

Leading in Worship

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# A HANDY MANUAL

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Carol Penner



# Leading in Worship: A Handy Manual

Carol Penner

LEADING IN  
WORSHIP

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# Preface

The term “worship leader” can mean different things in different churches. I am using the term to describe the role of the person who says the words that hold a worship service together. They give a welcome, they pray, they introduce things, they say the benediction.

In some churches, it’s the pastor or priest who always does that. That’s great, they are trained to do that.

I’m writing this little manual for people who belong to churches where people in the congregation lead worship. Volunteers. People like you!

Getting up in front of a crowd of people on a Sunday morning to lead worship can be like riding a roller coaster. I remember the first times I led worship.

There was the long rising lead-up to Sunday, where I thought, “That worship leading, I’ve got to do something about that.”

At various times in the week before the service thoughts flitted through my mind, like flighty birds, “I’ve got to get ready, I’ve got to sit down and work on this.” “If I don’t prepare it’s going to be a disaster.” “I will be up in front of everyone, and my tongue will be flapping but it won’t make any sense.” This part often lasted right up until Saturday night.

Then there was the short, quiet moment at the top of

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the roller coaster where I actually sat down and wrote a few thoughts down (usually Saturday but sometimes Sunday morning before breakfast). I felt clear, I felt safe, I felt inspired, “I can do this, no problem! This is going to be good!” I was on top of the world.

All of that seemed to have no relation to the moment in church when I first glimpsed all the faces looking up at me. An adrenaline rush cascaded upon me like Niagara Falls, and as I teetered towards the pulpit, all I could think was, “Why, why, why am I doing this?”

That was when I felt the hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach and knew in my gut that I was not prepared enough. But there was no going back. The service gained speed. I heard a voice, was it mine? I lost all sense of time, it seemed everything was going very fast. I careened up and down to the microphone over and over again, sounds were flying out of my mouth. Were my words making sense? I had no idea, they were gone! And suddenly there I was walking out of the church, weak-kneed, and it was all over! Somehow I got through it.

Worship leading is all wrapped up with faith in God, which makes it harder to understand why the whole ordeal can be both so terrifying and extremely satisfying. For certainly God is part of the reason you go through it. And sometimes people will come up to you and pat you on the back and say, “Good job!” or “That was a beautiful prayer.”

We feel called to that roller coaster. People need to be led, and someone has to do it. Someone, somewhere, in a committee, has said, “Let’s ask them, they can do it! They haven’t done it for eight months, or two years or whatever, it’s been a long time, they won’t be able to say no. . .” We get the

call, or the email, or the tap on the shoulder, and though part of us wants to say, “No,” part of us wants to say, “Yes.”

If you have ridden the roller coaster, this book is for you.

# Introduction

There are lots of very serious and very good books about being a worship leader, and I recommend you read them. But you probably won't because your life is so busy, and those books look pretty hard to read.

I am writing this for the person who just wants a few short thoughts that will help you to be an eloquent, spiritually deep and extremely wise worship leader. Yeah, right. Sorry, no can do.

Instead, what I offer are some handy down-to-earth thoughts about the job you are doing, and some practical tips that will help you through this. And lots of examples of things to avoid. Just read the bits that you need.

This book may at times seem irreverent, but I assure you it is not irrelevant. Lots of irreverent things happen in church every Sunday, and still we worship the God who loves us.

Let's begin.

# Part I

## Preparing to Lead

# Chapter 1

## Me, a Worship Leader?

You believe in God, most of the time. You know you're not the best Christian in the room. News flash! That's a great place to start. If you have that down, kudos to you because it's one of the most important things in being a worship leader.

The big word for that is humility. Nothing worse than having some puffed up person in the pulpit, saying, "God told me..." or "The Lord revealed..." Unless of course God did tell you something, in which case you are like Mother Theresa and you don't need to be reading this.

If you are, like the rest of us, just an ordinary run-of-the-mill Christian, just go with that. That works. You don't have to get all holy suddenly to be a worship leader.

Sometimes we feel we have to become extra spiritual to worship lead. We feel guilty ahead of time because we aren't as devout as we think we should be to do this job. As worship leading day approaches, maybe you find yourself thinking, "I should read my Bible." It's sort of like going to the dentist...the two days before your appointment, suddenly you are like a dynamo with the dental floss.

Reading your Bible is not going to hurt. It's great, go for it, do that. We could all use more Bible-reading. But if what's motivating you to read is that you are not good enough or not spiritual enough to get up and lead the people in worship, you might as well close your Bible and go for a walk.

Self-doubt in the spiritual department is a pretty common feeling. Even pastors feel that way (good pastors at least).

The good news is that you can be just who you are. You don't have to try to be someone else, some spiritual up-and-comer. You can lead from where you are. That works.

# Chapter 2

## Why People Come to Church

People come to church for lots of different reasons, and thinking about these reasons can help you as you think about leading worship.

- a. Some people come to church to meet God. It is, after all, called God's house. They come over like kids knocking at their friend's door, "Is God home?" You can usually tell these people because they are not sitting with their face buried in a bulletin, or scrolling through their newsfeed on their phones before the service begins. They have an eager look about their eyes. They look like they are expecting this to be fun. They see church as a way to interact with God together with other people.
- b. Other people come to church because they have nowhere else to turn. Life has dealt them a bad hand, or they've played their hand disastrously, and they are all in. And they need help, big time. God-sized help. You can't



always tell who these people are, because some people are very good at covering up this God-sized hole they are carrying inside.

- c. Some people come to church with a chip on their shoulder about the whole idea of God's house. They believe that because God is everywhere, and since you can worship God anywhere, the church is not really that important. These people feel they are doing the church a big favour by showing up. These are the sort of people who like to tell you that they worship God best in a canoe on a quiet mountain lake. Except when they don't come to church, more often than not they are in their pyjamas at home watching back-to-back episodes of a crime drama on Netflix. Which can be fun. Overall, they don't feel comfortable in church, because they would rather be somewhere else.
- d. Some people come to worship because they like to see their friends. They will always miss your Call to Worship because they are visiting in the foyer. If they are parents, as soon as little Junior sneezes they rush from the pews to the nursery, where they spend the rest of the service visiting with the other parents. Thank God we have nurseries, parents need a place to visit. Adult company is very important when you are with toddlers all week. Being with other Christians is actually a good reason to come to church. Worship isn't a big priority for these people.
- e. Some people come to church because they love the music. These are the people who tap their toes not when the music is playing, but when you are talking, impatient

for you to finish up so we can have some more music finally.

- f. Some people come to church to single-task. Our lives are filled with so much multi-tasking. . . people like to come to a place where all they have to do is sit in church. Except some people can't single-task. See g)
- g. Some people come to church with good intentions to single-task. But they can't manage it. Without helping it, they manage to be in church and sleep at the same time. These people usually sleep during sermons, but sometimes they manage to catch a few zzz's through a longer prayer. These people find church extremely rejuvenating. They always leave church refreshed.
- h. Some people come to church to find something to be mad about. They need to do this weekly, because they have run out of steam regarding the last thing they saw or heard in church. Don't waste any energy trying to please these people, because they generate enough energy all by themselves, sort of like nuclear fission. Sometimes they don't mean to be this way, they just can't help themselves.
- i. Some people come to church because they always come to church. These are the faithful people who know they should come to church, and there they are week after week. They have low expectations, or actually, the word expectations isn't really in their vocabulary. They are the I-am-here-no-matter-what folks. There are always a good number of these people at any given service, because these are the type of people that show up. True blue, these people are the backbone of the church.

- j. Some people come to church because they never go to church, and just feel drawn to check it out. These people don't know what to expect.

There are lots more categories and sometimes people can be in a couple of categories at once. This is the group of people you are talking to when you are leading worship. They are not perfect people, often they are not here for the best reasons. But God can work with that, just like God can work with you.

# Chapter 3

## The God Part

You may think you understand church and what it's about. You've been going there a while. You see the service and its component parts, and it all fits together like a well-oiled machine, most days. Sometimes it creaks along, but it gets there.

What you may not realise is that all is not what it seems. Just as people come to church for all sorts of reasons, so too, God shows up for all sorts of reasons, and in all sorts of ways.

If Jesus can show up in someone getting a little something to eat or drink (like in Matthew 25), then he can show up just as easily in someone getting a cup of lukewarm coffee in the fellowship time before the service. Jesus in the handshakes and pleasantries in the foyer. Jesus in the two women talking intensely with tears in a back pew. Jesus in the flowers on the altar table, wanting to be looked at. Jesus in the music and in the ears of the listener. Jesus in the eyes of the newcomer sitting in the second row from the back.

And yes, Jesus in the mouth of the person at the podium calling people to worship. That's you! When you call people to

worship, you are welcoming people to God's house, on God's behalf. You are being God's doorman.

As a worship leader, you have a humble job. You guide the church members into a place that can be transforming. Emphasis on the words "can be." For some people it will be. Who knows how? With Jesus all around you, it's a safe bet that it's not you making it happen.

I think of the movie *The Matrix*, where average people keep morphing into Mr. Smith. It's a bad analogy because Mr. Smith was the villain in the movie. But that image of morphing is very appropriate here. We are all ordinary people, but God can do amazing things through us, in certain times and places. Mysteriously!

Sometimes people call this the Holy Spirit, blowing through us like a mighty wind. Most of the time the Spirit is inconspicuous, just the slightest little holy ghosting breeze. Did the curtains move a teensy bit? In reality, we mostly can't tell when that happens. Did I mention it's a mystery?

# Chapter 4

## Waiting for the Sun

In summer I like to go to a relaxed summer resort town on Lake Huron. It's filled with lots of people who go there every year. And every evening at sunset a big portion of the population shows up on the beach to watch the sunset. And some evenings it's spectacular. When the sun finally slips into the water, the crowd claps appreciatively. And even then they linger, because the colours keep changing in the sky, the sun's afterglow is worth watching. Worship is sometimes like that.

But you know what? The crowd at the beach shows up even on days when the sky is totally overcast. It looks like there will be zero percent chance of the sun showing up, and there everyone is, with their expectant faces turned to the west.

That's like worship too. We get our cloudy days where we hope to see God, but we really aren't counting on it. We show up for worship regardless. The dark grey clouds rule the sky. The water is choppy and steel coloured. And it just gets darker and darker. That's the whole show folks, the whole kit and caboodle. Everyone turns and goes home.

But sometimes on those overcast days, just at the almost imperceptible crease between the sky and the lake, the sun explodes through like fireworks, and instantly everything is illuminated, the water is incandescent, the sky is flaming, our faces are glowing with gold. It lasts about 30 seconds or a minute. Then it fades into grey ordinariness. Worship is like that too. The sudden illumination is all the more poignant for the fact that it's momentary, unpredictable and totally out of our control.

As a worship leader you are a witness to mystery. And you have to say the announcements. It's not all about mystery. It's a job. Someone has to do it.

# Chapter 5

## Service

Sometimes I have led worship because I hope that it will make me think more about God, and I want to feel closer to God. Sometimes, leading worship, I have felt that close-to-God-feeling.

Maybe you have felt it, or something like it. For me it can be a...well, it's hard to describe. I would use a verb like gushing, but that's too close to gushy, and it's not at all sentimental. It is a feeling like something is pouring out of you, maybe it's love.

You look at all those people in their individual particularity, and they aren't individual, you see them as a whole. Whereas a few moments ago you noticed Tiffany with her funny dress, and Chris digging ear wax out of their ear, and Lee who always bugs you, now you see them, no, you know them, as dear to you beyond words. You want to give them good news from God that they need so deeply. You feel a momentary wholeness with them as perfect as a soap bubble. Then, pop, it's gone.

I am thankful for the times when that has happened, but



it doesn't happen very often. In fact, most of the time it does not happen. It's not something we can manufacture. I can try to feel loving towards people, but it's not anything like that close-to-God-feeling, which is a gift, plain and simple.

Most of the time, leading worship is just showing up, doing the work, trying to be competent and faithful. Most of the time there is not much payback in terms of feelings. Yes, a few people say thank you, but if you're into worship leading for the gratefulness you will get from the congregation, you will be sorely disappointed. Worship leading can be a lot of work for very little return.

And I have sometimes been a bit resentful. I can plan a service, plan my little heart out, in fact, thinking how deep and sincere my prayers are, how eloquent my transitions, how my worship leading is everything you could expect it to be. And I get back nothing. Nada. Not a smidgen of close-to-God-feeling, even though I did all that work. And then to top it all off, maybe everyone walked out after the service without even one "Thank you very much."

If that happens to you, I can say to you, "Now you are a worship leader, my friend." Because it's not about what you get out of it. Being a worship leader is service. It's very much like bussing tables at a restaurant. Someone has to set the table, someone has to clean up. You don't do it for tips. You do it because it's your job this week in the Congregational Café.

# Chapter 6

## What, Me, Prepare?

People who have never led worship before often feel that it is dead easy. They think it's a walk in a proverbial park. Just throw a few comments in here, read this there, say a prayer, send them on their way, easy peasy.

Yes, you can lead worship that way and I've seen it done. Once in a great while there is someone who has poise, pluck, and the gift of clear, off-the-cuff public speech. I don't think I'm going out on a limb here to say, dear Reader, that this is not you. You need to prepare. You need to think ahead of time what you will say, and you need to write it out.

Writing things out does a bunch of things:

- a. It keeps you on-topic. No drifting away into bizarre tangents.
- b. It keeps you on-time. No adding ten extra minutes to the service because you rambled.
- c. It helps you be more thoughtful with your public words. All good public speakers think ahead of time about what

they will say.

- d. It helps with anxiety. You may think you will be able to remember what you planned to say, but sometimes, with eyes upon you, your brain can turn to jelly. Paper helps with that.
- e. When you bring papers up, people know you have prepared.

I know there are many churches where the tradition is to speak extemporaneously, which is a fancy word for “off the cuff.” Just stand up and say things without notes. And if that is the tradition in your church, if that is the way everyone is worship leading, that’s great. But even if you plan to go up with no notes, it is a good idea to think ahead about what you are planning to say.

Now I know there are some people who want to stand on the promises of God. You know, the whole idea from Luke 12 where Jesus says that when you stand before the authorities, God will give you words to say. I do believe that. Especially if you are on trial for your life, which is what that verse is about.

Applying that verse to worship leading is about as logical as applying it to exam writing. “God will give me the answer to these trigonometry questions when I am called up before my teachers. I don’t need to study!” If that has worked for you, then feel free to not prepare for worship.

But if you are a believer in doing your homework, then think of preparing for worship leading as church homework. You want to be prepared when you stand up to lead the congregation. Whether you are going to read a prayer word for word, or make up a prayer on the spot from some point-form

notes, or just stand up and pray what is on your heart, preparation ahead of time will help you be a better worship leader.

# Chapter 7

## Setting the Table

Imagine you are invited to someone's house for dinner. You arrive, and the person seems perfectly calm, but the table is not set, and there is no smell of food. They tell you, "When you sit down to eat, I will pull some boxes of food out of the cupboard and we can throw some plates on the table. I think there's food in the cupboard."

Contrast that with arriving at someone's house and all the plates and cutlery and glasses are laid out, there are fresh flowers and folded napkins, and you can smell the aroma of something savoury cooking. There is a coconut cream pie on the sideboard. The host walks in with a tray of appetizers. Which situation makes you feel more at ease as a hungry person?

A ninety-year-old woman told me that she always made a point of setting the table as the first step in cooking dinner. That way when her hungry family came home, even if she hadn't started cooking at all, they saw the table and knew there was at least a hope of dinner. Preparing for worship is like setting a table; hungry people like to know that you have

given this worship leading thing some advance thought.

Now some people planning a dinner party spend weeks making a menu plan, doing the shopping, and cooking ahead. They even set the table the day before people arrive.

Other people like to do everything the night before, or even in the few hours before the guests arrive. I am in this latter category.

In my worship blog, I can see from my traffic statistics that a good number of people are last-minute people. The busiest traffic on my blog is on Saturday night and early Sunday morning. So there are a lot of people like me!

You know yourself and how to plan so you do your best. Each person can choose what works for them, there is no right or wrong answer. Give yourself the amount of time you need. But you don't want to be rushed, because if you are the nervous type, that can lead to feelings of panic.

Setting the table is a good word picture for preparing to lead worship because worship is table fellowship. You are getting things ready. Ultimately it's not about the little details about what you are serving, it's about who you will meet at the dinner party. Everything about the service is designed with the presence of God in mind. Spending time in preparation is respect for the honoured guest.

# Chapter 8

## The Best Worship Leader in the World

You could be the best worship leader in the world, but if you are crabby and difficult to work with, then it's worth nothing. Worship leading must first and foremost be about love. We love God, we love the church, we are ready to serve.

Of course, we don't always feel loving. You may be worship leading simply because someone talked you into it, and you aren't sure you can really do this. As Sunday comes closer you may not feel very loving towards that person on the worship committee who asked you!

The most important thing you can do to prepare for worship leading is to pray about it. Pray that God will give you love for the church and inspiration for you as you do this work.

Prayer is effective; I've seen that to be true. Sometimes I've felt inadequate. I am nervous about doing this job. And all these people coming to worship are from so many different backgrounds. How will I know what words to say to help them worship? And there are so many different needs in the

congregation, how can I possibly choose what to pray about? What are the most important things?

The times I was the most tied up in knots about worship leading happened when I was thinking about myself the whole time, about my words, and how people might view me. The time worship leading flows the best is when I'm thinking of other people.

As you think about the congregation, you start to remember what is happening to them. Mr. L just had that operation. And Ms. M is getting back from holidays, was she in Florida celebrating her daughter's graduation from medical school? And the N family's grandmother just died.

When you keep your eyes and ears open to the congregation you start to discern. The Holy Spirit guides your thoughts so that you can minister effectively to the people that are gathered this week to worship. God will guide you as you write your prayer.

Being open to discernment means that sometimes you will make some last minute changes. You have your Congregational Prayer all written on Saturday night. But on Sunday morning you listen to the news and something big happened in the world, and everyone is talking about it. The concerns that you so carefully placed in your prayer don't seem to be the right thing. Or maybe you remember a significant event that happened to someone. It's important to listen to little nudges of the Spirit.

I remember sitting in church before one service, looking out at all the people and I suddenly remembered something big. A young couple got married in the church yesterday! I wasn't invited to the wedding, but now I see their parents and think of it. I quickly add a line to my prayer, asking for a blessing



for the new couple.

Being a worship leader is very much about having faith that God will help you to do this job. You need love that is bigger than your own small-capacity love reservoir. God is faithful and will work through you. So that's why you can do this.

# Chapter 9

## Being On Theme

Find out from the preacher what the theme of the sermon is, and be sure to read the biblical texts for the day. Your worship leading should reinforce and complement what the preacher is talking about.

The worship service is going to make a stronger impression if everything you do in the service is related to the preaching theme. There will be numerous times in the service to think about a theme. Hopefully this will strengthen or deepen people's faith. They will go home and think, "What was church about?" If the theme was reinforced numerous times, they will have an easier time remembering.

Sometimes the theme is simply the day. Today is Palm Sunday. Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Today is Thanksgiving. Worship lead accordingly.

What happens when you don't follow the theme? It's not a disaster, but it can feel like a rummage sale. As a worship leader your Call to Worship is about love and kindness, your Congregational Prayer focuses on God's faithfulness in hard times, your Benediction is about courage, the music team

picked songs about holiness and humbleness, and the preacher spoke about the importance of education in the church.

You see in and of themselves each of those themes is good, we can learn something from everything. But when someone is throwing eight tennis balls at you at the same time, it's hard to catch even one. People will leave the service with the impression that they thought about something good, but what was it?

Having one main theme, and everything tying into that theme, makes for a coherent, focused service where people can settle into one aspect of our faith in God and meditate upon it, going deeper. It can be more impactful than scratching the surface of eight different themes.

# Chapter 10

## Your Style

Everyone has a different style of worship leading, because everyone has a different voice. But there are certain basic ground rules that are good to follow when you are preparing to lead worship.

Use a simple vocabulary. You don't want to be boring, but at the same time long words are going to sail past some of your audience. If you do want to use a longer word because it's so good, repeat the idea using simpler language. There are multitudinous, there are many, ways to say things.

You are not there to increase people's admiration of you because of your ~~loquacious perspicacity~~ way with words. You are not trying to impress people, you are trying to lead them in worship.

And long words can intimidate people. When people don't know what you are talking about, they can feel that they don't belong. And it can make worship inaccessible to children who are listening. Be as inclusive as possible.

Simple doesn't have to mean boring, it just means avoiding

words that are 12 letters long. There are lots of simpler words that are interesting and vivid. Instead of saying, “We are glad to be here this morning”, how about “We are delighted to be here this morning.”

Worship is an oral presentation. People will be listening, and not reading your words. That means flowery language and long sentences are simply not going to work. When people hear the spoken word, the listening brain likes short declarative sentences, which follow a logical order of subject, verb and object.

Take that last sentence, for example. That is a written sentence that hopefully works because you are reading it on a page. If I had to say that out loud to someone, I would make it simpler. “Write sentences in a logical order: subject, verb and object. People are listening, not reading. The listening brain needs things to be simple.”

See the difference? You may think that the first sentence will sound intellectual and lyrical to the congregation. In fact, it makes you sound confusing. Listening people understand short sentences best. They will miss a lot of what you are saying if you write long complicated sentences.

Communicating out loud effectively is especially a problem for people who have studied Arts in university. They are used to writing essays, and when they write notes for worship, they immediately fall into “essay-writing mode.” Don’t do that. Worship leading notes are not going to be handed in and marked. They are notes for an oral presentation. Just imagine what you would say to someone sitting right in front of you, and then write that down.

When you have written out what you plan to say, the best thing you can do is to read it out loud to yourself. When

planning worship, I'm always writing something "for the ear to hear."

Then I go and practice it out loud. When I practice, I always make changes because I hear how it sounds. I usually simplify and cut sentences in half. I make it shorter, sharper, clearer.

# Chapter 11

## Curb Your Religious Language

This is a really important point, so pay attention. Some people think that the more religious language you can string together in a row, the better your worship leading is. This is misguided.

When you use lots of religious language you are:

- a. Immediately excluding any newcomers who don't have that religious vocabulary. This is one of the most important reasons to speak plain English. "We got into the Word and God laid it on our heart that there's a hedge of protection around us." What the heck does that mean? If you can explain it, then you should be saying it in those everyday words. "We read the Bible and thought about it. We believe God is protecting us."
- b. Communicating in clichés. Stringing together religious language often ends up making no sense. "We want to lift up all who are unequally yoked, Lord, we want to

just bathe them in prayer because we have a heart for them.” What is it you mean by this?

- c. Trying to sound pious or holy.
- d. Being lazy and not doing the work of communicating effectively.

When you write your prayer, imagine someone who does not go to church at all. Maybe it's your next door neighbour. Speak in language that they would completely understand.

And don't use “thee” and “thou” in your worship leading...those words are reserved for people who lived in 17<sup>th</sup> century England. The only time you should hear those words are if you are reading an old prayer written in a time when they actually talked like that.



# Chapter 12

## Don't Throw Out the Baby

OK, this may sound like a contradiction from my previous point. I wanted to make that first point about religious jargon pretty strongly because I think it's a problem for many people.

But don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. There is a time and place to use biblical or religious imagery in your worship leading, particularly your prayers. Use it judiciously, carefully, in ways that do not exclude people who have never read the Bible before.

It is really appropriate to lift a phrase from the scripture reading in your prayer. It can connect with your theme. If your scripture text was from 2 Corinthians 9 about the cheerful giver, maybe you want to include that phrase in your prayer.

Or take the well-known phrase "lead us not into temptation" from the Lord's Prayer. For those who know the prayer, it reminds them, "Right, Jesus said that we should pray that way." The key is that even if people don't know the Lord's prayer, that phrase does make sense in everyday English.

Our religious tradition is rich, and occasionally using familiar phrases from hymns, or songs, or well-known prayers can be effective. For example, if you say in your prayer, “What a friend we have in you, Jesus!” it may bring back memories for many people of the popular hymn “What a friend we have in Jesus.” This is a reminder of God’s faithfulness over time. Another example could be, “God, we need your amazing grace today as we gather for prayer.”

I am not saying that you should do this numerous times when you worship lead; that would be leaning towards trying to string a lot of religious language together in a row. But it can be an effective thing to do occasionally, when it fits.

Finding out which hymns or songs will be sung in the service around the prayer time can give you some ideas of words or phrases that you might want to pick up in your worship leading.

# Chapter 13

## Being Resourceful

I have encountered worship leaders who have that deer-in-the-headlights look. They want to do a good job, but they do not feel equipped. They like creative worship leading, except they don't feel they have a creative bone in their body. They worry that somehow their worship leading will miss the mark, or fall short in some way, and that people will be disappointed.

Here's the scoop. You don't have to be a wordsmith to worship lead. There are lots of very good worship resources on-line that you can find in the click of a mouse. Even if writing creatively is not your gift, you can still know what you like or don't like.

Typing "worship resources" and your denomination into a search engine will bring up items from your tradition. Or you could search for "Call to Worship" or "Offering Prayer." If it's Palm Sunday, add that to the search terms and you'll get prayers written specifically on that theme. Since you are reading this manual, you know about my worship blog; there are lots of other resources out there too. I am sure your church library or pastor has books of worship resources.

Just because you find something on the internet doesn't mean it is a great prayer. Read it. Does it flow, does it startle you with its clarity, does it move you with beautiful language? Keep going until you find something that speaks to you.

Worship websites are meant to give people ideas. You may like a part of a prayer, feel free to adapt it or combine things. Just try and keep it on a theme, you don't want it to feel disjointed.

My rule of thumb is that if you are using a resource orally, you don't need to say where it is from. If you are organised enough to pick your material four days ahead of time, then it's a good practice to reference the source of your prayers: you can print where you found the prayer in the bulletin.

For you worship leaders who are looking on-line for resources Saturday night or Sunday morning, it's way too late to print anything in the bulletin. My advice is: just use them. Don't feel you have to preface everything you say in the service with a source, because that can get very cumbersome and distracting. I find that it interrupts the flow of worship.

If people ask you about a prayer later, or compliment you on your beautiful prayer, be honest that you found it on a certain website. There is no shame in that, you are not getting marked on your prayers, so it's not plagiarism. In fact, people will be thankful that you found such an eloquent and meaningful prayer.

What I do feel strongly about is if you print a prayer in a bulletin, or project it so people can read it, then it's important to reference where you found it. Otherwise people will think that you wrote it. If you changed a few things about the prayer, simply say, for example, "Adapted from a prayer by Carol Penner at [leadinginworship.com](http://leadinginworship.com)."

The great thing about being resourceful is that reading prayers is good for the soul. At some point you will have a moment where you read a prayer and it takes your breath away. You think, “That is exactly how it is!” It is always a delight finding a prayer that exactly expresses something you are feeling or have experienced. Reading good prayers helps you be a better pray-er.

# Chapter 14

## Honest to God

The best worship leaders are deeply honest worship leaders. They are willing to look at themselves intensely to find the rough edges, the deep needs and the greatest joys. They are willing to share some of these with the congregation, in careful ways.

Being a worship leader is not about exposing your secrets to the congregation. That would draw too much attention to yourself, and would actually distract people from concentrating on God. I've seen worship leaders become too confessional, using the service as a time to talk all about themselves and their feelings. Avoid doing that.

Being an effective worship leader means being self-aware, and using that self-awareness to reach out to the needs of others, and bringing that all before God.

Let's take doubt as an example. Maybe lately you are struggling with doubt. You wonder, "Does God really exist?" This isn't just a speculative exercise. It started when you watched that documentary about starving people in Sudan. You wondered, "If God is watching, how can this happen?"

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What if God isn't there?" It's a question that makes you so sad, and it settles on you at the oddest times. "What if..." you ask yourself. It's been bothering you for months. Each time you think it, your stomach drops.

And then you are called to worship lead. As you think about what to pray about, you wonder if you can include something about this. Surely other people must feel this way as well. What if lots of people are worried by doubt, but no one feels they can talk about it. Maybe in your Call to Worship you say,

*Here we are Lord: the people who believe and the people who want to believe. The people who have faith, and the people who struggle with doubts...*

Maybe later in the Congregational Prayer time you raise it again:

*Today we pray for all who struggling with doubts. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel all night, we don't know how this is going to end. We need your presence, God, some sign of your existence and your care. Be with all who struggle through long lonely nights of doubt. Thank you that you are the one we struggle with, even when we can't recognise you or see you in the dark.*

You aren't talking about yourself, but you are drawing on something personal to reach out to the congregation as a whole. You are being honest about who you are, about who we are.

You don't begin the Call to Worship saying, "Some days I am not sure I really believe in God, so it was hard to lead worship today." That would make you the centre of attention.

Neither should you say, “Today we are all struggling with doubt...” because some people may not be at this moment. But you can say, “Some of us here are struggling...” because that is more accurate.

Honesty can be about sad things or hard things, but also about joys, also about hopes. Draw on the most important things in your life. Draw on them for the benefit of the whole congregation. But don’t try to hijack the service away from the theme that the preacher is setting. Talk with the other people who are helping plan worship to co-ordinate what theme you want to emphasise together.

Self-awareness about our own lives is, surprisingly, a very good path towards communicating with others. All of us honest before God. That is the best policy when it comes to worship.



## Part II

### Parts of the Service

# Chapter 15

## The Call to Worship

Not every service begins with a Call to Worship. Some churches like to begin with a Welcome, often followed by announcements, and then a Call to Worship. I don't like that, and here's why.

People come to church to worship God, among many other reasons. I think that we signal the importance of that purpose by having the Call to Worship first. I think that Welcome and Announcements are actually part of our worship. God calls us to worship together, and be a community, and so working on that community falls under worship in my books.

What does a Call to Worship do? It acknowledges that we have come from our various homes, and our various activities, and now we are here to worship God. The Call to Worship draws the attention of the people together in one spot. It is the poised moment between before and after. Before we were just milling about, and now we are all together in worship.

What does a Call to Worship look like? It is short! It is declarative. . . which means it says something about what is happening: "Now we are together to worship!" Sometimes it

includes scripture, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it focuses on who God is, sometimes it draws attention to who we are as the people of God together.

I think a Call to Worship should include a short prayer. It makes sense to ask God to be with us, to encourage us, to challenge us, to hear us. Some worship services only have one or two prayers; including a short prayer at the beginning of the service is a way to centre our thoughts on God.

A Call to Worship is the time to introduce the theme. Not in a heavy handed way like, "Dear Lord, today our theme is the Prodigal Son, so help us as we think about that." Try a more subtle approach: "God, here we are to worship you! Thank you that no matter how far away we go from you, you are always there waiting for us with open arms...".

People who know the story of the Prodigal Son will get the reference, and for people who don't know that story, the Call to Worship still makes sense. Later when you read the Prodigal Son Story, people will recall that you started the service with that beautiful image.

If you are walking to the podium with two pages of notes for the Call to Worship, you are doing the wrong thing. The Call to Worship is not a time to sermonise. I remember one worship leader who wanted to set the whole congregation straight on the doctrine of salvation in her Call to Worship. I think she secretly wished she was the preacher!

Here's the thing, people only have a certain SAS per morning. SAS stands for Sermon Attention Span. If you take ten minutes of that SAS for the Call to Worship, and the person with a children's story takes ten minutes of that SAS, then there is very little SAS left for the poor preacher. People are just plain tuckered out before the sermon begins!

Imagine you are invited to someone's house for dinner. They greet you at the door and immediately launch into a long conversation with you, right there at the door with you on the welcome mat. You smell the food, you can see the table waiting, but you are standing listening to your host talk for 15 minutes by the open door. That would be weird. That's the way it feels when the Call to Worship is too long.

The Call to Worship is the threshold where we enter into worship. It sets the theme and lets people know we are here to worship God.

# Chapter 16

## The Welcome

When you worship lead, it's your job to welcome people to worship on behalf of the congregation. Emphasis on the "on behalf of the congregation." I think it's important to say this, because too often people treat the welcome as if they personally are saying hello. "I want to welcome you..." or they add that meaningless J word "I just want to welcome you..."

First off, is it really you that's welcoming people? Did you build the church, are people coming to your house to spend a morning with you? No. They are coming to God's house, to worship with this gathered congregation of believers. So using the plural "we" can be more appropriate. You are welcoming people on behalf of a group, you are their spokesperson.

Maybe it feels too weird to say, "We greet you." I often start a service with, "I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome to worship!" Mentioning Jesus' name puts the reason for the meeting right up front and centre. We do this all in the power of Jesus, on Jesus' behalf. The Welcome says something about our values.

The Welcome is a time to introduce yourself, or the other

people who will be leading the service. It's good to know people's names, that adds a personal touch. Some churches have all the names in the bulletin, so they forego that introduction piece.

Some churches like to welcome newcomers or visitors to the church. I think this is a good idea, a special call out to people who are here for the first time; "Thank you for coming, we are glad you're here."

Please do not ask newcomers to stand. Some churches have done this in the past, and I am glad to see that it is falling out of fashion. I don't know who invented that idea, but it sure wasn't anyone who was a newcomer in a church. Being asked to stand and introduce yourself to a crowd of people you don't know can be mortifying.

The Welcome should be brief. Some people see the Welcome as a time to share a homey and personal anecdote. This is usually misguided, in my view. I remember one church I attended, the worship leader began the service with a ten minute story about how he had gone shopping with his wife the day before. I don't know what relation that had to the worship service, he failed to make that clear. Perhaps he wanted to show people, "Look, I shop, just like the next person." Not a particularly inspiring message, but he delivered it with gusto. Maybe he was trying to show just how friendly and approachable he was. Which again mistakes the purpose of the worship leader. It is not about you. It's about welcoming people to worship on behalf of the congregation.

In some churches I've been part of, we use the Welcome to say, "Please turn to the people around you and greet them in the name of Jesus." I like this because it allows people who may not have had a chance to say hello to each other to meet.

Some churches include this greeting after the pastoral prayer, and they call it “Passing the Peace.” You turn to your neighbour and shake their hand saying, “The Peace of Christ be with you,” or something to that effect. 80% of the church will probably like this part of the service. (I am making these statistics up. But I am a good guesser.)

But 20% of people hate the “shaking hands with your neighbours” part of the service. They detest it. I had a lengthy conversation with an earnest couple who said they were thinking of not coming to church because they hated this so much. For them it seemed insincere, because it was forced. “We should be greeting people before the service because we want to do it,” they said. “If you tell us to do it, it is totally fake, it’s not sincere.”

Other people don’t like shaking hands because they simply don’t like touching strangers. They find this time awkward because it feels invasive to them. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will probably be long lasting. . . I am not sure how much people will want to shake hands in the future. It’s also possible for people to give each other a little fist bump or a wave and a nod instead of shaking hands.

If people have gotten into the service without being formally greeted, then this welcome and handshake part is a good idea. You have to gauge the climate of your congregation. Hopefully you have very friendly people in the foyer who have done their job of greeting everyone who has come to church.

In my mind, it is a sad day indeed if someone comes to church and no one says hello to them. They leave the church without so much as one person offering a hand of welcome. If the person is a newcomer, they will never come back.

I have been a visitor in enough churches to know that this

happens more often than people would like to admit. I remember one time I entered a foyer. A person happened to be walking in my direction. They looked at me and realised that they didn't know me, and so they quickly looked away. Then they looked at me again, saw for sure they didn't know me, and then changed direction, so we wouldn't pass by each other. They didn't know what to say to a stranger.

Another time, I was visiting a church and I slipped in right when the service was starting, so I didn't get a greeting from anyone. When the service was over I stood to go and I thought I might make eye contact with someone and say hello. The people to my right, to my left, in front of me and behind me were all engaged in conversations with someone. What a friendly church, everyone was chatting. They just weren't friendly with me, a newcomer. I made my way to the door, past all the chatting groups of people, and left without anyone saying a word to me.

Those situations were awkward for me, but they weren't traumatic. I am a church-goer and I kept coming to church. But what if that had been my first time in church? Welcomes are important, they are the way we make people feel comfortable in God's house.



# Chapter 17

## Transitions

When people think of the worship leading role, they often liken it to being an MC, a Master of Ceremonies, like in a wedding program. An MC's job is to make sure that people come up when they should, and they try to say a few words between speeches to make everything flow smoothly.

In some ways, that is the job of a worship leader. You do call people forward to give announcements, or collect the offering. It is often your job to introduce a preacher, or to thank them for their words. And you do want to say things that make the service flow smoothly.

What is different between the roles of an MC and a worship leader is the purpose of the event. This is a worship service. It's not about being jolly, or keeping things light, which is what an MC often does. It's not about inserting jokes and trying to get a laugh. It's not about diverting people, or showing them how clever and witty you are. This is about worship.

Being a worship leader means that you have to take people from there to here. You have to lead people from one element of the worship service to another. When things are moving

along tickety-boo, it may not seem like a hard job. But unexpected things happen, and in order to smooth out uneven parts of a service, it helps to be nimble and to think on your feet.

What do I mean by uneven parts? Worship services have lighthearted bits, like Announcements, or a Children's Story. But sometimes these are immediately followed by something more sober, like a serious scripture passage, or a Sharing Time where people will be talking about difficult things in their lives. I call them uneven because they don't fit together smoothly. As a worship leader, you know what is happening next. You anticipate this, and try to make the transition as smooth as possible.

For example, you might say: "Thank you to everyone who planned that puppet show for the children today, I am sure it took a lot of preparation! It's good to laugh together and think too about the message behind the play. As we turn from the puppet show, it's time now in our service to turn our attention to scripture. Today's bible passage from the Psalms was written during a very difficult time in David's life. . . ."

Those words may still seem a bit choppy to you, but believe you me, it's less choppy than people still chuckling while you say, "And now for our scripture reading," and launch into the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The point is to avoid a lurching feeling where the congregation stumbles over a big emotional change of pace. Hymns and songs are often useful not just because they help us pray and think about God, but because they provide transition points from one thing to another. A well planned service evens out these changes of pace with music.

But in even the most thoroughly planned services unex-

pected things happen; a funny announcement, someone sharing some dreadful news, a bird flying into the sanctuary. As a worship leader, be aware of what is happening, and don't be afraid to deviate from your planned words to address something unexpected.

Worship leaders lead by acknowledging what the congregation is feeling. So if someone preaches a very heartfelt message that has many in tears, as a leader you could say, "Thank you Brent for sharing so personally with us today in your sermon, you've given us a lot to think about as we leave the service today. It's time now for the benediction, please rise. . ."

If, after Brent's moving sermon, you stand up and only say, "Please rise for the benediction. . ." it sounds like:

- a. You didn't hear Brent's moving sermon
- b. You didn't notice that the whole congregation is quite caught up thinking about his words
- c. You're saying, "I just want to get out of here, let's move along, move along."

All three are unfortunate.

Doing transitions is mostly about paying attention to what is happening in the service, and how the congregation is feeling. Next time you are in a worship service, watch for these changes of pace. See what the worship leader says, or doesn't say, and imagine what you could say to make a transition easier.

# Chapter 18

## Presenting...Scripture!

Some churches rarely let anyone but the pastors speak from the podium or pulpit. If they do let someone up there, the one place is for a Scripture Reading. Maybe the thinking is, "They can't screw this up too badly."

And indeed, one just has to read the words on the page. In my experience, worship committees often see the Scripture Reading as a place to get the young people involved. The fact that Junior stands at the mike and mutters his way, haltingly, through God's words for us today, is seen as just fine. At least the young people are involved.

I think that scripture should be one of the high points of the service. They are the word of God. God can speak to us through them. Can we treat them with the respect they deserve?

I remember once I went to a Benedictine monastery for a retreat. They have regular services throughout the day and the night. I was at one of these night services, it must have been 4 a.m. It was pitch black out and all I felt like doing was sleeping. It was time for scripture, which seemed to me

to be an ideal time to just close my eyes and inconspicuously doze off a bit. But the scripture reader, who was an 80 year old man, was absolutely electrifying. He had a good voice, but more than that, he read it with such conviction that I was mesmerised.

How do you become a good scripture reader? What to do:

- a. Practice reading the scripture ahead of time. What is the most important part of the text? How can you emphasise it? Try reading it a few different ways. If there are difficult words or names, look them up so you know how to say them.
- b. Use a version of the Bible that works well for you. I like to use inclusive translations of the Bible, that try as much as possible not to exclude women, like the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). You may have a fondness for the King James Version, but often it is difficult to understand because of its archaic sentence structure and vocabulary. Sometimes the preacher will request a certain translation. You can find your text in any version from [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com).
- c. Print out the scripture reading on a separate piece of paper, with bigger font, and put one phrase per line. You can download your text in any version from [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com). Phrasing the scripture text helps you read smoothly.
- d. Try to look up occasionally as you read, which connects you with the people who are listening.
- e. Always carry your Bible with you, and have the printed version inside it. The Bible is an important symbol.

What not to do:

- a. Don't start reading in the middle of a verse, or with a pronoun. Let the readers know what was been going on in the text, and who the pronoun refers to.
- b. Don't read too much scripture all at once. If there are two scripture texts, it's helpful to have them at different points in the service. Unfortunately, some people's minds turn off when they listen to scripture. They think they know it, even if they don't. Scripture in a worship service is best absorbed in small doses.
- c. Don't sound like you find the scripture very boring. Everyone else will think it is boring if you read it that way.

# Chapter 19

## Reading Responsively

As a worship leader you can read everything that needs to be read. Or you can invite other people to help you read. The advantage of getting someone else to read with you is that people will pay more attention; “Why are two people up there now?” It just immediately piques everyone’s attention. It is especially helpful if the preacher has chosen an especially lengthy scripture passage.

When reading scripture, sometimes the passage includes characters who are talking to each other. It takes a few short minutes to break it down into speaking parts, then you read it as a dialogue with someone else. The difference it makes can be dramatic.

If the scripture text specifies something about the person speaking, why not follow that cue. Having an old man read Simeon’s words, or getting a young woman to read Mary’s words to the angel Gabriel can help the scripture come alive.

Or, alternatively, you can make a prayer or scripture passage into a litany where you take one part, and the congregation takes another part.

Psalms often work well for a dialogue with the congregation. Be careful as you break things up into parts. Giving a long paragraph to the congregation is not a good idea. They will plough through it like a freighter in heavy seas. Give them one or two lines, with the words phrased out every line. Here is an example from Psalm 3.

What not to do:

Leader: I lie down and sleep; I wake again for the Lord sustains me.

**People: I am not afraid of tens of thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. Rise up, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! for you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.**

Leader: Deliverance belongs to the LORD; may your blessing be on your people.

This will just be very awkward, the people won't know when to breathe or pause, it feels uneven. Contrast that with:

I lie down and sleep;

I wake again, for the LORD sustains me.

**I am not afraid of tens of thousands of people  
who have set themselves against me all around.**

Rise up, O LORD!

Deliver me, O my God!

**For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;  
you break the teeth of the wicked.**

Deliverance belongs to the LORD;



may your blessing be on your people.

In the second example, I left off the “Leader” and “People” words. They are distracting additions to the text. Simply say, “I will read the light print, the congregation will respond with the bold print.”

When you invite the congregation to read scripture with you, you are helping them learn the text. Human beings remember things better if we have both said them and seen them. Many people are not bringing Bibles to church anymore, so printing a scripture litany in the bulletin, or having it projected, allows people to interact more deeply with the text.

# Chapter 20

## Children's Story

Many congregations today include a story time for children in a worship service. Some churches like to send children somewhere else for their own age-appropriate presentation. I like to keep kids in the service. Hopefully they can listen and learn from the service. And a Children's Story is often enjoyed by the grownups too.

I think that the Children's Story is one of the hardest parts of the service to do. You just never know what will happen when you are dealing with children, and you sometimes have to think on your feet. Here are five tips:

- a. A Children's Story is primarily a story for children! Sit down and talk to the children at their level, don't tower over them. The adults in the back of the church may not be able to see you, but this story is not primarily for them. Some stories can be entertaining or funny for adults, but that is not the main point. The main point is to help the children understand God better.
- b. A Children's Story is something children can understand.

Think of your target group: your story should be something they can grasp. Use vocabulary and concepts they can follow. Use examples from their lives, or from your life when you were their age. It helps the flow of the service if your story connects to the theme in a kid-centred way. Using a visual focus (like an object that you bring along), is always helpful in keeping children's attention.

- c. Some people like to ask the kids a question, and then let them speak into the microphone with their answers. I avoid doing this. Here's why. This sometimes leads to a response that is startling or unusual, and the whole congregation laughs. This is confusing for kids, who may have been trying to say something serious, and now everyone is laughing at them. And older children will soon realize that they can play for laughs and will start saying smart-alecky things to get a reaction. This is just me... I know other people who love to have the kids speak in the service.
- d. A Children's Story is short! It should last between 3 to 5 minutes. Any longer and the younger kids may become restless and inattentive (and the service will go overtime). Simple is better! If you plan to tell a bible story and share a personal example and then have an object lesson/activity, you are likely going to go overtime. If you are reading a picture book to the children, you may need to skip some parts to keep within the allotted time.
- e. Be sensitive to the children. Try not to make assumptions about what the children's lives are like; allow for exceptions. Not every child who is listening may know bible stories. It can be embarrassing if you start quizzing them on something you haven't talked about yet. Not

every child comes to church with, or even has a mom and a dad. Avoid saying “You can go back to your moms and dads.”

In churches I was part of, I liked to have more than one adult at the front with the person who was telling the Children’s Story. If you get one rogue child, and the storyteller is the only adult sitting there, they will have to say, “Cara, please stop biting your brother.” Which is awkward, since you are usually wearing a microphone, and everyone will hear. An adult who is doing crowd control can really help.

While the Children’s Story can be very unpredictable, it is also very satisfying. The great eagerness that children bring to your story is a model for all the adults in how we should approach worship. A little child shall lead them.

# Chapter 21

## Offering Prayer

An Offering happens in most churches, although I know some congregations are encouraging direct deposit of tithes. But as long as we have buildings and paid ministers and charitable causes that need support, we will be passing around a plate or a bag or a basket, and asking people for a contribution.

Usually worship leaders are very low key about the Offering. “It’s time to collect our Offering now, will the ushers please come forward.” And we listen to a nice piece of music and there, it’s done.

I think that approach to giving money is underwhelming. Is it really that unimportant? People are giving up their cash, the money that they worked hard to get. Isn’t there a better way to recognise a gift?

Think about having a birthday party for someone in your family. People arrive and some are carrying gifts. At some point in the party do we look very serious and say, “It’s time for gifts now.” Do we sit there stone-faced, trying to get this part over as quickly as possible? I don’t think so! Gift-giving is part of the celebration. It’s not about the things, it’s about

the relationships of the people in the room. The gifts signify our care and love for each other.

In the same way, bringing gifts to God should be an upbeat part of the service. Giving is a joyful event.

So what does this mean for you as a worship leader? Maybe a few extra words of explanation; “When we take an Offering we are showing our joyful response to God’s giving in our lives!” “It’s a joy for us to give gifts back to the One who gives us so much.”

I like to include a prayer of dedication for the Offering. It can come before or after the money is collected, it’s a way of saying, “This is for you, God!” It can also be a way of acknowledging our feelings as we give our gifts to God.

If you can, it’s good to tie the Offering in with the theme of the service in some way. It doesn’t always work, but it’s nice if it does.

# Chapter 22

## Sharing: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

### The Good

Your church may have a tradition called “Sharing.” This usually happens around the prayer time, and congregation members have the opportunity to be handed a mike and share something that is happening in their life. This is a way of asking for prayer.

I am a Mennonite, and as a denomination we really emphasise community-building. We are keen on Sharing. Larger churches have a hard time including Sharing because it can get too long, but many small churches do this every week.

I have pastored in a small, pretty informal congregation. We sometimes would have Sharing as the sermon for the day. We’d say the theme ahead of time; “Joy”, “Generosity” or whatever, and people could share stories from their life about this theme.

Having Sharing is a good way to encourage people to support one another. We learn who we are, we hear each other's voices, and we can pray together for what matters to us. So that's good, right? Well it's good, except when it's not.

## The Bad

The problem with Sharing is that most people do not feel motivated to share when happy things happen (the exception being weddings and the birth of babies). Most people feel motivated to share when bad things happen. So that means Sharing time is often a litany of hard times. You take the average group of 80 people, and if they only shared what is happening to them personally, then it might be OK. But every person knows 100 people. And in that extended group of 8000 people there are bound to be at least 20 cases of lingering terminal cancers, tragic deaths, horrific car accidents and undoubtedly a house fire to boot.

As a worship leader, you may be trying to have a joyful service. The music—joyful! The prayers—joyful! The sermon—joyful! But then comes Sharing. You see doom and gloom blooming in the faces of everyone in the room as the stories pile on top of each other from bad to worse. Sometimes it seems as if there is a competition for misery: “You think that's bad, let me tell you about my neighbour's aunt!” You may not even have met her, but during Sharing, you feel burdened to tell her sad story.

It can be hard to resurrect a service after Sharing. It's like a black hole has come and sucked all the life out of the room.

So that's why sometimes I've encouraged people to share more positively by announcing a theme. “Today let's share



about what we are thankful for!” But if someone has a sad story to share, wild horses cannot stop them from doing that, no matter what guidelines you lay down. And perhaps that is as it should be. I know I’ve had sad stories to share, and just because the worship leader wants to be happy, doesn’t mean I am.

Maybe it’s OK to have this immersion in the woes of the world, even if most of the stories are about people no one knows. Some might think that this is a sort of *schadenfreude*, which is a German word meaning, “pleasure from someone else’s misfortune.” We certainly seem to enjoy our Sharing, against all odds.

But I think it’s more like, “There but for the grace of God go I.” We hear all the horrible things that are happening to everyone, but here we are, by some miracle, still breathing. Sharing makes us happy to just be alive, and we get to pray for all those unfortunate people whose lives are falling apart. Praying is always good for us, so what harm can there be in Sharing? Read on.

## The Ugly

There is a harm in Sharing Time and here it is: not everyone in church is a nice person. There are some people who should never, under any circumstances, be given a microphone in a public setting. But in our egalitarian church life, we give out microphones willy-nilly, even to total strangers.

This is dangerous. Some people have axes to grind, and they can be extremely nasty. And there are people with severe mental illnesses who don’t have an awareness of boundaries, or they may not even have a good grasp of reality.

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I have heard people share information that is not theirs to share. I have heard hurting people share way, way too much medical information, so much that the congregation is squirming. I have heard people give a prayer concern that is a thinly veiled slap in the face to someone they are in conflict with. I have heard delusional people share disturbing things that they have made up about people, at great length.

Just because bad things can happen doesn't mean we should never have sharing. Sharing can be great! But it just means that if you are the worship leader, and the ugly starts to happen, you must do something about it. You must intervene. This can be very tricky if the person sharing is on the other side of the church, and you are standing at the front. I think that's why some churches have the worship leader go around with the microphone. Then you can lean in, and gesture that it's time to wrap it up.

So what would you say in a situation where you need someone to stop speaking? "Thank you for sharing, but we really must move on." "That sounds like a very complicated situation, but thanks for sharing." "Shut up!" Ok, maybe that last one isn't appropriate, but think of something tactful to that effect.

Churches can at times absorb some ugly behaviour. "Oh that's just Mr. H..." I am always grateful when a congregation can roll with the punches, and try and love someone anyway. But you never know how hateful words can be a dagger to someone's heart; inappropriate sharing can make a community feel unsafe.

As a worship leader you have to be prepared for any eventuality. Sharing may be divine, but it can also be hell on earth, and if you are the worship leader, it's your job to be the ref-

ere if something ugly starts to happen. Like a car accident, it doesn't happen very often, but when it does happen, it pays to be prepared.

# Chapter 23

## Congregational Prayer

Praying together as a congregation is one of the most important things we do in worship. We say a prayer in the Call to Worship (sometimes), or we say a prayer in the Offering (sometimes), we say a prayer in the Benediction (sometimes). The one time we always pray together is during the Congregational Prayer!

Your church may call it something different. Some people call it “Prayers of the People,” some people creatively call it simply “Prayer.”

Whatever you call it, if you are the worship leader, you are likely the pray-er, the one who leads the whole group in this communal prayer time. So how do you do this part of the service?

I like to think of the prayer as having three parts, that you can remember with the letters PRP. Peeled Red Potatoes? No! Praise, Repentance, Petition.

A lot of people write prayers that are only petition. But the best prayers always balance petition with some repentance

and lots of praise.

One of the traps to fall into is to make your prayer too long. A prayer shouldn't be more than a page. People fall asleep or drift off, it's hard to pay attention to long prayers. I have looked out at the congregation and seen them become restless, like a field of wheat under a choppy wind, when a prayer becomes too long. If your prayer is too long, look at it and see if you are being repetitive. What is the ratio of PRP, can something be pared down?

Another trap to fall into is to be too short. One phrase for each PRP and then you're done. Really? Your community has lived complicated lives for an entire week, they come weighed down with pain and bubbling with joy. Are three sentences enough? You spent 12 minutes on Announcements in the service, and you are going to spend 40 seconds on a prayer to the God who made us? Think some more about the people you are praying with, and I am sure you will find more things to say on their behalf.

## Praise

If there is one thing we should do together as a church, it is give thanks to God. Of course some of the hymns or songs we've been singing in the service will have done this. But the Congregational Prayer gives you the opportunity to thank God in words you get to choose.

I think the most effective prayers are very specific. Using your eyes, your ears, your nose, your sense of touch and taste, what did you experience this week that was wonderful? Since it's spring when I am writing this, I might say: "Thank you God for the fresh taste of spring, for strawberries, red and

juicy, sweet and tangy on our tongues!” You could simply say, “Thank you God for food.” But specific thankfulness prayers are an invitation for others to think about the wonderful things they’ve experienced this week. I think at least a third of the prayer should be filled with thanksgiving.

Just a note. . . give thanks for things that are a common experience. Don’t say, “Thank you for the beautiful blue ocean I saw on my Hawaiian vacation this week.” That just draws attention to you. This is a prayer for everyone. Use your personal experience to think of things that you have in common with other people.

When we give thanks to God, we are really training ourselves to pay attention to the gifts God gives us every day. What does your church have to be thankful for? By saying thank you, you are helping the congregation pay attention to all the good things God is doing.

I know some people who find it very hard to pray at home. They really only pray when they come to church. If you only prayed one prayer a week, I hope it would include a lot of thankfulness and praise.

## Repentance

This week didn’t go perfectly. In fact, some people messed up in tragic ways this week. Our prayers have to reflect that fact. We say mean things, or do mean things to people, sometimes the people we love the most. Sometimes we hurt ourselves. And then there’s the many ways we participate in problems that are bigger than our own personal concerns, like systemic issues of poverty, pollution or racism.

This part of the prayer time is a chance to level with God. It's not about trying to make everyone feel like a worm. It's simply saying that all is not right here on planet earth, and we could really use some help.

Listing one or two ways we've fallen short this week is often enough. If you compile a big long list of sins it will depress the heck out of everyone, and mostly they will stop listening.

I think it's good to be specific. You could say, "We've fallen short in caring for our families." But that is pretty bland, and doesn't really say very much. Think about your own life, where have you messed up? I think of my life and can write, "Some of us have had a hard time being part of a family; we've been irritated when people wanted attention, and angry when people didn't give us the attention we wanted. There are things we said, that we wish we didn't say, and when something needed to be said, sometimes we were silent."

We can then ask God to forgive us. An important part of praying about repentance is some acknowledgement of assurance. God loves us! God doesn't reject us. It is important to say, "We thank you that you love us and forgive us," or "Your mercy to us is never-ending."

Finally, I think it's really important to say something like, "Give us the courage and grace to apologise to the people we've hurt and to right the wrongs we've done." People sometimes short circuit forgiveness; instead of working on a relationship with a person (which is messy), they go straight to God, and think they've taken care of business. This way of praying reminds us that even if God forgives us, we still need to do the work of repairing relationships.

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## Petitions

Usually as a worship leader you will be given some things that need to go in this part of the prayer. If you are supposed to pray for the people who spoke during Sharing Time, make sure you have a pencil and paper to write things down. If the Sharing is too lengthy, and you are worried about missing something that was said, it is fine to not repeat them all and just say, “God, you’ve heard all the many prayer requests shared here today. Thank you that you hear us and you answer our prayers.”

Or maybe your church doesn’t have Sharing Time. It is important to pray for those in your congregation who are sick, recovering in the hospital and grieving for loved ones who have died. If you are praying specifically for certain sick people in your congregation, check with your pastor to make sure that the person wants to have public prayer. Some people will not appreciate it if you say, “Please pray for our brother Mike who is in the psychiatric ward of the hospital, and for our sister Meg who is recovering from a hysterectomy.” Some people are very private about their lives, and you don’t want to offend anyone with your prayer.

I generally try not to be too detailed and specific when I pray for individuals. You may feel that you are showing a great deal of care for Ms. Q if you pray for “wisdom for the surgeons, and caring help from nurses, and peace for the family gathered and etc. etc.” It might comfort that family to have a very detailed prayer. But then when you pray for “Mr. R who broke his leg”, and then move on, Mr. R may very well feel slighted. He may feel he got the short end of the prayer stick.



It sounds petty, but this is life in the congregation, even prayers need to be fair, and if we are going to lift up one person in an extra special way, we have to think about how others will feel if we don't show that level of care to them. Of course there are always exceptions to this specific rule; like when a child in your congregation is in the hospital, or when there has been a particularly bad accident where everyone in the congregation feels shaken and upset by it. Praying communally can be cathartic...together we lay our worries and anxieties about someone before God.

I think it's important that petitions never just be all about our own congregation and the people in it. Are we a church that cares about our community and our world? If we are, our Congregational Prayer should reflect that. Our petitions should have a broader frame of reference than just our own lives.

Think about what's happening in a 1 km radius about your church... who is hurting? Pray for them. Instead of saying "Lord, we pray for people who are hurting within a 1 km radius of our church," try to be specific. "Lord, we know that in the neighbourhood of our church there are a lot of single parent families, and a lot of them have trouble making ends meet each week. Some have to choose whether to pay the rent or buy groceries. Help them, and help us figure out how we can help answer that prayer."

When we pray for the world, instead of saying "Help refugees," try to be more concrete. "Today we pray for people who are fleeing their homes and are crossing the sea in open boats. Protect them from the waves, and bring people to assist them. Help them find refuge." Or "We pray for people who are tangled up in bureaucracies waiting for refugee hearings. Give compassion to all who help them and hear their cases." People

can picture this, and so they can feel compassion too. Since being specific takes longer, you may not be able to pray for so many things. But that's OK. God will be listening next week too.

Petition prayers can also occasionally include questions. When tragedy strikes, and you don't understand something, you can ask "Why has this happened?" Refrain from answering these hard questions; just leave it open-ended. If you say, "We know we will learn something from this dreadful event," you may be jumping the gun on people who are not ready to answer the question yet. Think of the Psalms, David was full of questions for God.

# Chapter 24

## Announcements

Some people like the Announcements section of the service best. It could be because some people make a point of being creative with their announcements. The Announcement section might be the time where you see a little dialogue or creative skit encouraging you to attend an event. It's the time in the service where a lot of information is shared in a short period of time.

Except when it's a lot of information shared in a long period of time. Some churches overdo it on Announcements. It can get tedious if every last detail of every event is announced.

Some churches have said, "Enough is enough!" They won't even say Announcements out loud. They project them before the service, or write them in a bulletin and assume you will read them (this never works), or they email you the information.

But most churches strive for a happy medium. I think it's friendly to have Announcements. It lets newcomers, who might not be on an email list, know what your church is up to. The activities of the church are part of community life, and so

it makes sense to refer to them when the community gathers for worship.

Here are some tips about Announcements:

- a. You don't have to read every single notice everyone gives you. Because you are not the pastor, people think they can pull one over on you, and they sneak a two page announcement in. Ask the pastor for their opinion if something is too long.
- b. Do not use short forms. Don't assume that everyone knows what GULG or NCST stands for (Grown Up Life Groups? New Christians Stand Together?). For newcomers it can feel like they are being excluded from a club.
- c. Do not assume that everyone knows where Gary lives: "The seniors group will be meeting at Gary's house."
- d. Always let people know who is welcome to come to which group. "Everyone is invited to the Sunday School picnic next week, not just people in Sunday school!"
- e. If you are talking about a fundraiser, be sure to say why you are raising money. The "Youth Fundraiser" makes it sound like the church is in the business of raising money for itself. Explain that "Every year the young people in our church hold a fundraiser to support an orphanage in Kenya."

You can see where I am going with this. Think about how Announcements will sound to someone who knows nothing about your community. Make sure they are all intelligible to a newcomer.

I have seen worship leaders try to get the congregation involved. They ask a question and see how many people have done something. They say, “Who has gone on a service assignment some time in their life?” This may make a point that a lot of people have gone on a service assignment. But when the whole church with the exception of four people raise their hands, they are making the point that those four people don’t fit. They are misfits, because they stand out as different from everyone else.

Also, never assume that people have enough money to participate in the events you are talking about, “We hope that everyone will be coming on the church retreat this year, it’s only \$50 a person, so it’s very affordable.” Some people do not have \$50 extra in their budget to do anything, let alone \$200 for a family of four. By phrasing things that way, you are unwittingly sending a message to those with low incomes that, “This church is for people who are wealthy: you don’t belong.”

Basically, the key to doing announcements is being aware of who might be in the congregation, and being sensitive enough not to make assumptions about them.

# Chapter 25

## Benediction

Benedictions are the good-byes at the door. They are the prayers for sending, and the acknowledgement that it has been fruitful and good to be together in God's house.

There are four important things to remember when preparing your benediction:

- a. People have heard a lot of words, and they are ready to go home. Have you ever been very tired after a party and your host follows you out the door to your car, still talking? You get in the car and you want to drive away, but they are leaning on your car still talking to you. That's what it feels like if your Benediction is too long.
- b. People are usually standing during a Benediction. They are standing because they want to go home. Don't keep them standing very long.
- c. Send people away feeling blessed or inspired. Say words that are positive and upbeat. Just like the Call to Worship, this is not about you saying good-bye. It's not,

“Thanks for coming, I’ve had a really good time, I hope you have too.” (I have heard this.) You are saying words on behalf of your church, to remind us that God is with us, and will go with us from this place.

- d. These are the final words that sum up the service. Think back over the service. If you had to choose a phrase that sums up what the service was about, what would those words be? Use those words.

You can practice this. At the next service you are at, as you near the end, think back. If you had to choose a phrase to describe what happened, what would it be? See what the worship leader chooses to emphasise.

Now of course there are generic and appropriate benedictions, “My brothers and sisters, go in peace to love and serve the Lord!” These are fine. But if the whole service has been about Pentecost, why not use this last send-off as a way to reinforce the theme one last time: “Go from here filled with the Holy Spirit, whose power can do more than anything we can ask or imagine!”

# Part III

## Helpful Hints



# Chapter 26

## What to Carry

A well prepared worship leader always carries a pencil or a pen. Believe me, the day you do not carry a pen is the day you need one desperately. The music leader comes and shows you there is an error in the bulletin, something needs to be switched around. You don't need to be walking up and down the aisles before the service asking, "Does anyone have a pen?"

A well prepared worship leader always carries a tissue. Or makes sure that there is a box of tissues where they are sitting. You never know when your nose might start to run, and there is absolutely nothing worse than a sniffly worship leader, who is discreetly wiping their nose on the back of their hand when no one is looking. Note to self: people are always looking.

A well prepared worship leader always carries a Bible. It does not matter if someone else is reading the Bible passage, you have to have a Bible. I remember a mortifying day when the person who was supposed to do the Bible reading did not show up. The reading had to be done, but I did not have a Bible with me, there was no Bible on the altar, no one in the front pews had a Bible. I mean, it just looks bad to have

the worship leader begging for a Bible. Be prepared and save yourself the embarrassment.

# Chapter 27

## What to Wear, What to Wear?

In my experience, this is something that men spend almost no time thinking about, and something about which women agonise. I know that is a stereotype. There are likely men who make a mess of their bedroom, taking on and off multiple outfits before they go up to worship lead. They just never talk to me about it.

But because I've talked to a lot of women worship leaders, I know I am not unusual when Sunday morning has found me putting on and taking off any number of outfits, trying to find the one that will work.

This may mean that I am insufferably vain, which is possible, but it can also reflect the reality that for women, choosing an outfit for worship leading can be complicated. Talk to any woman who preaches or leads worship, and they often get just as many comments on their blouse, or their skirt, or their shoes, or their hairstyle, as they do on the words they say. It's the sad truth, people look at a woman's appearance and feel

perfectly comfortable commenting on it. This can lead you to be super self-conscious about choosing the right thing to wear so you are not conspicuous. You don't want people commenting on your appearance, you want them concentrating on your words. And yet you don't want to wear a paper bag; they would be sure to comment on that too!

I can't tell you how many times people have commented on my clothes when I'm worship leading. From "Where did you get that dress?" to "Those don't look very much like shoes a minister would wear." My male colleagues only rarely get comments on their clothing.

So what should you wear? Here is my two cents worth. Other people might have different opinions. I know this is a very contextual thing, every church is different, because there are different cultures and norms.

Let's start with formal vs. casual. Look around your church at what people are wearing normally, and make sure you are not dressing like the most casual half of the church. For most churches this means you should not be wearing flip flops, shorts and a tank top, or ripped clothing of any kind. You should not look like you are going to the beach. How casual should you be? Not as casual as 50% of the people.

Why am I saying this? For some people, going to God's house means dressing up. It's a sign of respect. A younger generation is no longer holding to this practice, I know. But most churches have enough older people in them, that if you stand up to lead worship looking like you are going to wash your car, it signals that you don't take this worship leading job very seriously.

On the other hand, it is possible to be too dressed up. To be the only person in a suit can be just as off-putting as being

dressed too casually. It may look like you are trying to be more important than everyone else. Take your cues from the congregation.

You don't want to be memorable. You don't want people thinking, "Our worship leader sure looked great today in that chartreuse smock with the crimson leggings and black and white striped scarf." You hope that they will remember something else about your presence in church.

The colour of clothing is a tricky subject. Men's clothing is definitely becoming more colourful. I worshipped in a church where a male worship leader wore purple pants and a green shirt. But the pants were a dark eggplant purple, and the dark green shirt was buttoned up. He was making a fashion statement but it was with subdued colours. Neon orange pants, and a bright yellow sweatshirt with the giant word "BOSS" emblazoned on it, is a different look entirely. It's a fashion choice that says, "Look at me! I want to be the centre of attention!"

I think that slogans on shirts are always something to avoid. It's not just that some t-shirts have words that might offend people, it's that any slogan is distracting. When you wear words on your shirt, people will be looking at you trying to read all the words on your shirt. We are hardwired to read.

Women's clothing is often very colourful, which is why it can be tricky choosing what to wear for worship leading. Here's a simple guide. Think of yourself in a photograph with all the people in the church. If your clothing will make you stand out from everyone else, it probably is not the best choice. You want to look nice, but not flamboyant.

Being well groomed is important for everyone, and so a word about hair. Comb your hair. You may feel that getting

up to worship lead looking like you just got out of bed is a theological statement: “God accepts me just the way I am!” To other people it doesn’t mean that. It means you are careless and haven’t spent any time getting ready to do the job you are doing.

Most men’s clothing has pockets, but this is less common in women’s clothing. Too many times it’s happened to me where I arrive at a church and all they have is lapel mikes. The sound person says, “Just put this box in your pocket or attach it to your belt.” You look down and you have neither pockets nor belt. There are certain articles of clothes that just don’t work for worship leading because of this. It is always a bad idea to just try and carry that little microphone box. You invariably drop it, which jerks your head to the side like a caught fish. It’s just one more thing to juggle with your papers and Bible, and you don’t need that hassle.

A final tip for every worship leader; don’t wear clunky, clinky jewellery, because it will drive the people in the sound booth crazy. It’s hard to adjust a microphone when someone’s jewellery is continually clinking against a podium.

# Chapter 28

## Modesty is the Best Policy

Modest clothing is important for every worship leader. I remember one pastoral intern who showed up to lead worship in a t-shirt and a wrinkled pair of baggy shorts. Besides looking like he was going to clean the garage, it was just distracting. People found it hard to concentrate on worship when they were looking at his knees the whole time. Perhaps people should have more self-control, but they don't.

The team involved in coaching him said, "Hey, next time, it's a good idea in this church to wear pants when you lead worship." He decided to ignore their advice and he wore shorts again the following Sunday to lead worship. Their words were more direct after that: "Wear pants. Try to look more professional."

Women's clothing is different, since women commonly wear dresses that show their knees. But how much of your leg should you show? When you stand in front of a group at a podium, people will look at your legs, and the more of your legs you

show, the longer they will look at them.

The same goes for cleavage. You are there to lead worship, not to look sexy. I have no problem with looking sexy if you are going to a club, or maybe even to a church dinner. But when you lead people in worship, you may think that everyone else should just block out your body and concentrate on your holy words. But your body talks just as much as your words, and wearing clothing that draws attention to your sexy body distracts from the words you are saying.

If your church has a stage, the fact that people will be looking up at you renders a short skirt even shorter. And if you are sitting on a stage, people will be at eye level with your legs, so you will need to keep your legs firmly together throughout the whole service, which is a lot to think about for an hour.

You may think I am entirely old fashioned on these clothing guidelines. But there are lots of people like me in the church. And you are not worship leading for yourself, or just people like you, you're worship leading for the whole church.

But I don't know the setting where you are worship leading. If you are in doubt about what to wear, talk to someone in your church about it.



# Chapter 29

## Ready for Takeoff

Worship leaders should be one of the first people at church before a service begins. I've seen a worship leader rushing into church two minutes before the service begins. This should be avoided because:

- a. It will give the other people helping with the service conniptions, because they will be hunting everywhere for you, and madly scrambling as they try to decide who can worship lead in your absence.
- b. You will not have time to prepare properly.
- c. You will feel scattered rather than poised and calm when you go up to worship lead, and things like that show.

If you are a put-together, organised person, getting to church early is not a burden for you. But if you travel to church with other people, especially children, it is a good idea to get up earlier, and get the whole team up and ready well before you have to leave.

# Chapter 30

## Countdown Activities

5. When you arrive at church, go up to the podium and make sure it is the right height for you. This is important for both short people and really tall people. It's very hard to look confident and be heard if are peeking over the podium or pulpit. If people can't see you, it's hard for you to lead them.

I like podiums that are adjustable, but you still often get the old traditional pulpit that is one height. And it is always made for a six foot tall man, and if you are only five feet, it is too tall for you. This is where you go around the church looking for something you can stand on. I often had to speak behind a high non-adjustable pulpit, so I always wore high heels. I have fallen or lurched off enough makeshift platforms (often several volumes of an encyclopedia from the church library), that I would rather wear high heels.

4. Next go through all your papers and make sure they are in order. Bending the corners of the papers makes them easier to turn, and they won't stick together. Put

bookmarks in the hymns or bible you are carrying, so it's easy to turn to the pages you need.

3. Stand at the pulpit and practice saying some of the things that you will be saying. This is why you want to get there early. If there are other people in the sanctuary you may feel too self-conscious practising, and practising is absolutely essential. Reading your notes out loud at home is good, but it's much more effective reading from the podium or pulpit because you can get the feel of looking up and looking down as you read. You can practice projecting to the back of the room.
2. When the sound booth person arrives, do a sound check. I cannot over-stress the importance of the sound check. You can prepare and practice for hours, you can be as eloquent as a saint, but if the microphone is two inches too far away from your mouth, no one is going to hear a thing. Note the angle that the microphone needs to be at for you, because someone may use it before you come up to speak, and they'll change it. Before you say a word, make sure the microphone is at the right spot.
1. Pray. Some churches gather everyone involved in the service to pray together, but some churches don't. Taking a few quiet moments in a room alone before you go into the service, or sitting down in the service and quietly praying is important. It grounds you in the purpose for your work that morning. You are doing this for God, so dedicating the time to God, and asking for God's help is essential. It will also help calm you down if you are feeling nervous.

# Chapter 31

## Stand and Deliver

Posture is a simple little thing, but it makes a world of a difference when you are worship leading. People who slouch in the pulpit don't look like they want to be there. The same with the person who is swaying from foot to foot. Besides looking like they want to go to the bathroom, they also look like they are warming up to run the 100 Meter dash right out of the church.

A confident worship leader plants their feet. It's your podium (at least for two minutes). Own it. Stand tall. If you want to, you can hold on to the podium, it might steady you.

On the other hand, don't be a draper. These are worship leaders who try to pretend they are just passing the time of day with you, they lean with one elbow on the pulpit, or hunch themselves over the podium. It may sound ridiculous, but when you do that, you actually are getting into people's space. People expect a certain distance from themselves and the speaker, and if you are a draper, you get too close. Not to mention that it will drive the people in the sound booth crazy.

I have a habit of lifting one foot just slightly off the ground and standing on one leg when I lead worship. I don't know why, I just do. It's just a quirky thing. I do it stealthily, and when I'm behind a pulpit, mostly people can't tell I'm doing it. But then when I stand behind a podium, not a pulpit, it's hard for me. I have to think about my feet all the time, and plant them. Another preacher I know shuffles his feet. Again, as long as he is behind a pulpit, it might not be too distracting, although people in the choir loft might find it amusing.

When you are in the pulpit, try not to have nervous habits that could be distracting, like flipping your hair every minute, or jingling your keys in your pocket.

If you are sitting on the platform at the front during the service, remember that people are always looking at you. If something unusual happens in the service, they will look at your face for a reaction. If you find the sermon boring you must always try to look interested. Don't cross your legs and wiggle your foot nervously, or look at your watch all the time. People are watching, and you need to be a calm, non-anxious presence.

# Chapter 32

## Diction over Dictionary

You may spend ages trying to craft your worship leading, pouring over the dictionary and the thesaurus. You've crafted such fine words! All that preparation is useless if you mumble and people cannot hear what you are saying. You must speak clearly and slowly.

One of the most common problems worship leaders face is that they talk too fast. If your words run together in a quick river of speech, people can't navigate the rapids.

I am a fast talker. The more excited or nervous I get, the faster I talk, and it can be hard to hear my words. But over the years I've tried to learn to slow down, and it is something you can learn too. For a long time when I started out worship leading I wrote SLOW DOWN on the margins of every page of notes, I found that helped me to be conscious of my speed.

For me, it helps to remember that there are likely people in the congregation who have English as an additional language. I took Spanish lessons faithfully for several years, but I am always flabbergasted when a Spanish-speaking person tries to communicate with me. They may be saying words I know, but

they are spoken so fast, I don't have a chance.

Another problem is not enunciating clearly. Some manage to speak slowly, but they slur their words together. This is extremely frustrating for people who are hard of hearing, but even people with keen ears get tired when they have to fill in the gaps of a mumblor.

What we are talking about here is diction. Speak your words clearly and carefully. It is possible to do this and not sound like an artificial intelligence robot. All you need is practice.

# Chapter 33

## Project Project

As a worship leader you are communicating to a group of people scattered about in a big space. For some churches, it's a large space indeed and people may like to sit at the back. So that's why you need to project your voice, you need to send it all the way to the back of the room. And that's a project, a long term job that you will work on the longer you lead worship. Yes, you have a microphone, and it's important. You need your words to be amplified so everyone can hear them. By all means, speak into the microphone.

But projection is about more than just amplification. It's about putting yourself out there. It's about the intensity, the awareness that you are communicating on a bigger scale. Being a leader means that you have some personality that can hit the back of the room.

Imagine someone is right in front of you. Right now, say "Hello" to them out loud. Now imagine a group of twenty people is right in front of you. Say "Hello" out loud to that group. Now imagine your whole house or apartment is jam-packed with people. You have one word, it's "Hello." Say it



out loud. Hopefully you will notice that there is a different intensity in that word, depending on the three scenarios. It's not just about volume, it's about how much of yourself you put into that word.

That is why it is good to practice your worship leading in the sanctuary where the service is going to take place. Look at the back row of chairs when you talk, not the front row of chairs. That will help you project.

Communicating with a big group is different than communicating around your kitchen table. If you are standing next to me, you may raise a corner of your eyebrow, and it communicates irony, or a little twitch of your lip signals humour. This is not going to work as a worship leader for a large group of people. Instead of a little tiny smile, you may need to smile more broadly. Of course if your church is large enough to have projection screens, the camera may do closeups on you, and so that doesn't apply.

I know people who have voices that vary in pitch. Sometimes they trail off at the end of their sentences. Or the more serious they get, the quieter they speak. If you do this, some will miss what you say. As a pastor, I usually said good-bye to everyone in a service. I would hear the comments after a certain worship leader led the congregation. Sometimes older people left looking sad or distraught; "I couldn't hear what they were saying." Hearing their pain always motivated me to be careful about projecting my own voice.

Some of you are thinking, "This is a sound booth issue. They should look after this." Most sound booth people are volunteers and are not professionals. Experience has shown me that they are not nimble enough to compensate if you vary the volume within a sentence.

It's hard to judge how well you project your voice. The way I checked it out was to approach some of the oldest people in the congregation after a service and ask, "Could you hear me clearly? Could you understand everything I was saying?" People really appreciate it if you care enough to ask them whether their needs are being met, and they can provide valuable feedback to you.

# Chapter 34

## I See You

Projecting is not just about your voice. Projecting is about communication with other human beings. And an important part of communication is visual, you look at people and they look at you.

Eye contact is something that will really help you as a worship leader. If you lead with your head down, reading your notes, people lose interest, because they are not connecting with you. You are more than your voice. Your personality can shine out in your eyes, and they want to see you as you speak to them.

I know this is hard. When I am nervous, my eyes may flick up, but they flick over the whole crowd like a blur. Sometimes it can be hard to calm down and just look out and see some people. But if you do this, it will help you.

Here is something that works for me. If you are in a church large enough to have a worship platform or stage, I find it easier to worship lead if I am sitting on the platform through the whole service. Some people hate to do this, they think it's all going to be easier for them if they just go up when it's their

time to speak, and then sit down again with the congregation when they are not speaking.

But if you sit on the stage you actually get a few minutes to look out and see people, and size up the crowd. Who is here? Who am I speaking to? You may even pick out a few friendly faces, and so when you actually stand at the podium, you are prepared. You can look out and make eye contact because you've done that initial work of situating yourself within this group of people.

When I tell you to look up, I really mean look at people. I remember one worship leader who must have been told, "Look up." He did look up, frequently. But he looked up at the light fixture on the left hand side of the sanctuary. Every single time he lifted his eyes. It was very distracting. And I'm sure he felt he was doing a good job because he was looking up. I guess he could go home and say, "I saw the light." He just didn't see the people he was leading.

# Chapter 35

## Tone Matters

This is where I talk about the fact that some people have a specific God-tone-of-voice. When they speak to human beings, they are speaking normally, but when they start to pray, they switch into a different tone entirely.

You may have grown up hearing people pray like this. In fact, you may think that if you want to pray, you have to put on that tone of voice. But I don't think you do. When we talk to God, we don't have to use any special now-I'm-approaching-God-with-a-request voice. We can talk to God in our everyday tone of voice.

Some people start speaking slower when they pray, and they sound miserable and sad. Perhaps they are trying to sound humble before God. But they are also projecting the idea that we can't talk normally to God. Perhaps they are projecting that God is mad at us, so we have to talk to God as we would talk to a parent who is angry with us.

Yes, God is bigger than we can imagine, and more majestic, and inscrutable. But God is also accessible. God wants to hear from us about everyday things. And we can talk in an

everyday tone of voice.

Of course, this all depends on the way things are in your context. There are different styles of worship. . . I am speaking out of my own experience in congregations.

# Chapter 36

## Involving Children

When you have led worship a good number of times and are comfortable doing it, consider including a child to help you lead worship. There are some very good reasons to do this, and some very bad reasons. I will start with the bad reasons for having them help.

- a. You want to include children because they are cute, and might say something funny.
- b. You want to look inclusive, so you bring them up there only to read something that you wrote.
- c. You want to do this, but the child does not want to do this.

If you have a child who is interested and eager to help, then there are very good reasons to have them help you worship lead.

- a. Children are part of the church. Including them in the service shows how important they are.

- b. When children help lead worship, children in the congregation listen more carefully.
- c. Children have insights that adults don't have. Adults can learn a lot from children.
- d. God loves children

I will tell you up front that some people will not like having children help worship lead, and others will love it. Parents of children usually love it because they know that it sends a powerful message that children are valued and loved. Other adults sometimes see it as a gimmick or playing on the cuteness factor. They are worried that the children will be silly and take away from the seriousness of worship.

I think the youngest child I've seen effectively help lead worship was eight years old. They need to be able to read notes, and be able to think about the service with you. Children don't naturally know how to worship lead. You can't just ask, "What should we say here?" Instead, explain what a "Call to Worship" is. Describe the theme and then brainstorm some ideas with them.

Be honest. Don't pretend that you are going to give them free license to say whatever they want, and then reject their ideas. You are the adult in charge. But you can share what it is you want to say, and ask them if they can think of something to add to that.

For the Congregational Prayer, ask them to think about what the children in the church are thankful for. What are the children in the church concerned about? One child I worship led with thanked God for "playgrounds and swimming pools and softball diamonds." We prayed specifically for "tigers and



giraffes and rhinoceroses who are endangered because people are shooting them and taking their homes away from them.” We also prayed, “Help us not fight with our brothers and sisters.”

The very biggest challenge with including children is making sure they speak clearly and slowly enough so that everyone can understand them. This means rehearsing with them, and explaining how easy it is to talk fast and quietly when you are nervous and standing in front of people.

It is also extremely important to do sound checks with children because their voices are not strong. Figure out if they need a stool or chair to stand on so they can be near the mike. Don't just do a “testing, testing” sound check; have the child actually read part of their script, so the sound booth person can give feedback. Are they swaying away from the microphone? Practising in the sanctuary with mikes will also help with nervousness later.

One young girl helped her mother worship lead. She sat at the front, but when it came time for Children's Story, she scooted down to join the other children. I happened to be close, and heard her lean over and share with her friend in a happy voice, “I'm preaching today!”

Including children in worship leading benefits the whole church, because it's all about learning and growing. The church learns about its youngest members by hearing their voices. And the child learns about worship leading, and is more in tune with worship after that, because they've participated. All the children learn that God loves to hear the voice of children. They have a part in this thing called worship.

# Chapter 37

## Don't Just Walk Away

As a worship leader, when you have said your Benediction, you are not quite finished. When the worship time has concluded, turn to the other people in the service and thank them for their participation. That would be the preacher, the song leader, the musicians, the sound people, those who provided flowers or a visual focus, those who prepared coffee, and even the person who opened up and locks the building. Shake their hands and tell them you appreciate the work they did.

Being a leader means being a part of a team of people who helped people worship. Showing leadership means acknowledging that this was not a solo effort, but involved the hard work and dedication of many people.

Some people worship lead, and when they say the Benediction, they wait for people to come and thank them for the great job they've done. This is misguided. And you are bound to be disappointed most of the time. People may instead express appreciation to the preacher who had a bang-up sermon, or they may just quickly move on to other things because there are cookies in the foyer and it's 12:15 and their stomachs are

growling. You probably did a great job, people just have not taken the time to say it.

If you are going home feeling disgruntled because you didn't get any feedback, remember, leading worship is about service. You don't do it to be given a thank you. And in fact, leading worship is about showing leadership and you thanking others for their hard work.

# Chapter 38

## Getting Political?

Praying for your local, provincial, state or national leaders by name is a good idea (and it's an old idea, since Paul in his letter to Timothy suggests we do exactly this).

Now here is a tip. Don't use worship leading as a way to make a political point. This may seem obvious to you, but unfortunately, I know from experience that people can hardly resist this. They have a microphone, they have an opinion, and they may be praying, but they still can make their point.

Instead of saying, "We pray for our National leaders Ms. A or Mr. B.," I've heard worship leaders say, "Lord, we pray for our elected leaders who are wasting taxpayers' money," or "We pray for government leaders who are mortgaging our children's futures by racking up enormous debts." You may have strong opinions about political policies and their purpose or effectiveness, but I assure you, there are others in your congregation who disagree with you.

It's OK to pray about these differences, especially if you are in the midst of a difficult election: "Lord you know that in this congregation we have people who support different political

parties. We all want good government, please help this election be one where we listen carefully and get a good turnout for the democratic process.”

I am not saying that churches should stay away from controversial issues. I think God calls us to grapple with moral problems and address injustice. Therefore talking about poverty, prejudice and violence is something our prayers should address. What I mean by not being political is that you should never advocate for a politician or a political party from the pulpit, because you will be alienating some of your congregation.

So it's OK to say, “We pray today for people in our city who are homeless, who wander the streets with their possessions, vulnerable to violence and exposed to even the worst kinds of weather.” It is even good to say, “Give us courage to draw the attention of our politicians to the reality of homeless people in our community.” Advocating for people who are suffering is always appropriate.

What is not fair game is to pray, “Lord, we ask that Ms. K will be elected in our riding, since she is the only one who cares about poor people.” Or, “God in heaven, please remove Mr. R from office because he is such a crook.” OK, most people aren't quite so blatant in their prayers, but I have heard prayers that verge in that direction.

# Chapter 39

## Shaking Things Up?

Some worship leaders like to shake things up. If you normally sit during the opening hymns, they make you stand up. If you normally stand for Congregational Prayer, they make you sit down. They will want you to come up to the front to deposit your offering instead of passing the offering plates to you. These worship leaders love change. They think that the congregation is stuck in a rut, and why don't we do something different for once?

There are ruts, but then again, there are rituals. The word "ritual" may conjure up the idea of processions and robes and all sorts of formality. But ritual is about repeated behaviours of any kind. Every congregation has rituals.

One church I worshipped in had the ritual that when you walk into the sanctuary first thing in the morning, you visit with other people. You say hello to your community and chat about the week until the service starts. A worship leader came in and decided, "Let's have meditative silence in the sanctuary before the service. No talking!" She posted signs, there was meditative music. But there was also a lot of grumbling and

even non-compliance. While some people may have appreciated some minutes of silence before the service, visiting in the sanctuary was a ritual.

Rituals are repeated behaviours that help us find meaning in our lives. Human beings love ritual, the ordered pattern of the way things are done. Our rituals around belief in God are especially sacred to us.

Rituals can be things we do, but they can also be things we look at or hear. Taking away the altar table and the Bible on it so you can have the lectern closer to the people may seem like a good idea to you, but people may rely on that table, the Bible and the flowers as a meditative focus during the service. They always look at it as they listen to the sermon, so when you change that, that ritual is disrupted. People get grumpy and upset when you change things that they find meaningful.

This is not to say that you can never change things for worship. I am just warning you that you should not do this lightly, or on a big scale. It's good to talk to the pastor before rearranging the chairs in a circle instead of rows, or turning the chairs so that the two halves the congregation face each other. Even putting the Congregational Prayer at the beginning of the service rather than at the end can be a big decision. People gear themselves up for prayer, and if you spring it on them suddenly, they can feel unprepared.

If you are the worship leader who likes to change things up every time you get a chance, some people will dread having you lead. It is possible to be creative even within the regular forms and structures of a service.

# Chapter 40

## It's Not a Variety Show

I am sure you have been in a church where a worship leader is bound and determined to make everyone laugh. They insert clever little jokes in their Welcome and in their Announcements, or their Children's Story, or whenever they see an opportunity. You can tell that their goal is to entertain.

This is often why worship leaders tell anecdotes in a worship service, they want to get people chuckling. I am not against laughter. I think laughter is good for a congregation, and is a bonding experience. But laughter that flows out of our community, that arises in the course of thinking about a scripture text, is very different than the worship leader telling jokes. Jokes are about you, they make people think, "Boy, is she funny!" When really, you should want people to be thinking about God, not about your wittiness.

There may be some very tired, very sad people in the congregation, and to have an uproariously funny worship service will make them feel out of place. Most worship services have a mix of everything; some seriousness, some lighthearted bits, but all of it directed towards helping us worship God.



# Part IV

## Troubleshooting

# Chapter 41

## Thinking about Ego-Systems

### Too Much Ego

There are always some people who want to be a worship leader because they like being the centre of attention. You can tell these people because the day they lead worship is the happiest day of the year for them. It's like their birthday: "Today is celebrating me!"

Of course they would never say that out loud, and mostly they don't even consciously think that, but you can see it on their face, that happy birthday-boy/birthday-girl smile. They stand at the podium as if they've just been elected the new mayor of Churchtown. They also tend to speak slowly because they are so relaxed; of course they are, nowhere more comfortable than when all eyes are on them.

You can tell these people because they like to insert a personal story about their life, or an observation about the way

they are feeling, between every single element of the worship service. “I am so happy this morning to be here, as I was driving here, I was thinking. . . .” “I enjoyed that piece of music. . . .” “That was a blessing for me!” “I just want to add a few words, that sermon reminds me of the time I. . . .” “I’ve had a good time at this worship service!” In other words, “This is all about me and my faith!”

These big ego people are always entirely well intentioned. They feel that they are adding a personal touch to the service, so that it won’t seem cold. Of course when someone else is worship leading and adding a personal touch they hate it, because it’s distracting and off-putting.

That’s the thing, when there is too much ego at the podium it’s hard to worship. It gets in the way. Instead of pointing to God, or directing our thoughts to something deeper, all the arrows are pointing to the one who is figuratively jumping up and down at the podium with a sign, “Look at me, look at me!”

If you are worried, or even have a shadow of a doubt that you have led worship this way, keep reading.

## **Not Enough Ego**

Some people hate being a worship leader because they don’t want to be the centre of attention. They are asked to lead worship, and against their better judgement they accept, probably because the person who asked them was able to give a sob story about how there really is no one else to do it. Low ego people often have an over-exercised duty gene, and don’t want to shirk their responsibility; “Someone must do this. If they really are desperate enough that they had to ask me, I guess

it's my turn."

You can spot these people because they try to be invisible. If they can, they will try not to use the pulpit. They'll lead from an inconspicuous spot so that few people can see them. These people often have very good things to say, but they don't ever look up. They don't want to make eye contact with anyone, because that would mean acknowledging, "Here I am in the pulpit." They usually speak too softly. They may be afraid to say anything personal, the words they have crafted could be read by a store manikin.

These people are entirely well intentioned. They don't want to draw attention to themselves. They may want us to focus only on God, and not even notice them. They think that anything personal is inappropriate because they think their person is not worthy of being listened to. They hope by doing the job as impersonally as possible, no one will notice them, and then the service will be more spiritual.

Sadly, they are entirely mistaken. When someone is that self-conscious they actually draw attention to themselves by being too humble. People look at them and think, "I wish they'd stand up straighter." "What are they saying? I can't hear them!" "How remarkable that the worship leader has chosen to wear a colour that exactly matches the colour of the wall behind them!"

If you are worried, or even have a shadow of a doubt that you fall into this category, keep reading.

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## Just the Right Amount of Ego

Having fallen into both categories above at various times in my life, I may not be the best person to be writing this section. Am I being too humble? I don't want you to lose interest in this manual! I do think that I have been around the church block often enough to have some pithy remarks about ego, because you can't kick a can in church without stubbing your toe on someone's ego.

Having just the right amount of ego means that you worship lead fully engaged as a human being. You are present, and alert, and interactive. You don't draw attention to yourself, always being most mindful of the needs of the congregation. At the same time, by an occasional short, personal comment, you show your awareness of the flow of the service, and your appreciation of what is happening. People can relate to that, without turning their entire attention to you. By modelling being engaged, the worship leader helps others reflect, "How am I feeling in this service?"

How do you figure out if you have the right amount of ego to be a worship leader? You pray about it. You ask God to give you the right amount of ego, and God can help you jettison any extra surplus ego. God is the best judge of our ego-systems.

But how do we hear God's voice? We want to listen to the whisper nudges of God's Spirit in us, but we can, admittedly, be a bit thick. The only way you will truly know God's leading on this ego thing is if you ask a few other living, breathing human beings who can actually speak out loud to you. Your pastor is a good person to ask, or another person who is generally well respected as a worship leader.

## Ego Feedback

If you wonder where you fall in the just described ego spectrum, and you need some living, breathing help figuring this out, here is what to say. You ask, “Am I sharing too much about myself when I worship lead?” And you ask, “Do I put enough of myself into my worship leading?” It is a good idea to ask both questions, because sometimes we are deluded enough about our own worship leading that we actually miscategorise our problems.

Your pastor is hopefully skilled at worship leading. And they are, hopefully, caring enough to be honest with you. Listen to what they say.

Listen to what they say, depending on the location of the conversation. I am assuming that you ask them in a private place, and not over crackers and cheese at a dinner party. Your pastor can hardly be expected to level with you about your ego when other people are listening. If you ask these questions with other people present, the good pastor will assess the situation, and realise that if they are honest, you will lose face in front of your peers. They also are probably astute enough to realise that you just want to be praised in front of other people (more of the old ego problem), so they say, “We always appreciate our worship leaders!” Or they dodge the question, “Well, oversharing. . . that is a big topic.”

The person who does not have enough ego will probably also raise this question at a social event, obliquely, because they can’t imagine bothering the pastor with a one-on-one conversation. Hopefully the pastor will have something pithy and encouraging to say to you. I can’t think of what that might be right now, but they will think of something.

Private conversations with your pastor or a trusted and well-loved lay worship leader can be fruitful.

# Chapter 42

## “Late, I’m Late, for a Very Important Date!”

The title of this section is a quote from the book *Alice in Wonderland*. Like the White Rabbit who said these words, many people are late for church. This is a fact of life. In a church I pastored, up to 20% of the church came in five minutes after the service had started.

I can deal with that, in and of itself. It’s not ideal, yet if they slip in unobtrusively, it’s not a problem. They lost out on the beginning of the service, but that’s their choice.

What does bother me is when people walk into the sanctuary during the Call to Worship. This bothers me because it is enormously distracting for worshippers.

Ask any worship leader. It doesn’t matter how animated you are. You could be sharing words that you received in a vision from the mouth of God, and if three people wander up the main aisle to the front looking for a seat, 75% of the audience will stop listening to you and look at the people coming in. This happens every week.



The latecomers think they are being unobtrusive, as they walk down the centre aisle to the front pews. Being unobtrusive to them means that they are keeping their eyes cast down, except when they are looking for their seats. True, they aren't waving their hands and playing brass instruments, but they might as well be, because everyone is watching them.

When I was a pastor, I always asked the ushers to keep latecomers in the foyer until we began to sing, and not to let them walk in during the Call to Worship. But to be honest this never worked. The ushers didn't see the point, no matter how many times I explained it. And latecomers, who didn't seem to be in a hurry to get to church, are in an urgent and almighty rush to get seated, even closed sanctuary doors will not stop them.

Perhaps latecomers think, "It hasn't really started yet." By this they mean no one has started preaching. They treat the opening words of a service as filler, as if all you are saying is "It's going to be a show, a really big show today. . . ." They think the real act is the sermon.

This problem with latecomers is why some churches like to have a Welcome and a few songs first, and then the Call to Worship. That way less people miss the invitation to worship that sets the theme for the service. Maybe that's not such a bad idea after all.

# Chapter 43

## Managing the Emotional Voice

God knows you want to be sincere as a worship leader. If nothing else, be sincere. But sometimes, we are being so sincere, that we feel emotion welling up within us. Whatever the reason, we get up in front of people and our voice goes all quavery. This is a trigger. As soon as we hear our voice going quavery, it's a signal to our brain, "Hey, you are going to start crying!" When we start to think we are going to cry in front of all these people, our voice gets even more quavery.

Crying in front of the congregation is not the end of the world. No giant hook will fall down from the ceiling and jerk you up and off of the worship stage. But it is not ideal. It is in fact rather unfortunate.

It's unfortunate because it's awkward. Being overly emotional in the pulpit can feel like you are taking your clothes off in front of the church. It's not comfortable for them or for you. Instead of feeling ministered to, people start to worry: "Are they OK? Will they get through this?"

The reason it is unfortunate is not because there is never a time to cry. Sometimes a tear or two in the pulpit is the only human response when someone the congregation loves has died, or there has been a natural disaster. A quavery voice shows that “I, too, am human.”

However most of the time we don’t want to have quavery voices at the podium because the reason we are crying is not communal. It’s personal. We had a bad morning. We had a fight with a family member on the way to church, or we didn’t get enough sleep last night, or we are hungry because we skipped breakfast. Most of us would not have a quavery voice if we could just have a snack and a nap.

So what do you do when you are in the pulpit and your voice is quavering?

What not to do:

- a. Sometimes you think, “I’m going to lose it, I’m going to lose it!” and so you start talking really fast to get through it. This never works.
- b. Sometimes you think, “If I just look out, and try and get eye contact with a loved one in the congregation, they will give me strength!” Looking at a loved one almost always will make you more emotional, because they are worried about your distress, and when you see their look of concern, this will send you off. So don’t look at people you love.
- c. Sometimes you think, “I have to stop, I have to take a moment.” And as you start to feel overcome with emotion you cover your eyes with your hand, or you look up to heaven. As soon as you do this, you realise, “I have

stopped speaking and am making a dramatic gesture that everyone can see. I must be having an emotional moment.” This will make you more emotional. Don’t do this either.

What to do:

- a. Being emotional is a body thing. As you get more emotional, your voice is rising in your throat. The more emotional you get, the higher pitched your voice is going to get. Pitch your voice lower. Once you do this, you don’t sound as emotional to yourself, and you will be able to keep going.
- b. Speak slowly and deliberately. Concentrate on breathing. When you are emotional, you forget to breathe, which makes you feel breathless and emotional.
- c. Imagine yourself getting through this without stumbling. You can do this, and you can do this without crying.

Some of you are reading this entry incredulously, because never in a million years would you ever cry in the pulpit. Read on, dear Reader.

# Chapter 44

## Cold Fish Syndrome

Some people, the people who could not relate to the entry above, are never emotional in the pulpit. This can also be a problem. Sometimes you need to show emotion, because if you don't, you look as cold and uncaring as ice. Which is not the characteristic that gets you voted Worship Leader of the Year. Indeed, you could really offend people if you are too cold as a worship leader.

For example, it's time for prayer, and you are asked to read some prayer concerns.

- a. Please pray for the conference which is coming up next weekend.
- b. Continue to pray about our church's financial situation, we have not met our budget.
- c. Mrs. W died this past week and the family is gathering for a private funeral on Tuesday.

If you read a, b and c in the same tone of voice, and with no difference in feeling, this is a problem. There are grieving

people in your congregation. By using the same tone of voice for all three items, emotionally you are equating the three prayer concerns.

Being a worship leader is about way more than sharing information. Your tone of voice communicates just as much about what you are saying as the very words. As a leader you are giving information and instructing people how to feel about what you are saying.

The key is that you have to read announcements and prayer concerns ahead of time so that you know what's coming. Then you put a star beside #3, or a little note for yourself. Maybe before you read it, you add a few short words at the beginning and the end, "Our last prayer concern is more personal, and difficult for many to hear. Mrs. W died this week, and the family is gathering for a private funeral on Tuesday. Please pray for them all in this very hard time." You do this in a warm tone of voice. Then you pause.

The pause is important because if you don't pause, this might happen; "Please pray for them all in this very hard time, we're going to collect the offering immediately after our prayer time." If you say something is hard, but you go immediately on, it shows you are a liar. You are demonstrating that it is obviously not hard for you, ice person that you are, because you have moved on in the space of a phrase! It doesn't have to be a long pause, maybe just three or four seconds. But that pause speaks volumes.

Even the most experienced worship leaders screw up. You did read the prayer concerns ahead of time, but somehow you are distracted, and you are not thinking about what you are saying. You get to the end of the long list of prayer concerns, and it suddenly registers that you have neglected to give one

announcement the emotional attention it deserves.

What can you say? You don't say, "I've made a mistake, I listed Mrs. W's death as if it didn't matter." As soon as you apologise, you draw attention to yourself, and the mistake you made, and your apology might just make things worse. Much better to just move forward and add some kind words, words that you would want to hear if Mrs. W was your mother. When I have made this mistake, I've said, "Those are a lot of things to pray for, I look back at this list and I realise that some things are a lot harder than others, and for some here, the death of Mrs. W is all they will be thinking of this week and for a long time to come. Let's be sure to remember them this coming week in our prayers at home."

I wish it would go without saying, but a vivid experience I witnessed has shown me that I must now say: be very, very careful about equating different griefs. If you are announcing that the V family is grieving because their dog got hit by a car, don't put it right next to the announcement about Mrs. W, and then say, "A lot of people are grieving this week." Don't put those items anywhere near each other. Losing a pet is not to be put in the same category as losing a person. I know people love their pets, but if you are not a pet lover, and your mother's death is grouped in the same grief category as dog grief, you are going to find yourself in some hot water.

This is why you write things out ahead of time, to avoid saying things that offend people.

# Chapter 45

## Paper Ghosting

At some point in your life as a worship leader, you will step into the pulpit, take a deep breath and look down to read your words and you will see the WRONG PAPERS. There is the thunderstruck moment where you think, “Expletive Deleted!” There is the scrabbling moment, where you, like a hamster in a pile of wood shavings, look for the right paper in the sheaf of papers in front of you. It’s not there. Then there is the stunned moment where you look up to see rows of eyes looking straight at you.

Houston, we have a problem.

Chances are, you have left it at your seat, unless you left it in the washroom when you were talking to someone. Or in the car? Did you take the paper out of your folder at breakfast so you could have another look at it?

All these thoughts rocket through your head at the speed of light. You must make a decision. With these eyes upon you, should you spend your time scrabbling through your papers one more time? It depends.



What to do:

- a. If you are missing the long list of announcements that many earnest people handed to you, (the ones you pledged with your life to deliver), just say, “I will be giving the Announcements at the end of the service.” There, it’s done. Move on. If you truly have lost the Announcements, don’t sweat it, they aren’t ever really that important, much as everyone will tell you different.
- b. If you are missing your prayer, and you are a person who can think on your feet, invite people to pray, and just go for it. Your preparation will come through (hopefully), and as you talk to God, you may feel inspired and the prayer will sail. Or maybe it will limp along. That’s OK too, you can’t be perfect. No one is going to die because your prayer wasn’t that great. It’s sincere. You delivered it. It’s over.
- c. If you are panic stricken about praying, this is when you say: “Silence is an important part of prayer. It gives us time to listen for God’s voice. Please join with me in a minute of silence for our prayer time today.”
- d. If you can get it together, you could even lead them in a guided prayer. Remember PRP, Peeled Red Potatoes? No... it’s Praise, Repentance, Petitions. All you have to do is make up three sentences and leave a 30 second pause between them:
  - i. In this moment of silence, let’s offer our praise to God.
  - ii. In this moment of silence, let’s offer our repentance to God.

- iii. In this moment of silence, let's offer our petitions to God.

Then you say an Amen at the end, or invite people to join you in saying The Lord's Prayer.

What not to do:

- a. Do not say, "I'm so stupid. I've lost my paper." As a basic worship leading rule, you should never criticise yourself publicly. It makes people lose confidence in you as a leader. (You should never start worship leading by saying, like I heard one person say, "I don't know what I'm doing but here goes.")
- b. Do not go through your papers again and again while everyone watches. Having a leader shuffle papers in obvious distress does not inspire confidence. That paper may very well be in your stack of papers, but wait till you're sitting down and everyone is singing a hymn to find it.
- c. If it's prayer time, don't say, "We'll pray later." When it's time to pray, it's time to pray.

# Chapter 46

## Left to Your Own Devices

People love their devices. Screens are mesmerising and super handy. You can use them anywhere, even when you are sitting in the congregation listening to a sermon. I know, I know: you have your Bible on your phone...that's the excuse everyone uses.

Lots of people are using devices instead of paper for worship leading. I am fine with that, with some conditions.

Make sure you have powered up ahead of time. Most older churches do not have plugs in the pulpit, so if you are at 2% battery, you can kiss your notes good-bye.

Do not use something as small as a phone for notes while worship leading. The screen is simply too small. If you are reading scripture from your phone, you might as well be reading from a pocket-sized King James Version. Because the print is so small, or because you have to continually scroll down, you will find it impossible to look up, which is what a good worship leader needs to do. And if you accidentally jerk your

thumb because you are nervous, it can take you some time to find where you were in your notes. There is nothing more stupefying than watching someone on a stage scrolling through their phone saying, “it’s here somewhere, I just have to find it... no... just a sec... I’m almost there...”

If you have your phone with you when you are worship leading because you use it to keep time instead of a watch, make sure it is in airplane mode. Those pings and rings really travel when you are on a stage. Even the vibrate mode travels, and you will see numerous people grabbing their phones to see if it’s them that’s making that sound. Which is, of course, distracting.

# Chapter 47

## The Screech From...

Into every worship leader's life will come, when you least expect it, the dreaded screech. You go up to the microphone, innocently, trustingly, with good intentions and with faithful words that you want to deliver. Then, suddenly, a sound like the very scream of Satan blasts from every speaker in the church. You watch as the entire congregation startles up and settles down with a bang. It's like a seismic event. It probably registered on the Richter Scale.

As a worship leader, you yourself have been thrown back two steps by the blast. You have a wave of guilt because you think, "Did I do that?" Don't say that out loud.

Everyone is looking at you reproachfully. I want to assure you that it is not your fault. It is Satan's fault. A demon has taken possession of the sound system, and you have to wait for the sound people to exorcise it before you try speaking again.

Don't take it personally when you step up to the microphone again and people have their hands over their ears. They just want to hear no evil. Eventually when they realise it's safe they will be fine.

The up side of this problem is that the people who were sleeping in the pews are now awake. Into every grey cloud, God paints a silver lining.

# Chapter 48

## Dead on Arrival

You come with the best of intentions with your notes in hand. You are all ready to give your hearty welcome to the people of God. You look out over the vast auditorium, you smile, and when you deliver your Call to Worship, your voice dribbles over the pulpit and falls with a tiny thud on the carpeted floor. The microphone is not on.

This is where you smile a hard pointy smile at the people in the sound booth, as a way of signalling to them that the service has begun, and that they should turn on the mikes. You clear your throat. You smile nervously, but hopefully, and in a non-anxious way.

Next you tap the microphone tentatively. Tapping the microphone more vigorously is also an option. Saying the obligatory, “Is this working?” into the microphone is also helpful and expected.

Hopefully there is activity in the sound booth. Hopefully they will simply toggle one switch to make the mike live. Hopefully you won’t have the experience I had once where the sound person just sat there and raised their hands and shrugged their

shoulders at me. I wanted to shake him.

Even when you know the microphone is dead as cement, never under any circumstances ever say “expletive deleted,” even under your breath. The saying of “expletive deleted” has been known to work magically, instantly restoring power and amplification to the most recalcitrant of sound systems.

Waiting for the sound system to be restored is one of those awkward moments where you wish there was a rule book to know how to handle it. But Gentle Reader, I will not leave you without guidelines. Here they are:

As long as the sound people are in the room visibly fiddling with wires and buttons, you should stay at the podium, as a hopeful gesture. They may need you to be part of the team and tap on the mike. But when the sound people leave the room hunting for another microphone that might be in the auditorium or is it in the storage cupboard, you have every right to return to your seat.

But before you go to your seat, you have to provide some leadership to the many eyes that have been watching you this entire time. They can't hear you, or at least not many people past the front row can hear you. But you must gesture to them, something like, “Talk among yourselves.” Or if you have a willing musician, you can signal to them to strike up a tune to pass the time. Hopefully it will not be a long time.



# Chapter 49

## Missing in Action

Sometimes when you find yourself speaking into a dead microphone, you will smile your hard pointy smile at the people in the sound booth, but your pointy smile, just like your voice, falls flat. That is because the sound booth is empty of people. There is no one to receive the pointiness of your smile. You can in fact see into the foyer, and the person from the sound booth is chatting away with someone at the coffee bar.

If your microphone was working, you would speak into it, and call their name, and draw their attention to the one job they have to do, and could they please do it. But of course, that is not an option, because you don't have a working microphone.

Saying politely, but in a loud tone of voice, "We need someone in the sound booth," will usually result in some other congregational members murmuring "Sound booth, sound booth." If the auditorium is large enough, it becomes a sort of whispered chant, like a prayer. It is almost reminiscent of those charming times in childhood when two people were tussling on the ground and all the children called out, "Fight, fight!"

When the sound of the chanting reaches the sound person, you will see them jump. It takes a special worship leader to continue with the scheduled program after this unfortunate series of events, a worship leader with extremely low blood pressure.

# Chapter 50

## Read My Lips

Every worship leader at some point encounters the sound technician who repeatedly likes to turn microphones on and off. They usually decide to turn the microphone off because they don't want the ambient sound of the pre-service crowd to be picked up and amplified. They are people who pride themselves in their trigger-quick reactions to anticipate your every need for amplification.

When someone like this is in the sound booth, you walk deliberately to the microphone, you look the sound booth person in the eye, and you speak out your Call to Worship. As usual, the first nine words of your sentence are not amplified. So instead of "I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ, welcome. . ." the congregation only hears, "To this service."

The sound booth person likes to turn the microphone off at every opportunity. Perhaps they don't want the microphone to pick up your singing, although your chair is fully ten feet from the podium. You return to the microphone to announce "It's time to give our faithful tithes in this offering to God, today it's" . The congregation only hears, "For the local budget."

You think you can outsmart your trigger-happy sound-person, by pretending to speak, or saying only unimportant things at first, but invariably when you try this, the microphone is working perfectly.

The fallback position on this situation is humility. Your words are not that important after all, the congregation can guess what you were going to say. Don't even think about having the sound booth person replaced with a more competent person. They are, without fail, the most faithful volunteer in the church, and the biggest giver. No one will support you if you try to do something about this incompetence.

Life in the worship lane is sometimes this way, just accept it.

# Chapter 51

## Screaming

One of the most startling worship leading experiences I've ever had was when I was leading a service in a long-term care home. There were around 60 residents present, most of them in wheelchairs. I was midway through my opening Call to Worship, when one of the women in the front row started screaming, "Get me out of here!" Loudly. Over and over again. It took some time for the staff to come and get her.

It is not startling that she felt that way. As someone who has spent a lot of time in churches, I have seen enough faces that are saying exactly that. What was startling was having it be audible.

Should one lean over and say, "Yes, what a good plan, may I join you?" Should I have stopped the service and waited for her departure?

Somehow, the stiff upper lip part of me just took over and I kept on going as if nothing unusual was happening. This was probably not a good thing to do. But it was the only thing that I could think of at the time.

Sometimes you will have a child scream wildly during a service, and you will need to know what to do as the parent tries to catch the child who is running down the aisle, or carries them out flailing to the nursery. Sometimes, if it is during a very serious moment like a communion service, you too might just choose to ignore these screams.

However, a screaming child can be a mortifying moment for the parents involved, and so try to think of something that might put the parents at ease. Maybe something sincere like, “We love the sound of children in our worship service.” Depending on how well you know the parents you might add, “At any decibel” for a lighthearted moment. We want parents to feel unjudged, and not blamed for the noise that children will inevitably make.

# Chapter 52

## Wandering

Along the same lines, into every worship leader's life will wander a young toddler who has escaped the bonds of their parent's arms and are making a break for freedom. Straight up to the platform at the front.

I remember one young boy who somehow eluded his exhausted parents, making his way to the empty choir loft where he sat down quietly and surveyed the congregation. His parents frantically gestured for him to come down right NOW! In the end they had to go and retrieve him. When there is a little tableau with this much dramatic potential happening, you might as well stop talking and look too, no one will be listening to a thing you are saying.

Stopping your worship leading and going and retrieving the boy and delivering him to the arms of his parent with a smile, will earn you their eternal thanks, and people will say, "There's a leader!" Except if the child is frightened of you, and dives under the pews making it harder than ever to find him. This could very easily happen, to the great delight of the onlookers.

I have found it never hurts to have a small toy on the front chairs with you, in case a child comes up. You can use this to distract the child until the parents arrive. It's also helpful because sometimes parents bring their child with them as they come to say an announcement. As soon as they reach the microphone, the innocent toddler in arms starts twirling around, so the parent puts them down. At this point one of two things invariably happens. The kid starts flopping on the stage like a newly caught mackerel or they run in circles at high speeds.

I remember trying to distract a whirling child once, but all I had was a sharp pencil, which they found very interesting indeed. But I didn't want to actually give it to them, because it was dangerous. Then they started to cry because I was being so mean, not giving them the sharp pencil. That's when I began to leave a small toy by my worship leading chair.



# Chapter 53

## Smile and the World Smiles with You

People don't come to church because they want to get depressed. They come to church to find good news. Imagine their dismay when you stand up to greet them with a face that would not be out of place welcoming people to a funeral parlour.

I can't tell you how many times I've been in services where the worship leader is like a wet blanket. Any spontaneous joy or laughter that happens in the service is squelched by the worship leader intoning something in a mournful voice. A worship leader should be animating, building on the positive energy in a service.

And now you are thinking, "But what if I am not feeling happy?" Here's the scoop. It's not about you. It's about the job you are doing. Think about everyone who has come to worship. Do you want to inflict your bad mood on them? Is that the role of the worship leader, to take their own personal negative feelings and spread them around?

I know it's not easy to try to be upbeat when you are personally feeling low. This happens. So here are some tips:

- a. Pray. I have found myself praying, "God, you know how I'm feeling, and you know the people here today need some good news and hope. I want to help them find that, and I need your help."
- b. Think about the people you are talking to, not about yourself. Think about the fact that they are really needing this service to be uplifting. What do you think they need to hear in order to meet the coming week with hope?
- c. Try to smile. It's not about having a smile pasted on your face the whole time, because that will look fakey. But when you stand up to greet the people, is there anybody there that you are genuinely happy to see? Try and find them in the crowd and smile at them.
- d. Try and have a happy sounding voice. How do you make your voice sound happy? You smile while you are talking. It's hard to sound miserable when you speak with a smile on your face.
- e. Look lively. Walk to the podium as if you are looking forward to talking to people. Your body speaks volumes even before you open your mouth

Leading worship this way can actually have a positive effect on you. You may feel more hopeful by the end of it all.

# Chapter 54

## Pulpit Letdown

I love it when I worship lead and I feel confident that my words are communicating well.

But that is not always the case. Sometimes I lose confidence in my words even as I say them. The pulpit seems to be an elevator going down too fast. I feel that I've chosen the wrong things to say, and no one seems to be responding. Some people may thank me for worship leading, but I am feeling too gloomy to notice. I go home miserable, thinking, "I don't want to do that again. I did a horrible job."

This happens to everyone some time. I don't have a way to fix this for you, it just happens. But here is something I've noticed. When I lose confidence in what I am saying, it doesn't mean that I am actually doing a bad job. Sometimes I get good feedback about a service, but I am sure it was dreadful. The reason I felt it went dreadfully was because of how I am feeling. But my feeling is not necessarily a good judge of the service itself.

This is where faith comes in. We are asked to do a job, and we do it because we want to help our community worship

God. We ask God's help, and we work on it ahead of time. We trust that God will give us the words to say. During the service, we do not have a good experience. The question is, does it really matter whether you enjoyed it?

You may have a broken arm, and you go to the Emergency Ward and a very attentive nurse attends to you. You go away with a positive experience. The nurse may have had a terrible day, and she goes home wondering why she is even in nursing. But because she is professional, and does her job well, her personal feelings didn't really change your hospital experience.

It can be that way with worship leading too. You go home sad, discouraged and disheartened. That doesn't mean everyone there felt that way. They may have had a very meaningful experience. It just means that you had a hard day. But the fact that you did your job and didn't give up half way through is a good sign. It shows that you put everyone else first before your own subjective feelings.

And that's part of worship leading. It's service. It's not about you. At the same time, if you always feel this way every time you worship lead, then maybe worship leading is not for you. Maybe it's not the work you are called to, because I think there should be some joy there somewhere, sometime.

# Chapter 55

## The Power to Change

Worship leading is service, I've made that point. But worship leading is also a devotional practice. Many people who worship lead find it deepens their faith. As you read scripture and think about a theme, you are asking in a concentrated way; "How can I help people turn their attention to God?"

As you think about the topic the preacher has chosen, you ask, "How does this connect with the people in my church?" You think about the young people, and the old people and the children. You think about the happy people whose lives are sailing, and the people who are feeling like life is a train wreck. As you think about praying with this group of people, you realise that you are in love with them. You are in God's love, which encompasses us all. How to find words to express this?

Worship changes us because God is wrapped up in this from beginning to end. Gradually bit by bit we absorb worship as a way of being in the world. We mature and grow more into the people God wants us to be.

And that's the wonderful thing about worship leading. God

shows up. And God has the power to change us.

## Part V

# PWLI: Penner Worship Leader Inventory

I am always impressed when people present something called an inventory, so I thought I'd use this format for the big round-up of my handy manual.

A good worship leader:

- Prays for inspiration.
- Loves the congregation.
- Prepares ahead, and follows the theme.
- Arrives early enough to get organised.
- Points to God, not themselves.
- Remembers they are delivering good news.
- Projects their voice so everyone can hear.
- Pays attention in the service, making smooth transitions.
- Prays honestly and not too long.
- Communicates with simple, straightforward, vivid words.
- Does not use religious clichés.
- Never criticises themselves publicly.
- Thanks the other people involved in the service.
- Always carries a pencil, a Bible and a tissue.



# Epilogue

I hope that this manual has been handy for you. I've enjoyed writing it. It has brought back so many memories of different worship services. Services that have gone well, and services that were difficult. But what sustained me through all of them was God's presence in the gathered community of believers.

I hope that you feel better equipped to be a worship leader after reading this. I hope you feel reassured that you don't have to be perfect, you just have to be you. I hope I've given you some tips on how to do this job, and what you can do to improve your worship leading skills.

My final words are a prayer:

God of grace,  
thank you for freedom to worship,  
and the way we can gather every week  
to pray and sing together,  
to read the Bible, reflect on it,  
and be your people together.

Thank you for congregations everywhere,  
all over the world,  
that worship you faithfully.

Thank you that you call some of us  
to lead out in worship.  
Help us to do this job humbly,  
with a spirit of service.  
Help us do this job joyfully,  
with the knowledge of your presence.  
Help us do this job faithfully,  
no matter how we are feeling.  
Help us to do this job hopefully,  
expecting to encounter Jesus.  
Let our worship leading be a blessing  
to our congregation and to the world,  
because we do it all in your name,  
Amen.