

Dynamics of Worship and Patterns of Human Experience: Transforming Keys for Worship

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A small ethnographic study of fourteen congregants has defined some initial observations about the ties between worship and daily life.¹ The study listened to men and women from a wide range of age and experience. Its aim was to articulate the dynamics of worship that are particularly effective as accelerants for faithful living. As the study sought to name any transformational dynamics, it did stumble upon a number of significant personal factors that set an a priori framework for each congregant's experience. However, these a priori factors did not obscure some salient conclusions. In sum, insight from the study can be broadly structured under three primary dimensions of worship experience. For purposes of definition, we may name those structuring dimensions as vision, community and engagement.

There were four primary dynamics at play in the experience of vision in worship for those who were interviewed. The first dynamic was the variety of visual elements that address any congregant upon their arrival in sacred space. Secondly, there were a number of gestures employed by leaders and participants that tangibly represented meaning for those who worship. There also were a number of aural aesthetics that served to construct a perspective of meaning for each congregant. Finally, the experience of vision was strengthened by the clearly defined articulation of norms.

¹ Brian R. Paulson, "Worship That Shapes and Directs" (D.Min. proj., Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, 1999), 14-55.

The experience of community in many ways was a dimension of greatest significance for those who were interviewed. There were three primary dynamics of this experience. In the first instance, familiar role models served to embody the expression of faith within the context of worship. This dynamic seemed to facilitate the transforming reception of authentic speech. Finally, tangible expressions of hospitality served to underscore a sense of belonging and common purpose.

The third dimension of worship that affected daily life was the conscious promotion of the experience of engagement. In one respect, this dimension can be understood less by specific instances and more by systematic patterned actions. A particularly potent dynamic of this dimension was found in the experience of rhythm and musical phrasing.

Each of these articulated dimensions cannot adequately express the rich breadth of experience that was defined by those who participated in the study. In the original doctoral research, an intentional effort was made to avoid the reduction of participants' experience into unnatural academic categorizations. This intention is true to the character of ethnographic research. However in order to advance the practice of ministry and its daily consequence, these dimensions and their constituent dynamics may serve as keys for those who fashion and direct the weekly worship of local congregations.

A careful execution of James Spradley's approach to the ethnographic interview structured the preliminary doctoral research.² This abstract cannot display the rich variety of material that was

² James P. Spradley, The Ethnographic Interview. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1979.

presented in that early project. However, the outcome of that research, as distilled above, is an enticing first indication of the kind of insight and direction that a more expansive ethnographic survey may produce.

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