



But what about the actual task of giving out the books? The welcomers should arrive early and have the piles of stuff all sorted before most people arrive. That way they can concentrate on the human relations. The table where the books are placed should not be behind the sidespeople so that their backs are to the people arriving when they sort and pick up the books. The table should not be between the sidespeople and the incoming worshippers as it then acts as a barrier. It should be to the side so that it is easy to shake hands and maintain eye contact throughout the initial welcome. If a table can be avoided altogether, so much the better.

It is preferable if there is actually very little to give out anyway. Dumping a pile of books and leaflets on a newcomer can so raise their anxiety levels right at the start that a large barrier has already been created. People are not used to finding hymn numbers or places in prayer books. In many, if not most, situations today it is better to have as much as possible on the screen from the data projector. A single attractive notice sheet is quite enough to give out and so give the opportunity for a warm human welcome to the worship event. If hymns and liturgies must be written out, it is usually worth the trouble of compiling them together in a single order of service that most strangers can follow reasonably easily.

2 The worship event

You the newcomer have found your way in, you have been welcomed by the sidespersons' team, you have found a seat. Now the service or fresh expression style of event is beginning. This is the heart of the matter. Will it be a mystery or turn-off to you or else an entry into a whole new spiritual world?

There is so much to say about this, the heart of the church we are welcoming people into, that it won't fit inside the Members' Manual. So you may need to help course members access the material below from the web site. Here is the 'over to you' exercise in the manual:

Over to you ...

There is a web site associated with this course - www.everybodywelcome.org.uk When you have found it, click on 'worship event' and read all about it there! If you are not online then persuade someone to print off a copy for you. Or perhaps there may be copies available in church.

The standard of the football ground is important – is it clean and safe and comfortable? The behaviour of the crowd around you is also important – is it drunken and foul-mouthed or enthusiastic and happy? But what you have actually come for is the game and now the referee has blown the starting whistle. A dull, petulant 0-0 draw and you might decide you are not going to become a 'Rovers' fan. But an exciting, skilful 4-3 victory and you just might be hooked.



The team are waiting in the tunnel, ready for the signal to walk out onto the pitch. Every player waits expectantly, limbering up, jumping up and down and flexing their legs. Occasionally, a player shouts out encouragements, hoping to inspire his teammates. For the past week the team (players and coaches) have been hard at work putting tactics and skills into practice. Today is match day and the team are looking forward to giving their all, together in their own stadium, in front of the home fans.



'Active' worship

The referee signals and, to the accompanying music, the loud announcement over the PA system and the roar of the crowd, the players take to the pitch. Just how well preparations have been made is about to be put to the test. Will the team produce a world-class display – a thrilling end-to-end game or a dull-as-dish-water draw? Will the play be boring and predictable or flamboyant and eye-catching? Will the team display inspire every visitor in the stadium to pick up a ball and have a go? Will each player pull their weight and excel in their role? Will the game plan prove effective – how well will the team hold their shape and formation? When things go wrong, as they invariably do, will the players blame each other and argue among themselves? And what about the coaching staff; will they help the team realize their full potential? Only the team performance on the pitch will provide answers to these questions. How well the match goes and the subsequent result will, of course, directly impact the post-match drinks. The buzz of an exciting game will last well after the final whistle and energize many a conversation. It will also directly influence each player's future involvement in the team. No one really wants to play for a team going nowhere. Ask any player who they want to play for and they almost always give the answer: 'A team going places, a team with vision, a team with hopes and dreams, a team that wants me on their books.'

When we gather together for worship we are like members of a team taking to the pitch on match day. We each have an essential part to play in the worship offered. The aim: to give glory to God by enabling everyone to be active and fully involved team members, not passive spectators. In worship each of us has a vital and unique role (whether we lead from the front or not). We come with different gifts and talents, numerous learning styles, a diversity of backgrounds and stories, an array of hopes and dreams as well as very different struggles and fears. With all this diversity and difference we form a worshipping community.

Visitors and newcomers are an important part of this community. One of the aims of church worship is to help visitors and newcomers become spiritually alive as they are caught up in a collective experience of connecting God and humans. And as they



become spiritually more alive within the worship of the church community they will become more bonded into it. So we hope and pray that every visitor will have a life-changing encounter with God's presence. But the things that are normal and relaxing to us may be strange and fearful to them. So how can we take care to usher in the newcomer to God's presence while not diluting the regulars' worship-encounter with the living Lord?

Or, to put the question another way, Irenaeus (a second-century bishop) tells us that the glory of God is a human fully alive. So, how well does our worship help those present to be fully alive? Does it inspire life and energy and vibrant community? Does it shape and transform us into Christ's living body? Does it connect with life, with culture? Does it challenge and provoke? Is it creative and imaginative? Will newcomers be attracted and engaged by the life and vibrancy of our worshipping community?

A community in which every member seeks to be fully alive will build its worship on the following principles:

Good leadership

Confidence and sincerity are the two keys. Prayerful preparation is the way to find them both. If there is an air of uncertainty in the leader, the congregation will tense and visitors will be uncomfortable. The leader should be familiar with the shape of the service and any liturgy being used. There should be no flapping of pages to locate obscure prayers or Bible verses, and no unintentional long pauses. Being well prepared does not mean a lack of reliance on the Holy Spirit – he can inspire our preparation as well as our delivery!

Eye contact and communication with conviction are also important. If other people are helping lead the service the main leader should check they know what they are doing – embarrassing slip-ups, pauses and confusions just raise anxiety levels in the congregation. But we don't need to pretend to be super-professional. If something goes wrong then it is best dealt with by a light remark that creates a ripple of laughter and punctures the tension.

At the start of the service it is important to offer both a warm welcome to all and an introduction to the service that explains its theme. Every service should be planned so that all the ingredients – the readings, the sermon, the prayers, the hymns etc. – 'work together for good'. So the leader should make sure that if there is indeed a theme, he or she is clear about it in their own mind and flag it up to the congregation. There is a delicate balance, though, between giving instructions and stage directions that are too intrusive and not giving them at all. So think through what areas are likely to be most difficult for newcomers and make sure that instructions are clear at those points. Some areas that are likely to induce anxiety among the less practised are:

- Use of books and sheets. Give out page and hymn numbers and give people a few seconds to find them. It is of course very important to make life as easy as possible for newcomers by having no more than the barest essential in terms of page references – good use of projection and/or customized service sheets can avoid too many page turns and numbers.



- Children going out to their activity. Make sure people know when and how that is to happen.
- The Peace. If this is an issue in your church you may wish to devote a few minutes of course time to the art of sharing the peace with an uncomfortable stranger.
- Communion. This usually needs clear stage directions about the options available – come to receive, come for a blessing or stay put. It is all too easy to conjure up a loud 'no' from God by suggesting that certain people are not allowed to receive communion. Yet it is all too easy for an unconditional welcome to the body and blood of Christ to trivialize the sacrament. So it is best to say 'yes' to all by giving clear options that invite each individual to choose the one that holds the most integrity for them.
- The end of the service. Make sure people know what their options are and where refreshments are being offered. The Welcome Team and the whole congregation should ensure that every newcomer or visitor is put at their ease by a friendly face as the service ends.

Good structure

It is good that these days there is such variety of form and liturgy in our services. People encounter God in different ways and God is able to use every style of worship. All churches make use of a liturgical structure, however free they think they are being, and many have set liturgical texts. The important thing is neither to allow freedom to become a mess nor liturgy a straightjacket. Giving a visitor a clear road map for the service can give them security. If they haven't a clue what is going to happen next or how long the service is going to last their anxiety levels will rise.

Many screen-using churches already provide page numbers for hymns and songs (e.g. page 1 of 4) but this still leaves worshippers without a clear indication of service shape. The answer: provide a progress bar (for example, Gathering – Word – Sacrament – Dismissal in a communion service) at the top or bottom of each screen. The progress bar highlights the current point in the worship (Gathering – Word – Sacrament – Dismissal). Progress through the parts of a part of a service can also be highlighted, such as something along the lines of taking – thanking – breaking – sharing. This can be achieved quite simply using PowerPoint slides or by designing a template for the church presentation software. The progress bar is a simple but effective tool providing a basic map of the service, enabling worshippers to engage more fully in the worship journey.

Good sermons

People can easily switch off or drift away. Many people these days are not used to listening to a monologue. The correct response to this problem is not to preach a short sermon but a good one, not to preach a superficial sermon but a profound one, not to go off on theoretical flights of fancy, but to engage the listener in linking their everyday world to the God of the Bible. The sermon needs to be consistently good, so preparation should be a priority in the preacher's diary the week before. If someone is actually not very good at preaching, it is usually better to risk hurting them by asking



them to step down than to risk hurting the congregation by allowing them to continue. All preachers need training, refresher training and leadership accountability to get the best out of them.

Good music

This can not only draw people into the heart of God but also attract people into coming back again. The quality of the music matters as much as the style, but the sincerity of the musicians matters the most. Church leaders will find that time, love and care invested in church musicians and singers is time well spent. But the musicians need a servant heart – they are not there to dictate what happens or to veto styles they don't personally like.

Too often the local church tries to produce in its weekly worship something it has seen elsewhere. This happens in all styles and traditions. What happens in a cathedral with a brilliant organist and trained choir cannot be replicated by a 95-year-old organist with three elderly choristers, one child and a cat. What happens at Spring Harvest with a ten-piece semi-professional band cannot be replicated on Joe's six-string with his son 'having a go' at the drums. Let's be realistic about our abilities and do the very best with what we have. Also, we need to be wary of too many unknown hymns or songs. At least 75 per cent of the hymns/songs chosen should be well known by the congregation so that they are sung well and the newcomer can join in. As a rule, never sing an unknown song or hymn at the beginning of a service; always start with something most people will know. There's nothing wrong with a new song or hymn but remember that to the newcomer most of them will be new and the only hope they have is that everyone else will at least be singing well so they can join in. If no one else is singing, there's nothing worse than a strained silence gradually filled with squawks and screeches to make the stranger feel uncomfortable.

Allan came to church the first time because his wife had nagged him so much. He had every intention of saying to her, 'I've been, done it, and never again!' He went the next week though because he had enjoyed the singing so much. He went on to a nurture course, confirmation and leading and preaching.

Let's also recognize that people learn a lot of theology (good and bad) through the words of the songs and hymns. It is therefore important to choose them carefully. Graham Kendrick is known to have said, 'After all, a member of the congregation is far more likely to walk home humming the tune of one of the hymns (and thereby remembering the words) than reciting the main points of the day's sermon.'

One very good practice is for you to go to another church for a change. Go and view it as an outsider and reflect on what is good and bad and allow that to inform you about your own church. It might be a good idea to let your minister know you are doing it and not all go on the same week!



If your church is short of musicians, or they have not reached their full potential, you may consider paying for one or two members to have music lessons and buying them some instruments. Some churches have always invested in a paid organist – also consider this option for gaining excellence by paying a worship-band leader. A good choir and good musicians of whatever style can lift the worship of the whole church but please don't announce 'a time of worship' when you actually mean singing! We worship God with our whole lives, not just when we sing to him.

Genuine warmth

Cold formality will not attract many people into the arms of the living God. Warm worship facilitates an authentic encounter between the church community and the living, loving God. It allows everyone to get caught up into the action for all are welcomed and involved. Warm worship helps newcomers see that this is the team they want to play for.

So the question is this – how can we make our worship warm and genuine? This is not just a question for the vicar or the worship leader or the choir master. It is for all of us because the spiritual temperature of the event is mainly controlled by the spiritual temperature of our own hearts. How can I best allow the warmth of my own relationship with God to shine through my worship? This is about how I sing, how I pray, how I respond to the preacher's joke, how I relate to people before the service, during the Peace and at the end. But it is also about how my relationship with God is nourished and sustained during the week. If I am used to praying and reading the Bible, and if I arrive a little early in order to prepare myself, then it is much more likely I will be one of the spiritual radiators in the church rather than one of the fridges.

Here is an old prayer: 'Lord renew your church and begin with me.' How can your own worship and relationship with God be renewed?

Accessibility

Some people respond spiritually to a cultivated sense of awe, wonder and mystery. But that is not the same thing as being unclear about what is going on and confusing people. Most people will respond better if they know roughly what is happening and why, if the language used in the notices, stage directions and sermon is straightforward, if the music culture is one that they resonate with, and if the prayers are couched in everyday language rather than in-crowd holy-speak. In fact any references or in-jokes that might leave newcomers feeling excluded or baffled should be kept to a minimum.

Gospel-richness

Christian worship is our loving response to all that God has done for us through Christ. Therefore, worship should tell the story of God's grace which stretches into the past and the future. It should also facilitate our response to God's grace. In addition, following Jesus requires a radical reorientation of our lives: e.g. taking on kingdom values, walking the way of the cross and living as slaves of Christ. Vibrant worship sensitively communicates the invitation to follow Christ.



Well-chosen hymns, songs and prayers, the use of images, candles, banners and film clips, well-prepared sermons and helpful rituals all have a part to play in telling God's story of grace to the community and inviting the community's response. They will also provide opportunities for all those present (including visitors) to see where (and how) their own story fits within the bigger story of God's people.

Some Christians think that we should go easy on 'Jesus' language with newcomers in case it puts them off. Usually it is Jesus who attracts and the church that puts people off. So do not be afraid of gospel-rich worship. Take people to the gate of heaven and they are likely to return for more.

Connecting with culture

Have you ever left a worship event feeling that you weren't allowed to be 'yourself' or that the worship made little or no connection with the world you know?

It is important for a community to see that worship is sparking within their contemporary world, in the midst of the life and culture they know. It is important in worship that we are all encouraged to bring the world to God and God to the world. Such an approach ought not be seen as a watering down of all that is 'holy' in church but a way of seeing God at work in all things – places, circumstances and resources. This then means that people feel able to bring their own lives (corporate as well as individual struggles, problems, thoughts, hopes and dreams) to church instead of feeling that they have to leave them at the door and collect them afterwards. This approach also means that we can communicate something of God, and worship him using creative resources available in contemporary culture (e.g. news, film, music and art) by weaving these into our worship. Those who are new may then be more able to make connections and find the familiar in an unfamiliar environment.

As our society is now multicultural in all sorts of dimensions (e.g. music) then we need a wide variety of worship cultures to connect with the wide variety of people living in our local areas. A robed choir and a Prayer Book service will be culturally appropriate to some people and in some contexts. An informal service with contemporary music and language will be culturally relevant for others. Neither worshipping community should belittle the other – both may be equally valid expressions of accessible worship for the people who attend them. But, of course, our key question is whether any particular act of worship is accessible to those people who might begin to attend it.

Some churches try to offer variety by making the service traditional one week and contemporary the next. This is usually a mistake. Not only do the regulars soon divide off into those who go '1st and 3rd Sundays' and those who turn up for the '2nd and 4th', but also newcomers can be put off the second or third time they arrive for worship as it is radically different from the event that attracted them first time around. Each worship event should be at the same time in the same place 52 weeks a year in roughly the same culture. Cultural diversity is best catered for by a variety of services not by wide variety within one.

Can you think of one way in which your church's worship could become more relevant to the everyday life of your neighbours?



Deepening relationships

Is anyone else tired of staring at the back of someone else's neck in worship every week, or is it just me? We convince ourselves that our worship events build community but do they really? Just because we stand or sit in rows, sing or speak together in the same place at the same time, does that build community? After all, genuine community requires authentic relationships, so how well do our worship events encourage and enable deeper relationships? More imagination is needed if this is to be worked out. This issue needs considering if we are to be truly welcoming. How could this be done in the context you are in? Interactive sermons may be one idea. Or how about asking the congregation to brainstorm some ideas, or set up a selection of interactive worship stations? But of course as far as newcomers are concerned such an approach may also be off-putting, so it may be a question of going gently and simply providing the opportunity in worship for people to say 'hello' to someone they don't know. Seeing the 'post-match' drinks as an essential part of the worship event may also be key. But of course, not everyone in church is comfortable chatting enthusiastically with strangers – some of us need a pillar to hide behind.

What practical things could be done to ensure that your worship helps the community to deepen relationships?

Almost immediately after the service the church warden went over to one of the visitors and sat next to him. Within a few seconds they were laughing together and chatting freely. The visitor informed him that his warmth towards him was really appreciated. He now attends each week.

The traditional understanding of what we call 'services' is our service to the God who serves us. The traditional understanding of what we call 'liturgy' is a public work performed by the people for the benefit of others. Much of every worship event is not merely 'spoken liturgy' but 'animated liturgy' – serving God and others. How we go about things in worship demonstrates who we are and what we believe to newcomers and visitors. As Christians we of course want to demonstrate the grace of God. However, if I had a pound for every time I've seen musicians play and sing, or people welcoming at the church door, as if they really don't want to be there, I'd be rich. Of course we don't want to pretend about how we feel but it is crucial to remember that the way we go about things is just as important as what we do and the words we say in worship. This has implications for everyone and not just the 'up front' people. Generosity is a quality all of us can work towards – engaging fully in the worship, thanking people for their contribution, chatting with visitors or helping an elderly member of the congregation come forward to receive communion, to name but a few ways.

Doing things well with a generous spirit is therefore very important. People pick these things up. Worshipers will tell if we'd rather be reading the Sunday papers with a big mug of coffee. They will also notice if things are ill-conceived and ill-prepared. A friend of mine once said that the Holy Trinity is not honoured by the slapdash. Rublev's



famous icon shows a generous welcome for all at the table of the Trinity. It seems natural then that the Trinity is honoured by our generosity towards others; in fact we participate with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit when we show generosity to others. Showing this through the time and effort given in preparing, leading and facilitating worship is a crucial part of providing a warm and genuine welcome to worship.

What small acts of generosity might make a big difference to the attractiveness of your church service?

Trinitarian focus

Trinitarian worship is worshipping the Father, with and through the Son, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

This of course may seem pretty obvious. But often, ensuring that worship is thoroughly Trinitarian can be a priority way down the list as the challenges facing us when trying to communicate the doctrine of the Trinity are very real. Also, churches that are light on liturgical text place much of the weight of responsibility for ensuring that worship is Trinitarian onto the songs, hymns and the preaching. Many songs are Unitarian in content, focusing on only one person of the Trinity. Careful use of the songs would ensure a Trinitarian focus: e.g. the collection of songs during a whole service providing a Trinitarian balance. The same can be true of preaching. But through a whole sermon or collection of sermons we can attempt to provide a balance.

Thoroughly Trinitarian worship holds the power to inspire a community to a greater expectation in worship events. With a more holistic view of God, everyone present will have greater opportunity to recognize that the living God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is available to be met. And, as we have noted, the Trinity is a community in which all find a welcome.

Thoroughly Trinitarian worship also helps ensure that worship is not overly focused on our subjective responses. It helps communicate the nature and character of the Triune God, his story of saving grace, his loving purposes in and for the world and his invitation to us to follow and serve. Faced with a fuller understanding of God, newcomers as well as old hands will be more able to respond to him in worship.

All involved

What's your learning style? How do you engage with the world? For example, are you a visual learner (preferring images, graphs and diagrams), a verbal learner (preferring to hear or read information), or are you someone who likes to learn by doing (an active or kinaesthetic learner)? In any community there is considerable difference and variation in learning styles among the people. And yet, almost invariably church worship favours those with a verbal learning style providing texts to read, speak, hear or sing.

Perhaps then it is time to redress the balance a little and, armed with our spirit of generosity, help more people engage in worship more easily. This may involve re-imagining our worship spaces by thinking of ways to communicate visually (through artwork, banners, candles or film). For those who are active learners, practical worship stations or rituals may be effective. For those who prefer to think things through, time for quiet reflection may be helpful.



In worship all should have the opportunity to be active team players and not simply spectators. This way we will dispel the consumer myth that worship is provided 'for me' by a few people. Transforming the 'audience'/'concert' culture of church to a 'hands on', 'participative' worship environment may help us provide a warm and genuine welcome to worship where all become valued and involved.

What sort of involvement works well in your church?

Creativity

For many, creativity is freedom, for others it feels like chaos. What is needed perhaps is a healthy framework for our freedom, to provide a strong foundation and structure for any creativity. The Church of England's worship resource *Common Worship* provides the rich inheritance of the past and contemporary frameworks with which to build creative worship. It encourages an 'imaginative engagement in worship, opening the way for people in the varied circumstances of their lives to experience the love of God in Jesus Christ in the life and power of the Holy Spirit' (*Common Worship* preface). Whatever service plan we choose to adopt (e.g. 'text light' Service of the Word or 'text rich' Order One Holy Communion) they provide the framework with which to build creative, imaginative worship that engages a diverse community. *Common Worship* in its very nature encourages us to remix the traditional, blend old and new. Tried and tested traditional resources and well-thought-out new ideas can work so well together. In fact, each can help unpack the meaning of the other.

The church has a wealth of worship resources at its disposal and yet so often we use the same few from a certain corner of church subculture. Instead of replicating the worship styles promoted by certain branches of the church (just as churches used to copy the cathedral model), churches might do better by serving fresh locally grown worship which newcomers may find more appetizing.

Can you think of something creative that might appeal to a newcomer?

3 Welcoming the children

The welcome and hospitality offered to children is a touchstone of any church's discipleship. It helps determine how close to the kingdom of God a church's life can get:

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.' And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.

(Mark 10.13-16)