

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Many ways to worship



Many of us assume that the way we're used to worshipping is the only right way. We think everyone ought to want what we want. But our churches can't afford to offer only one style of worship. We must provide a variety of worship styles in order to help many different people experience God's presence. We need to help them praise God within a community of Christians, and respond to God by giving their best. In this way we help them grow in faith.

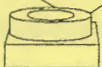
I was reminded of this recently when I heard about the worship of a new, fast-growing congregation. It meets at a Holiday Inn in a suburb of a large city. The average age of the members is 32, an age group that doesn't always feel at home in our traditional worship services.

In this new United Methodist congregation worship is exciting. The excitement starts with lively music while worshippers gather. The pastor says, "We want people to hear the music as they approach the meeting room, so they'll want to come in and see what is happening." This noisy atmosphere might make me want to leave rather than come in, but I know that everyone's tastes aren't like mine.

Make a joyful noise to God! ... Come into God's presence with singing!  
— Psalm 100:1-2

### HERE I AM, LORD

I, the Lord of sea and sky,  
I have heard my people cry.  
All who dwell in dark and sin  
my hand will save.



## Heads-up singing

Music in this new congregation's worship services isn't presented in the way I'm used to. Many songs are from the United Methodist Hymnal, but they are projected onto a large screen in the center front of the room

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## Changes in worship scare us

In their book *Trouble at the Table: Gathering the Tribes for Worship* (Abingdon, 1992), Carol Doran and Thomas H. Troeger affirm what many of us recognize from our own worship experience: we feel most comfortable when we are with people who share our interests, values, and goals. Most often this is our own church congregation or a sub-group within the congregation.

Every such group, Doran and Troeger remind us, "holds its particular style of praise as precious and sacred, as the one that most effectively releases the prayer that is in their hearts." Each has its own distinctive customs, allegiances, beliefs and rituals, symbols and code words, and ways of celebrating and being together.



## We imagine everyone agreeing

Worship has become a problem for the church, these authors find, because many of us remember when most church members seemed to agree on what worship ought to include. "We cannot help longing," Doran and Troeger observe, "for the unanimity of opinion about worship practice, which we imagine has pervaded Judeo-Christian history." They remind us, however, that the unanimity hasn't been as great as we imagine. Not even King David's worship pleased everyone.

Michal ... saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she despised him ...

—2 Samuel 6:16

## Bringing our fears into the light

Doran and Troeger encourage us to draw on the best that each segment of our membership has to offer, without separating us from each other. But that's hard to do, because in matters of holy ritual people's anxiety is usually very high. Any change in familiar patterns of worship can feel like a body blow. It can also bring the vague fear that we're breaking some of God's rules by changing. This fear is often baseless, since most aspects of our worship reflect only our personal tastes and a very limited part of the Christian tradition rather than timeless God-given rules, but the fear is still powerful. Like other paralyzing fears, we can overcome this one only by bringing it out into the light and examining it.



*(Many ways to worship, continued from page 1)*

rather than sung from hymnals. "When people's heads are up instead of buried in hymnals, they sing more," the pastor observes. "They feel involved in the music because they can see and hear the other people singing all around them."

This pastor moves around as he preaches—he doesn't use a pulpit. And he doesn't wear a robe. In fact, he usually doesn't even wear a coat and tie. He and the greeters and nursery workers wear golf shirts with the church's name and logo on them. And the greeters don't wait for people to come into the worship room. They are stationed all along the hallways that lead to it, and in the parking lot, too.



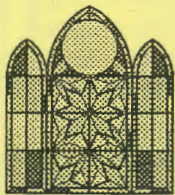
### Face-to-face seating

As this pastor described his congregation's worship I thought about another fast-growing congregation I had heard about. It is meeting temporarily in a school cafeteria. The school prohibits moving the tables and chairs, so the church members sit around the tables for worship. Communion is served at the tables, too. Members get to know each other because they sit face-to-face. Table groups talk as they gather. When newcomers enter, they are escorted to a table, introduced, and brought into the conversation.



The pastor says, "At first we thought this arrangement would be a problem, but we've found that it is a big plus. When we build we're going to have to think seriously about whether to have pews in our sanctuary. We may want tables instead."

### What are we worshipping?



Hearing about churches like these reminds me that the pews, pulpits, pipe organs, hushed atmosphere, Sunday clothes, and stained glass that many of us consider essential for worship aren't really essential.

We forget this. We worship our buildings, furnishings, words, and customs instead of letting them help us worship God as they are meant to do. We let them separate us from other Christians and sometimes from God. If we're serious about being the church, we can't afford to keep doing this. ❖

## What helps? What hinders?

Familiar parts of our worship that help us in some ways can hurt us in others. And what helps some people worship hinders others. I invite you to look with me at some of these worship features.

### ▪ Familiar words, actions, and visual images

Prayers and scriptures that we know from memory help us worship. So do familiar symbols and pictures, and gestures like kneeling and bowing our heads. They say what we can't put into words. Their familiarity keeps us from having to think what to say or do, which can be especially valuable when we are ill or under stress and have no energy to spare.



These familiar features of worship let us forget ourselves and our surroundings so that we can be aware of God's presence and mystery and can open

### We aren't all alike

Worshippers in a typical church congregation today include people who have lived in many places. They have belonged to churches of various denominations and to congregations with different customs. Many have not been active in any church before. As a result, traditions that are well-known to some are foreign to others. Worshippers also have a variety of personalities. What some people consider essential in worship, therefore, others consider undesirable or even sacrilegious.

We can't afford to declare anyone's worship preferences wrong just because they're different from our own. Instead, we who are in leadership positions or in the majority with regard to worship preferences must deliberately promote variety instead of insisting that our churches have only the kind of worship that we personally prefer.



Perhaps the best way to get the variety we need is to have more than one service each week, with each one designed to appeal to a different group. One worship service could be in a fellowship hall or a living room instead of in the sanctuary. One could be on a weekday instead of on Sunday. One could feature contemporary music instead of traditional hymns.

Besides helping our own congregation offer more than one kind of worship, we need to help our denomination include congregations whose worship is different from what the majority wants. Christians can worship in many ways, and we need them all.



Recently I was a visitor in a worship service. When I arrived, the first hymn was in progress. I listened to the people around me, hoping to figure out which verse they were on, but I couldn't tell. Many mouths were closed, and only faint mumbles were coming from those that were open, even though the hymn was an old familiar one.

Unfortunately, this lack of participation is characteristic of many of our worship services. It gives the impression that we don't care about God or the church. Because we do care, we must take responsibility for participating and for offering worship that will inspire participation.



ourselves fully to God. Our innate hunger for this experience is so strong that we're likely to seek it elsewhere if we don't find it in our churches' worship. So familiar worship features are helpful.

But *limiting* ourselves to what is familiar in worship is dangerous. It keeps us from noticing the meaning of what we are doing and saying. It makes us miss new insights that God is trying to show us. It lets our attention wander during worship.

Besides, some traditional words and pictures reflect error and injustice that Christians have failed to recognize in the past. Many pictures of Jesus mistakenly portray him as a blond Caucasian. By its excessive male imagery much of our traditional worship language unjustly excludes women's experience and inaccurately portrays God as exclusively male. To keep using these words and pictures after their harmful effects have been brought to our attention is to disobey God's will.

▪ **A standard order of worship**

We need structure in worship. We get it from having a bulletin, reciting creeds and litanies, and following a prescribed pattern. These features provide security and predictability. They help us know how to participate. They let us feel that we belong.

But we also need spontaneity and creativity. Too rigid a structure leaves no room for the unpredictable action of the Holy Spirit. It deludes us into thinking that we can keep God in our packages. And it can make worship seem dull and dead.

▪ **Beautiful buildings and furnishings**

They can speak to us of God, because God is the author of beauty. But when we overemphasize

our church architecture and furnishings, beauty becomes extravagance. It can also make us think we can worship only in a church sanctuary.

▪ **Quiet stillness**

For many of us, soft music and hushed voices express the respect that we've been taught is appropriate for God's house, and the awe that we feel for God. They create the atmosphere that we consider appropriate for prayer. But worship easily becomes insipid, dull, and boring when it consists only of soft sounds and stillness.

Worship needs to include opportunities to express enthusiasm and excitement through movements and sounds, including loud sounds. It needs to remind us that we're part of a community, by letting us hear the people around us, talk with them, and join them in expressing shared feelings and beliefs.



Silence is also important in worship. It lets us reflect on what God calls us to be and do, and on how we are responding. But it must be real silence. Soft music and soft voices aren't silence.

Worship must include both sound and silence. Different people want these in different proportions, but we don't do anyone a favor by offering only bland quietness as a middle ground. We merely put people to sleep. ❖

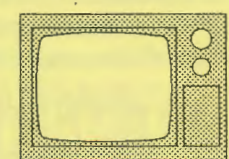
**Worship can't be all we want**

▪ **Worship may not entertain us.**

Our culture has encouraged us to expect to enjoy everything we do. We want everything to be fun. But in worship we aren't meant to be mere spectators who have come to be entertained.

▪ **Worship may not meet our needs instantly.**

We're used to changing channels when we no longer like what we're seeing on TV. We're used to instant coffee and food prepared in microwave ovens. As a result, we tend to reject whatever doesn't serve our purposes immediately. But the value of some features of worship takes time to discover. Learning a new song or appreciating a new method of taking communion may take time, but it can be worth taking time.





▪ **Worship can't include everything we'd like.**  
We've gotten used to having a giant variety of products to choose from when we shop, but the church isn't a mall or a supermarket. No worship service can include everything that everyone wants.

▪ **Worship can't always keep us comfortable.**  
Worship isn't meant to be an anesthetic or an escape. Deadening our pain and reassuring us that we're right isn't its purpose. True worship increases our awareness of God's will for our individual lives and for the church and the world. It alerts us to changes that God wants us to make. It directs our attention not only to God but also to what we have

in common with other human beings, to our responsibility for each other, and to the ministries to which God calls us. Worship must start where we are, but real worship doesn't leave us there. ❖



**Next month . . .**

**What happens  
at Sunday School?**



**Connections 3-94**

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## Many ways to worship

### What constitutes quality in worship? And how important is it?

Musically, a Bach chorale is far superior in quality to the song "Here I am, Lord." "Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee" is musically better than contemporary scripture songs. More complex musical and literary forms contain depths of meaning and beauty that communicate at a level below consciousness. Their meaning reaches deeper and stays with us longer. We don't have to be fully aware of what they are communicating to be influenced by it. But music that has less substance, complexity, and musical style is often easier to sing and to listen to. Words whose entire meaning can be seen at a glance require little time or effort to understand. Which of these characteristics is more important for worship?

In a worship service I recently attended, a pianist played a flowery combination of "Jesus Loves Me" and Debussy's "Clair de Lune." The sound was superficially pretty, but combining these two pieces is jolting and inappropriate musically and theologically. Does this matter? Are Christians who appreciate and hunger for words and music with substance merely being elitist when they object to the constant use of simpler music? Are we failing to give our best to God when we settle for what is easiest and quickest to sing and understand? Or are we obeying God's will by trying to reach more people? I'm not sure. What do you think?

### Connections readers ask, "Do you speak to groups?"

Yes, I do. If you'd like for me to speak to a church group you're in, let me know and maybe we can arrange it.

If you've recently sent me a check to help cover the cost of Connections, thank you! If you haven't, it's not too late. And you can still get my book **GOD'S PARTNERS: LAY CHRISTIANS AT WORK** (Judson Press), co-authored by Stanley J. Menking, by sending me \$13, which includes postage and tax.