

Passionate Worship

*gathering with expectation and anticipation
to encounter God at a deep and meaningful level
that speaks from and speaks to the fulness of our living
and inspires and sustains our discipleship*

Passionate Worship is one of the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations,
and crucial to the development of the others.

Nurturing Passionate Worship in our congregation
means thinking about how...

Our Words
The Word
Our Music
Our Atmosphere
Our Attitude

...can deepen our worship.

Five Elements of Worship

Our Words

the words we actually say and hear in worship and how they're spoken

The Word

the words of our scriptures and how they're shared and reflected on

Our Music

the music we hear and the hymns we sing in worship

Our Atmosphere

the ambience and environment of our worship space

Our Attitude

the inward spirit with which we approach and act and speak in worship

Each of these worship elements can contribute (or not) to making the worship in our communities not just faithful or rooted in our tradition but also *passionate*.

Our Words

In Passionate Worship, the prayers and responses we speak and hear...

... encounter and speak to God directly
... use language that we might actually use
... reflect the real experience of worshippers
... feel like truly praying and speaking to God.

Some suggestions:

Look for, or write, prayers in the active voice rather than the passive.

eg: *“God, our world cries out”*
instead of *“God, our world is crying out”*

Speak directly TO God instead of ABOUT God.

eg: *“Healing and Forgiving God”* or *“God, you heal and forgive”*
instead of *“God, who heals and forgives”*

Approach prayer-writing as a pray-er ~ always remember it is speaking to God, and should reflect the real prayers and language of worshippers.

Eg: *“God, we pray for our neighbours,
and especially all who are discouraged because they can’t find work”*
instead of *“God, hear our prayers for those who are unemployed or underemployed
or struggling with the economic insecurity of these times.”*

Find ways, or help your worship leader find ways, to become aware of the real needs of your congregation and community, so that these can be reflected in the prayers.

*This doesn’t necessarily mean that prayers name specific people.
It can just mean that prayers reflect, for example, the stress of final exams,
or a season involving much travel,
or a season in which many are vulnerable to illness or falls.*

Encourage a variety of voices in your worship words.

eg: *Prayers written and spoken by lay members of the congregation,
or prayers that incorporate sung or spoken responses.*

The Word

In Passionate Worship, The Word (the Bible passages and stories)...

... is presented in ways that highlight its importance and centrality
... is not only used as “readings” but also incorporated into worship words
... is reflected upon honestly and expectantly from a real-world perspective.

Some suggestions:

Invite, or encourage your worship leader to invite, a small group of interested and willing presenters (various ages) to gather regularly to look at the upcoming scripture readings and plan how they will be presented.

Could the reading be ‘told’ rather than ‘read’?

*Many passages lend themselves to being told aloud as stories,
directly and without notes to the congregation.*

Could the reading be dramatized?

*Even some of Paul’s most convoluted letters can be dramatized,
(and greatly benefit from the clarity gained!)*

Do ALL the lectionary texts for a given Sunday need to be read?

Sometimes a powerful presentation of just two, or even one, is better.

Use or adapt the Psalm of the day as a Call to Worship, Confession, or Litany.

*The psalms ARE worship words, not ‘readings’,
and their language invites a direct and deep encounter with God.
Mine this treasure trove of praise and thanksgiving and steadfastness and lament!*

If you are called to preach, share your honest reflections on the Word.

It is okay to react to it ~ “what are we supposed to do with THIS??!”

It is okay to poke at it, and question its message.

The congregation is quite likely doing the same, having just heard it.

Why not be real about it? They want to hear how it can possibly be relevant or useful.

Ultimately, the question of every reading is “What’s the Good News here?”

Our Music

In Passionate Worship, our music and hymns...

... are prayer and praise in another form
... enhance the spirit of worship
... speak to and from our real experience

Some suggestions:

Carefully choose hymns whose words connect with and assist the flow of worship.

*eg: Words of a hymn can be reflected in the worship words that follow:
“Be our vision, O God, as we leave this place...”
or “We do adore you, God of Glory, and we are joyful to be here”*

Carefully choose hymns whose tunes connect with and assist the flow of worship.

*eg: In most cases, an opening hymn should be bright in tone.
A hymn leading into quieter time of prayer should move into the contemplative.
A closing hymn can be bright or enlivening, or it can be solid and grounding.*

Give the choir anthem some meaning in worship.

*If the choir sings an old hymn as their anthem,
place it in a spot where its words and tune assist with the flow.
eg: “The Lily of the Valley” might work well after a gospel reading,
while “The Church in the Wildwood” is better as an early anthem in the service,
leading into the opening prayer.*

Recognize that church is now the only place in which most people sing.

*Many people are embarrassed to sing if they can only hear themselves.
Raising the volume of the organ even a bit in a small space can make a difference.*

Take a hint from John and Charles Wesley.

*There are tunes people really like, with words that are cringe-worthy.
Are there people in your congregation who might enjoy writing new words?
Is there contemporary music that would work in worship?
Are there instruments your congregation members sing with OUTSIDE worship
that could be brought INTO worship?*

Traditional hymns can be wonderful.

*But not if they are played like dirges and sung like collective punishment.
Instead of insisting on new and unfamiliar hymns, if this is meeting resistance,
first insist that the old favourites start being sung with vigour at a decent pace.*

Our Atmosphere

In Passionate Worship, the place where we gather...

... is bright and clean and warm and inviting for all ages

... inspires pleasure and peace and prayer

... is accessible and easy to navigate

... is at once sacred space and human space

Some suggestions:

Take someone who's never been in the church on a full tour and invite them to comment honestly on what they see and how your space conforms to the above.

Can they find the bathrooms or the hall?

What is their first impression on entering in the door?

What draws their eye, for good or ill?

Would they want to spend an hour here?

Does anything confuse or surprise them?

Consider how your worship space reflects the CURRENT congregation.

If a stranger were to walk in on a Tuesday morning,

would they get a sense of who's here on a Sunday morning?

eg: if there are children in your congregation, are there toys or pictures on the walls?

If there are active groups, is there evidence of same?

Have an "All Churchy Questions Answered" Sunday, in which people can ask all the questions about church symbols and practises about which they've ever wondered.

Consider how symbols and practises might be given new meaning in worship. Be careful about using language that is incomprehensible to newcomers (or, frankly, oldtimers).

eg: "What's that symbol on the pulpit hanging-thingy and what's it supposed to mean?"

"Why do we have grape juice and not wine?"

"Why is the Lent colour purple?"

"What on earth is a Narthex?"

Ask the people of the congregation (including children) if they feel like their church building is truly theirs.

Does it feel like visiting someone else's house?

Do they feel they can use the kitchen?

Are they anxious about making a mistake or a mess?

Our Attitude

In Passionate Worship, we approach worship...

... with excitement and anticipation
... expecting and/or delivering a full effort committed to excellence in all elements
... as an opportunity for a deep and nourishing encounter with God

Some suggestions:

In order to lead worship with excellence, worship leaders **MUST** have adequate time for deep and prayerful preparation. This requires committed support from the congregation, in adjusting their demands on their minister's time.

*How much time would be ideal or at least desired?
How will this be supported by the congregation's adjusted demands
or intentional ceding of the necessary space and time each week?*

Consider the way in which prayers and readings are read.

*Is there a need to encourage and train people to read with passion and confidence,
to make eye contact and inspire engagement,
or to bring the words to life through drama or storytelling?
Could the congregation benefit from a committed and regular worship team?*

Consider the musical offerings.

*It is better to have no hymns than hymns that detract from worship
because they are abysmally dirge-like. Insist at least that whatever music
is familiar to the congregation be played with spirit.
If it takes golden oldies, use golden oldies, but if no one's really singing,
then singing is not worshipping for them. This might, in fact, be worth a conversation.
Model, or enlist others to model, bright and committed singing.*

Cultivate an atmosphere of sensitive warmth and welcome.

*Eg: When a newcomer appears, invite them with
"Sometimes people really want to be involved in the church right away,
while others are looking for a space for rest and regeneration.
Is getting involved something you're interested in?"
instead of "Wow, is it ever great you're here,
because we need a new secretary for the Board and no one else wants to do it."*

Starting Conversations

The following are some questions and exercises designed to be used in small groups, by the whole congregation, or by worship committees to get people thinking about why they worship, what inspires them in worship, and how their worship experience can become more *passionate*.

General Questions

1. Why do you come to church? What brings you here? What are you seeking?
2. Can you recall a particular service that you found deeply meaningful? Can you identify the specific elements that made it especially so?
3. Are there times outside of Sunday morning when you worship? How and when does this happen?

Specific Discussion About Sunday Services

As a group, either videotape or take notes during a regular Sunday service, and gather afterward for discussion. How will necessary improvements happen?

1. Were there moments that ignited your intellect? What did you learn?
2. Were there moments that moved you? What brought joy, tears, or praise?
3. At what points did you feel fully engaged? Why?
4. At what points did you fade out? Why?
5. Where were peaks of excellence? Where were boosts in excellence needed?
6. Did the service feel smooth and flowing, or a little choppy?
7. Where is there a speeding up of rhythm and energy?
8. Where does energy calm and slow?
9. Does it ever just stop abruptly?
10. Were there symbols or images being used? Were they used effectively?
11. Was there narrative and story? Was it engaging?
12. Where might children connect? Teens? Adults? Older adults?
13. What was the atmosphere of the service? Contemplative? Joyous? Tedious?

Offering Our Best

How would you rate the excellence, and perhaps improve, the following. How will these improvements happen in your congregation?

1. The comfort of the worship space
2. The sound and lighting quality in your service
3. The design or décor of the area focussed on in worship (ie: chancel/altar area)
4. The bulletin or Order of Service