

An Idea for Service Preparation

To begin you must know that I see many parallels in the Word between sung and spoken ministry. One clear passage demonstrating this partnership is the grammatical and syntactical parallels between Col 1:28 and Col 3:16. Given that the preached and the sung ministries both have the effect of teaching and admonishing our people I try to view each service as a whole presentation of truth. This helps me to begin with a “big idea” for the service and craft all the elements of the service toward that central message. Then musicians and preacher are partners in ministry, heading the same direction. There are certainly more models than this for service development, some of which I will explore in other articles, but this pattern may be a help to you.

3-4 weeks ahead -

- Get a general handle on where the preaching is going.
- Pick a choir number that we can begin on somewhere “in the same universe” as the message or something that can logically transition to the message. For example, if the message were on Proverbs 23 and the enslaving nature of alcohol you might sequence from the holiness of God and our need to obey Him in our life choices. Obviously not every service can or should be strictly thematic.
- Begin hymn selection
 - ☐ This usually means picking 10-15 hymns, songs, choruses
 - ☐ I usually begin looking outside our hymnal (presently Majesty Hymn). I do this for several reasons:
 - it keeps the creative juices flowing,
 - it gives me special music ideas (discussed below)
 - it keeps me thinking text and direction
 - ☐ I then go to our hymnal resource which I use heavily

1-2 weeks ahead -

- Settle in on congregational songs.
 - ☐ Try to balance...
 - concrete/abstract
 - subjective/objective
 - solid teaching songs/testimony songs
 - prayer songs/declaration of truth songs
 - 1st person/concrete 3rd person.
 - ☐ At this point I try to consider my congregation and their familiarity with and receptivity to the hymns on my list. If the choir number and special are new, the congregational songs rarely are and vice versa.
- Engage the hearts of other musicians.
 - ☐ I call the person scheduled to do “special” music (a term I dislike but use here for clarity) and say “the sermon is on the choir is singing..... do you have any ideas that might coordinate with the service?” Here’s why:
 - It engages the singer/instrumentalist; now they are in the ministry of the Word as a team player.

- It encourages the musician, now minister, to think text not just their favorite sound or song.
- It gives me a chance to “coach” them if the song they are hoping to sing is not where we want to go.
- Sometimes I will suggest a song(s) that might work or even ask them to sing a specific number.
- I have found this a great relationship building process with my people.
- I contact all keyboard players, those involved in video (when applicable), and sound operators about the plans for the service so they are fully informed about where we are going as a team.

Sunday-

We do have a “mic check” on Sunday morning for all special music for the day for one last “look see” at the music, sound folks having a chance to anticipate levels, etc. I also think this is an important time to pray together with the worship ministry team.

I am wrestling with how a prelude “works” right now. Our people are very loud as they enter. Much of this talk is good. We do have an organ (a.m.) and piano (p.m.) prelude right now where I rotate various musicians. Here are some of my musings:

- Organ is almost unknown outside of church and acoustical piano fairly rare as well. Should the first sounds a visitor hears when entering be completely foreign to them? Hmm.
- If we continue with traditional preludes, and that is my tentative plan, I don’t want to discourage the majority of greeting and fellowship that goes on before the service.
- Even if I could legislate a quiet atmosphere, I am not convinced this would be “best.”
- I do think that whether people consciously know it or not an atmosphere is set by the sounds being produced by the musicians. For this reason I believe preludes are still important.
- Because I use a multitude of prelude people, their ministry is not always accomplishing our goals of preparing people for the service.

I know that our purposes for a prelude need to be thought through and the coaching our musicians are important. Perhaps, if you had some time you could give me your ideas about preludes and what Scriptures should speak into this area of ministry. I would appreciate your Biblical wisdom.

Of course, it is the whole of the service that needs our greatest forethought. Consider the concepts for song selection listed below and carefully consider your last 6 weeks of services.

- I. Consider what the Bible says about corporate singing.
 - a. Is the text theologically correct? cf Col. 1:28 and 3:16

As a practical suggestion, paraphrase the text you are about to select and ask yourself if you really want to say that in your service.

- b. Does the text reflect proper balance evident on the songs we see in the Word?
 - i. Revelation vs. Response
 - ii. Concrete vs. Abstract
 - iii. Objective vs. Subjective
 - iv. Prayers, Scripture, Creedal Songs (statement of belief), Praises...

I try to have a mixture of concrete songs of truth, especially scripture songs or songs with strong scriptural allusion, along with songs that can be an expression of current belief. Since most music in the Word is prayer I also try to include at least one song we can sing to God and introduce it that way. There is a subtle difference thanksgiving, praise and worship. Perhaps this is a hierarchy, or a sequential direction. In any case, texts that do all of these should be considered in the overall balance.

- c. We must consider nonverbal communication. Does the music say the text?
 - i. What does this music and text say abstractly?
 - ii. What does this music and text say in this current cultural setting?
- d. Consider the people you are leading. We are not leading singing; we are leading people.
 - i. Remember you can't lead people somewhere you have never been. Make sure that *your* worship is authentically and thoroughly biblical.
 - ii. The music must be both worthy of the Lord and able to help the people we are worshipping with.
 - iii. Make sure that all the music is appropriately sequenced with the other important parts of the service.
 - iv. Ask the question "What direction is the inclusion of this music leading these people?"
- e. Consider the purpose of the service **and then** the music.
- f. Include Biblically mandated items in your overall program, then principles we must flesh out in our ministry.
- g. Include other necessary items (announcements, recognition, welcome, etc.) in tactful ways.
- h. Creatively consider using optional components ("special" music, choirs, ensembles, soloists, instrumental music, visual elements, drama, etc.).

Most importantly remember that “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but spiritual to the pulling down of strongholds.” Every decision must be bathed in prayer, controlled by the Spirit and informed by the Word of God. There is no plan or program that will substitute for knowing and passionately obeying God.