

Jim's Tool Box

How Are We Connecting People with God through Our Worship?

One of the common experiences that most believers share is the opportunity to share in worship (assuming that folks show up). For many clergy, the planning and execution of the weekly worship experience(s) takes a lot of time and energy. From preparing the message to planning the worship experience, pastors and others who help plan worship (lay servant leaders or paid staff) work to offer an experience that will help draw those who attend closer to God and to one another.

In addition, the support services that surround the weekly worship time(s) take a lot of energy when they are done well including:

- the ways that the persons are invited into worship
- the way they are greeted and welcomed when they arrive
- the experience that worshippers have during worship
- the way that folks are sent out
- and especially if they are first time attenders, how the congregation follows up with them

I began thinking about worship and the work that many pastors and laity do around preparing each week when I read an article posted in the [Smart Ministry](#) email that I receive each week.

The article that I read was authored by a Wesleyan pastor Lawrence Wilson. His article entitled "Finding God at Church" addressed the issue of declining church attendance in North American churches. He said, "The primary reason, I believe, is not that the music isn't contemporary or the preaching doesn't talk about real life issues, but that there is not *power* in our worship. We seldom sense an authentic connection to God."

I'll admit that I agree with his assessment. Many worship services in which I participate (and I confess many that I have planned and led) have left me feeling completely flat. The services (including too many that I planned or led) offer little or nothing that is inspirational or that moves me in a spiritual way. It's hard to define what it is that moves people (including me), but you know it when you feel it and when you see it. When I have experienced it, I have known it. Whether the service was "high church" in a large traditional setting or a contemporary praise service or a "free" service in a small country church, I know the experience when it happens. It is not dependent on the style of the service or the kind of music or even the preaching, but I believe it can happen. As lay and clergy leaders in the church, we need to work to see that it happens more often in our worship services.

Of course, we cannot "program" the movement of the Holy Spirit in our services. We cannot script God's presence at a point in the service, but I do wonder if we cannot

do a better job and seek to be more intentional about “setting the table” as we prepare ourselves and others who come into worship that all who share in the service are coming into a holy moment. Too often we treat the service in a routine kind of way as if we really don’t expect God to show up or for God’s presence to be felt among those who worship.

So whether it is a moment in the message, or in a story that someone shares about their faith journey, or in the words and music of an anthem, a praise song, or a favorite hymn, how can we prepare all who worship to be ready to sense God’s presence in our midst?

I realize that at one level, God is already there. We don’t have to invite God in to our service. God just shows up. But as folks come from the busyness and the strains of their every day life, they may not be ready to realize God is there. For clergy and lay leaders, we may be so busy planning or thinking about the service that we may not be aware of God in our midst as we lead the services either.

Here are some basic suggestions that Wilson offers in his article:

- ✓ **Pray for it.** Days prior to Sunday, seek the Spirit's leading for yourself and your people.
- ✓ **Plan a God moment.** No, you can't engineer God's activity. But you can bring yourself and others to a point of expectancy—a moment in the service when you believe something special could happen.
- ✓ **Arrive expecting to meet God.** Faith is our basic currency in dealing with God. If you believe (God) will gather with you on Sunday, (God) will.
- ✓ **Help others enter God's presence.** People come to church carrying a ton of junk in their heads, everything from the stress in their marriage to the errands they need to run in the afternoon. Call them to a place where they can sense God's presence. Help them slow down and listen.
- ✓ **Let people share their experience.** When we see God working in others, we are more likely to seek (God) ourselves.

If you have other suggestions about ways to help people connect with God in your worship services, I would be glad to hear about them. Email me at jwaugh@wocumc.org. If I receive some ideas, I’ll be glad to publish those.

One of the areas of fruitful practice for congregations is to connect people with God. One of the primary ways we attempt to do that is through our worship services. What are you doing to help the worship services in your church be a time and place that help others connect with God?