

Worship in the College Community Church

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"Pastor, I want to tell you why I decided to join the church today. I came here when I was a freshman but I didn't like it so I joined another church. Now that I am beginning my senior year, I feel the need for this type of worship and church so I want to become a member."

That brief speech is often heard when a junior or a senior in college unites with our church. It is a good indicator of the particular church community and college in which we work and how we do our jobs.

Setting

Our church building sits about a hundred yards from the campus of Carson-Newman College, a Baptist institution. In fact, the sanctuary was built large enough to hold the entire 1600 students of the college and more than large enough for our 900+ resident members. Both college and church are nearly 150 years old and have always had a strong relationship. The small town in which they are located accentuates their size. The sociological conservatism of the area gives them both strong roots of tradition.

Problems in Worship Planning

College churches are a class unto themselves, we believe. Every church that ministers to a college community shares a common set of problems, the least of which is not, we can assure you, what to do in a worship service. Let us state at the outset that we have yet to find the worship agenda for an academic community. We would be the first to listen to anyone who has. What we have done is to struggle with the problem of almost literally trying to be all things to all people (without the Damascus road experience!) and to pray for grace and guidance.

Most churches that serve college communities have at least three distinct large groups in them: the college-related people, the townspeople, and the students. Within these three

large groups are smaller sub-groups such as the faculty and staff of the college, the long-time residents and the newcomers in the town and the many different types of students. Even these smaller groups could be divided depending on how many different categories you were willing to use. We believe that we could find a person to fit into almost any category that we could think of.

In our particular situation, all of these groups, though diverse, are influenced to a great degree by the surrounding sociological environment. Our town is nestled in the Tennessee Valley which is historically the most conservative part of the state. The Tennessee Valley is part of Southern Appalachia which is one of the conservative parts of our country. We believe that this strong element of sociological conservatism is a great factor in our worship, and indeed, in our entire church's life.

With this setting are several particular characteristics of our college church that determine how we plan and execute worship. Neither our list or discussion of these characteristics are exhaustive but will serve to give a clearer picture of our situation.

We have deliberately chosen not to discuss in detail the particular characteristics of our townspeople because of the nature of the article. Let us assure you that they are very important in our planning for worship. Everyone who deals with college churches in small towns knows of the town-gown relationship (conflict) that is present. The two sides may well appear to be quite different in life and work, but we have found in our own church that their worship needs and wants are strikingly similar. This fact of similarity was not immediately apparent to us when we began work here but we have discovered it in the course of our ministry.

This similarity is found most strikingly and unsuspectedly in the mixture of mature academic learning and simple faith of many college personnel. We have discovered this mixture only by experience. Looking back we probably would not have believed that such a mixture exists if someone had told us before we moved here. It does, however, and we have often struggled with that mixture as we have tried to plan our

worship. This is not to state that our townspeople have a simple faith, but it is to state that a great amount of formal academic learning does not guarantee an equally sophisticated taste in worship.

The college community, we believe, is more critical than other communities. This is an obvious result of the great demands that are placed on the students as they study and (we hope) learn. Professors who have endured long years of personal sacrifice to earn degrees and reputations are very critical and the administration, with its constant demands to spend less money and find more students, cannot help but be critical. Not that we feel criticism intensely all the time or always receive cold prickles; but, that condition does exist and we must deal with it in our planning.

As the church and college stand in relationship to each other, we have found in our situation that the church stands second to the college. This includes everything from the very practical matters of scheduling an event to the spiritual and personal commitment of the individual. The church everywhere faces the dilemma of being the last thing on everyone's schedule and the first thing off. It is especially true that the church must be second to the college in almost all phases of the lives of faculty, staff, and students.

It is almost a paradoxical thing that because our church building is so close to the college campus, and because the students are required to attend chapel once a week in the church building, our church often is too closely related to the college by the students. When we discuss trying to be more appealing to the students, we often hear the complaint that the students don't like to attend worship because they have to attend chapel. Knowing students as we do, that just might be an excuse rather than a reason, but we hear it often enough to consider it at least partly valid.

The opening paragraph alluded to another characteristic of the college community with regard to students. Juniors and seniors tend to have different worship needs and wants from freshmen and sophomores.

If all goes well the graduating senior should be a young adult, compared to the entering freshman who is still an ado-

lescent. We have seen a dramatic change in many of the students who have been with us for their entire four years of college and this change in personal maturity is reflected in their attitude toward worship.

The church may well receive second attention in regard to activities or loyalties by the college community but it often receives first attention as a dumping ground for the pressures and frustrations of living and working in a college environment. This can be a healthy thing if done without threat or injury to anyone. However, if tensions are especially high at the college we know that we can do little right in a worship service or even in pastoral relationships. This is surely a great challenge to our ministry and one in which we are still reaching to find better solutions.

Philosophy of Worship

As we plan worship for the church there are some assumptions we make that may be somewhat different from the non-college oriented church. One assumption or philosophical principle is that worship is the most important thing our church does. Some churches, we realize, would not accept this principle at all. On two occasions we have discussed with the church on Sunday evenings the five areas of the church's life—worship, outreach, education, fellowship, and ministry. After defining each term and examining our own work in each area, by survey sheets the congregation was asked to rate our church in the five areas. On both occasions the members said that worship is the primary functions of the church, and the area in which we do the best job. As we plan worship we deliberately attempt to set the service on such a level that we offer to God the best efforts at worship we can possibly give.

Another working assumption for us is that worship needs both continuity and change. There is sometimes so little change in the worship that people become bored. The predictability of the worship service bores them. We know, however, that people need some continuity from week to week. And yet, we also know that you increase impact by decreasing predictability. So we work at doing some things often, but we feel free to make changes in anthems, responsive readings, prayers, litanies, congregational participation, service order, and quiet times.

Further, we believe education is a valid part of worship. To be sure the worship planner cannot ignore the inspirational aspect of worship. People want and need to be inspired to become better Christians. Often, however, there is little for the mind in worship. The worship hour on Sunday ought to be that occasion in the week when people think their best thoughts and make their noblest decisions. Education through worship is accomplished by being at least as attentive to content in music, prayer, and sermon as we are to style.

We assume that worship must have both a personal and a corporate dimension. Traditional Southern Baptist worship sometimes lacks any corporate emphasis. We encourage personal, vertical relations to God and neglect the body of Christ. Our failure to develop a powerful, sensitive corporate ethic is somehow related to our one-dimensional worship services.

In our college community setting we also believe that worship in our church needs to serve as a model. It should have a certain "oughtness" about it. It ought to point our students, for instance, to the rich diversity and endless possibilities of worship. Worship is more than "preachin'" and "sangin.'" It is communion with God through the multi-form avenues through which God is prepared to meet us. Worship needs to assault all our senses, animate our imagination, and challenge our wills. It ought to be fresh, original, and creative. It must also respect convention and tradition. The challenge to do worship in a college community, working with these assumptions, is immense.

Planning for Worship

Our church staff works together in planning worship. We try to plan long range for a full year. We do more specific planning for a quarter in advance, and, of course, very specific planning week by week. The pastor and minister of music usually meet to plan in detail the following Sunday's service. The selection of sermon topic and anthem have been known for weeks. Attention has been given to the church year, the denominational calendar, and special emphases in our own church. We "build" a worship service around a theme. That theme determines the selection of music, the scripture reading or responsive reading, any visual devices we may employ, the nature of the sermon, the pastoral prayer,

even the organ prelude and postlude. We feel every worship service needs to be cohesive. Its various parts need to relate to each other.

The Sunday morning service is moderately formal. The worship service attendance in our college community church is about twice what the Sunday School attendance is. (Other churches may have different experiences at this point, but students are notorious for sleeping through Sunday School). We find that in the college church there are many people who are not church members but who seldom miss worship service. Many of these people come from denominational traditions other than Baptist. Often they are appreciative of worship which makes an effort to go beyond the routine and familiar fare common to churches.

The Sunday evening service is quite informal and an excellent time for experimenting. Our experiments recently included congregational "hanging of the green" on the first Sunday evening of Advent. The congregation was asked to bring decorations for the sanctuary and our families decorated the windows and the front banisters at a certain point in the service. We have also experimented with chanting some of the psalms from the Old Testament.

No single worship service can touch every base. The college church is often more pluralistic than other churches. We find the sociology of our church to be complex and diverse. It is an exciting and sometimes frustrating task to plan worship for the college community church. We do not have definite answers for the task, but it has been a pleasure to mention in these paragraphs some of those things that have proven to be good in our church.