

The gifts of global connections in worship

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I am a young Mennonite pastor from Chhattisgarh, in central India. Ours was the only Christian family in the rural village where I grew up, and we did not have transportation to get to church, which was far away. For most of my childhood I didn't get what most Christian children take for granted: Sunday worship in a church setting, Sunday school, Christian fellowship, Christian friends. About once a month, a pastor visited our house for a church service. Now and then we attended special services at Christmas or Easter.

A desire to dwell in the Lord's house

Coming out of this experience, I see the church as the first house of a Christian. I value Christian fellowship, and love for the church building is also important for me. Yes, a house becomes a home only when a family lives there, and the church becomes church only when it holds a fellowship of believers. But a person who is homeless may know the worth of a house better than those who are privileged to own one. In the same way, we cannot disregard the value of a house for the church, because it is a place that sustains our life, evokes our emotions, and carries a history.

The church and its worship always attracted me. From early childhood I had a desire to serve the Lord. Dwelling in the house of the Lord was something I longed for. I was inspired by my grandfather's evangelistic and pastoral ministry. I found in myself the same love for the Lord and for preaching the good news.

After training at the institute of another denomination, I returned to Bhartiya General Conference Mennonite Church. It was a challenge for me to serve as a pastor in the Mennonite church, as I had to learn everything from scratch. But when I become a pastor, I found loads of things to appreciate in the Mennonite church. I soon became convinced of Mennonite beliefs. Now I am doing further study in a Mennonite seminary in the United States. There I have had opportunity to think about what worship is, and why and how we worship.

What is worship?

One day I saw a Hindu boy come to the steps of our church. Kneeling down, he made a prayer. He seemed to find the church to be the dwelling place of God. This small incident made me wonder how often we—who know all about the church and sit inside its walls—fail to see that God is present there. How often are we so submissively present amid a realization of God's presence?

Just as that small prayer of that boy can be considered worship, so are many other acts also acts of worship. In my culture, people have sometimes said to me that singing just prepares us for worship, and preaching is the center of our worship; the main thing is to listen to God's Word. Yet it would be shallow to think that singing is not worship but just the means to take us into worship. Worship includes singing hymns, offering praise and thanksgiving, baptism—and any other element that is rendered to God.

When we sing words of adoration and thanksgiving and supplication to God, those words have power. Singing brings us a sense of standing in the presence of the Lord. As a songwriter, I know what it takes to write a song. Whether it is composing a song, singing a hymn, or performing a ritual, what we are doing is not a mere repetition but a fresh representation of what we believe. Likewise, when the gospel is introduced to a person along with the elements of worship, it is a fresh representation that will continue to be reaffirmed and updated in the life of the new believer.

Experiences of Mennonite worship in India

When Mennonites came to India with the gospel early in the 1900s, they introduced the pattern of worship they had practiced in North America. In our area, converts were mostly tribal people who lacked formal education. Especially in the tribal belt, people of Hindu culture are fond of music and singing, and these are important aspects of their religious life. With the coming of a new faith and new forms of worship, the new converts of southern Chhattisgarh needed songs of praise they could sing. Soon the missionaries' hymns were translated by the local people, who were overjoyed to sing again.

Back then, evangelists would travel by bicycle, carrying a lamp and a tent and some cooking equipment. They would stay in a village for a few days. In the evening, they would start singing local songs, and they would play instruments—some of them tribal, and others that had been intro-

duced from Europe. The music attracted people. Then the evangelists would talk about salvation in Jesus.

Those songs were embedded in the hearts of those evangelists and were a source of spiritual nourishment for them. My grandmother, also an evangelist, introduced me to hymns from the Mennonite hymnal and also to those local songs. Early in the morning, at 4:30, she would start singing the old songs, one after another. Those songs are still meaningful and moving for me, and I still use them in my meditation.

Changing patterns in worship and music

More recently, worship and singing took other forms and became more fully the people's own. An example is *Christhapahari*, a worship session that comes from a Hindu practice. Believers praise God continually for an entire day, twenty-four hours, nonstop. The concept is taken from *Asthapahari* ("eight times"): every three hours is counted as one *pahar* (time). People of all ages sing and dance together, with no limit, no other engagements, no worries—just singing and worshipping.

To people in the West, it doesn't sound practical, but to these people, it is spiritually nourishing.

Some local musicians have composed new songs in Hindi and Chhattisgarhi and Oriya, some of which sound like Hindu worship songs. But these songs have become a means of sharing the good news, as for the evangelists in my grandfather's day.

When I became a Mennonite pastor, the only thing I knew well were the old hymns and local songs that my grandmother taught me. In one church where I was pastor, I discovered that the

youth didn't like to come to worship because they found the hymn singing boring. It is painful to me when music becomes a source of division in the church. The adults wanted the youth to come to church, but they taught that the youth needed to "correct" themselves first and learn to enjoy the old hymns, rather than going for the contemporary music.

Why are such things a source of conflict in our churches? I would say that it is not a problem of the youth or the adults but a problem of lack


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of preparation. Yes, the church's worship is a communal service, but it is individual too. Like the adults, the youth have their place in the church. We need to make room for each other to find our place in worship. That can only happen when our services are properly planned and when our congregational worship practices are shaped by an intention to experience God together.

Observations from a new context

For three years I have served here in the United States as a volunteer youth minister. It has been a great learning experience for me. I have also been involved in church ministry and in planning worship services. Initially, I didn't feel any connection to the singing during the church service. Then during my first Christmas season here, singing "O Come, O Come, Immanuel" brought tears to my eyes. It became the bridge to connect me to the worship here.

I learned that people take worship very seriously here, with the idea that if we intend to receive best, we should also invest our best. In my congregation here, there is an order for the worship service, with everything being organized and with prior practice. The entire worship hour is planned in a way that integrates all the pieces and seeks to reach everyone. Singing, reading the Scripture, the sermon, and rituals are linked together and build on one another.



The churches back home are free in their worship and allow nothing to stop them from praising God. They move, dance, sing, and shout. When we are too prepared and too concerned about perfection, we do not allow for the spontaneous work of God's Spirit among us.

Gifts of global connections

Being a student here has given me the opportunity to get connected with people from all across the globe. When I ask other international students here about their spiritual life, most say they miss the worship and prayer practices from back home. There is something about worship that becomes part of who we are. We cannot change it, and it is more than language or culture. But we agree that we

are not complete without others and we have a lot to learn from one another. As the African saying puts it, we are what we are because of others.

As disciples together, our nature is to continue to learn. Our goal in worship is not to be perfect or efficient, but to grow and to become more alive and more dedicated to God. Approaching the throne of God is what worship is meant to be. When we lose sight of this basic purpose, we always face difficulty. But when we come prepared to worship, we receive what we need, and all are blessed by the service. We do not come for singing alone. No part of our worship is greater than the other: through all the elements we worship the Lord.

Although I have learned to appreciate a well-organized worship service, I also feel a need to give space for the Spirit of God to move. The churches back home are very open to the movement of the Spirit. They are free in their worship and allow nothing to stop them from praising God. They move, dance, sing, and shout. When we are too prepared and too concerned about perfection, we do not allow for the spontaneous work of God's Spirit among us in worship.

Coming out of these experiences, my dream is for churches across the globe to appreciate and learn from one another. Following our conviction is more important than following the latest trend, whether in music or dress or understanding. Let's let our worship be inspired not by the latest thing the world offers but by the freshness of patterns the global church has to offer us.

About the author

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