

THE TRUE ROLE OF A WORSHIP LEADER

Growing up as a worship leader and pastor, I thought a lot about worship. I did it a lot. I traveled to lots of environments. I read about leading worship. And I went to worship conferences.

In all that reading and conference going, there was a consistent thread : lists. Lists of “dos” and “don’ts” and “hows,” “whens,” “wheres,” and “whys.”

“Sing songs in a ‘congregational key’.” “Sing songs that are familiar.” “Don’t sing too many new songs.” “Don’t sing too many of your own songs.” “Don’t make it too loud.” Ooooff. It gives me a headache just thinking about the idea of trying to lead people based on the recommendations of someone else who has no bearing on the people I find myself alongside of in the place we are.

But what’s the real danger in all these lists?

It gives worship leaders the perception that

1. there’s a “correct” way to lead worship.

and

2. their goal is to find that “correct” way and work hard to replicate it where they are.

And the lists we have usually indicate the “correct” way to lead worship is to make the environment as easy and accessible as possible. To make it comfortable to the people attending your church. To make it as pedestrian and least-common-denominator-appealing as you can. This is what we’re saying to worship leaders when we tell them to sing songs with simple melodies and a narrow vocal range.

The true goal is to recognize, create and amplify a culture of worship unique to where you are.

People at **our church** in Orlando love singing high notes. They love going for it full on with passion and singing loudly. I can see how that might not work for a worship leader in a brightly lit wooden chapel of 50 people over the age of 70. “Congregational keys” vary as widely as the make up of congregational cultures. That’s why the lists of rules aren’t helpful. Leaders don’t lead well because they follow the latest set of rules. Leaders lead well because they know who they’re leading, where God is going and how those two things might align.

Formulas and rules lead the Church toward sameness rather than unified diversity.

The culture of church music is that the main role of a worship leader is that he or she should spend their time listening to music, ask the speaker what he or she is speaking on and pair those songs with the content of the message. In most churches, there is an expectation that the role of the worship leader is to be an aggregate of the songs being written by a small few around the world and filter those same songs into their congregations at a rate that keeps people from being bored of the old songs but not too quickly that there are too many new songs.

But let me suggest this :

The role of a worship pastor is not to replicate what he has seen or heard somewhere else, but to create a unique culture of worship where he is now.

Worship leaders shouldn't only be leading songs. They should be building a culture of worship that reflects the uniqueness of their locale and congregation. If the worship leader is truly pastoring, it's not because he or she is singing songs that are easy for people to sing. It's because he or she has a finger on the pulse of the move of God in their church and are writing songs (or, even better, leading a team of songwriters) who are writing excellent music that reflects that unique move of God.

This is exactly what is happening in places and congregations whose songs the world is singing. Why are we singing Jesus Culture songs? Because they created a culture in which they didn't simply sing the songs of other people. Rather, they spent time assessing what God was uniquely doing in their congregation and built a culture of putting those things into songs. Then allowed that to overflow into the rest of the world.

There's nothing wrong with doing other people's music in your church, but to truly pastor people through music means using the tool of music to reinforce and introduce the things God is doing and wants to do right where you are.

No one outside your church is writing songs that completely and accurately reflect what God is revealing right now in your church. That's your role.

There are many processes of growth to mature to this point : expecting more of yourself as a worship leader, raising up songwriters, preparing for God to do something unique, shifting the culture to expect new songs and to engage with them. But when we engage in these difficult processes, we see worship take on a whole new level of power and meaning in our churches.

What happens when we create a unique worship culture?

1. We call our leaders to more.

Your role is no longer to simply find good songs. It's not even to only find good songs that fit a theme. It's to truly pastor by recognizing what God is doing, how people are connecting with Him and how worship might stir a deeper level of that.

2. We call our congregations to more.

When our congregations see us engaging more time, effort and energy into engaging with God in the process of writing and preparing of worship, it serves as an example. The congregations who are served by those in a healthy worship culture are called to a higher level of engagement in their own personal spiritual journeys.

3. Music unifies us.

To pastor means to meet people where they are, be with them there and to move them somewhere new. Music has the ability to do this unlike any other medium. Music moves us.

Songs give us the opportunity to make collective declarations.

As we translate the unique move of God in our community into song, it allows us to pastor people into a deeper level of expression of and journey into the things God is doing.

4. Music becomes a catalyst for action.

Songs stick in our heads. Talk about trying to drive a point home or getting people to move into action in their daily lives. There's no better tool than a song that people will be singing throughout the rest of their week. A teacher can teach for 45 minutes, and people might remember a single point. A musician plays a 5 minute song, and people walk away singing the entire thing over and over again.

When we're writing songs that reflect or reveal what God is doing, we help usher people into experience and application.

Leading pastorally as a worship leader doesn't mean creating a comfortable environment. It doesn't mean connecting to the last common denominator at your church. It means going where God is and being willing to take people along for the ride.

It's way less work to keep doing what you're doing. It's much easier to buy the latest worship record, find the hits and play them. People might smile. They may love it. But that's not what they need from you. Get up and do the work of translating what God is doing or wants to do into songs. Everyone, including you, will be glad you

did.

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Check out Cole's brand-new book **Creative Faith: Living and leading with an artist's heart** – a fantastic resource for creative leaders.

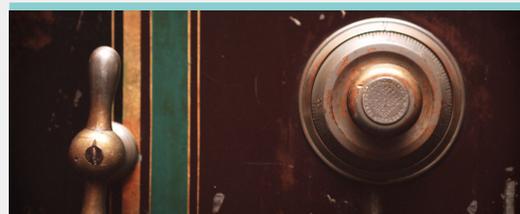
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