

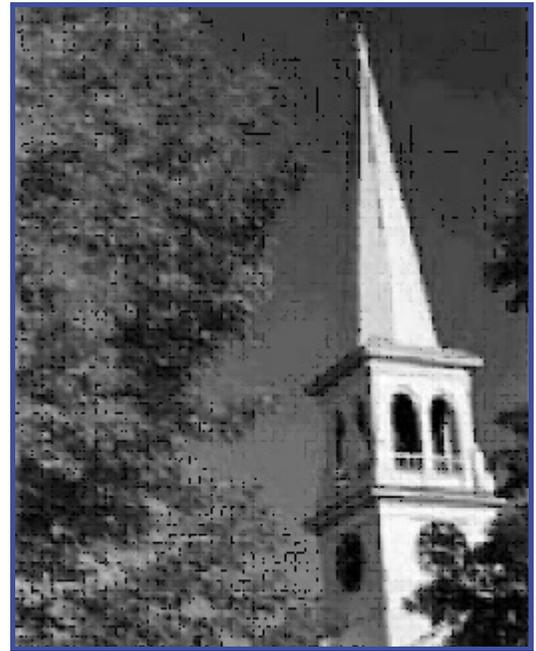
Strong Worship on a Weak Budget

Can the small-town church have meaningful worship with limited resources?

by Gary Roseboom and Ron Klassen

For more than 15 years Gary and I, who serve on staff together at RHMA headquarters, have been discussing worship in the small-town church. Admittedly, in these discussions I have been more the learner! The reason: After growing up in a small-town church in Upstate New York, Gary served for 30 years as a Minister of Music in larger churches. His personal experience in both small and large churches, as well as the careful thought that he has given to the whole subject of worship, makes his understanding and perspective on worship valuable. In this issue of SmallTalk we thought we'd invite readers to "listen in" on some of our conversations.

—Ron Klassen, RHMA Executive Director



Wor-ship (wur' ship) **n.**

[root: the Old English word "worthship"] to ascribe worth to God.

KIERKEGAARD SETS THE STAGE

Before concluding that worship in the small-town church is inferior due to its limited resources, you may want to consider what 19th century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, had to say. While we do not agree with much of Kierkegaard's theology, he did offer some insights on worship which we wholeheartedly embrace.

Kierkegaard compared worship to drama. In drama there are actors. Drawing a parallel, in worship he said the actors should be the congregation.

In drama there are prompters. In worship the prompters are the worship leaders up front. In drama there is an audience. In worship the Audience is God.

A number of implications can be drawn from this. In drama, if the prompters are doing their job properly, they will scarcely be

noticed. Rather, the audience will focus on the actors . . . and in worship the actors are the congregation. How often do we get this mixed up? We treat worship as something which happens up front that the congregation sits back and enjoys. Having said this, it is certainly appropriate for worship to be enjoyed by the congregation. It is also appropriate for worship to take place up front as someone sings a solo, shares a reading, or offers a prayer—though certainly those in the pews can be

worshipping then as well. But worship in the most complete sense happens when the entire congregation is actively involved and does it for God's pleasure.

GOOD NEWS FOR THE SMALL CHURCH

It seems to us that this perspective on worship, put in the context of the small-town church, can be liberating! With most small-town churches being small in size, they are well aware (sometimes painfully) that they do not have all the resources of a bigger church: large choir, professional quality singers and

Comparing Worship to Drama

<u>Drama</u>	<u>Worship</u>
Actors	Congregation
Prompters	Leaders up front
Audience	God

instrumentalists, carefully designed building—acoustically and aesthetically, top-quality sound system, PowerPoint. Not having these things can make small-church people prone to think, *We can't worship as well here*. Small-church pastors are prone to look longingly at all the wonderful things megachurches do and think, *If only I could have a bit of that in my church*.

But the best worship happens when there is participation from the congregation. And what size church is likely to have the broadest participation? This perspective on worship creates quite a challenge for the big church, because so many attend with the mindset that the music and other parts of the service are for them, and they take it all in solely as passive observers.

A lady who grew up in a megachurch married a farmer in South Dakota and now worships there in a small, country church. Sometime after she was married she attended her former church back home. Shortly after this Ron was speaking at her church in North Dakota and she told him about her first visit back to her home church. She said, "It seemed like such a production. I never noticed this when I was living there, but when I returned home for a visit I noticed. As I sat in my former church I wondered to myself, *Do people here need all this glitz to worship? My country church is so humble. They don't attend for a show.*"

We hasten to say that there are many who genuinely worship in bigger churches and many in smaller churches who don't. We're not trying to pit one against the other. Our point is that the best worship doesn't necessarily correspond to those churches that have the most resources. It rather happens where there is the highest level of participation among the congregation. This means the small-town church, though limited in resources, is a prime candidate for excellent worship!

STRONG WORSHIP WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

With this philosophy of worship as a foundation, we'd like to offer suggestions that will help your town or country church have excellent worship, though limited in resources.

(1) Be careful with your choice of words. Be wary of calling the platform up front a "stage." If anything, with God as the audience and the congregation as the actors, the "stage" is the floor that the congregation is sitting/standing on. Similarly, don't say, "Such and such a group is here to perform for you" or "You'll love this song."

It is important to not only use the correct terminology yourself, but to gently teach your congregation to do the same.

(2) Encourage the broadest participation possible—ideally, the entire congregation. With the congregation being the actors, the Audience (God) is most pleased when there is the widest participation. We need to be careful to make the congregation an integral part of worship. We both have a book on our shelves titled *Worship is a Verb*. This relates an important principle: for worship to happen in the fullest sense of the term, people in the pew need to participate not spectate (yes, we made up that word!).

There are many ways to encourage broad participation. One is to select the most "singable" songs—songs that do not have a high degree of difficulty and that the congregation knows well. This doesn't mean new songs shouldn't be learned. But some new songs are more "singable" than others.

The broadest participation will come when all age groups are considered. You might want to include some children's songs in your congregational singing. You might want to keep abreast of contemporary songs that teens and young adults most like to sing.

And, in deference to the middle- and older-age adults, you might want to blend in the old hymns with the newer songs.

We would further encourage using as many people in the service as possible—not leaving the worship “prompting” up front to just one or two.

(3) Find a balance between perfection and participation.

With both of us being perfectionists, it is hard for us to say this: It might be that excellence in many churches today is over-rated. Perhaps participation should trump professionalism, especially in small-town churches.

Time and again the Bible tells how God appreciates the efforts of ordinary people. Perhaps you are familiar with the song with the words: “God uses ordinary people.” If we say this, then how can it be right to only use extraordinary people in worship?

This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t aspire to do the best we can with what we have. The Bible talks about using our most talented and skillful people in worship. It also talks about training people for music ministry (e.g., 1 Chronicles 15:22; 25:7; Psalm 33:3). But at the same time we want to encourage 100% participation.

Imagine how pleased God is to hear children play an instrument or sing in church, even though their music is less than perfect. This will also please the parents, because they’ll know that their child wouldn’t

likely have such opportunities to participate in worship in a large church. It may not be professional, but a young one is worshiping and that is what is most important.

Families or groups might be encouraged to sing a special music number. Recently Ron was in a church in Pennsylvania where a family sang. It wasn’t professional, but their hearts were coming through loud and clear. Ron couldn’t help but think, *I’ve been in lots*

of megachurches where I was moved by the quality of the music. But the music I am hearing from this family has equally stirred my heart to worship God. To that small church’s credit, participation was more important than perfection.

(4) Try to make your worship time as spontaneous as possible.

Wise small-town pastors and worship leaders will follow the ancient advice, “know thyself,” and tailor the worship

services accordingly. Most small-town churches have a relational bent that lends themselves to less formality, less “stick to the order of service,” and more folksiness and spontaneity. Most small-town churches should have enough planning to keep the services from being chaotic, but also be characterized by the unstructured folksiness that one would expect when a family—in this case a church family—gets together.

Small-town church worship services might include less formal instruments like guitars, accordions, and harmonicas. They might include spontaneous song selections from the congregation. They might include

“Quotable . . .”

“If the players and singers are doing their best, and seeking to do better, then God accepts their ‘sacrifices of praise’ and so should we. Remember, our spiritual sacrifices are presented to God ‘through Jesus Christ,’ and that makes them acceptable (1 Peter 2:5). Whenever I am listening to a below-average presentation, I imagine my Lord receiving it and presenting it to the Father, and that changes my attitude completely. . . . Learn to appreciate the best, but do not become a religious highbrow who is above listening to anything but the best.”

—Warren Wiersbe, *Real Worship*
(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 199.

gathering around the piano to sing. This happened one Christmas when Ron was pastoring a small-town church. The singing of carols around that piano produced one of the most meaningful worship experiences Ron has ever been a part of!

(5) Ask: What components are essential for quality worship to happen? Contrary to what we might think, we don't need all kinds of resources up front in order for successful worship to happen, because the people in the pews are the actors. That's where the bulk of the worship is taking place.

Psalm 150 describes a variety of possible ways to worship. Then it concludes with the one essential ingredient needed: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord" (v. 6). Worship is ascribing worth to God with whatever resources are available, however limited they may be—the barest of essentials being breathing people! Obviously there are many things that can aid worship, but these are not necessary.

Know that a fancy sound system is not essential for worship. Nor having a worship team up front. Nor a large choir—or even a small choir for that matter. Nor talented soloists and instrumentalists—or even instruments. Nor projection of words with PowerPoint.

A few years ago Gary participated in a beautiful worship service experience in Trinidad with none of these things. All that was present besides "breathing people" was an older man with a hand drum.

(6) Give careful thought to who your best worship leader might be. Often in small churches it is the most talented person who

automatically becomes the worship leader. With this being the criteria, it could be that in many small-town churches the best worship leader is overlooked. Higher criteria for choosing a worship leader should be (a) godliness and (b) a knack for encouraging congregational participation. (It helps if this person also has just enough skill and talent to avoid embarrassment!)

(7) Make sure worship costs something. When it comes to worship, we should have David's attitude when he sought to build an altar on Araunah's threshing floor. Araunah offered everything free of charge. But David replied, "No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing." (2 Sam. 24:24)

"Quotable . . ."

"They loved me enough to overlook my mistakes, and they loved God enough to worship Him anyway."

—Bill Giovannetti, *Great Worship with Modest Means*
(*Leadership, Spring '94*), p. 52.

We may not have a lot of money to put into worship, but our worship should cost us something. We ought to put time into worship preparation, rather than throw it together

at the last minute. One way to do this is to choose a theme for the service, tying the worship and sermon together.

Another thing that can enhance worship is to research the background of songs and share a few brief words with the congregation before singing. A good example: *"In the Garden."* Apart from understanding that this hymn conveys the story of Mary's experience in the Garden on Resurrection Sunday, this will only be a rather sentimental, shallow, and not-too-worthy hymn. Other research will reveal ways that songs can be sung which will help them be more meaningful.

And, of course, another "cost" that should be put into worship is practice time. A few minutes of going through the songs ahead of time will go a long ways toward enhancing worship.

WORSHIP ON A WEAK BUDGET?

Can we have strong worship with limited resources? Yes, because worship primarily happens in the pew not up on the platform, with God as the audience. As the song says, “Take joy my King in what You hear. May it be a sweet, sweet sound in Your ear.”

In order to have the best worship possible, Gary suggests that you work through the following checklist when planning worship:

- Is what I am planning to do going to . . .
- bring glory to God or to us up front?
 - allow the congregation to be the actors or put them in the audience with God?
 - be something the King can take joy in, or be noise to Him? (“Noise” is the word used in Amos 5:21-26, which reminds us of the importance of clean hearts for worship.)
 - elevate people into God’s presence or drag Him down to our level?

After attending a number of smaller churches, author Fred Smith observed, “I was impressed that the service wasn’t held for the membership but by them.”¹ This perhaps best sums up why some of the best worship can be found in small-town churches.

¹ *Leadership* (Fall 1991), p.86.