

CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP OR WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM FORD

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I was sad last year when the Ford Motor Company announced that it would be ending production of the Lincoln Continental. That car was an American icon for decades and has endured much economic, political, and cultural change. Despite its long, durable history, it wasn't selling very well compared to the more contemporary models on the market. Likewise, traditional worship is going out of style in favor of "contemporary" worship.

If one scans the positions available pages and Web sites one can see the trend. More churches than ever are exploring contemporary worship and looking for music leadership that is comfortable with it. More than that, "traditional," "classic," or "formal" worship is getting pushed to off-peak hours (8:30/9:00 A.M.) or to very hyped Saturday afternoon and evening services. There was a time when holiday services at any other time but Sunday and the presence of a rock band were unheard of. The influence of *Willow Creek*, the *Sister Act* movies, pop/new country music, and contemporary Christian artists and the shorter attention span of the general public have all contributed to the rise of contemporary worship. The biggest reason contemporary worship has taken hold is simply because it sells. It sounds secular, but it is true.

The churches here in the Albuquerque area with the largest weekly attendance are those in which "praise-and-worship" style music is the norm. For this reason, there seems to be a rush among pastors and worship and/or search committees both here and in many other places to offer contemporary worship, their logic being that their congregations will grow overnight with the words "Contemporary Service" out on the church billboard. They soon find, however, that calling something "contemporary" doesn't make it so, and the general public isn't fooled either.

Those who are classically trained church musicians seem to approach contemporary worship with suspicion. They do so because unlike choirs, handbells, and instrumental ensembles, contemporary worship is rather new in the greater scope of church history, and few have any training or experience with it. Keeping contemporary worship at arm's length doesn't make one comfortable with it. When everyone started getting MIDI installed on their organs, a former professor of mine had it added to his as well. He said, "We are never too old to learn." There were no courses in contemporary worship when I was a student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, but since then I have learned by doing, watching, reading, and asking questions of those who seem to know. Here is what I have learned.

The Concept

The term "contemporary worship" means different things to different churches. Among the evangelical traditions, the purpose of contemporary worship is to reach the lost world for Jesus Christ. Ideally, if a person has no idea what church is and has never

attended one, contemporary worship borrows from popular culture's entertainment media to express Christian content. The goal is to give the unchurched a positive entry-level experience that hooks them into coming back.

For the liturgical traditions, contemporary worship is an abbreviated and less formal version of traditional worship. Absent are traditional hymns, hymnbooks, creeds, and other formal elements. The goal is to revive interest in those who may have grown up in that particular tradition but have since found other things to do. In other words, making backsliders into forward-sliders.

The Practice

Depending on church resources and personnel, contemporary worship may range from very simple to terribly elaborate. The service is led by an ensemble called the "praise band." It can be staffed by at least a keyboard player with any combination of singers/instrumentalists available. The praise band begins with very loud, "praiseworthy" and high-energy music and gradually works its way down to more meditative music. This happens within ten to 20 minutes.

Scripture lessons or service themes may be presented through drama, skits, or multimedia. "Special music," or music other than that sung by the congregation, may precede the sermon or homily. Prayers are scattered throughout the service as appropriate. The sermon is on a basic theological point. The service is concluded with Communion or with a closing song centered around commitment or Christian service.

The contemporary service, in trying to provide a positive church experience, is generally no more than 45 minutes long. It may occur on Sunday during the off-peak hours, but many churches offer contemporary services on Saturday afternoons or evenings. They can be held anytime during the week.

The Criticism

When contemporary worship first developed, it was designed to do radical things and grab the attention of those who had no church background or who had a negative concept of church. Everything was aimed at a congregation of prospective converts in mind. Once a person became a Christian, they were to be led toward a deeper faith and an appreciation for the larger church tradition. Unfortunately, well-done contemporary worship has been so popular that some congregations have rushed to replace their traditional services with it. Worse yet, they skirt the deeper faith issues that some churches tackle in traditional worship.

While some churches do it well, others are quick to imitate it poorly, believing they will experience an explosion in their congregation's numbers. The music and theology are simple, repetitive, and too often shallow. The biggest point they get across is that anything traditional is bad. Unless a conscious attempt is made by congregations to approach their worship style with sound philosophy and motivation, there is the possi-

bility that the heritage of worship may be lost.

Prophecy

Whenever something sells, chances are it will be around for a while. For the here and now, contemporary worship sells, and those in church music leadership should make the best of it. In the United States, interest in church choirs by young people is declining, the number of people who play the organ is shrinking, and there is increasing pressure on the church to be more convenience-driven. If these trends continue, choirs, organs, and Sunday morning services will one day no longer be a reality. Church as we know it will have a totally different look and feel. Ever since the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, church history has been replete with change. Change is almost always unwelcome, but soon becomes a sacred cow. Contemporary worship is the latest example of that change. Over the next several decades, it will likely be absorbed into the traditional worship practice and become a tradition of its own.

Contemporary Organists

While contemporary worship seems not to leave much room for the organ, organ skills are essential to the best praise band leaders. Good philosophy, a sense of history, improvisation, transposition, and a good ear for registration (to work all those stop-like buttons keyboards are loaded with) are all vital to leading a congregation seamlessly from praise to prayer.

Among my classically, ministry-trained colleagues, there is a variety of attitudes and opinions regarding contemporary worship. They range from those who embrace it wholeheartedly to those who have no interest at all. Regardless of how any of us feel, contemporary worship has a significant share of the church-going market and it will likely increase in the coming years. The Bible says, "To whom much is given, much is expected." Whether a call or a career, those who are in positions of leadership in church music today are given the ups and downs of contemporary worship. It is up to church musicians to help develop it into something that praises God.

Although the Lincoln Continental is out of style for a time, chances are that it will be back with whatever contemporary influences come to bear on the auto industry. Likewise, if traditional worship should go out of style, it will be back for sure. It may not be exactly the same, but new, fresh, and improved.

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