

INFORMALITY AND MUSIC IN WORSHIP - An organist's view

Various writers have been urging us to adopt a freer and more liberal approach to worship. It is certainly essential that we continually reassess the nature of worship if it is to be living and meaningful. In many parishes the nature of worship seems to be moving away from the simple, dignified, formal style of service that has been the hallmark of Presbyterian worship towards a style of service that is more casual and informal. I am not referring here to the arguments over the use of 'thou' versus 'you' which have exercised many writers but to a change in the ethos of our services. In the past services may have been wordy and rigid in form, but now the pendulum seems to be swinging in the other direction and a certain casualness and loss of order is appearing.

There are three points I would like to make about informality in worship. Firstly, casualness of preparation. I welcome the increased participation of youth fellowships, sunday school children, kirk sessions and 'ordinary' members in worship. But such participation requires far more preparation than a 'one-man band' service. Too many services have been affected by inaudible readings where those taking part have not been given tuition in the basic rules of reading aloud in a large building, or gabbled prayers which the congregation cannot follow. A service with non-ministerial participation may lose its spiritual message if the congregation are distracted into wondering what is happening next. Why not have a rehearsal beforehand - choirs do!

Secondly, we are losing the value of silence in worship: silence as part of a prayer, silence during the serving of the elements at communion, silence during the taking up of the offering. We can worship together through silence - and by using silence constructively we can pray and meditate about what has been done before. As worship becomes less formal, so it is becoming increasingly difficult to find churches where silence is valued. Children are not being taught the importance of silence in church and with the general decline of discipline there is often distracting chatter before and during services. It is fashionable to talk about gathering the whole family of God together to worship, but children have different needs and cannot always be treated as adults. It is not fair to children to expect them to sit quietly through a full service each week, nor is it fair to adults to pitch services at the level of a child. Some informal family services lack depth of scriptural teaching - a noticeable lack in the Church of Scotland today.

Thirdly, conversational language in worship. I cringe on the occasions I hear a service start with 'Good Morning, Ladies and Gentlemen' instead of 'Let us worship God' or on hearing prayers in the style of a fireside chat.

While I would accept that archaic language can be a hindrance to understanding, surely we should aim for the highest standards in expression we can achieve?

Changes in the nature of worship are also causing a number of organists to take stock of their work and to consider their role in worship. There are those who will argue that the organ is out of date, yet there is no other instrument which can so effectively accompany and inspire the singing of a large group of people in a building which may be over-large and acoustically difficult. Furthermore, many congregations do take a real pride in their organ.

The organist may be faced with a paradox, however, which seems to have arisen as a result of this trend towards informality. The congregation may take pride in their organ and yet show little understanding of its use in a service. I refer to the increasing habit of talking both before the service and during the collection of the offering. The organist will put a considerable amount of thought into the selection of voluntaries to complement and illustrate the themes in a particular service.

The voluntaries might be chorale preludes on a hymn to be sung, they might be voluntaries written for a particular Sunday in the liturgical calendar (much of Bach's music is liturgically based) or they might be chosen to reflect the atmosphere of a particular service: for example a service on the glory of the resurrection might be complemented by a spirited postlude, while a service meditating on the passion of Christ might be enhanced by music of a more 'romantic' vein. Each service should be a spiritually uplifting experience and the organist can try to help in this by choosing music which before the service will prepare the people for the worship to come and which, during the offering, will assist the congregation to meditate on the preaching of the Word. And yet in some churches such attempts to worship through music are completely negated by the chatter from the pews. Surely music in church is for more than just covering up footsteps and making background noises! In their search for a more relaxed form of worship, some ministers may unwittingly be making it more difficult to create the calm atmosphere in church which seems to me so essential if a service is to be a truly spiritual experience.

The organist of course requires the active co-operation of his minister if he is to ensure the music is appropriate to the service. He must have the praise list and an indication of the theme of the service in plenty of time to enable suitable choir and organ music to be prepared. This means that hymns must also be chosen with care, bearing in mind the suitability of the words, the quality of the tune, choosing a variety of metres and even considering whether the final hymn will send the congregation away rejoicing - or otherwise! No doubt all ministers interested enough in liturgy to be members of the Church Service Society will automatically do these things, but it is not universally

the case!

The other main issue of concern to many organists is the quality of some of the songs/hymns/choruses being offered as worship. Many churches are using choruses of widely varying quality in both words and music, usually accompanied by guitars. Our concern is not with the use of guitars - there is no reason why organists should have a musical monopoly in the church. Indeed I believe that it is important that as many people as possible should be encouraged to use their varied musical talents in church. Rather the concern is about the quality of the words and music used. It seems to be held in some quarters that it does not matter how poor a chorus is as long as 'the youth' like it. Such an assumption insults the musical intelligence of many young people. If such a theory is also followed in Sunday Schools, then a whole generation will grow up who have very limited expectations of church music and who may have learnt few of the great hymns of the church in their formative years. Furthermore can we justify offering to God anything other than the best we can achieve within the limits of our human frailty? Is it enough to say that we know song 'x' is poor, but still use it, or are concepts of 'good' and 'bad' music or 'poetic' and 'banal' words irrelevant and out-dated? The leaders of worship have a duty to lead and inspire people to a deeper spiritual awareness - is this possible through second-rate material? Music in worship is not entertainment but part of our response to God's Word.

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