

Issues surrounding worship have received a lot of “press” over the last few years. Numerous books, articles and theories have been written and propounded. Someone coined the phrase “worship wars” to describe the ways worship styles, music choices and instruments used, have created divisions within congregations and between worshiping groups. One of the joys, blessings and strengths of FPCA is that two completely different worship experiences are part of our Sunday morning celebration. Each service, 9:30 and 11:00, offers worship to Jesus Christ, as Savior and Lord, that is guided and expressed through scripture using different types of music, and worship formats. Yet both services are grounded in a solidly reformed theological understanding of *“Christian worship (that) joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to the triune God.”* (Book of Order, Directory for Worship W -1.1001) The Directory for Worship section of the Book of Order offers a beautifully crafted understanding of the reason for worship, the elements of worship and the order of worship. I encourage you to take time to read this.

In Chapter 1 – the Dynamics of Christian Worship begins with these words…

“In worship the people of God acknowledge God present in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God’s claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed. In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God’s service in the world.”

All worship begins with God’s initiative. What God has done for us motivates us to worship as response. Through the power of the Spirit the people of God respond to the grace of God in their lives and in the world.

The fullest expression of God’s initiative towards humanity is in the person and work of Jesus, as God entered fully into the brokenness of humanity. Worship focuses on the Living God entering into the “common life” of humanity as Jesus took on flesh and dwelt among us. Throughout our worship services, in word, song, praise, proclamation, action and response we bear witness to the work of Christ as the Word spoken at creation; the Word “promising and commanding” throughout history; and as the Word made flesh, crucified, buried, raised in power and soon to return as judge and king. In addition the Word written,

Scripture, is the word proclaimed, through preaching, and the Word enacted and sealed, through the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. All point to Jesus Christ as the Living Word.

As God initiates – the people respond – and so in worship we respond to what God has done by gathering together as a community of believers. The visible expressions of our response are words and deeds of prayer, praise, offering, remembering. The Directory for Worship poetically describes the response of the worshiping community – this way:

Fasting and feasting,

Rejoicing and wailing,

Marching and resting,

Dancing and clapping hands,

Purification and dedication,

Circumcisions and anointing,

Burnt offerings and sin offering,

Doing justice and mercy,

Making music and singing to the Lord. (W-1.2003)

Chapter 3 of the Directory For Worship focuses on **The Ordering of Christian Worship.**

With scripture as our guide, and the heritage of rich and vibrant expressions and elements of worship the church seeks to be open to the creativity of the Holy Spirit while at the same time expressing worship in an orderly way that permits spontaneity and free expressions. There is an acknowledgement that “The Church has always experienced a tension between form and freedom in worship.” (W-3.1002)

Accordingly, I seek to design worship following a progressive format that serves as a means to provide the worshiper with the tools, words, acts and responses that would generate personal and heartfelt participation.

Liturgy means the “work of the people.” So that I create worship services that includes the voices of the people, not just the worship leader. I want worship services to be led by the people, not just professional clergy and so I seek to include the congregation in as many aspects of the service as possible. Having people other than pastors to read the Call to Worship, Prayers of Confession, Scripture demonstrates the communal aspect of our worship. In addition, music of every kind, bells, choirs, organ, instruments, voice add beauty and dimension to our expressions of praise, prayer and petition.

In keeping with the tradition of the Presbyterian Worship that is presented in the Book of Common Worship, I create worship services that follow a progressive pattern.

We are called together using words of scripture that express adoration, and praise. It is especially important to me that the words of Scripture be woven throughout our worship. Whether we are aware of them as scripture or not, the worship material that I choose always has a scriptural basis. Many Christians today do not read scripture on a regular basis, memorize it, or study it – so worship on Sunday can also be a teaching moment, when scripture is placed on the lips of the people, and becomes familiar language of prayer and praise.

After acknowledging Gods goodness and majesty we acknowledge our sin. Having a written prayer of confession is a tool to help us remember the ways and places that we fail, or the actions that have become so ingrained into our lives that we no longer see them as contrary to God’s laws. The prayer of confession is never complete in itself, but only a means to open our minds and hearts to the personal confession.

I am particular about including a scriptural Assurance of Pardon because again, I think we need to continually hear the Word of God and to become familiar with the many words of grace and forgiveness that are integral to the text.

As we are assured of our inclusion in the family of God we extend welcome and peace to others.

The reading of scripture, the hearing of a sermon, the opportunities for responding to the Word, through giving, and the sacraments all follow a progressive pattern of worship, that can be replicated in our daily lives.

I design the worship bulletin as a take home devotional, so that if someone was to choose to do so they could use it every day of the week in personal worship. Beginning with words of praise, a prayer of confession, a word of assurance, reading of scripture and then moving out into the world responding to the grace of God to us in Jesus Christ the weekly bulletin is a worship resource. For many people following this “traditional” worship format provides resources and structure for personal response, within a communal event.

Elements of a successful church are generally resident in worship and I believe they include:

- 1) a worship environment that leads people to be focused on Jesus Christ, and brings glory to God,
- 2) people who are seeking to honor God in their lives,
- 3) response to the love and grace of Christ in giving and serving others.

This reflection is by no means exhaustive or complete in any discussion around Christian worship. This is what informs my pastoral work as I seek to create worship services that are vehicles to adoration, opportunities for personal connection to the Living God, and at times lead us to awe.