

Article

Interview with Andy Flannagan

Andy Flannagan is a worship leader, singer and accomplished song-writer who is passionate about justice issues, and the Director of the Christian Socialist Movement. He recently sent us this extract from an interview he gave to a student which he thought the Sanctuary would be interested to make more widely available.

We are publishing it here because we believe much of what Andy is saying is a message that many parts of the church today need to hear.

(To find out more about Andy and his work, visit www.andyflan.com or [read his blog](#))

This interview was undertaken by Alistair Gilfillan, a third year student at the [Midlands Centre for Youth Ministry](#), for his dissertation entitled 'Where is the place of sacrifice in modern youth worship culture?'

Could you start off just by telling me a bit about your background as a worship leader?

I started, like many people, basically because I was a boy with a guitar, not because I was greatly gifted. I had a guitar, I was learning to play it, and it seemed to be useful to help people to sing if I played along. So it was pretty unspectacular.

Only when I got to university, I think, did I start to think 'OK, I actually need to give this some thought' – I need to think about how I'm playing, what I'm playing, the lyrical content of the songs, and what I'm actually asking people to do.

What positive things have you seen in modern worship culture? What are the things we've got right at the moment?

I think even the use of phrases like 'worship culture' quite scare me.

My fear is that we have actually created a worship subculture where it's about a certain type of music and a certain type of person who needs it - and it's become a little genre all of itself. In fact you could say that it's becoming an industry, sadly.

A lot of the time money and marketing are the driving factors that decide what we're going to be listening to. We listen to the next thing that's marketed to us, so other people decide who they think we should listen to, and I fear that **the driving factor is profit not prophet** – not being prophetic that is. Which I think is a real danger.

We've created a kind of celebrity culture, where worship leaders become almost like celebrities and we like their sort of worship, or we like worshipping like them, or we like their songs.

When I have been to the States and gone to churches there, they haven't asked 'what's God doing with your church?' or 'what's God doing with you? What's going on back home?' Instead, their first question was 'Whose stuff do you use?'

And it felt like they'd created this kind of personality-centric thing, and some of that stuff is infiltrating here too, sadly.

In the States worship culture has become huge – it accounts **for eight per cent of the total market there - bigger than classical, bigger than Latin, bigger than Jazz.**

And a lot of what's going on there is just **marketing to Christians – finding music that you can sell to them.** It's not just about the motivation of asking 'what is the Spirit saying to the churches?' And at the end of the day, it's much easier to release a fifth album from the guy you know sells really well, rather than reaching out for a new thing, or the creative thing.

I understand why people do that, but we've got to be aware that we're breeding a nation of **consumers**, rather than participants.

So much of the worship experiences that we create for people are us just telling them what to sing, rather than giving them opportunities to express themselves, and where they're at before God. So young people particularly happily sit in that place of consumerism, like we do in all aspects of life, rather than writing songs for themselves, rather than feeling empowered to do that.

So, you're asking me what I see is positive?

It's great to see songwriters beginning to write songs that address all aspects of God's character, rather than just the romantic aspects and intimacy. We're actually starting to sing songs that actually address the breadth of God's character, **songs about justice**, songs about God's desire to see change and transformation in the world. We're starting to sing songs of that nature now, which is a very positive thing.

We've got to let that **not just be a fad** and a thing that we're singing about at the minute, we've got to realise that these are songs about God's character. We sing songs about justice because we worship a just God who is the God of justice.

It's encouraging to see that finally happening, but again I've heard people saying things like 'well it's great that we're singing more songs about the poor', and **the fact that we're singing songs about the poor makes it pretty clear that we're not worshipping with the poor.**

I long for the day where churches are engaged in the community to such an extent that we're not singing songs about other groups of people, we're actually engaged, **incarnated**, in the midst of people who are struggling.

That will utterly change the sort of language and the sort of words we're using, rather than the presumption that these are songs to write for a crowd of middle class people to sing in the suburbs and make them feel less guilty because we've remembered the poor people. It's a pretty limited way of looking at life and looking at the Kingdom.

You mentioned about participation in worship, why do think that is so important?

I think because we're made in the image of God. And God is the divine Creator, he is the fount of all creativity. We all have creativity in our being, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Our praise should match its object, and so if we have an entirely creative God, our worship should match that. It should be creative, it should be an expression of who we are and of who God is. If we just rely on other people's words to communicate with God, it can become like a second-hand relationship. It's like we're – to use the language of the 21st century – **outsourcing our relationship with God to the worship songwriters.**

I see this happening all the time, with young people especially – they'll sing somebody else's words, and they'll love it and it'll be a great sound, and they'll get a warm and fuzzy feeling. But when they hit 18 or 19 and they go to start a job, or go off to university and they haven't spent time developing their own relationship with God, their own words, they just flop.

They just disappear because they can get that buzz from other things like alcohol or relationships, so they don't want faith anymore. Maybe it's because it wasn't real; it wasn't their relationship, their metaphors or their words. They were only using a language of seed sowing and refining fires, and it didn't actually integrate with their nine to five experience.

I believe we don't create enough space for people, especially young people, to be able to express their anger, doubt, or sadness towards God. Rather, we say 'hi, here's the songs we're going to be singing today, and here's how we're going to be feeling while we sing'.

But if we don't create enough creative space for people – whether it's through art, poetry, writing, rap, dance or whatever – then we don't create enough space for them to express what they are feeling towards God. And if they can't have that space to express their anger, frustration, doubt and everything else, then they will find other ways to express it, but these won't necessarily be in the direction of God.

So we've got to start trying to create that context where people can do that.

Do you think there is a difference between what worship leaders try to communicate about leading, and what those being led in worship understand?

I think that's a huge question. Very often there is much more subliminal communication going on than the actual physical communication. Even though you're saying 'oh hey, this isn't a performance, this is worship', at the same time you're standing on a stage with a microphone, a huge PA system, and huge big screens, and with big lights on you.

So everything within me is screaming 'this is a performance'.

Anybody walking in from the outside world would say 'this is a performance'. At the end of the day, I don't care what you say it is, it is a performance. You're creating a sense that people are standing looking at a stage in the same way they would look at a stage when an artist is performing. It can carry that same dynamic of hero worship and that turns the congregation into consumers, rather than a participants.

It doesn't matter how much your worship leader says 'it's not about me' – if there's a whopping big picture of them on the front of a CD looking cool, that is what's being communicated. If their name's up in lights, that's what's being communicated.

And we let ourselves off by thinking 'yeah well we kind of have to use the ways of the world to get this stuff out there'.

Well, who told us that we have to? Who told us we have to sell our stuff?

Can you really imagine the early church selling worship resources to each other?

Can you imagine Amos making the top 10? He wouldn't have. He wouldn't have been popular enough. Amos' way with words was far too uncomfortable for people.

Perhaps we've started following what sells the most, rather than always listening to what God is saying. We need to ask again – what is God's specific word for the church at this specific time?