

Article

Worship in action – how to be part of the answer to your prayers

God answers prayers, but how he does so often includes us much more than we expected when we were on our knees...

We all know that God can do anything. That he can miraculously or instantly transform any situation we're praying about. And often he does just that, raising our faith and inspiring us to keep on praying big prayers. But sometimes, transformation and answers take longer or happen step-by-step through God transforming us to be part of his answer. This type of answered prayer requires perseverance and a different kind of faith. Faith that is hopeful, patient and active. Faith that never gives up doing what is right.

We don't, and won't, always know why God chooses to act immediately, or visibly, in response to some prayers and why he goes more slowly, or uses our actions, in response to others. But we do know that just as he calls us to have faith for miraculous answers to prayer, he also often chooses to answer prayers through the acts of his people – both supernaturally and through simple human action. God in his love for us, desires that we work with him, **partnering with him** in caring for the world and its people –and we find that as we do so, we can become part of the answer to our own prayers and those of our neighbours.

Being part of the answer means feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, loving the widow, orphan and stranger, or fighting injustice ourselves through direct acts of compassion (e.g. Isaiah 58:6-9). But it also means giving, shopping ethically, reducing our carbon emissions, fundraising, praying for revival, getting involved in politics, volunteering, taking a campaigning action, leading justice-focused intercessions ... the list goes on. But the fundamental point is this: God asks us to **worship him in spirit and in truth** (John 4:23-24) with every part of our lives matching our worship of him – true worship in action.

So, where do we start?

Through this article, we're hoping to inspire you to put your worship into action in new ways, and to give you some pointers as to how you might do this. It's a vast area, but hopefully these suggestions and links to people and places with more information will get you started on the journey.

Before we get into the detail, it's important to say this – we advise you to not try to do everything at once – you will almost certainly burn out if you try, and become disillusioned about making progress. Instead, we suggest taking **one step at a time**, making one key change every few months and waiting until that has embedded into your life before moving onto the next one. It also really helps if you **involve others**. Get your church, home-group or close circle of friends on board and all commit to make the changes together – this way you can spur each other on and be accountable. You'll also find comparing notes and sharing your stories of how you're doing can be fun and more motivating.

Finally, it's also important that you **follow what God has laid on your heart** by starting with the issues that really stir you up. You cannot meet every need, and you don't need to acquire super-powers to qualify as a true worshipper.

Ask God to help you know what you're really passionate about – perhaps it's to care for the homeless, or to campaign against trafficking, or to start living your life in a way that protects the environment and vulnerable communities. It may be immediately obvious to you, which is great – but if you're less sure or have several passions and can't decide where to start, spend some time praying for God to reveal the best way forward for this season.

1. Taking action directly

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Matthew 25:35-36)

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.” (Proverbs 31:8-9)

One of the best ways of putting worship into action and becoming part of the answer to your prayers is by using your own time and/or voice. There are a number of different ways you can do this – here are some suggestions to get you started:

a. Volunteering

The options in this category are potentially vast. Choosing to spend time volunteering could mean getting involved with meeting a need with others from church, helping out at the local homeless shelter once a month, having a weekly cup of tea with a lonely elderly person, creating a wildlife garden, or deciding to spend a year looking after AIDS orphans in an African country. But again, you need to do what God has given you a heart for and once you know this, here are some places you can go to find out more:

▪ **Volunteering through your church**

Most churches have several opportunities to serve – whether that's helping out on a Sunday or with mid-week activities in the local community. Chat to the leaders in your church to find out the best way for you to match your interests with the options available. It may be too that what you really want to do doesn't yet exist within your church – in which case, why not speak to your leaders about your idea and if they're enthusiastic, find others who share your passion for that area and get a new activity going together?

▪ **Local volunteering**

If you know what type of volunteering you want to do, then the best way is to go direct to the relevant organisation (e.g. Age UK for helping the elderly - www.ageuk.org, or Christians Against Poverty for debt counselling and support - www.capuk.org). However, if you want to browse local opportunities, some towns have volunteer centres and even if not, most churches, libraries and community centres have noticeboards full of volunteer adverts. You can also check out local papers and society newsletters. The following general websites can also help:

Community Service Volunteers - www.csv.org.uk

Volunteering England - www.volunteering.org.uk

Do-it - www.do-it.org.uk

- **International volunteering**

Where to look for information depends a lot on what you want to do – and deciding to spend a significant chunk of time abroad (e.g. during a gap year or summer holiday) or to move out there permanently is clearly a huge decision that needs weighing up carefully. There are also literally hundreds of organisations you can volunteer or work abroad with, so even when you decide what type of thing you'd like to do, you need to research which organisation to do it with thoroughly. However, these organisations can give you a good idea of some of the opportunities that exist:

VSO - www.vso.org.uk

Tearfund - www.tearfund.org/transform

Oasis UK - www.oasisuk.org

Médecins Sans Frontières - www.msf.org.uk

United Nations Volunteers - www.unv.org

b. Campaigning

Just like volunteering, opportunities to campaign are wide and varied, both in terms of the issues covered and the methods used. The best place to start is to decide on the issue or area you're passionate about, and then find out about the organisations who work on that – some are likely to appeal to you more than others. Depending on the issue and organisation, there are also usually three main ways to campaign – online, locally (e.g. getting a petition signed on a market stall or lobbying your MP) or nationally (e.g. joining a march to Parliament or a big event). Here's a quick guide to some current issues and links to a few organisations who campaign on them:

- **Disadvantaged individuals, people groups or communities in the UK**

The Children's Society - www.thechildrenssociety.org.uk

Shelter - www.shelter.org.uk

Crisis - www.crisis.org.uk

Age UK - www.ageuk.org

Mencap - www.mencap.org.uk

- **Global poverty eradication**

Christian Aid - www.christianaid.org.uk

Tearfund - www.tearfund.org.uk

Oxfam - www.oxfam.org.uk

World Development Movement - www.wdm.org.uk

- **Human rights and trafficking**

Stop the Traffik - www.stophetraffik.org

Amnesty International - www.amnesty.org.uk

- **Environmental issues and climate change**

Stop Climate Chaos - www.stopclimatechaos.org

Arocha – www.arocha.org

Christian Aid - www.christianaid.org.uk

Tearfund - www.tearfund.org.uk

Friends of the Earth – www.foe.co.uk

People & Planet - <http://peopleandplanet.org/>

- **Trade justice and international debt alleviation**

Trade Justice Movement - www.tjm.org.uk

Micah Challenge - www.micahchallenge.org.uk

Jubilee Debt Campaign - www.jubileedebtcampaign.org.uk

Fairtrade Foundation - www.fairtrade.org.uk

c. **Causing change on the inside**

The other way to get involved in changing the systems that cause the injustices of the modern world is from the inside. For example, you might prefer to join a political party and speak up for positive, justice-focussed change at its meetings or AGM, rather than lobbying or campaigning from the outside. This can apply at every level – from being a Christian voice in your local community as a councillor, Justice of the Peace, or school governor to standing for Parliament. If there's something you want to change, think about the most effective way for you to do that given your time, skills and talents – sometimes working within the system can be the best answer.

2. Raising money

“Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart” (Deuteronomy 15:10)

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.” (Matthew 6:19-20)

a. **By giving**

The early church provides us with a wonderful picture of what true community is all about – sharing life, loving and supporting one another, praying together, caring for the sick, and sharing their possessions (Acts 3:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35). Giving money generously and if required, sacrificially, can be an incredible blessing to others and ourselves.

Many Christians tithe or give a basic regular amount to the church, but whether you do or not, if you know of individuals or communities in need, ask God whether you should give to them and if so, how much. If it's someone you know personally, consider how you can do this in a way that honours them (most people are embarrassed by offers of financial help). When giving to an organisation, think about the best way to do this – sometimes the quick injection of funds can be the most effective way for them to make a difference (e.g. in response to a natural disaster where money is needed to buy emergency supplies) but often organisations prefer regular donations to help cover ongoing costs, and provide stability to their partners and programmes.

Giving generously, whatever our means, is something that we're all called to do – though we should never do so as a replacement for taking any action ourselves. However, it's also true that at times giving to specific organisations can act as an effective substitute for acting directly when we are unable to. For example, if you're short on time and so can't volunteer; are not located near the need; or if you're unable to campaign because you don't have a computer and aren't mobile. If this is the case, giving to organisations who do help the people or cause you have a heart for, can be a brilliant way to put your worship into action.

b. **By fundraising**

Another way of providing the money needed by others is through fundraising. (This also helps raise awareness of key issues and needs, increasing the impact of your convictions and generating support beyond yourself by involving

others.) This might be via taking part in an already-organised sponsored event, such as a swim, run or abseil, or it could involve you organising an event yourself, or making things you can sell.

Many organisations provide ideas, resources and assistance for supporters putting on fundraising events so if you're doing it for a specific charity, ask for their help – a lot of them also have "key moments" in the year (e.g. a specific day or week when events will be happening all round the country) so research this too. If you're putting on the event yourself, perhaps to raise funds for the church or a local charity, you can find some guidance and original ideas at www.how2fundraise.org and www.better-fundraising-ideas.com

3. Developing a more ethical lifestyle

He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

God spoke: "Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth." God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth." (Genesis 1:26-28, The Message)

We're called to live lives that worship God in spirit and in truth, and this means every part of our life needs to be an outpouring of our love for him, and a reflection of our faith in his goodness. This includes ensuring our day-to-day actions should bless him and others, and care for creation. But it can be difficult to even get your head round the impact your choices make. We live in a globally interconnected world, in which one action by one person in the UK has a chain reaction right back to the life of another person thousands of miles away. So, as a result, things like how we shop, eat, travel, bank and deal with our rubbish have a huge impact.

This is probably the biggest area where you need to take one step at a time, opting to live sustainably in both senses of the word... Ethical living and environmentally-friendly consumption are also now incredibly fashionable topics, so there's a vast amount of information out there, but here are some key pointers to help you focus on the key areas:

a. Ethical shopping

This is about choosing to buy products that don't have a detrimental effect on others or on the planet. This might be in terms of the labour conditions and pay for those involved in making them or the carbon emissions, resource degradation and/or pollution resulting from their production and transport. General principles suggest that you should try to:

- Boycott or campaign against companies which have unethical practices such as profiteering from sweat shops or using child labour. (If you are going to boycott unethical shops – particularly those benefiting from unjust practices in the garment industry – make sure you write and tell them that this what you are doing, so they know it is not just because of style preferences.)
- Reduce the amount you buy (do you really need that new item?) – or buy second-hand where possible
- Support local traders rather than big multinational companies and supermarkets
- Buy seasonal and local produce
- Buy Fairtrade items where possible
- Buy more organic produce (or grow your own!)

- Use a re-usable shopping bag instead of plastic bags
- Avoid packaging – or if you do end up with some packaging, try to make sure that it's reusable or recyclable

There are a great many publications and websites covering ethical consumerism, but the following provide a helpful place to start:

Tearfund's Lift the Label campaign and resources - <http://youth.tearfund.org/lift+the+label/>

The Good Shopping Guide (available as a book or iphone/ipad app) - www.ethical-company-organisation.org

Ethical Consumer Magazine - www.ethicalconsumer.org

Ethical Trading Initiative - www.ethicaltrade.org

Fairtrade Foundation - www.fairtrade.org.uk

b. Ethical banking

It's not just how we spend our money that is important; what we do with our savings and investments is vital too. Many large investment funds and banks invest their customers' funds in all sorts of schemes and projects, many of which are detrimental to the environment or vulnerable communities – this includes things like arms trading and oil exploration. So, make sure you know what's happening with your money and that you feel what you're investing in matches your principles. These organisations can help you find out more:

The Ethical Investment Association - www.ethicalinvestment.org.uk

The Ethical Investment Cooperative - www.ethicalmoney.org

The Cooperative Bank (one of the best banks ethically) - www.co-operativebank.co.uk and www.smile.co.uk

c. Reducing your carbon footprint

Excess carbon dioxide emitted by humans is now known to be the major factor in causing climate change – which is already having a huge impact on global weather systems and the livelihoods of many of the poorest and most vulnerable communities in the world. Reducing your carbon footprint refers to minimising the impact you have as an individual and therefore the amount of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere. There's heaps of advice as to how you can go about this, but here are a few initial suggestions:

- Switch to a **green energy supplier**, such as www.ecotricity.co.uk or www.good-energy.co.uk. We could get 85% of our energy from renewables in this country but we currently only get 6%. Renewable energy companies say they just need more people to switch – and they'll keep on building more capacity.
- Look at how you **travel**, and in particular how often you fly. How you get around has one of the biggest impacts on your carbon footprint, and even one trip abroad per year can double your emissions. So consider using the car less, taking public transport or walking and cycling sometimes, and perhaps holidaying in the UK this year (or in Europe by train – check out www.seat61.com for help with planning your journey).
- Reduce the amount of **electricity** you consume by switching items off standby when not being used. The Energy Saving Trust (www.energysavingtrust.org.uk) estimates the average household wastes £37 a year by leaving electronics on standby. Doing things like only filling the kettle with the amount of water you need can also make a big difference.
- Eat **less meat**. According to the UN, the global livestock industry produces nearly a fifth of global carbon emissions. If you eat meat, buy less but better-quality produce from local organic sources. Less meat can also cut the risk of heart disease and strokes – see Friends of the Earth's report "Healthy Eating Planet" at http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/healthy_planet_eating.pdf

- **Reduce, reuse and recycle** – cut back on how much you consume in the first place, reuse items rather than buy new ones (e.g. try www.freecycle.org or local charity shops) and for everything else, make sure you recycle them. All local authorities now have some level of door-to-door collection recycling services, as well as recycling centres you can take items to. Check out www.recycle-more.co.uk and www.recyclenow.com to find out what you can recycle and where.

4. Getting others on-board

When you're putting worship into action by living out some of the suggestions in this article, it's likely that other people will notice, or you'll want to tell others about them and get them starting the journey too. You know your friends, community and church better than anyone, so think about how you can best communicate these ideas with them. It might be as simple as getting them to read this article. But other approaches could include:

- writing about your own journey or putting articles (reproduced from elsewhere if easiest) into your church or local community magazine to tell people about the issues and encourage them to act
- finding small group studies for your small group to do which focus on justice issues or worship as a lifestyle
- leading a justice-themed prayer meeting or week of prayer focussed on interceding for particular issues and asking God to build faith and commitment to put worship into action (whether personally or in your church)
- suggesting to members of your church involved in preaching and leading services that it might be good to explore the biblical basis for acting justly and caring for creation, and if done, to give people an opportunity to respond to this through a time of outward-focused prayer, and reflecting on what they can do differently to be part of the answer to this..

Have a browse through www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet for resources and ideas too.

5. Closing the circle

This article has focused on practical ways in which you can put worship into action and become part of the answer to your prayers. It's important, however, that we don't forget to complete the circle and bring our actions, passions and concerns back into our worship – whether that's through spending time praying for the people you now volunteer with or the organisation you campaign for; including songs about climate change in your worship set or on your iPod playlist; or, interceding for the UK church to live out the call to worship in spirit and in truth. We hope the other resources at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet will help you do this and more.