widely neglected. In Yadkinville we sought consensus by discussing worship in our congregational meetings and personal conversations, by teaching on the subject of worship, and by using questionnaires.

Second, once credibility and consensus are established, *start small*. Create sure successes—small changes that will be accepted by almost everyone. Add extra songs and Scripture readings, or a prayer devoted exclusively to praise. In most congregations, wholesale changes are threatening and will be understandably resisted, but small

successes can pave the way for other measures to further enhance the worship experience.

Third, *change the focus of worship, if needed*. Is the worship assembly God centered or human centered? Worship should heighten a worshipper's awareness of the being and activity of God. To determine the focus of your worship, ask these questions: What is the theme of your songs—human achievement or God's greatness and work? Is the worship about our duty, or is it a celebration of God's grace? Is our work presented as the primary thing or as the proper response to the primary One? Does worship center around the preaching event or around praise? Does the preaching itself tend to draw more attention to us or to God? It would be an interesting exercise to put these questions to the congregation.

One simple thing we have done at Yadkinville is to set aside a block of time during the worship for a Scripture reading of praise, a praise hymn, and a prayer devoted only to praise. There is nothing revolutionary in that, but change does not have to be drastic to be effective.

The small church revolves around relationships and is typically defined by the strength of those relationships. What better context, then, for celebrating our relationship with God?

Fourth, *plan for effective worship*. The scene is all too familiar. The song leader stands in the foyer or sits on the front pew hurriedly flipping through the hymnal just before worship, jotting down a few numbers. A Table crew is hastily conscripted to serve the Lord's Supper. The order of service and preaching style haven't varied a bit over the past ten years.

The saying is well worn but true that "to fail to plan is to plan to fail." Time spent in thoughtful preparation is essential to meaningful worship. Our God deserves worship that is more than an afterthought. The disgrace is not in being a small church but in being small minded about God.

Thoughtful worship planning can help create an atmosphere that elicits reverence to God's greatness in the hearts of the worshippers. The planning does not have to be elaborate, just thoughtful. The following guidelines should be helpful in planning for a meaningful worship experience.

1. *Determine the objective of the worship for that day*. What is it that you want to accomplish? What

spiritual response do you seek in the worshippers? Is it praise or repentance? Gratitude or humility? Select songs and Scripture readings that will support the objective. Have prayers that are focused on the objective.

2. *Plan around a theme.* When possible, relate the music to the sermon for that day. If the preacher is involved in a sermon series, select a theme song for the series. Even if you cannot always coordinate the music with the sermon, the songs themselves can be focused on a theme. There can also be a prayer and a Communion reading that are both focused on the worship theme for that day.

3. *Communicate.* Those who plan the worship should clearly communicate the theme and objective to everyone else involved in the worship so that they know how to direct their words and hearts as they read or pray.

Planning will require additional time and effort. However, the dividends will far outweigh the investment, and God will be duly honored.

Finally, *focus on substance over style.* Much of the controversy today over “traditional” versus more “contemporary” styles of worship is unfortunate, leading some to equate style with substance. The fact is, if the fundamental attitudes and elements of biblical worship are present, God can be exalted in any style. The Creator is not impressed by a particular style. Nor will those who visit our worship assemblies be drawn like moths to a flame because of a style. Both God and the visitor ask, “Can heart be found here?”

Conclusion

In his book *Small Churches Are the Right Size*, David Ray shares this insight about worship in the small church:

In asking myself the question, “What is worship?” I recalled Jesus’ great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37–39). . . .

According to this definition, worship is the active response of the Christian community to God’s love with the praises of our hearts, the yearnings of our souls, and the ponderings of our minds, and the active movement toward a loving mutual ministry to all that are in our sphere of influence. . . . By this definition an imposing sanctuary, large numbers of people, majestic music, and powerful preaching are not necessary for legitimate worship. . . . What is necessary is a body of people actively committed to God, to one another, and to a shared ministry beyond the doors of the church.¹

Regardless of the size of your congregation, this kind of worship is not only possible, but Christ and the holy Word call us to it. Are we willing to answer?

DENNIS CONNER is preaching minister for the Yadkinville Church of Christ, Yadkinville, North Carolina.

Notes

¹David R. Ray, *Small Churches Are the Right Size* (New York: Pilgrim, 1982), 56.