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The Rationale for a Culturally Relevant Worship Service

George Hunter

There is a significant movement toward “contemporary worship services” in churches across America. I hear, for instance, that only 12 out of 22,500 Lutheran churches (ELCA and Missouri Synod) featured a contemporary service in 1985. By 1995, approximately 3500 Lutheran churches were offering a contemporary service. More and more churches, in most denominations and traditions, rely less upon pipe organs, hymnals, robed choirs, and the old European hymns, and rely more upon grand pianos, guitars, bands, drama teams, singing ensembles, and newer music with the words projected on a screen. The movement toward contemporary worship, however, has attracted its fair share of suspicion, criticism, and even rage.

The struggle around contemporary worship is taking place in a country that, with more than 120 million secular undisciplined people, is the largest mission field in the western hemisphere, fifth largest on earth. More than 350,000 local churches dot the landscape of the USA. About 80% of these churches, amidst a mission field, are stagnant or declining.¹ Furthermore, at least 80% of the churches offer worship services that suggest that their leaders expect next year to be 1957.² This article suggests a causal connection within these two data. Eight in ten churches are stagnant or declining, in part, because what they do from 11:00 to 12:00 on Sunday morning is not “culturally relevant” to the unchurched people in the church’s ministry area.

Our situation in the USA is not unique. Traditional churches are culturally malappropriate in many cultures across the earth. For instance, England’s churches usually ask prechristian people

to step back into the English culture of the 1920's or 1930's. Again, one of our doctoral students at Asbury demonstrated that the traditional churches of the German speaking section of Switzerland are so culturally distant from prechristian younger people that they are incapable of assimilating converts.

Top Ten Reasons Supporting Contemporary Worship

Why are increasing numbers of churches introducing a contemporary service? What are the reasons? In the holy tradition of the David Letterman Late Night Show, let's look at "the top ten reasons."

10. *Cultural Relevance is the rationale for contemporary worship.* No one, I hope, advocates a band, or an ensemble, or a drama team just to be trendy, or "with it," or "avant garde." This movement, at its best, is not driven by an obsession with novelty. The purpose is to communicate and celebrate the Christian message through the cultural forms that fit the population the church is called to reach.

The acronym SLAM suggests the elements in the people's culture that the church needs to take seriously. SLAM refers to communicating the gospel treasure through the Style, the Language, the Aesthetics, and the Music of the target population. Each of those terms suggests several specific possibilities.

"Style" refers to a range of factors such as the people's clothing style, interpersonal style, and the leadership style and the speaking style to which they respond. "Language" signals strategic church leaders to employ the people's language, even their dialect and heart language, as well as their recognition vocabulary. "Aesthetics" refers to the kind of architecture to which the people relate and feel comfortable, as well as the range of visual, dramatic, and folk arts through which they perceive meanings.

"Music" may be the most important, and certainly the most controversial, element of culture to consider in planning worship. A dozen or more genres of music thrive in Western culture today, but no church needs to offer music that diverse. Most people enjoy several types of music. If you minister through one of the types of music they like, you have a good chance of engaging them.

9. *All worship services are contemporary, but most are "contemporary" to some other culture and/or some other generation.* For example, churches that feature eighteenth century German pipe organ

music are “contemporary” to German culture, of the eighteenth century. Somewhat more specifically, two deep cultural roots shape most of our local churches. First, your typical “old line” church is rooted in the European cultural soil of, say, England, Scotland, Germany, or Sweden, from which the denominational tradition came. Second, the church is rooted in the 1950’s, when “main line” Christianity last prospered and significantly influenced the society. The problem is that the culture of the community around the church is different from the European culture from which the denomination came, and the community culture is increasingly different from what it was like in the 1950’s.

8. *Cultural Relevance is one way we extend Incarnational Christianity. In “missiological” language, we want to plant and grow “Indigenous” Christianity.* Our precedents for this approach are impressive. Jesus left the culture of the Trinity and fully adapted to Aramaic speaking Galilean Jewish culture to communicate the good news of the Kingdom of God. Paul was willing to “become all things to all people” to win some, and he convinced the Jerusalem Council³ to free the Christian movement to adapt to every culture on earth. Martin Luther translated the scriptures into the vernacular language of the German people. Luther and Charles Wesley wrote hymns to the popular tunes of their people. William Booth followed suite, asking “Why should the devil have all the good tunes?”

If a typical group of American church leaders launched a mission to Aymara Indian people in the Andes mountains, they would have the good sense to learn the Aymara language and culture, to communicate in the style, language, aesthetics, and music of the Aymara people, and thereby raise up and grow an indigenous Aymara Church. Remarkably, it might never occur to that same group of church leaders to adapt to the culture of the people whom God entrusts to them in their American mission field.

7. *Employing culturally relevant forms is desirable because God’s revelation takes place through culture. Culture is the medium of God’s revelation.* This principle stops short of an iron law, but the entire history of the gospel’s spread dramatizes the reality that revelation is much less likely to break through when the message is presented in culturally alien forms, and is much more likely to break through when presented in culturally indigenous forms.

6. *When we express the gospel in “their” cultural forms, then they*

perceive that Christianity is "for people like us." When prechristian people visit a church, typically they come asking two questions, perhaps subconsciously, among others: 1. "Do people like us go to this church?" That is the Identification question. Are there people here I can identify with, who would identify with me, and my struggles? 2. "Is this religion for people like me?" That is the Indigeneity question. They get the answers to both questions from their reading of the people and from the cultural cues transmitted through the church's dominant style, language, aesthetic expressions, and music.

5. *Traditional churches have already come a long way – in agreeing that ministry in the people's language is necessary to reach them.* Following Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church has moved from Latin to the people's language virtually the world over. While Protestant Christianity has not yet experienced its equivalent of Vatican II, almost all English speaking churches in the USA have shifted from the King James Version to some twentieth century translation, from Elizabethan English to current English. While some language impediments remain, like ecclesiastical jargon and ministerial tone, we have won the basic battle over language.

4. *However, traditional churches have not yet discovered that Culture is "the Silent Language."* Anthropologist E. T. Hall explained, in his classic text, *The Silent Language*, that meanings are communicated through, or blocked by, all cultural forms, not just language. We learned our language consciously, so we are more or less conscious of its effects upon us. However, we "acquired" the rest of our culture, more or less subconsciously, in our early socialization. So the effect of meanings through cultural elements other than language is more or less subconscious, but no less real. For example, people can tell you if they like, understand, and can relate to a given kind of music, but usually they cannot tell you why.

3. *Furthermore, traditional church leaders do not yet perceive how deeply culture shapes personality and the way people see and experience the world, that Culture is "The Software of the Mind."*⁴ While all human beings have the same "hardware," there are about 30,000 distinct societies on the earth – each "programmed" with its own distinct "software." The computer age has given us the almost perfect analogy, that we never had before, for understanding cultures. We all know that, to communicate with someone else's

computer, you have to communicate within the programmed realities of its software. When you try to transmit a document from one software to another, you risk losing some of the data, and distorting some data. The more different the two softwares are, the more you risk loss or distortion. Between very different softwares, you can have total loss. Furthermore, the difficulty of moving from one "generation" of the same software to another, say from Microsoft Word 5 to Microsoft Word 6, helps us appreciate the difficulty that two generations who share the same culture can have in communicating with each other.

Unfortunately, our liturgical scholars have not yet discovered the depth, pervasiveness, and power of culture. For instance, James White's *Introduction to Christian Worship* is the most widely used worship text in seminaries. White defends "diversity" in worship, and explains that a good liturgy relates to what makes a people "distinctive, their language and history, for example." However, cultural differences go deeper than different languages and histories. In culturally relevant communication, including worship, we engage a people's distinctive "script," we communicate by adapting to their "software."

2. *Consequently, the leaders (and people) of traditional churches resist making the changes to become a culturally relevant congregation.* I have conversed with many people who expressed strong resistance to the Indigenous principle. Often, they have never learned to distinguish between message and form, between the gospel "treasure" and the "earthen vessels" through which we communicate its meaning. So they assume that their forms are attached at the hip to the message, that faithfulness requires perpetuating the old language, music, etc. This, of course, is almost every public evangelist's dilemma. The evangelist is not free to employ the style, language, aesthetics, and music to which the prechristian people can relate, because the evangelist's traditionalist board members and donors expect the evangelist to employ and perpetuate the inherited forms of the old time revivals, or the camp meeting era.

You do need, of course, enough continuity to keep the people you already have on board. But churches that have remained essentially faithful to the message are usually able to negotiate and demonstrate their way into more culturally relevant forms. The church leaders who have painted themselves into a corner are the leaders who, to accommodate to modernity, have abdi-

cated some of Christianity's classical message. Those leaders are often forced into "liturgical fundamentalism." Having surrendered much of the message, they are forced to retain the forms to keep enough continuity to keep their people!

1. *Most culturally irrelevant churches cannot engage prechristian people, nor can they retain even a majority of their own young people.* This bad news, however, contains some good news. For instance, some churches who are not interested enough in reaching outsiders to change the way they do church, are interested enough in keeping their own kids to consider change! Furthermore, our youth are washed by the same cultural seas as secular people. The changes that would help us engage and keep our young people are essentially the same changes it would take to engage secular prechristians. Moreover, our youth are allies; they can tell us what to consider, and they can provide appropriate leadership.

Whatever motivates church leaders to consider strategic change is probably okay. In any case, at least eight in ten churches across America need to get their "apostolic act" together. They cannot continue indulging in what addiction theory calls "insanity" – defined as "Doing the same thing over and over, each time expecting a different result." Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed that "The rusty swords of the old world are powerless to combat the evils of today and tomorrow." Eugene Nida reminds us that "Every great movement into the Christian faith has been characterized by an indigenous hymnody."

Typical Challenges to the Idea of Culturally Relevant Worship

Virtually no one buys these ideas the first time they are exposed to them. One chapter of my book *Church for the Unchurched*⁵ offers "A Case for the Culturally Relevant Congregation." I have received more "flack" from that chapter than from everything else I have ever written, combined! When I have advocated these views in public seminars, I have had people "ca-thart" all over me! Eight challenges, stated below – more or less verbatim, have surfaced most. Here is what I have learned to say in response.

1. *"We are not going to change what we do every six months just to keep up with the top 20 songs and every other fad in American pop culture."* Each time I have heard that challenge, strong feelings have accompanied it. I have found it useful to reframe the issue

in terms of the difference between Popular Culture and Traditional Culture.

Popular Culture is much the same everywhere. Popular Culture varies little across space. People who are most “into” pop culture are likely to sport the same hairstyles, wear the same jeans, or listen to the same hit music in Chicago, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, or Moscow. The nearly worldwide popular culture changes rapidly over time. This season’s most popular song will be absent from the “Hit Parade” this time next year. We call the changes in Popular Culture FADS. The fads come and go, say, every several months.

By contrast, Traditional Cultures vary a lot across space. The dozen or so traditional “macrocultures” of the earth, like the Arab, Anglo, Latin American, and Germanic macrocultures represent such astonishingly different “software” that almost nothing translates from one of those macrocultural worldviews into another. Furthermore, we readily identify a range of traditional cultures within a given macroculture. Within Anglo macroculture, we observe large differences between the American, British, and Australian versions. Within the American version, Appalachian traditional culture is very different from the traditional culture of the American Southwest, and both are very different from New England traditional culture.

While traditional cultures vary a lot across space, each traditional culture changes slowly over time. But they do change, and we call the changes in traditional cultures TRENDS.

Should the strategic culturally relevant church flex with the fads of the popular culture, or the trends of the traditional culture, or both? Popular culture presents an occasional opportunity to a church. For example, if you did not play (and then respond to) Joan Osborne’s hit song asking “What If God became one of us?”, you missed an opportunity. Youth ministry typically finds quite a bit to engage in the rapid changes of pop culture.

However, most of our churches are not culturally irrelevant because they fail to stampede with every fad in the popular culture. They are irrelevant because they have not flexed with the much slower, glacier paced, changes of the surrounding traditional culture. Once, when the typical local church was planted, the church’s worship style, language, aesthetics, and music fit the traditional culture of the people they were called to reach, and the church grew for years. Gradually, the traditional culture

changed and the church did not, and growth was arrested. The church becomes culturally relevant by adapting to the dominant trends of the traditional culture.

2. *"I will not cooperate with the wholesale abandonment of our rich tradition just to be 'relevant'."* Ignoring, for now, the obvious truth that an ecclesiastical tradition can become an idol, this challenge deserves a threefold response.⁶ First, there are probably some things in your tradition that have outlived their usefulness and deserve discarding. For example, if your ushers still hand folks a mimeographed bulletin, it will soon be hard to convince folks that your church is in the same century as they are. You might even discard the hymns and songs that are unintelligible to the visitor, and to your members!

Second, some things deserve retaining, without any change. For example, you are not likely to improve on The Lord's Prayer or The Apostles' Creed.

Third, some things deserve retaining, but in a repackaged form. For example, much of a church's inherited liturgy can be reminted in current language, and much of its inherited music can be accompanied by an imaginative keyboardist on a synthesizer, adjusting the pace as appropriate to a generation whose music ranges from ballads to MTV. For instance, a quarter century ago Judy Collins put "Amazing Grace" on the charts by singing it at ballad pace. More recently, the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir's faster pace breathes contagious power into the Alleluia Chorus of Handel's "Messiah." Much of the tradition, when adapted to fit the shape of a changed culture, becomes powerful and contagious once again.

3. *"I will not allow myself to be co-opted by this culture and compromise the gospel."* This writer points to a real danger. The danger, however, is less likely if one understands the difference between the gospel and the forms through which we communicate it, and the danger is much more likely if one does not. Specifically, the danger in uninformed adapting is accommodating, or selling out, to the truth claims or values of American culture, such as its materialism, or its self-reliant individualism, or its assumption that the American Way is God's way.

There is, however, another danger. Isaiah tells us that, as God sends the sun and the rain for a purpose, so God sends His Word for a purpose, that God hopes the Word will not return to him void but will accomplish the purpose for which it was sent.

There is great danger is not adapting to the style, language, aesthetics, and music of the target society. If the seeker visiting a church cannot understand what it means, nor sense that it is intended for people like him or her, then the gospel has been compromised.

4. *"American culture is a fallen culture, and much within it is unworthy of the Christian gospel."* American culture, like all cultures, is indeed fallen. The gospel comes to judge parts of any culture, and its mission involves the transformation of culture. Missionaries have learned, through experience in many cultures, to use from the culture only what is useful and congruent with the gospel.

This principle reflects the position that Sally Morgenthaler advocates in *Worship Evangelism*. Her strategy "dares to be a bridge, to acknowledge the seeker's culture by using their best stuff, not the trash." Any reader of *The Good New Bible* knows this strategy can be implemented. That translation employs American English, at its best, without the slang, etc.

5. *"Some contemporary worship services don't even let people participate in the service. The people are just spectators, and that violates everything I learned in seminary."* This writer registers a beef with one of the two approaches to contemporary worship. One approach, the "High Participation" service (for people who want to "Try it on"), may stress sustained singing, choruses, hand clapping, dance, dyad prayers or whatever, inviting the attendee to participate much more than in a typical traditional service. The other "High Performance" approach (for people who want to "Look it over"), such as Willow Creek Seeker Services, has people sing one song and shake a few hands, but the attendee observes most of the service.

This is another issue that needs to be reframed. The goal in worship is not participation per se, but engagement, or involvement. Welcome to a mystery: Participation no longer equals Involvement. For instance, I have watched my own kids participate in a Responsive Reading without any engagement. On the other hand, I have noticed spectators at a Willow Creek drama become powerfully engaged.

6. *"The traditional worship service we offer now serves a satisfied congregation, and they pay the bills. If we burned the organ and featured a guitar and drums, we would lose our base of support."* Actually, I never recommend that people dump any traditional service

that has a congregation supporting it, but people often assume I recommend that. The largest church in the Lexington, Kentucky metropolitan area is Southland Christian Church. For years it averaged well over 3000 in attendance. The popular long term pastor retired, and the search committee imported a young turk from Las Vegas. He changed all three traditional services into Willow Creek type contemporary services, and added a Saturday night contemporary service. After six months, overall weekend attendance has increased by 1800! But some strong financial supporters, who wanted at least one traditional service to be retained, have left and it remains to be seen whether the church can now underwrite its vision for the future. The new pastor will make it, though many pastors who employed a substitution strategy would not survive.

The contemporary worship movement, generally, does not advocate the substitution of a contemporary service for the traditional service if there is a viable congregation that loves the traditional service. The movement recommends the addition of services—services that duplicate the service we already have if it is full and another like it could serve more people, as well as different services shaped to engage a different slice of humanity.

Actually, pioneering Protestant churches are only playing “catch up” to what post-Vatican II Roman Catholic churches have been practicing for years. For example, as long ago as the early 1980’s, Chicago’s Holy Angels Roman Catholic Church featured six, very different, masses each Sunday. The first mass was a traditional pre-Vatican II mass, with robes, in Latin. The second was an informal “guitar mass.” The third was a “family mass,” featuring the piano, and much activity, with children ushering and taking the offering. The fourth was a “teen rock mass,” with a praise band. The fifth mass was a repeat of the (outgrown) guitar mass. The sixth was their “Alka-seltzer Service,” for people who battle drugs and other addictions, including people with “fried brains.”

7. *“Having a second, liturgically different, worship service is such an unprecedented and radical idea that we could never sell it.”* I can summarize my basic response to that challenge in five words: Rubbish, Tommyrot, Hogwash, Horse feathers, and Balderdash! In our Protestant traditions, precedent (for what that is worth) is much more on the side of two (or more) different services than against it. For example, most of our traditions featured a Sunday

Evening Evangelistic Service for a century or more. In its heyday, it targeted prechristian people, its language and music were much more “user friendly,” it explained basic Christianity, it gave people opportunities to respond to Christ’s invitation to follow Him.

Gradually, the culture changed, the evening service did not change with it, and prechristians stopped coming. The service survived by changing its agenda to preach, sing, and pray Christians into a deeper life. A generation later, Christians had stopped coming, and the Sunday Evening Service, in most church, made way for Bible studies, expanded youth ministries, or Sunday evening football on TV.

The contemporary service is essentially a reinvention of the Sunday evening service, rescheduled at a time when today’s prechristians will come, embodying style, language, aesthetics, and music that fit this generation of prechristian people in this culture.

8. *“Some things are more important in reaching people than cultural relevance—like the spiritual and life credibility of the pastor and the people.”* This writer is saying that a church that reaches secular prechristian people has more going for it than just a culturally relevant worship service, and that is profoundly true. No church causes an influx of prechristian people just by closing the organ keyboard and featuring some character with a guitar. My book *Church for the Unchurched* maintains that a culturally contemporary worship service is merely the “tip of the iceberg,” that the other eight-ninths, below the surface of public view, actually explains the attracting power of an “Apostolic Congregation.” The deeper reality involves a people immersed in Scripture, disciplined in prayer, compassionate toward lost people, obedient to the great commission, involved in small groups, lay ministries, pastoral care, and ministries to prechristian people.

Considering the depth and shape of the whole iceberg, the contemporary worship service makes, comparatively, a modest but indispensable, contribution. First, the culturally relevant worship service removes the “cringe factor” and frees the people of God to invite their friends. (Christians are enormously more likely to invite their friends to a service that they would love for them to experience than they are likely to invite friends to a service they would dread for them to experience!) Second, the service open the door, and it helps seekers discover whether there is

anything in the church for people like them. Whether they find things like love, hope, real faith, power, and God there influences whether they will return and, in time, respond.

The writer is also right in the assertion that the credibility of the church is a more important variable in reaching people than the style of the worship. Indeed, my own field research with secular prechristian people reveals that the credibility challenge of the Church comes in at least three forms. One group of people wonder if we really believe our message. A second group have no doubt that we believe it; they wonder if we live by it. A third group does not doubt that we believe it or live by it; they wonder if it really makes any difference.

A seeker at Willow Creek wrote a poem that memorably reflects this reality.⁷

Do you know
do you understand
that you represent
Jesus to me?

Do you know
do you understand
that when you
treat me with gentleness,
it raises the question in my mind
that maybe He is gentle, too.
Maybe He isn't someone
who laughs when I am hurt.

Do you know
do you understand
that when you listen to my questions
and you don't laugh,
I think,
"What is Jesus is interested in me, too?"

Do you know
do you understand
that when I hear you talk about arguments
and conflicts and scars from your past
that I think, "Maybe I am just a regular person

instead of a bad, no-good, little girl who deserves
abuse.”

If you care,
I think maybe He cares —
and then there’s this flame of hope
that burns inside of me
and for a while
I am afraid to breathe
because it might go out.

Do you know
do you understand
that your words are His words?
Your face
His face
to someone like me?

Please be who you say you are.
Please, God, don’t let this be another trick.
Please let this be real.
Please.

Do you know
do you understand
that you represent
Jesus to me?

Writer

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NOTES

1. Furthermore, of the approximately 20 churches out of every 100 that are growing, more than 19 of the 20 are growing primarily by biological growth and/or transfer growth. Less than 1% of our churches, in the midst of receptive mission fields, is growing substantially by conversion growth.

2. Which means that churches are strategically positioned across the land if 1957 ever comes back around. But if it does not, these churches will become increasingly irrelevant to their communities.

3. See chapter 15 of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

4. See Geert Hofstede's *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. McGraw-Hill, 1991.

5. Abingdon Press, 1996.

6. These responses are more fully unpacked in Sally Morgenthaler's fine book, *Worship Evangelism*.

7. Quoted in Tim Celek andf Dieter Zander, *Inside the Soul of a New Generation* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1996) 106-107.

Appendix I

Styles of Worship Services

Liturgical:

- ⇒ Mood: Formal, solemn, majestic.
- ⇒ Music: Pipe organ, traditional hymns, classical anthems
- ⇒ Purpose: To lead the church to give corporate recognition to the transcendent glory of God. Favors reverence over relevance.
- ⇒ Biblical Model: Isaiah 6

Traditional:

- ⇒ Mood: Orderly, majestic, contemplative.
- ⇒ Music: Organ and piano, traditional and gospel hymns, traditional and contemporary anthems.
- ⇒ Purpose: To lead the congregation to praise and thank God for His goodness and to hear Him speak through His word. Geared for people with a religious background.
- ⇒ Biblical Model: Colossians 3:16-17.

Revivalist:

- ⇒ Mood: Exuberant, celebrative, informal.
- ⇒ Music: Organ, piano, and taped, gospel hymns, contemporary songs and anthems.
- ⇒ Purpose: To save the lost and encourage believers to witness. More emphasis on evangelism than worship.
- ⇒ Biblical Model: Acts 2-3.

Contemporary:

- ⇒ Mood: Expressive, celebrative, contemporary, informal.
- ⇒ Music: Keyboard, piano and taped music, praise choruses and contemporary songs.
- ⇒ Purpose: To offer a sacrifice of praise to the Lord in a spirit of joyful adoration. Contemporary worship for believers, although some unchurched are invited.
- ⇒ Biblical Model: Psalm 150.

Seeker:

- ⇒ Mood: Celebrative, contemporary, informal.
- ⇒ Music: Piano, taped, synthesizer and band, scriptural music and contemporary, little traditional congregational singing.
- ⇒ Purpose: To present the gospel in clear non-God talk terms and modern forms. An upbeat, evangelistic service.
- ⇒ Biblical Model: Acts 17:16-34.

Blended:

- ⇒ Combination of traditional and contemporary elements.