

Is Your Worship Compelling?

By Bruce Reyes-Chow

Adapted for the VIBRANT TOGETHER SERIES



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IS YOUR WORSHIP COMPELLING?

Bruce Reyes-Chow

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**What is the Future of the Presbyterian Church?*

“God is not done with us.

God is always asking us to transform and be renewed in the Spirit.”

Bruce Reyes-Chow: “I have found that one of the ways that churches grow is by cultivating and nurturing belonging at some central gathering, generally their worship service. Too often, however, we get caught up in tactics, fixes, and production rather than curating an experience that is integrated and consistent with the values that we profess to hold.”

Belonging

Is cultivated and nurtured

WHY BELONGING

“When we choose belonging as our foundational intention and driving motivator for worship, we create a touch point for folks that draws folks into a relationship with one another and the divine.

And when this happens, we provide a compelling experience that folks will not want to miss.”



THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIASTIC ARROGANCE

Focusing on worship, let me pose three reasons why our worship services may NOT be compelling or express belonging — and what to do about it. Don't worry, there are more than this, but this should be adequate to get the juices flowing.

1. **Theological and Ecclesiastic Arrogance:** I once heard a white politician, when asked why more African Americans did not support him, respond with, "Well, if they just took the time to learn about me, they would support me." He put the onus on those who did not know him to get to know him rather than express how he might better share his beliefs in ways that others would be compelled to get to know him better. Too many of our progressive churches also hold this perspective when it comes to our theological views, both in how we expect people to find us as well as what they should navigate once they arrive. After all, our theology is so good that people should know, understand, and appreciate what we believe. Yes, I believe we hold a better version of the gospel, but church by osmosis is not a tactic that cultivates belonging.

What to do: Make few assumptions and do not make people guess what is next. Over-explain if you need to and guide people through the experience of worship as if it's their first time. Most importantly, don't make people feel lost as if they are sitting on the outside trying to figure out what they are supposed to be doing. . . as if they do not belong. If we want people to feel as if they belong, we must act as if we actually believe they do.

Putting the Pieces Together – Let's Talk About It...

- *Where do you see "arrogance" when it comes to our worship?*



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- *How is theological arrogance an issue for us and how is it an issue for evangelical Christianity? Where do such things converge and diverge?*

- *If you were to attend your worship for the first time, what elements and actions would need explanation? Are those currently provided? Why or why not?*

THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIASTIC INCONSISTENCY

2. **Theological and Ideological Inconsistency:** If a church is going to claim that they hold progressive theological values such as expansive language for God, created non-binary understandings of gender, the holiness of diverse family structures, etc. those values must be reflected in all aspects of worship. It is so jarring for me to be in a space that talks about LGBTQIA+ affirmation and gender fluidity but then gendered references in scripture are not deconstructed, binary musical lyrics go unchallenged, and much of the service does not reflect the progressive values that a community claims to hold. When we let inconsistency slide, our professed beliefs ring hollow, which, for those searching for open and affirming spaces, translates as lazy, hypocritical, and performative.



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July 18, 2023

What to do: Do the work, challenge the norms, and trust the community's capacity and willingness to shift. For instance, if the community believes that pronouns are an important gesture to communicate welcome, be consistent both verbally and in any written bulletins, building signage, welcome nametags, etc. Change the imagery norms or at least acknowledge problematic language and imagery in music, prayers, scripture etc. . . . or don't use those resources. Do not let inconsistency slide.

Putting the Pieces Together – Let's Talk About It...

- *Where do you notice or hear inconsistencies in worship practices, liturgy, or actions?*

- *Which leads and has a greater impact – our stated theological stances or our applied practice?*

- *Where are you with use of language and gender references? How important are your own personal preferences vs. the needs of someone else?*



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- *What avenues of action might be appropriate when an inconsistency with theology is identified?*
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BORING

3. **BORING:** I have heard progressive pastors in the past say things like, “Well we could grow too if we were willing to do X.” First, I do not think that is true. Growth is difficult, no matter one’s theological perspective. Second, I think it’s an excuse to avoid the hard work of communicating a theological perspective with energy, creativity, and imagination. We are so allergic to the idea that we might be considered “one of those churches” that we have made the main purpose and measure of worship — to make it through alive. In our caution to not be emotionally manipulative (A good caution BTW), we have removed emotional exploration altogether. Hate to break it to you, but many of our progressive worship services are not as moving as we would like to believe them to be. We use too many words, we have made rituals mundane, we are guarded in our emotions, and we have abdicated our responsibility to create space where the Spirit is expected and assumed will move our hearts, minds, and body. We have a wonderfully liberating theology, but somehow our main lens for sharing it is measured restraint.



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July 18, 2023

What to do: How to make your services more energizing is a hard one because of personality, style, etc. Still, three things to try that are not about theology but about freedom of the spirit are these: laugh more, move more, and share more. Good god, we need to laugh more in worship, not only as a way to invite a loosening of the Spirit, but as a way to remember to take our faith seriously, but ourselves not so much. We need to creatively move more during worship, whether through worship stations, guided movements, or putting our bodies in different spaces for worship; sitting still, face-forward for an hour + gets old. Lastly, we need to share more about our humanity. Without engaging in group therapy, we must find ways to be more vulnerable, share more of our collective humanity, and connect more deeply across common struggles, hopes, and celebrations.

Putting the Pieces Together – Let’s Talk About It...

- *Do we “use too many words” and are “our rituals mundane?” If so, what might be done about this?*

- *What do you think about the invitation to “laugh more, move more, and share more?”*



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- ***What about emotion? Where and how does your current worship evoke emotion? How evocative do see your worship, and if you were to seek to grow that, then what steps would be need to be taken?***
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- ***How boring is your worship? What would a new-comer say? A twenty-something year old?***
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PREACHING

A word about preaching. For preachers, I know that “be a more dynamic preacher that will pack the pews” is an unfair expectation that places undue pressure upon a preacher and opens us up to the possibility of “cult of personality” growth. For congregants tempted to say, “If we just had a better preacher, we would grow.” I guarantee that there are reasons you are not growing that have nothing to do with the dynamism of your preacher. That said, boring, disconnected, sterile sermons do a great deal of harm and can severely hinder growth. So much can be done with that preaching moment if we could only dispel the myth that there is only one good way to preach [Insert name of charismatic speaker here]. The best preachers in my life are not the best because of their style. They are good preachers because they move my soul. The name commonalities in life, help to me make sense of the chaos of the world, communicate love for my journey of faith, and are authentically and honestly them. Yes, there is risk in being vulnerable and transparent, but if the preacher is unwilling to take that risk, why on earth would anyone else?



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Putting the Pieces Together – Let’s Talk About It...

- *Preaching as that which “moves my soul” – what do you think of that?*

- *What makes a sermon memorable?*

- *What is the difference between a preacher being vulnerable and making it all about themselves?*



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**What is the Future of the Presbyterian Church?*

VITAL WORSHIP QUICK DISCUSSION GUIDE

With Session, Worship Team, or Group

- *Where do you see “arrogance” when it comes to our worship?*

- *Where are you with use of language and gender references? How important are your own personal preferences vs. the needs of someone else?*

- *What do you think about the invitation to “laugh more, move more, and share more?”*

- *Preaching as that which “moves my soul” – what do you think of that?*
