

article

Putting the baby back in the bath – towards wider and deeper worship

Liz Baddaley, co-founder of the Sanctuary, has written this article out of a heart-cry to see our worship set free – whatever tradition we're from – to express and encounter more of the fullness of God's character and the relationship he invites us into.

Perhaps appropriately for an article on this subject, it is written in three main sections which you can read through progressively as a whole, or select from as a different way into the principal message of the article. The first makes a case for why embracing different worship traditions matters; the second examines the practical strengths of traditions which are often held in opposition or contrast; and in the third, Liz relates her own experience as a way into these issues.

This article could read like a lament. But it's not. It's actually a celebration, an invitation and perhaps most of all, a prayer.

I want to celebrate the depth of relationship we are offered by God and the richness I have experienced from walking with and learning from hundreds of different Christians. I want to invite us all to learn from each other – the glorious, diverse body of Christ which over thousands of years and myriads of traditions experienced by billions of unique individuals has sought, found and glorified God in more ways than any one of us could hope to explore in a lifetime.

And I'm praying that you – like me – will be challenged to move beyond your preferences, preconceptions, prejudices and comfort zones so that you will come to know God more fully, and love and appreciate his whole church more deeply.

1. Making the case for change

Beyond labels and extremes

All cultures and sub cultures are apt to define themselves in reaction to what has preceded them, and to focus so much on the new or corrective idea that they lose sight of the benefit of what has gone before. This can be seen at work in artistic movements across all media.

But it can also be observed as a recurring pattern – both historically and in the present – in how movements and theologies within the Christian church define themselves in relation to other streams and/or what has preceded them.

We can often stray into re-defining our particular expression of Christianity, our churches and even whole networks and denominations in reaction to other parts of the body. Time and time again in individuals' stories and in church history we can react against an excess or omission in one area that we create a parallel problem by correcting to its polar opposite. Or we seek so passionately after one 'new' revelation that we are in danger of forgetting the old ones that have been so brilliantly absorbed. Somehow things get dropped on route...

Devotion is no exception. We have become experts at tipping the baby out of the bath along with the water.

1 Corinthians 1:12 could be expressed in a thousand ways for the contemporary church but one would certainly be:

“This is what I mean: One of you says, “I love modern songs”; another says, “I sing hymns”; another says, “tradition is empty religion”; and another says, “I’m uncomfortable with emotionalism in church”; one says “the Spirit must be free and is constantly creating – that’s irrelevant”; another says “This has stood the test of time and so I know it can be trusted – I can’t imagine any of *his* songs will be sung in a hundred years”...

The list could go on...

But is sitting on the fence really so bad? Why are we so reluctant to take the middle, balanced ground that embraces *both... and...?*

And what could we gain if we moved beyond our pigeon holes to explore the fullness of what the church has to offer us as we all seek the One it exists for?

After all we’re not walking alone; and we’re not the first generation to follow Christ. Isn’t it about time we started being a bit more open to getting some help from outside our neatly drawn barrier markers? Because I get the sense that when Christ looks at his church, he sees a whole bride not a fragmented series of camps... and that when we join in one song in heaven, he’ll have thought of something we can all sing together.

The fact is that none of us is completely right. None of us has the ultimate way of expressing worship. God looks at the heart – and I wonder if ours were a bit more open to each other and what God has revealed of himself to those different to us, whether that would be a sweeter sound in his ear.

Learning from the wider body

Often worship tradition understandably becomes closely allied with theology and this has led to some churchmanships being suspicious of, or even deeply resistant to, exploring the devotion that comes from, or has now become associated with, a different stream within the church.

Our acts of worship have sometimes become statements or guiding labels to help us communicate and navigate what school of thought a particular church is ‘following’.

In recent years we have seen denominations become much more fluid, and churchmanship become the defining marker of theology. In my opinion, this feels like a positive step forward for unity – bringing together like-minded and hearted believers across lines that become wonderfully meaningless as soon as everyone really starts to focus on the Saviour they have in common.

Could our acts of worship also become more fluid? Wouldn’t this also build unity – and increase the richness of our relationships with, and understanding of, God?

I’d rather not define myself as a Charismatic Evangelical. I’d rather simply be a Christian... but sometimes I recognise I need to do this to make you process what I’m saying and where I’m coming from. However, for all of us, such labels also limit our understanding...

For example, can’t I still be firmly in this theology and yet sit in silence with a lit candle for an hour, or sing a song from centuries ago... Will you really think I’m not serious about the authenticity of Bible if I read out a creative meditation I’ve written inspired by a passage of it? And if I structure a prayer time carefully and plan it diligently because there’s a lot on my heart and mind I feel we should cover, will you think I’m not open to the freedom of the Holy Spirit?

And just because I want to build consistency in the congregations I lead, do I need to use the same style, the same songs and the same medium every week?

The Holy Spirit isn't only free to move in the setting that I have come to associate with churches who hold doctrines connected to the spiritual gifts as central. And contemplation and questioning is not in contradiction to the solidity that is sought and celebrated by evangelicalism.

Will I really become irrelevant to my generation if I celebrate poetry that was written hundreds of years ago?

Honestly, do I really think that Jesus isn't going to be revealed as the truth to someone if I make space in a worship set for the questioning and struggle that is a very real part of any authentic journey of faith?

Isn't it much more of a trap to reduce relationship and devotion with our creator to a particular system or set-up that we have decided is optimum to the exclusion of everything else our brothers and sisters from across the body of Christ could teach us about their experiences of him?

This doesn't mean accepting every teaching that comes from every part of the church. But it does mean recognising that every part of the church has something to teach us – and treating this truth with the respect and attention it warrants.

If not, is it possible that our reductionism is in some way narrowing the revelation of God himself by prescribing and boxing in who he is, the way to approach him, and how and with who he can move?

Benefiting from the body's history

Engaging with contemporary culture and our own stories is vital – Christianity is about relationship more than rules – being a follower and not just a believer – and therefore it must be authentic to the here and now and the yesterday and today of our individual walks of God.

But we make it so much harder for ourselves if we forget that previous generations have also done this and have much to teach us. What we're facing is not as uniquely challenging as we think it is. At the most fundamental level all human experience is the same and we need to stand on the testimony of hundreds of years of people fighting the good fight.

Their songs and words put into perspective the contemporary (and in my opinion temporary) 'post-Christian'/post-modern/secular context that speaks the lie that there will be an end to "the increase of his government". Their voices remind us that our history has included everything from the dark ages to the decadence of the Regency period as well as the vibrancy of the Celtic church and the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Their testimonies speak of incredible courage and beauty of devotion in the midst of poverty, illness and personal struggle. And we need to hear their wisdom rather than silencing it.

When we are all worshipping together in unity for eternity, we won't just be joined by people who enjoy different styles today, we'll be joined by saints who never even had the opportunity to sing with a worship band... indeed with some who weren't ever allowed to sing in church at all because they weren't ordained or were simply female – but who still worshipped God.

Connecting to a global church

Each of the sections in this article could be a separate resource – indeed they warrant whole books of research and discussion and I am deliberately only scratching the surface to raise some broad brush stroke questions. Of all the areas I'm considering, this one perhaps needs the most attention in our churches today.

Our worship – particularly in the part of the church so reliant on modern sung worship for the core of its devotion – has become overwhelmingly Western. It is driven by an industry – much of which I am hugely grateful for and deeply benefit from – but which needs to be careful that it doesn't become another form of colonialism.

In our desire to be relevant and self-expressive and to share the very real benefits of recording and distributing songs with the wider church, we *must* make room to source, celebrate and learn from the global church.

The most vibrant and growing parts of the church are not in North America, Australia or Europe. It's great that we incorporate devotion from other western countries. But language is not the primary reason why we aren't singing songs from the two continents seeing the most explosive growth of our faith – Africa and Asia – and why they are singing ours.

Poverty of opportunity and resource in poorer nations, and huge influence and financing in richer countries, have led to a western-centric songbook. But the western church – suffering from sleepiness and stagnancy – desperately needs to hear the prophetic voice of its brothers and sisters as they voice their joys and struggles in devotion.

Balancing relevancy and counter-culturalism in mission

Both in terms of our theology and our worship styles, it is important to keep this over-arching element in balance – whether it refers to how much contemporary and how much older content we use, or simply to how we go about doing church.

Churches that prioritise being seeker sensitive are on to something. We are very prone to creating Christian sub-cultures whatever part of the church we are from. Our practices and language can be alien to those who come in and be potentially off-putting because of that.

We must find ways of communicating ageless truth in a contemporary way which meet people where they are at and asks the questions they are really asking rather than the ones we would like them to be focusing on. We mustn't let our preferences and traditions get in the way of people finding Jesus.

However, we can go too far the other way. In trying to imitate what is outside our walls we can end up looking almost exactly like it – and losing anything obviously distinct and counter-cultural. Cultures will come and go but God is relevant to all of them – not just because he can communicate to them all, but because he transcends them with something much richer and infinitely more true. Something which people will recognise when they see it authentically – and which all our clever contemporary methods will never match.

I once spoke to a church leader who was worried about allowing too much freedom to the Holy Spirit in a church service in case it put people off who were new to church. He said he'd never want a scenario where everyone was so engaged in the worship that people who were new felt excluded. I had to applaud his heart and motives, but this statement also caused me deep concern. Are we saying God can't be trusted to reach people without our help? Or that people are more likely to be attracted to something that only half the people there seem truly connected with?

One of my favourite stories regarding this is about Eugene Peterson and how he came to write *The Message* after years as an ordinary church leader trying to expand the meaning of scripture to his congregation in ways they would understand and connect with. One of my friends – herself a youth worker – who is a huge fan of his most famous work was excited to hear the story behind it which she presumed was going to reveal that he had studied youth culture in great depth to write with such fluency and relevancy for young people. But no – he had simply spent a lot of time at the source – looking at the Hebrew and Greek and prayerfully trying to impart understanding to those under his pastoral care. He found out that God is the one who knows how to best connect with everyone, no matter their culture, background or age – he discovered something crucial for us all to remember – that God is relevant, period.

Being a safe, risk-taking church

Whether we would describe ourselves as belonging to a ‘traditional’ church or not, we all create traditions religiously! In fact it’s amazing how quickly it can happen.

When I was a member of a Charismatic Anglican church we used to laugh about this phenomenon together. A number of individuals who came from freer church traditions would perhaps introduce a new way of praying (for example by having half of the congregation sing a worship song while the other half interceded) and before you knew it intercessions were ‘done like this’ for the foreseeable future.

There is a sense in which this is a good thing. Consistency can help people feel comfortable, get people used to new ideas, emphasise key truths, build community and aid discipleship. It’s good for new people to have some idea of what to expect and for existing members of the community to be able to define the family they belong to in a helpful way.

But the problem is when these traditions become prioritised or we cease trying new things. It’s important not to change everything all the time. But equally, it’s vitally important that we’re constantly growing and deepening – bringing freshness to our worship so that it doesn’t become dull, dry or rote – but is infused with what God is saying and doing day to day – which (as in any relationship) will be changing with the seasons.

Our God is a creative God and he called us to be creative too. The fact that he desires our worship – and a relationship with us – should never become something we take for granted. Instead, we should be constantly looking for new ways to make him known, to praise him, and to celebrate who he is and all he is doing in our world.

And indeed, our church communities will benefit from this variety too – it will be likely to involve more people in our times of corporate worship, and different styles and expressions will connect with different people in powerful ways.

Finding a better balance between introducing new elements – even just new songs – and having things that are familiar enough for people to get past concentrating on what’s going on and fully focus on worshipping – is difficult, but well worth the time taken and the mistakes that will be inevitably made on the journey.

2. Exploring some of the different options more practically

A quick note on heart change *and* intentional change

Like everything to do with worship, it’s vital we seek heart transformation. We could put in place a myriad of different styles, devotional languages and approaches from the very best motives outlined above and below. But it mustn’t be about tick boxes or programmes.

There is a place for making intentional changes and decisions and I am advocating that. But equally, it's vital that we remember that the journey of devotion is one of each heart towards its Lord and maker. It's vital that we make changes and explore new areas prayerfully, asking God to lead us to the new areas he would have us explore, and following his promptings as we become aware of them.

Freedom *and* structure

Even churches that are informal and would describe themselves as having no structure tend to still have some in reality. And that's a good thing. Like all the other things we're discussing, freedom and structure are not enemies. They should be partners.

The beauty of a structured service – particularly one in any of the traditional church denominations – is the inclusion of all the major elements and attitudes of devotion. You don't forget to intercede because it always happens. You praise, you confess, you declare your orthodox faith in unity, you read scripture and hear it expounded etc.

Things progress logically and often the songs and hymns have been deliberately planned to link in with the Bible readings and teaching – themselves probably on a structure or cycle which means that in the course of a particular time-period you will receive the whole counsel of God.

The danger of course though is that the structure starts to always dictate or limit what happens. At its most extreme we create a culture where we always meet for an hour and a half which means ten minutes for the intercessions, which always come at a particular point in the order of service. This means even when a tragedy has occurred that informs the context of all present, we might not get to it till later in the service at the 'appointed time' and we certainly wouldn't ever consider abandoning everything else to respond to this before God as a community. Surely something is very wrong if we find ourselves in this place?

But way before we reach this extreme, we can already be missing out on going deeper in one area one week or on allowing God to lead the service. God is at work during our preparation for worship, yes, but he isn't limited to this and fresh revelations are likely to come during any service where people are open to listening for them – and this is a good thing.

It was for freedom that Christ set us free. God longs to meet with us, to transform us and to speak into our situations. He moves uniquely through different members of the body and if there is no space for them to contribute, again we miss out.

At the Sanctuary we're trying to hold these elements in tension – and it's a challenge. We have pray-ers from different traditions and we want to resource the wider church as a whole. We want to be responsive to the headlines but not driven by them – particularly because there is an injustice even in what makes the news. We follow a rhythm of prayer and we have rotating lists and patterns to ensure we reflect as fully as we can the heart of God and the needs we want to bring before him.

We aren't a church, but even here with a particular outward focus on poverty, injustice and intercession we need to be very careful that we don't reach a point where there is no room for our personal needs – and no scope to abandon the structure or focus one day because someone joins us who is in need, or we just feel is right to do something different.

Standing for the voiceless and the overlooked requires intentionality – we can't just follow what is on our heart every day or we will not experience the fullness of what is on God's heart. But our intentionality must never be immovable in the face of what the Spirit is saying.

We may exist as a creative hub with an agenda to write worship resources that empower the church to pray and act on many different issues – but we should always be more interested in following what God is saying on any particular day than in covering off a tick list. In any case, it's our experience that the most powerful resources we create – whether they look like they come from spontaneity or not – begin in this context.

High and low

In most of our churches a clear choice has been made between a style and a setting for worship which either promotes a sense of reverence and awe *or* a sense of informality and intimacy. It seems to be very unusual to embrace both. And I confess that I don't know how to do it but I feel the issue needs to be raised. We can choose to balance the theological content and tone of our worship to incorporate both of these elements but it is very hard to capture a balanced approach in this area.

And yet our God is both meekness and majesty – both the King on the throne and the personal saviour who calls us 'friend'. He has given his life so that we might all come freely into his presence. And yet all of us have sinned and fallen short of his glory and we mustn't cheapen his grace by forgetting the price that has been paid for us to come.

I don't have the answers but I'm interested to see how our sacred spaces as well as our worship content can better reveal the richness and fullness of God and the relationship we are invited into with him by embracing both 'high' and 'low'.

The safety of liturgy and the humanity of spontaneous prayer

We know from scripture that God is not impressed by long and beautifully crafted prayers – what he wants is a heart which is after his own. But does that mean there is anything wrong with long and beautifully crafted prayers? I would suggest not.

Liturgy is a gift I have come to later in my Christian walk but it is one I am endlessly thankful for. Why? Here are just a few reasons:

- Like songs, liturgy can provide a framework for unified prayer – literally we are all agreeing on the same thing at the same time – and this has an even greater power when we remember that Christians in different traditions and locations are also joining in with some of the same words. How wonderful and powerful.
- It can help us pray in an informed and coherent way about complex issues. I have long been grateful for organisations such as Christian Aid writing liturgy about tax reform because it helps me learn what to pray for and intercede with confidence and clarity.
- When we face heart-breaking situations or when we come to the end of ourselves, it can be difficult to find words. Silence is fine. The spirit groaning within us (Romans 8:26-27) is wonderful. But having words to turn to can also be a precious gift.
- Good and varied liturgy (and this is another key point – too many of us use the same liturgy all the time) can grow our faith and challenge us, both in prayer and in life, to move beyond our comfort zones, by putting in front of us things that we might not normally pray. It can be hard to pray for mercy for those who are unjust and exploitative in their leadership of others... but it's important to me to come face to face with whether my heart can say *'Soften my heart and unclench my fist from round this stone. Judgement is yours and I surrender it to you now. I recognise that your cross is higher and wider than I could ever imagine. I accept that your grace is so radical it offends the law of justice – so much so that it welcomes me – a sinner – into your very presence.'*

- It can be beautiful and poetic – and this kind of art and excellence has a place in our churches. It mustn't become essential for prayer but by expressing things in creative ways, our minds and hearts can connect to things more deeply and see things in a new way.

Having said all this, we must be able to come just as we are and pour out our hearts with freedom, honesty and spontaneity. In any relationship there are conversations and messages that we craft so they say exactly what we want in a way that we and/or a loved one can come back to again and again. And there is also the stuff of every day discourse – sometimes quick and tripping off the tongue naturally and sometimes charged with the raw emotion of a circumstance or experience. All this is vital.

I am incredibly grateful for some younger Christians I have got to know recently who address God in a uniquely authentic way. I have noticed almost every Christian I know – including myself, though I am working on this – adopt a sort of 'prayer voice' when they move from talking to me to talking to God. Depending on their tradition, they either become louder and more impassioned or quieter and slower in their speech. Their language often becomes more formal or rhetorical either way.

In contrast, I remember one small group session where a Geordie friend was thanking God for what he was doing amongst us. She actually used the phrase 'that's great so crack on with that God', delivered with absolutely no variation from her usual speech – and my heart sang at the authenticity of it.

Whether it's a short arrow prayer, or a long outpouring of everything we're thinking, feeling and longing for God to transform in a situation – God looks at the heart and longs to see it reflected back to him in prayer.

Celebrating scriptural prayer whilst also seeking creativity

Recently a number of people have said to me that songs that simply set scripture to music are 'the best'. In some ways I'm inclined to fully agree with this statement. There is something incredibly powerful about using God's word to pray and praise. And I think many of our hymns and songs don't include enough direct quotation of scripture.

However, the Word – Jesus – reveals himself to individual believers as well as through his word in the Bible. It's important not to relegate the outpourings of Christians, led by the Holy Spirit in response to their saviour, as somehow unimportant or self-indulgent.

We must find our own language to express praise and lament, and we will be edified and enabled to grow in this by listening and speaking or singing the words that other believers have used – particularly in response to situations that we struggle to even voice our complex emotional response to.

As ever, it is always the extreme embracing of, or abandoning of, something that gets us into trouble and short circuited from the fullness of what is available to us.

Again this is true of the psalms. Singing or saying the psalms – particularly in some kind of formalised cycle – is generally associated with more formal and high church settings and those from freer traditions have often moved away from this in reaction. However, to do this is to gravitate to only using selected psalms and/or to begin to lose the variety and freedom of emotional landscape which is acceptable for believers to voice to God. Quoting the odd verse in a worship song alone is to lose the richness of an astonishingly modern yet ancient resource.

Loud and quiet and stillness and movement

In a way the list of polar opposites, and the invitation to *both and* could be worked out in section after section... and these ones are at one level so obvious that they do not require much expansion in terms of specific detail.

But I feel it's important to mention this area because differing traditions particularly tend to gravitate to one extreme or the other here – choosing to select *either* noise and movement or quiet contemplation and stillness, rather than experiencing the full freedom and contribution to devotion that the whole dynamic range brings.

I have heard many people say that they need quiet to meet with God – sometimes even justifying this with scriptures such as 1 Kings 19:12 which speaks of the 'still, small voice' which brings the revelation of God rather than the earthquake and the fire that preceded it. They are right. Sometimes we can only find God when the noise and the busyness stops. When we sit still in silent meditation and reflect...

But equally, he is not limited to this. He can speak in and through noise – and a church which does not embrace making a joyful noise to God, or the freedom of movement in dance, or the gift of using different postures at different times of prayer is a church which has missed out too.

It might not be very English to engage in 'emotionalism' in church but it is vital for our spiritual health and God's glory to worship him with our minds, bodies, souls and strength. If we are to present our bodies as living sacrifices this cannot be reduced to simply cerebral exchanges and 'spiritual' expression. It must also find us kneeling in humility, jumping for joy, dancing with abandon, and quietly sat at the foot of the cross...

Reprising hymns *and* asking for just one more chorus

This summer I was privileged to spend time learning from one of my friends about the value and beauty of hymns in a deeper way than I had previously done. He introduced me to Kevin Twit's teaching from RUF Belmont and to the recordings – and movement behind – *Indelible Grace* (see www.igracemusic.com) who are breathing new life into old hymns by setting them in contemporary styles and/or to new melodies.

Of course, this is not new – and many churches more acquainted with modern worship songs have been continuing to sing hymns and/or adapting them to modern settings for some time. But this emphasis is more deliberate, and more determined to search out some hidden treasures as well as the top ten sung at Church of England weddings. It also recognises that sometimes these texts and melodies need some help if they are going to appeal to new generations of believers.

I was recently talking to a teenager on work experience at a local church who came to spend some time with us at the Sanctuary. We fell to discussing worship leading and he explained that being in an Anglican church he felt an expectation that he should lead hymns from his guitar as well as modern songs but he found this difficult. Some of this was taste and some of this was the fact that many of them are more natural for keyboard players than they are for guitarists – after all that's what they were written for.

I told him not to worry too much until he actually wanted to lead with them but to pray that God would show him their value...

Having said that I did then do a bit of a hard sell campaign by illustrating all the different things you could do with hymns – slowing them down so there's more space and time for the words; leaving out all but essential chords so they are easier to lead from with a guitar; playing them in more contemporary arrangements; writing new tunes... the list goes on.

Whether you adapt them or not, there is a huge benefit to including hymns into your worship repertoire. Here are just a few:

- Many of the most famous and enduring hymns have been tried and tested and represent some of the most beautiful and helpful devotion ever written.
- In the canon of hymns – both well known and less so – are lyrics on every element of individual experience and church life. Both as resources in themselves and as an example of developing a repertoire of breadth and depth – they are invaluable to us. They are not afraid to express sorrow or doubt or to grapple with difficult concepts and this is important.
- Hymn writers of the past were primarily lyricists and/or theologians and so many of the best hymns convey rich truth with a clarity and beauty of language that we are the poorer for losing. This type of writing is also perhaps less often matched in today's songs which are often written by people who are both lyricists and musicians, or stronger in the latter category.
- The hymn's format allows space for depth and development of theme and because of this leads to a richness of truth and theological content which is hugely valuable.
- Singing well-known hymns unifies us with a huge number of Christians over a wide-range of traditions and many who have walked the path ahead of us over the last two hundred years or more. There is a power in this beyond easing translation between traditions – we are literally praying the same prayers.

But it's a mistake to think that hymns – whether contemporary or historic – have everything covered. They don't. Using them as a complete diet is likely to lead to too many words; too much contemplation; too complex or formal devotional language that could create distance or unreality from normal discourse about and to God; and a possibility for too much emphasis on singing about God rather than to him.

Modern worship choruses and songs remain one of the greatest gifts to the worshipping life of the church today and to say anything else is to deny the value of Christians creating their own response to God in their vernacular. Hymns were contemporary in their day and thousands were written – some were just for the time and some were for future generations as well – but most of them were a blessing in some context.

Today's worship songs are no different. There are some banal lyrics out there and some repetitive tunes. But there is much that is pure heart response – beautifully creative and compellingly current. Some of the many advantages of using them are summarised here:

- They reflect the experiences of contemporary Christians in accessible language.
- Many of them are simpler to learn, sing, play and understand – all a good thing for accessibility.
- Many have less words and more space, allowing time for greater reflection on, and connection to, the meaning of what is being sung.
- They provide useful frameworks for freer worship for those from traditions wishing to use spontaneous song or to bring creative and more participative elements of shifting contexts and foci into their sung worship.
- They are easy to remember which (along with their simplicity where relevant) makes them good for small group settings and for helping people absorb and have truth easily called to mind.

One plea though – let's not bin worship songs the minute they're older than five minutes because the decade's hottest leader has just recorded a new album or we've learnt seventeen great new tunes at a summer festival...

Let's embrace a fuller version of the modern tradition which recognises the worth of what's been around for a generation or even a decade and which seeks to select a repertoire of songs on the basis of thorough theological coverage and variety of devotional language, tone and representation of human experience.

And again let's come full circle... why would we want to only use modern songs? For example, simple isn't always good – there is a place for richness also... in language and music.

Let's choose our sung worship repertoire intentionally and holistically with a desire to reflect back to God the fullness of who he is, to make it as easy as possible for people to come to him, and to recognise the diversity of who's coming.

Indigenous *and* imported

One of the most worrying extremes of worship – in every tradition – is an over-emphasis on centralised resourcing. This can make devotion a passive, consumptive exercise and can limit the creativity of the ordinary believer – which should be expressed in their devotion – by reserving worship as something done by 'experts'.

Theological accuracy and creative excellence are important. And it's brilliant that the wider church can benefit from other parts of its body by pooling resources and distributing the best of what it has to offer. But it can lead to too much emphasis on imported songs, hymns and prayers. (Of course sometimes what is marketed is *not* the best of what is available – but that's another subject.) My principal concern here is simply that if all the worship resources come from outside of the community, the unique context, mission and heart of that community is not being fully expressed.

I'm not necessarily suggesting that every song that's written by a member of the church should be included in the canon of that church – whatever the content or quality. But I am saying that surely in most churches there is a songwriter who should be liberated and embraced; an artist whose work can open the eyes of the congregation and a writer who could craft uniquely appropriate content... It might not be the best of what you use in your devotion (though equally it might be) but it will be real, owned and special – and it will be completely in tune with where that church and its worshippers are on their journey at each particular point of time. Without embracing 'home-grown' devotion your body within the body is stifled and you are missing out on the unique expression of worship that you can offer as a congregation and individuals within it.

You may feel that corporate settings are different from individual ones – but I would suggest that if we don't give people permission to share in church they will seldom feel able to do it in their individual devotional lives.

Of course, this has to be kept in balance too. It's important to learn from other churches and traditions – if you only use what is created in your context you can become too focused on the emphases of your own church – naturally drifting into extremes you may not even be aware of.

Hearing *and* seeing *and* feeling – bringing alternative and creative worship into the main-stream

Most of our worship – whatever our tradition – is auditory. We sing; we speak; we listen. This is a good thing. But we need to reconnect with the visual and kinaesthetic in our worship too. God did not create a two-dimensional world that is only inhabited by words. Creation is a riot of colour, scent, texture and sound. And as we create in response to celebrate this richly creative Creator in our worship surely we should also expand the dimensions and languages that we use?

Prayer stations, creative worship installations and alternative worship services – together with a fuller understanding of the importance of using different learning styles (especially with youth and children) – have done wonders for undoing some of the tension and distrust of allowing sensory experiences in church. But for the most part these types of worship are still limited to special events and smaller congregations, rather than being incorporated as a regular part of corporate worship as symbolic acts or shared experiences.

(For a fuller exploration of this issue, please see *Colouring in the dots of worship – using different media to connect different hearts* and *Practical input – using different media to connect different hearts*, available at

www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles and www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-practicalinput respectively.)

Time for some holy fusion

There's also an opportunity for a beautiful new genre of worship to be created as all these streams come back together into a fuller reflection of what I believe worship in the throne room looks like. A greater beauty which is not just about the diversity and variety of bringing different elements together – but the creation of something entirely new and extraordinary as they are fused together to produce something new.

At the Sanctuary we've seen a tiny glimpse of this as we've begun the next stage of our journey with worshippers from a wide range of backgrounds and it's been powerful. None of its rocket science and we're just getting started so watch this space for new ideas, but so far we're particularly loving:

- Using shorter, adapted elements of well-known liturgy tweaked to fit the specific element of God's character we're celebrating that day.
- Saying liturgy over free-form music coming out of freer sung worship.
- Writing very informal liturgy that feels spontaneous and fresh but using it for corporate prayer so we're unified.
- Continuing to experiment with changing pronouns or key words to change the context of songs and liturgy.
- Incorporating alternative worship, testimony and community discussion into the midst of free worship and prayer.

3. Putting my own hand up... a personal testimony of a widening and deepening journey

I grew up in a lively Pentecostal church with a consistent structure of worship, sermon, worship. Worship here meant singing – and there was lots of it. I absolutely loved it.

I count it as a great privilege to have begun my journey of faith in this setting. I was around, and developed myself, a huge value for seeking the presence of God, experiencing encounter with God and the central importance of sung praise and worship both for glorifying God and transforming our hearts as we meet with him.

I have a huge library of songs in my head (which is constantly added to) and as a result have easily accessible scripture and sung prayerful responses to almost every element of God's character imaginable and certainly any situation I encounter. It is an indescribable blessing and gift to me and still my easiest access point to becoming aware of God and his precious presence.

But as well as being hugely enriched by the tradition I began my Christian walk in, I was also a product of my environment – and limited by it.

When we visited my grandparents in the holidays we would attend the short and welcoming service of their thriving Methodist church. My mum was astounded by how hard my brother and I – who regularly enjoyed an hour of non 'all-age appropriate' sung worship and would happily sit and follow a sermon almost as long – found it to sit still, let alone engage.

With no modern songs, no band, less freedom, and liturgy this church felt like a non-church and I didn't even recognise its worship as being real. I now know how tragic that attitude was but at the time I just couldn't process it.

I also remember being genuinely nervous when I started singing in College Choir for chapel once a week in my first year at University – particularly during the Eucharist (which honestly was a new word to me at aged eighteen!). I was

terrified of doing something wrong – there was so much structure and ritual and God felt distant to me as I robed up and sang beautiful choral music. It was beautiful but it didn't feel like worship.

Turning my first corner

Help did come from the Anglican church though... which as a cradle non-conformist still makes me smile. At St Aldates, Oxford and St Pauls, St Albans I was given the amazing gift of a bridge that spanned my tradition and others. In the most wonderful sense I encountered some middle ground. I was exposed to structure, liturgy, more hymns and even an occasional alternative or creative worship act.

I didn't love it all straight away though... I took to the St Aldates' approach of singing some of the confession and Eucharist liturgy much more readily than I did to speaking it elsewhere. And I found prayer stations and other forms of reflective or creative prayer difficult to engage with at a heart level as well as a head one. Especially if they were conducted in silence! I almost needed music – and not just any music – *my* type of worship music to act as a translator, or perhaps more honestly as a fall back which I could focus on rather than what else was going on.

I accepted that all these different styles and approaches were a good thing and that other people were blessed by them so I was all for participating and building unity – and indeed as a worship leader passionate about helping to bring people into God's presence, I was determined to lead in more styles and traditions too to help others. But I just didn't connect myself.

There were glimmers of change even then though...

And my second...

Working for ecumenical organisations – and in particular having the privilege to write worship resources for Christian Aid for so many years – was a revelation. As I began to write liturgy and creative prayer resources – particularly those related to complex justice issues – I grew to love at least worshipping through the process of writing these other forms of devotion – even if I wasn't quite connecting to them as a participator yet.

From a young age creativity had been connected to worship and I had enjoyed writing and playing worship songs – and I was discovering that other forms of creativity could provide this connection.

These resources were helping others worship too and so I was leading worship in a different way and thrilled to be a part of it, but actually participating in this type of worship – whether written by me or someone else – was still far less helpful to me in terms of actually expressing worship.

As I grew older and met more and more Christians from different churches who inspired and challenged me, I was introduced to the huge variety of different 'first languages' of devotion – it became more and more important to me to incorporate these different styles.

And there were hints of transformation in me too. The first time I read some of the liturgy contained in Church House and Christian Aid's *Pocket Prayers for Peace and Justice* that had included meditations on passages of scripture by Christians from the Majority World, the power of speaking this pre-prepared prayer cut through to my heart with an intense power.

And at a Good Friday service at church one year at St Pauls, I felt my heart break at one station out of about ten when I was invited to pray for forgiveness for those who had hurt me deeply whilst holding a nail in my hand and remembering...

Revelling in the difference

In more recent years a sea-change has finally happened. Don't get me wrong – I *really* could sing of his love forever! But I've started to actually connect with devotion that is expressed through posture, nature, art, liturgy, interactive stations, silent meditation... in short anything and everything seems to work as long as it is true and real to God's nature.

Suddenly he seems to be everywhere and things that previously seemed inaccessible, dry or just plain strange have come alive with the freshness, power and beauty of the Holy Spirit breathing in and through them.

Why is it different now?

Some of it is attitude. The more I care about what helps the huge variety of people I lead in worship – whether in person or through the songs and resources I write – the more I want to explore new elements which will help them. The more I care about communicating God's heart for justice, the more I want to access different 'languages' in order to help as many people as possible from as many different traditions as there are to connect with this. The more I genuinely love the church and long to see it unified, the more I want to celebrate its diversity and gain from its strength as well as work to heal its brokenness.

Some of it is exposure and a growing openness to learn from other traditions. I am just as thankful to have grown up in a strong Evangelical tradition as I am for my Pentecostal roots, but I am so relieved to have for the most part been able to leave the more negative aspects of it which are wary of other churchmanships. This journey has been a virtuous circle.

Some of it is gratitude – to Christians from other traditions and the past whose walk has revealed so much more of our Lord to me that I genuinely respect and long for more of what they have. And to the amazing Father who has created so many beautiful ways for me to know him; why would I want to miss out on any of them?

Some of it probably is simply maturity and a deepening of my walk of faith. As I've got older I've learnt worship is infinitely more complex and yet at the same time still more astonishingly simple than I had ever thought possible. My whole life really can be a love song if I want it to be and if I'm open to it... and I can find God and bless him through ever deepening and enriching ways.

Like all change it's been a mixture of heart-shift and intentional habit change – another virtuous circle of transformation for which I'm deeply grateful, and by which I'm greatly humbled.

Still so far to go

A couple of weeks into the Sanctuary's centre being open, we had one of our free-form Friday morning worship times focused on creation care. It was beautifully crafted alternative worship. A playlist about creation was on in the background as we meditated on our mural of the moor; read psalms celebrating God's creation and spent time writing our own before moving into a time of intercession for those suffering from the effects of climate change at different prayer stations around the space.

The sense of God's presence in the room was astonishing and a number of us heard from God in a powerful way. Afterwards I was reflecting on the experience with two other people from very similar church backgrounds to myself who were there and we laughed at how surprised we were – not that we should meet with God during this type of worship – but that we would experience his presence *so* powerfully present. Normally we still only experienced *that* level in our home tradition of free, sung worship.

“In alt worship?!” we laughed, “But how did he know to come... we didn’t even ask him!” It was a joke that came out of an honest admission that at some level we still feel like our default style is *the* definitive way rather than *a* way into God’s presence.

Why am I still surprised that he lays a thousand possibilities in each day for us to find him in and through?

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