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DYNAMIC AND ENGAGING THEMATIC WORSHIP

“O God, you are my God; I earnestly search for you. My soul thirsts for you; my whole-body longs for you in this parched and weary land where there is no water.

“I have seen you in your sanctuary and gazed upon your power and glory. Your unfailing love is better than life itself; how I praise you! I will praise you as long as I live, lifting up my hands to you in prayer. You satisfy me more than the richest feast. I will praise you with songs of joy.

“I lie awake thinking of you, meditating on you through the night. Because you are my helper, I sing for joy in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you; your strong right hand holds me securely.

“But those plotting to destroy me will come to ruin. They will go down into the depths of the earth. They will die by the sword and become the food of jackals. But the king will rejoice with God. All who swear to tell the truth will praise him, while liars will be silenced.” Psalm 63:1-11 (NLT)

Consider the following people: An eighty-year-old woman with a fourth-grade education. A professor with a PhD. A spouse struggling to keep her marriage together. A convicted felon who has served his time. The recovering drug addict. The cancer patient undergoing chemotherapy. These are all people who could and do walk inside a church searching for answers, seeking to worship the Lord in the midst of their struggles.

These are all people with very different backgrounds, perspectives and challenges. How does a worship experience go about reaching each and every one of them?

I believe the solution lies in thematic worship.

What is thematic worship?

My own personal definition of “thematic worship” refers to an entire worship experience that is centered around one theological theme. Please do not confuse the term “thematic worship” with “worship” itself. Worship is defined by someone seeking to have an encounter with God. Worship is also seeking answers from God in the midst of your struggles. The key word in that definition

is “struggles,” plural - different challenges face different people.

Thematic worship does all it can to reach out to everyone in the congregation. A thematic worship experience makes every effort to make every song, litany, skit and call to worship center around a specific theme. Therefore, the experience reaches out to as many people in as many ways as possible to help them understand its theme and grow closer to God.

Thematic worship also gives a streamlined focused approach to the worship experience. No one in the church - those listening or those who created and composed the worship experience - loses sight of its theme or goal. The message is instilled in the congregation.

Examples of thematic worship done at St. John AME recently include worship experiences with themes such as “Praise,” “Reset” and “New Things.” Hence every single aspect of the worship experience centers on these specific themes. That doesn’t just mean a sermon or a song preached or sung on Sunday respectively. That also includes Bible studies done throughout the week, banners hung in the sanctuary and online hashtag campaigns. All of this can assist in making the theme much more focused and dynamic for the worship experience.

Why is thematic worship effective?

Thematic worship helps benefit the individual. First of all, it doesn’t leave them with a scattered, unfocused or

rushed-sounding worship experience. Oftentimes people enter into the sanctuary feeling troubled and lost in their struggles as it is. They need a clear objective - the worship experience's theme to rally around. The thematic worship experience does not deviate away from its theme. It gives the congregation an unswerving goal to focus on in connecting with God.

Second, with thematic worship, you can incorporate many different ways of reaching the congregation with a specific theme. You are not limited to a sermon or a few hymns. Litanies, praise dancers and skits can also be incorporated into the worship experience.

It may be litanies; it may be the praise dancers. It may be the sermon that reaches an individual in the congregation. Every person who is seeing or hearing the worship experience is being touched by one theme.

Thematic worship demands planning

Thematic worship cannot be done on the fly. The worship experience can and does allow for the Holy Spirit to move through the congregation in surprising ways, as I'll discuss later on in this chapter. However, on the whole, thematic worship is dependent on intensive and collaborative planning.

That planning begins with the head of the church - the pastor.

Over the years, I have learned about designing the worship experience. And let me tell you, the thematic worship experience literally starts with a whole lot of prayer.

I tell young preachers this: Don't stand above people in your congregation, stand in the middle of them. I think what happens with many teachers of Christianity is they have good theology. However, they cannot connect with people from all walks of life - from Miss Edith, an elderly lady with a grammar school education to Dr. Winston, a university professor.

Step into their shoes. See the world from their perspective. Then begin to pray and meditate on how to best connect with them through a worship experience, of which your sermon will play a major role.

Prayerfully plan the sermon

As a pastor, my "radar," so to speak, is always up, searching for people in need of spiritual care and the challenges they face. Stand in the middle of the struggles people are going through. Ask yourself what you are giving to people to encourage them in the times we're living in. This is always the mindset I take when writing my sermons.

The sermon with great care and prayer should be planned and thoroughly exegeted.

In creating sermons, I exhaustively study the scriptures connected to the theme. Every single word must be exegeted in the original language and made relevant to today. I use a special Logos Bible software package for exegetical purposes. Imagine sixteen tractor trailer trucks pulling up to your house, each loaded with books, commentaries and dictionaries - this is a fitting analogy for my exegetical

software. It's a massive and powerful library I use for all my sermon and Bible study work.

Researching a topic thoroughly is important. If you have not planned the sermon studiously, the congregation will know. However, to truly connect with the congregation through a sermon and worship experience, be keenly aware of the congregants' individual struggles and the social, political and social climate they live in.

Make thematic worship relevant to the present age

Be real. That's how you start reaching people. Put stories from the Bible in a current social, political and cultural context. The story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a very familiar one in our culture. Perhaps even to someone who has never been to church. But when you step back and really examine the familiar story, you can see it from a new perspective.

Just think about it - Mary, a virgin, is visited by a supernatural being, an angel. That in and of itself is mind-blowing. Then the angel informs her that she will give birth to the Messiah!

Now, relate the story of Mary in a way anyone in this day and age will understand. Mary was considered to be someone from the lower class. In today's society, Mary would have lived in the trailer park, the housing project, the ghetto. She didn't grow up in a mansion.

Draw that bridge. Put Mary's story, Moses' story or David's story in a context to make it relevant to people in

the present day. Then they can see those stories of old from their perspective.

The worship experience is an opportunity to connect scriptures with current political, cultural and social issues. Make the worship experience a learning experience as well. This also is an opportunity to expose the congregation to new and relevant information and resources.

During the month of February, Black History Month, St. John AME Church puts a very heavy emphasis on black people in the Bible. The Black National Anthem is also played. Eufaula, Alabama, where I currently pastor, is a small rural community surrounded by cotton fields. The Black National Anthem is not played before every basketball or football game here.

The song's lyrics include:

*“We have come, treading our path through the blood
of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.”*

As a pastor, I would be at fault if I didn't expose my children to this important piece of their heritage and struggle as black people. (I consider all the youth of St. John AME as my children whom I love dearly.)

During October, Domestic Violence Awareness Month, the drama ministry performs skits about domestic violence

every Sunday. These skits are coordinated with the sermon and the rest of the worship experience to focus on this important and relevant topic.

Thematic worship demands collaboration

Once I have pondered the sermon theme, I get with my worship leader, music ministry team and drama ministry. We brainstorm different songs, hymns, dances and skits to use in the worship experience to coordinate with the sermon. It's important to know that the planned worship experience is tentative at this point. This is largely due to the fact that you may not have all of the pieces figured out to ensure that the worship experience is memorable. However, the pastor is encouraged to at a minimum know the theme as well as the scripture that will be used in order for the collaboration process to be beneficial.

In thematic worship, we must make every effort to make every song, litany, skit and call to worship center around a specific theme. That means everyone who is a part of the collaboration process must be on the same page.

Various graphics to be displayed on screens must be researched and designed. The drama ministry has to rehearse skits. The dance ministry has to have music to connect with the theme. Everyone must have an understanding of the text to be referenced. The choir must get psalms and hymns together; the choir may have to learn contemporary songs they aren't aware of. Planning is

extensive and intensive. The pastor's knowledge of the source material must be passed on to those they collaborate with so the congregation is aware of their dedication to the service.

Collaboration is key to creating a thematic worship experience. It requires trust among the pastor, minister of music and any other church leaders involved in the planning process. This is because, though planning and coordination is important, we must make room for the Holy Spirit to move throughout the worship experience - sometimes in surprising ways.

During a recent worship experience, our minister of music, who is also a gospel recording artist, wrote and performed a song right at the conclusion of an invitation to discipleship/altar call and our musicians got right behind it. The song was connected to the theme of the worship experience; it naturally flowed with the course of the service and was not out of order.

The above gives credence to two points: First, my implicit trust of the church leaders who assist me with the planning of the worship experience alongside their trust in me. It is absolutely imperative that the worship leaders and pastor have a close working relationship.

Second, this displays the fact that the Holy Spirit is moving through our planning process, so we are prepared if - and when - the Holy Spirit does move throughout the worship experience in impromptu ways.