

Worship: so much more than just going to church



David Thompson talks to Karen Campbell about what it means to be present to God as his people in worship and how congregations can facilitate that in how they shape their services.

One aspect of the denomination-wide ‘Present’ initiative, launched at this year’s General Assembly, is the call to be present to God as his people. That involves giving attention to God. It happens as we read his Word and speak to him through prayer, but also through giving ourselves heart, soul, mind and strength to times of worship together with others in our congregation. That kind of being present to God in worship is so much more than what we often refer to as ‘going to church’.

Rev Karen Campbell is someone who has thought deeply about worship and contributed a lot to our denomination in this area in a variety of ways over the years. She has recently returned from a season ministering in Church of the Servant, a Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and is now working with the Irish Council of Churches.

While worship is always primarily for God and his glory, any natural expression of it arises not just from the rhythms and practices we find in Scripture and our tradition, but who we are as a worshipping congregation today. Karen expresses a strong sense

Present TO GOD AS HIS PEOPLE

of that rootedness in context. She first encountered its power while serving overseas with the church in Kenya. She recalls: “There was a very stiff formal liturgy in which there didn’t seem to be much life until they began to sing in either Kiswahili or one of their local languages. That’s when life came back. That really started me on a journey of asking – how can we peel back the layers of our liturgy to really engage the heart and allow people to embody their grateful response to God?”

In Grand Rapids, Karen encountered a very different congregation. “It was one that ministered to refugees and asylum seekers. There were easily 20 different languages and cultures

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represented on a Sunday. So it was mind-blowing to think – how can we reach everyone at the same time? We learned very quickly the importance of helping those who didn’t have English as their first language to have other cues to help them understand worship.”

This involved tapping into the common historical roots of worship around the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, along with the seasons of the church year such as Advent and Lent. Because of language barriers, the congregation also worked harder at visual cues that guided participants through the different parts of the service – the call to worship, prayers, Scripture reading, ministry of the Word and response.

It is interesting to reflect on what we in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland have to learn from all of this. Perhaps we should expect that there will be many things that follow a similar framework in every congregation’s worship because they are rooted in, and reflect who we are as Reformed Christians. Nevertheless, we should equally expect that those same things may look, feel and sound very different in their expression from church to church.



Worship in Kenya



Rev Karen Campbell, worshipping at the Church of the Servant, Michigan, USA

Karen describes the need for congregations and those who shape and facilitate worship, to identify a centre point for their congregation's worship and to work from it. She says, "You need a body of music and a body of liturgy that people return to often, knowing that these are ways of worshipping and words that are familiar, such as the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed. Over time the congregation and its worshippers come to imbibe and embody them. From that safe space, comes a freedom to try new things and stretch the boundaries, like singing songs in a different style or language, or adopting more movement into a service, or creating moments of silence."

When congregations get this right there is a sense that the texture of worship fits the look and feel of the worshippers, not in a consumeristic way, but in form and expression which facilitates them to be present to God.

Considering how congregations can practically be more present to God, Karen identifies that our posture towards worship is key. Worship is a means of gladly receiving his grace, not something that we need to work up for him. For some congregations, this might mean a break with long-standing tradition.

She reflects: "To have the announcements, which are all about activities, right at the start of the service is not always the best place to be starting. We should be beginning from a place of contemplation. What might it mean to clear a space right at the start of worship where we are paying attention, having our eyes

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opened and our senses engaged by what we are here to do, so that we approach worship with a readiness to encounter God?"

Another practice that Karen has seen benefit from is extending the reach of the sermon both prior to worship and afterwards. "In the Church of the Servant an email went out on Monday morning highlighting the Bible text for the following Sunday. Along with that were some questions to ponder and practices to consider that arose from the passage and a verse to memorise. All of that helped prepare people to come ready to connect to what would be happening on a Sunday."

Following the sermon we might also usefully consider how to be more creative about slowing down that final part of the service to give space to enable response to the Word. She suggests the possibility of introducing a period of silent response and the importance of prayers of intercession which pick up the theme of the service in ways which connect with what is going on in the world and our lives.

Rather than coming to worship to escape from all that is going on in the rest of our lives, or from the news which is often so grim at the moment, Karen is passionate about the church's worship overflowing into its witness. This is unsurprising given the focus of her present role with the Irish Council of Churches which involves encouraging the church to find its voice

and role in countering racism, engaging in peace building and bringing Christ's healing to a fragmented and hurting society.

"As a people we place such an important emphasis on worship, which is founded on a rich and wonderful theology. For many good reasons, church in our context, prizes a kind of pietistic worship where prayer and worship are afforded high value, but it's often a very vertical value as opposed to a horizontal value. The shadow side of that is that our worship can seem isolated from the rest of the week. We worship a God who has been wounded on our behalf and in his own being became vulnerable for us in Christ. That's an awesome theological idea. But it allows us to be vulnerable too.

"It's about coming and going from worship without pretending and sweeping things under the carpet. We need in our vulnerability to be able to bring those realities before God in worship, lament them, respond to them, go away changed ourselves and determined to bring God's change to the world."

As our conversation draws to a close, so many words about what it means to be really present to God in worship run one after the other – expectancy, anticipation, vulnerability, attentiveness, gratitude, humility, surrender. It's all so much more than just going to church again this Sunday. Let's be present to God as his people in worship!

Rev David Thompson is PCI's Secretary of the Council for Congregational Life and Witness.