



*At a workshop I was teaching a few years ago, a participant dragged a man forward to meet me at the conclusion. I hadn't noticed him that day. She introduced him as her pastor and told me that she had called him half-way through the day and said, "You HAVE to come see this!" And so began a wonderful relationship with the folks of First Presbyterian Church of Scottsbluff, Nebraska. Other team members came to Tahoe to study with me and earlier this year I got a wonderful update from Brad, the pastor, about what has transpired in the last couple of years. I reprint it here as a testimony—not so much to my teaching—but to the transformation that can happen when a church begins to spend quality time learning, dreaming and planning for meaningful and memorable worship. There are lessons to be learned throughout Brad's letter...*

"Our music and worship efforts in the past three years have borne fruit as a result of doing three sequential things:

**1.) We invested in our people.** After one individual attended your workshop here at the Methodist Church in August of 2006, we sent two others of us to the first EleVation in October of that year, followed by six more in the second EleVation in June of the following year.

**2.) We carved out a space for experimentation,** to let ourselves off the leash, without taking anything away from the present worship experience of the congregation. We did this by introducing an autumn series of eight Saturday night worship services in our Chapel, followed in the spring by seven more Saturday night services throughout Lent. We created sets, such as making the Chapel completely over into a Garden of Eden in the fall around the theme 'The Genesis of the Gospel' and into a Garden of Gethsemane during Lent. We played with nature sounds (i.e. background sounds of crickets outside the walls of Jerusalem), smells (baking cinnamon apple pie once in Eden and bread in a bread machine in the corner once in Gethsemane and pulling it out, still hot and steaming, to use in communion), and visual art and text projected up on screens during our singing. We played with congregational participation in both readings we provided and testimonials they provided - sometimes prepared ahead of time and sometimes not. We played with moving the congregants (ranging from 25-45 during those two seasons) both around the Chapel and even out of the Chapel, out of the church building and back in on one occasion. We played with music - both what we chose and how we chose to sing/present it. We focused on gathering outside the worship space, so our 'entering' might be made and acknowledged as part of our worshipping. I could say more, but you get the drift.

**3.) We set out to move without fanfare the best of our experimentations from the secondary space into the regular worship space, the sanctuary,** asking ourselves what would translate, mostly incrementally though sometimes dramatically. I'll mention two examples of the result of this which stand out: One was last Easter, on which we had communion, which is not our normal custom, but so that we could introduce the

'Communion Setting' from the Presbyterian Sing the Faith book. The team encouraged me to sing the introduction, non-singer that I am, but it went well with the Choir rehearsed and leading the congregation - and it has now become part of the regular rhythm of our communion Sundays (if change becomes regular, is this 'plug-and-play transformed?'). We introduced a **well-planned and well-scripted, but non-explained, new musical communion tradition, which everyone loved!** They had the experience of doing something new before knowing that something new was going to be introduced - wondering what just happened after it was over...

We as a church just spent a weekend hosting our larger Presbytery - gathering into our sanctuary roughly 150 pastors and elders from as far a way as Boulder, Loveland, and Fort Collins, Colorado. Long story short, we pulled out the stops - and one seasoned, mid-sized steepled church pastor said without equivocation, "That was the best worship I've experienced at a Presbytery meeting - ever!" **Around the theme** of Matthew 25:35a "I was hungry and you fed me...", we taught them the 'round' of 'What Does the Lord Require of Me' before dinner, and then after, in the sanctuary, moved with two a cappella singing plus two **voice-over-piano-call-to-worship** leaders, piano and organ, bass guitar and three choirs - the children up front and the two adult choirs processing in robes - through an opening 'high' of Rocka My Soul into an invocation and 'down' into the depths of our opening hymn of Christ the Great Foundation (from the 'rock' to the 'foundation'). Through the confessions and prayers, scripture and sermon, anthems and offerings, we moved into the Communion Setting. At the conclusion of part d., as you know, it ends with the Amen...and then refrains of Hosanna in the Highest. As this came to completion, I invited our guest preacher from the front range to **say his benediction over slow piano music, during which our gifted pianist transposed that Hosanna music into the new refrain of our closing song, 'We Are Marching', during which all the choirs once again gathered behind the table and led us all in our concluding, choral 'call to action', accompanied by some added African percussion.**

What were most gratifying of responses were the comments from seasoned pastors, young and old. **"This is very different,"** one thirtyish pastor thought to himself as worship sounds began to unfold behind him, **"but when I saw the procession, they were all wearing robes."** "What struck me immediately," a young woman co-pastor from Greeley said to one of our team members, "was that **everyone participating in the worship leadership seemed to know what was coming next - there were no mid-stream instructions and no mid-worship explanations to the congregation - everything just happened.**" An older couple from Colorado said over breakfast the next morning, **"If someone liked traditional worship, they would have loved that service; if someone preferred more contemporary worship, they would have also loved that service."** Even our own choir director and our pianist/organist, who have been enthusiastic sports about following these new ideas and suggestions, have been the most engaged of us all in their expressed desire to find some time to 'debrief' *what happened* in that Friday evening worship - in what I call this 'milestone' event in the development of our worship and music program.

**All this to say, I'm not sure what you hear in all this, but thank you!** I think we all have a sense that we have a great foundation to work from, and that we've only just begun. I think one of our growing edges is long-range planning; another is a broader range of congregational participation in worship leadership. All the best to you. Stay in touch. We'll do the same. - Brad Gustafson"