

## *IS WORSHIP KEEPING THE CONGREGATION UNHEALTHY?*

There is no aspect of congregational life that can be more greatly compromised by unhealthy rules and expectations than worship. Paradoxically there is no aspect of congregational life manifesting the potential and hope for health than worship.

The pinnacle of a gathered faith community is worship. This is the time and place of most consistent gathering of members. Worship is a strength as parishioners are focused on the healing grace of God's love. It can and should be transformative as lives are turned toward the Holy and they respond. Worship is a time to enhance our spirituality, our relationship with God and all that God cares about, including one's self. Being the pinnacle, worship nurtures the congregation affirmed in the love of God. This deepens the congregation's trust and confidence of being able to respond as a member of the body of Christ. Transformed congregations respond with study, witness, and serving. Stewardship of all of God's creation includes care of one's personhood. For the health of the congregation this stewardship response is as crucial as developing and maintaining healthy fellowship, which is more than just coffee after worship. Fellowship is to be, what the early church called *koinonia*, gathering together for the purpose of nurturing the relationships of members with one another. Through these responsive engagements other people are welcomed into the journey of transformed lives in God.

In other congregations, worship is far too often less than inspiring, less than

enhancing of spirituality, less than transformative. As it happens, the gathering of the faith community, often called worship, has become that which contributes most to keeping the congregation unhealthy. This is a paradoxical reality for many congregations; worship, which should be God-centered and therefore transformative, loses its power as members fail to hear the words in their language that would foster a trusting relationship with God. Failing to trust God's love, grace and power, the congregation is unsuccessful in trusting it has a purpose and mission and fails to trust its clergy to lead. In the grip of insecurity, many congregations expect worship to simply be a place and time for nice "God talk" by the pastor. Some participants may look for confirmation of who they are and the situation in which they find themselves in life, often wanting something different but afraid to embrace the transformative.

In many congregations, especially those in a survival mode, transformation is not sought. The power of love to transform is not an expectation. There is an insecure controlling aspect of the congregation that works at avoiding God and denies any need for healing. Therefore, the congregation seldom fully engages in worship. Instead it defers the most important corporate expression of its reality to by-the-book worship and habitual practices. This exercise is employed with the expectation it will ensure the peace and insulate from being challenged with new hymns or different forms of worship. While holding all these unspoken expectations, the pastor becomes solely responsible for worship. Placed in the hands of the clergy, worship is guided by their own spiritual preferences and sense of worship. Even

when the pastor's preferences in worship, language, practices, and theological emphasis, differs from what would be the healthiest for the congregation, there generally is no objection. Since there is no sense of corporate personality, a common ground upon which positive practices could be built, there is no perception of what or how worship could be more meaningful and engaging. As long as the language sounds familiar and the pastor "does not rock the boat" by challenging the congregation to participate beyond what has been their practice and with what they are comfortable, the congregation appears to be satisfied, settling into a state of indifference — emotional, if not also spiritual, detachment.

In congregations where any change in worship, or a suggestion of a second style of worship, is met with hostile reactions, the attitudes and expectations of worship are problematic. In such cases the congregation is no longer expecting worship to reveal to them the strength God's grace offers for daily life and faithful living. Instead, worship has become an act of strictly maintaining the rites, rituals, and traditions, as a response to anxiety, not an expression of the relationship of identity with God. The primary goal of worship is not worshipping but keeping the peace. This behavior is rooted in insecurity, grounded in lack of self-awareness, and the responses are based in fear. In an obsessive-compulsive-like-manner, the consistency of the "ritual" has replaced a trusting relationship with God as the source of security. Worship becomes more about appeasing God and other vocal members (how does one know the difference at that point?) than about one's own spiritual needs. The expectation *there should be no change in church* is irrational

and extremely unhealthy.

The deeper the congregation becomes entrenched in a survival mode, the more likely it is that worship becomes the primary, or only, functioning aspect of the community of faith apart from pastoral care and other pastor-driven activities. The messages heard in worship (not necessarily the same as what the pastor said) will tend to maintain or deepen the insecurity. The unhealthy rules are in control.

Consider Pleasanton Christian, whose motto is “Life is Pleasant Here.” At first visit it indeed seemed to be a very “pleasant” smaller mid-sized congregation. After worshipping with them several times, I made the judgment they were acting as a congregation whose values were focused on tradition, stability, and right order. In the Sunday folder I noticed an absence of opportunities for adult education or service. The worship was staid. The sense of tradition was evident and they appeared to be dependent on the structure it offered. People did not seem engaged; they did not sing-out, nor did they join in prayers, except for the Lord’s Prayer. Worship was very predictable and unvarying. One member told me, “I like worship here. It is always the same. It makes me feel safe.”

With the benefit of a few more encounters, I realized, at best Pleasanton Christian was in the maintenance mode of survival. Most of what happened was because of the energy and direction of either the pastor or because a few members committed to pleasing and helping the pastor. I became convinced this congregation did not really know or value who or what it was. I wondered if I was merely experiencing their coping mechanism.

I shared my insights and questions with the pastor and made a proposal to the board. Several months later I was invited to conduct their annual leadership retreat. An offsite location in a neighboring community was secured. The pastor and the board were encouraged to invite committee members and interested congregational members to participate. A number accepted the invitation. As I worked with the participants that day, I was a little surprised to learn the congregation affirmed its valuing of freedom and desire for experiences in the moment. They are a type that would really enjoy a good party. If this is who they are, being spontaneous and engaged would be natural. Immediate experiences would be more edifying than traditions. But that is not how they came across. Their self-disclosure stood in contrast to how they came across.

Yet, as I reflected on my experience with them I did remember some moments which should have been clues. One of the Sundays I attended happened to be a Youth Sunday. The small children sang several songs, the congregation craned their necks to see and then generously applauded. The youth read lessons and personally shared their faith and the congregation enthusiastically applauded. The pastor-led worship, before and after the children and youth portions, was governed by tradition. The organist, who played years beyond his desire to learn something new, seemed to contribute to the congregation being less engaged. On another Sunday I attended as a Baptism was preformed and later in that service the Senior Choir sang. Again, the congregation responded to each of these additions to the routine with applause. The applause seemed out of place to me, but upon reflection I realize

that is was in these events that stood outside of their every Sunday liturgical routine in which they were able to engage in a more spontaneous way.

This congregation was in the maintenance mode. It had learned to exist by being something it was not, maintaining traditions that were preformed perfunctorily. The real question is, “What kept them in this mode?” For one thing, they feared the loss of their aging organist and did not want to hurt his feelings by even looking for different music leader even though he had often encouraged them to do just that. Second, in issues related to worship they deferred to the pastor. In trying to engage a few members in conversation about worship it was obvious such questions made them uncomfortable. A number of the unhealthy rules were in play. They made it clear, in so many words, that the rule “Don’t rock the boat” controlled them. This congregation’s true personality was muted and underdeveloped.

The pastor continued to be guided by what he had learned in seminary over 20 years ago, and by what he was comfortable to him. Truth be told, his sermons were solid theological discourses with plenty of supportive material. The pulpit was always used for the sermons, which were prepared in manuscript form and read. The liturgy was by the book, which the pastor claimed as important because that was what was taught at seminary. He had a keen sense of what the congregation would complain about. He did not convey an understanding of what the congregations would find affirming and spiritual enhancing in worship.

This congregation, who needs worship to be an experience in the moment, is participating in a similar way to a bilingual person engaging in a conversation

using their lesser developed second language. They hear the words and understand what most of them mean, but often without the nuance and the depth of emotional connection that comes with one's primary language. In other words, the worship and the sermon are being conducted in a manner that does not speak as clearly, as engagingly, to this congregation as is possible. Therefore, they have adopted a worship style, which is in the tones of their second language, a language to which they have grown accustomed. It is the one-size-fits-all approach, which means it fits none appropriately. Constantly worshipping in a style that does not engage them more fully makes them more susceptible to insecurity. Therefore, they compensate by using ritual and tradition to maintain a set form of worship to control anxiety. Worship appears to be filled with unhealthy rules and unspoken expectations.

Pastor after pastor has unwittingly reinforced this congregation's underlying assumption that to worship means the congregation has to be something it is not. A hundred and twenty years in their hierarchical denomination taught them not to question the pastor's leadership of worship. A hundred and twenty years of worship with various pastors, most speaking a foreign personality-based language have failed to effectively affirm this congregation's identity and giftedness.

The pastor's worship leadership style is often, and unconsciously, instrumental in reinforcing the congregation's basic insecurity and, thereby, unintentionally promotes anxiety. When the direction and guidance for worship is strictly informed by the pastor's spirituality and preferences for content and structure, worship will often miss the mark, especially when the congregation's spirituality connects with

God through opposing styles, different values, and ears hearing differently. When the pastor chooses to defer and go simply by the book, or rely on “the right way to worship,” as taught in a worship and liturgy course in seminary, or as dictated by the insecurities of parishioners, the potential for missing the mark is increased. Published liturgies, as with pastor-created-worship, will reflect the dominant spirituality of the committee or person who created them. Liturgies grounded in a spirituality which emphasizes relationships and harmony will not be as edifying to a congregation whose spirituality centers in doing the right thing that God expects of us as it will for a congregation with a spirituality grounded in needing and developing harmonious relationships, being friends in the Lord. A worshipping community oriented to present needs, or based on past commitments to help and serve others, will not receive the strength and encouragement it needs being given a steady dose of worship designed in a spirituality that focuses on the big picture of God’s ultimate plan, a future vision. Pastor and people are looking in different directions and not connecting.

The sense of worship for clergy has unconsciously been informed by the preferences of their own personality type and spiritual posture in the crucible of early faith formation and theological training. Seminary is less than helpful as pastoral candidates are blessed to be spiritual leaders of congregations while developing less than adequate understanding of how their leadership style is shaped by their personality and how that leadership is received by congregations with differing personalities. When worship is driven by the preferences of the



pastor, differing from the congregation, it will hardly ever meet the expectations of either the pastor or the congregation. The congregation, on the other hand, may not as of yet experienced worship appropriate for its personality. From its beginning, it may have learned simply to defer to the pastor, or, assent to habits of worship, which members call tradition. Worship dictated by rigid expectations appears to be based more on insecurities and fears of doing something wrong than being reflective of the congregations' true preferences and common spirituality. Placating the underlying fears, governed by unhealthy rules and unspoken expectations, has resulted in uninspiring unauthentic worship, which may be directly linked to the decline of mainline denominations.

Pastor-centered conflict in congregations is a part of this unhealthy picture. The supposition is that congregation-pastor conflict is fueled by a lack of trust, centered in practices of miss-communication resulting in inflating anxiety. Especially in worship, where “the pastor is speaking for God,” “speaking God’s language,” what is the message for parishioners about their relationship with God when they cannot assimilate, or resonate with, what is being said or how it is being presented? Worship that does not fully speak to a congregation reinforces a piety in which they hear that they don’t measure up — they are less than they should be. In such a state mission and service will be motivated only through guilt, or driven by the energy of the pastor, which is limited. Eventually the congregation will want leadership it can trust. Anxiety, which is assumed to be the fault of this pastor, intensifies. Conflict erupts.

The congregation is diminished by attempts of those in power (not necessarily the same as the elected leaders or pastors) to reshape it according to one person's or one group's image. It is equally diminishing to hold the congregation captive to the fears and anxieties of the insecure. This often is not done maliciously or with any intent of abuse. This diminishing of the congregation happens naively; insecure, well-meaning, or arrogant leaders seek to exercise power, members assert their "ownership," and those fearful of the vulnerability or viability of the congregation attempt to rescue it. The congregation is diminished as worship, not only is governed by unhealthy rules and unspoken expectations, but becomes the justification for these rules and expectations in all aspects of corporate life. The consequence of these reactionary behaviors, generally results in the opposite of the desired outcome — the congregation is diminished and is placed in a position of being at greater risk.

The health and identity of the congregation is impeded when individuals, lay or clergy, use it for their own fulfillment of needs. The congregation is even further diminished as lay members and leaders, desiring to be faithful children of God, too frequently tolerate the inappropriate, disruptive, and destructive behaviors of a few members — people with issues deeper than what the love and acceptance of the congregation will heal. Leaders would be wise to work at affirming healthy behaviors while confronting and maintaining boundaries around the behaviors diminishing the congregation. They can help the congregation achieve greater health by replacing the rules keeping the congregation unhealthy and by exposing

the unrealistic unspoken expectations, which are nourished in a state of congregational dysfunction.

Somewhere, between the extremes of worship being transformative and church services that are placating, you may find your congregation. The challenge is to help the congregation move toward the healthier behavior, toward worship focused more on God than on the congregation's insecurities. This means worship that honors, and is shaped by, the personality of the congregation and guided by its common spirituality. Different personalities have different spiritual needs, focus, and life emphasis. Since the congregation's personality has not readily been named, it is easily dismissed or discounted. Healthy worship leadership is the requisite for moving the entire congregation toward a state of thriving. In worship messages will be heard and experienced that will either constrict or free, bind or loose. Leadership in worship, and at every level of congregational life, becomes transformative as it consciously engages the corporate personality of the congregation. Honoring the personality of the congregation and seeing value in how it is gifted for life, for worship, differently is the initial step in healthy leadership.

Recognizing that the personality cannot be changed is the second key acknowledgement. A healthy leader does not attempt to remake a congregation according to a self reflection. Leadership, on the other hand, which reflects back to the congregation in word and action how it has been gifted honors the personality of the congregation will begin the process of loosening the grip of insecurity. It is insecurity that paralyzes congregations and keeps them in states of health far less

than their desired expressions of faithfulness, dependent on unhealthy rules.

In the next chapter foundational practices of leadership for healthier congregations, will be profiled. Then with the remainder of the book you will be invited to engage with a system for understanding the preferences of your personality and those of the corporate personality of the congregation.