

The worship leader as host

Ruth Boehm

Since I left pastoral ministry several months ago to finish seminary studies, my husband and I have worshiped in more than twenty-five settings, including a prison, a synagogue, a home, and various churches. As guests, we have new appreciation for the role of the worship leader in offering hospitality.

Leading worship involves more than showing up and getting all the words out right. It entails keeping the main purpose of gathering for worship in clear view: not merely to catch up on the news, or to be inspired for acts of justice, or to study the Bible, but to worship the Holy One. How one sees the role of worship leader and acts within it does nothing less than enhance or inhibit the people's encounter with God.

When you plan to have guests in your home, your preparations include issuing invitations, deciding on a menu appropriate to the people and the occasion, shopping, preparing food, setting the table, perhaps getting out toys, lighting the fire, arranging flowers, turning on music, taking a few minutes to catch your breath. When your guests arrive, you greet them, attend to their needs, serve the meal, engage their interests, enjoy their company, deal with the unexpected.

The tasks of leading worship are similar. The leader who sees her role as hosting an encounter between God and people will prepare carefully, and will draw on a variety of skills—her own and others'—to offer hospitality in all parts of the service. The leader does not act alone in offering hospitality in worship. Valuing their contributions is part of making people feel welcome.

God has already invited everyone to a feast, and the table is laden. The host's advance preparations involve prayer and study, to discern what God has in store for the congregation. The leader will also consider the guests who are coming and their particular spiritual needs and gifts. He will set the theme, prepare the materials to be used, and create a conducive environment.

On the day of the service, during a moment of silence, two simple acts can help prepare worship leaders. The first is naming distractions and concerns that need to be placed in God's hands for the next hour, and the second is asking God for what is needed. Others who are helping host the encounter with God may be included in this time of spiritual preparation.

People have high expectations for worship. They expect teaching, prayer, singing (the music they appreciate), community

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building, sharing, visioning. Congregations want worship that is meaningful for children and youth and young adults and parents with young children and people in midlife and seniors and newcomers and old-timers, and those who are ill and well and hurting and joyful and disabled and whole, and the list goes on. They expect a service to include a multitude of things and people. But the principal task of the host is to lead the people in worshipping God, to make space for attending to God together. In our culture, it is amazing that people are in church on Sunday morning and not out having pancakes

or playing hockey, so it is the privilege of the worship leader to invite people to stop and notice God and offer their worship to the Holy One.

The worship leader should anticipate the needs of guests. Assume that people may be present who are newcomers not only to the congregation or the denomination, but even to being inside a church. Use gestures and words (spoken or in writing) to help people find their way. Consider how to do this in ways that help people enter into worship rather than calling attention to the mechanics of the service. Give names of people participating in the service, in the bulletin or at the end or the beginning of the service. During announcements and sharing time, identify people by name and make sure all can hear. If necessary, provide a context so those who weren't here last week or last month know what is happening. Use language that includes men, women, children, youth, seniors, un/employed, those of varied abilities, orientations, and ethnicities.

Different parts of the service require different hosting skills. At the outset, remember to offer a warm, sincere welcome. The call to worship should then draw the congregation to their purpose in coming together. Hosting praise requires an ability to move into the enjoyment of God's presence: freedom to be expressive invites expression from others. Leading public confession demands sensitivity, and comfort with the role of priest, praying "We are sorry, Lord; have mercy," and assuring the people "Christ forgives our sins." Leading a congregation in prayer is one of the most difficult tasks of the host because it involves preparation and spontaneity, reading the newspaper and listening to the needs of the congregation, drawing the concerns of the world and the people together. Good pastoral prayer takes humility, diligence, and practice.

Unexpected things often happen in worship. A well-prepared host can respond with calm assurance and help the congregation welcome surprises and find in them grace-filled moments in which God's Spirit can work. Recently, when a man fainted in a worship service, the worship leader identified the cause of the disturbance, and asked the congregation to sing until the medical personnel could respond appropriately. A prayer for the man, his companions, and the medical personnel was offered. The worship leader welcomed the unexpected, and responded in a way that was consistent with what a worshipping community does.

The task of hosting a worship service is a big undertaking. But it can be summed up simply as welcoming people and inviting them into an encounter with the living God. The host helps to create space for this meeting; she prepares and invites but does not force people to open themselves to God. Worship is about paying attention to God together. And in a world where we do so many things on our own, this is an awesome thing. Together we praise, confess, listen, grow, share each other's burdens and blessings, pray, and are blessed to go on our way. Worship forms individuals into God's people. The task of the worship leader is to be a host at this transforming encounter.

About the author

Ruth Boehm was associate pastor at Bethel Mennonite Church (Winnipeg), 1989–2001. After she completes her M.Div. in May 2002, Ruth and her husband, Barry Bergen, plan to go to Nigeria where they will teach at Gindiri College of Theology.