

# Worship Evangelism

Sally Morgenthaler

The year 2001 marks a decade anniversary for me. In 1991, I began to re-think the relationship between worship and evangelism. Seriously re-think. As a young ministry leader in the eighties, I'd avidly joined the ranks of the entrepreneurial Church, embracing its nearly singular fixation: crafting user-friendly services for returning baby boomers. On a non-existent budget, I shuttled between mega-church conferences, relishing the dual emphases of excellence and relevance.

However, after half a dozen of these conferences, I started feeling uneasy. On the van rides home, I celebrated less and ruminated more. No longer did I strategize about what our congregation could apply. My behind-the-wheel musings began unearthing a strange, subterranean discontent that took several years to excavate. I hid my doubts. How ludicrous to entertain qualms in the face of what appeared to be unparalleled success. Why couldn't I be like my comrades? Each year, they proudly bore home their conference spoils: tales of church attendance as eye-widening as any Sasquatch legend; marketing techniques that rivaled Dominos Pizza; and ah, the sweet surety of formula.

My community in south suburban Denver was no exception. Here, dense housing developments gobbled the same prairie stretches that I had memorized in my child's eye. Schools and shopping centers dotted the bulldozed landscape in record time. It was to this much altered and cloned frontier that young ministry leaders returned from their Meccas, mega-church dreams in their Dockers pockets. Soon, sandwich signs littered the newly poured sidewalks with names befitting North American Generic: Mountainview Community Church, SouthHills, Ridgecrest, Deercreek, Frontrange, Stonybrook. In rented gymnasiums and strip malls, fledgling church services took on an eerie sameness, a sort of mauve and teal antiseptic, complete with silk plants, talk-show chic, and color-coordinated worship team outfits. There seemed to be an unspoken ambiance of "enforced happy," although the occasional Vineyard church got away with 12-string introspective. But, over all, overt Christianity was out. Symbols, confessions, hymns, creeds, ritual, and just about any prayer over thirty seconds all signaled that a church was culturally challenged. It was an exhilarating time. It was a sad time.

In the midst of this odd mix of excitement and carnage, I was driven to write the book *Worship Evangelism*. In 1989, out of both my restlessness and brokenness, I'd reinstated confessions, silence, creeds, communion, and all kinds of prayer into my congregation's otherwise "seeker sensitive" services. By 1991, I felt compelled to write about the results. For, counter to everything I'd learned at relevance school, the irreligious people in our community were not only attracted to our repackaged confessions, creeds, and rituals. They started bringing their friends. And, between ski trips, they calculated their Sunday attendance just so that they wouldn't miss their favorites: communion and anointing for healing. User-friendly had never been this, well, spiritual.

The images remain in my mind: an elderly couple with their palms outstretched in adoration; a thirty-something woman with dyed red hair and white fur coat, wiping tears from under her sunglasses; children with their heads uplifted, waiting for a touch of oil; furtive singing waxing exuberant. Here were both the initiated and uninitiated encountering something way beyond Jesus my buddy. Jesus my solution. Jesus my moral example. Jesus, inspirer of how-to lists. They were meeting Jesus, God Incarnate. Jesus transcendent. Jesus mysterious. Jesus the emptied. Jesus the wounded and bruised. Jesus, the consummate Lover of their fractured souls. Gone was the Deity who only fraternized with the successful or perpetually positive. Clearly, *Worship Evangelism* was born out of these unexpected intersections with profound spiritual hunger and brokenness - including my own. Surprise. In the midst of this bulldozed frontier, there was deep discontent and an almost grasping for the holy.

Would that I could take credit for discovering the witnessing power of authentic worship (defined roughly here as worship where God is allowed to show up and people are allowed to be where they actually are). Too bad. I found too many places in Scripture that referenced it. And as I studied, I had an increasingly difficult time squaring what I read with what I'd been learning in church growth circles. There's Psalm 40:3, for instance. "He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord." Isn't this fairly explicit about adoration being a powerful, cross-cultural activity? Then there's the story about the Philippian jailer in Acts 16. Try holding on to worship exclusivity as you read that account. And of course, there's the

blatant section in 1 Corinthians 14: 24, 25. Not only did Paul assume that unbelievers would be present in the Corinthian's gatherings. He expected that they would be convicted and drawn to God through the act of worship itself.

I soon discovered that the kinds of worship transformations that were going on in our congregation were far from unique. When I began to investigate – speaking with pastors and worship leaders around the country and hearing the worship stories of missionaries overseas – I realized that the witnessing power of authentic worship was a phenomenon that had been all but obscured by two decades of church-lite. The popular eighties phrase, "Worship and seekers are like oil and water: they don't mix." had spread at hyper-speed through North American churches and, among certain circles, had attained something close to the level of Scriptural canon.

In the face of what many had already experienced by 1991, this doctrine seemed outdated at best. In 2001, it is completely untenable. The reality is, we live in a highly spiritualized, increasingly anti-humanistic culture, one that, ironically, was going "vertical" just as the self-christened cutting-edge Church was compressing God into gray warehouses, easy psychology, and do-it-yourself pragmatics. One doesn't have to look further than this year's Super Bowl for evidence of the cultural shift. Remember the Cingula Communications commercial? A paraplegic paints masterpieces with his mouth. He speaks, looking straight into the camera. Gregorian chant wafts over the noise of his unintelligible grunts. Not "generic" chant, however. It's the Agnus Dei from the Mass. "Agnus Dei. Qui tollis peccata mundi. Miserere nobis." Translated, "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us."

It's a new world. In December 2000, the organization, Up With People, closes its doors, after thirty-five years of entertaining people with smiley-faced humanism. In the same month, Madonna – queen of anti-Church - celebrates the baptism of her baby in a high-Anglican ritual. At press time, Creed's "Higher" still hovers at the top of the pop charts. "Take me higher, to a place where blind men see..." Thanks to Internet publishing, new Harry Potter tomes invade amazon.com's bestseller list before they're even in print. The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Life of Christ (cosmic cousin to The Complete Idiot's Guide to DOS) is literally flying off bookstore shelves. Meanwhile, at Einstein's bagels, servers wear pea-green T-shirts with this phrase in electrifying orange: "Jump off the spiritual bridge with your inner bagel and splash around in the coffee of life." The world's version of vertical may be alien to us, but the direction is unmistakable.

And the church's approach is evolving too. Look around and you'll find conferences geared toward all that is young, passionate, interactive, and unabashedly vertical. At the same time you'll see a refreshing trend as many upstart ministries to twenty-something postmoderns replace Letterman-esque entertainment with an indigenous fusion of narrative, mysticism, art, and technology. And some of the most fervent "oil and water" promoters of the eighties add worship elements to their seeker services, to create vertically-blended services.

Ten years. A long way from silk plants, Jesus karaoke, do-it-yourself lists, and eight proofs for the resurrection.

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