

worshipideas

Problems Transitioning from Traditional to Contemporary

Hi, I'm Don Chapman, the editor of the Worshipideas website and newsletter. I've worked in churches for years as either a keyboardist, music assistant or music director. However, when I left my church job to concentrate fully on my websites and arranging I was freed up from the weekly church treadmill to pursue one of my favorite hobbies: visiting churches!

I hear of traditional churches who've started contemporary services only to see them fail. I've seen it all - I've visited famous megachurches and new, small churches that meet in storefronts, and see common problems. Here are three which can be easily fixed and will greatly enhance your congregation's worship experience:

Problem 1: Plugging praise songs into a traditional format. Contemporary worship is NOT business as usual! Gone are the days of three songs and a sermon, turning to hymn #235 and trying to figure out the bass/tenor/alto part as you watch the song leader wave his arms (who reads music these days, anyway?) Traditional worship is often described as being "horizontal," meaning that we're talking ABOUT God instead of TO God. For instance, many hymns speak of God's attributes ("I Sing the Mighty Power of God.") Many old-time Gospel songs speak of our personal testimony ("Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine.") Of course, there's nothing wrong with this. But contemporary worship music usually directs our thoughts directly TO God - "Here I Am to Worship," "Lord, I Lift Your Name On High." This is an important distinction. Praise songs aren't Shakespeare, they're prayers!

The mindset of contemporary worship is a bit different from traditional. It's more personal, intimate. You'll find greater success with your contemporary service if you build it from the ground up instead of simply plugging praise songs into your traditional service order. Examine every part of your service: what will help or hinder your goals?

A common example are announcements. Either get rid of them by putting them in your bulletin, or bookend your service with them. Put announcements either at the very beginning or at the very end so you can have an uninterrupted block of worship time.

Solution: Realize traditional worship is usually horizontal (singing ABOUT God) and contemporary worship is usually vertical (singing TO God) and plan your services accordingly.

Problem 2: Stopping between songs. If praise songs are prayers, then think of your praise sets as prayer meetings! The traditional service order of separate event after separate event (song, announcement, song, testimony, song, reading, etc.) breaks up contemporary worship flow. George Barna states in his book "The Habits of Highly

Effective Churches" that successful churches have at least twenty minutes of uninterrupted worship.

Think of it this way: people need time to settle in and focus on God. They've had a stressful week and probably have yelled at their kids on the way to church. It will take five minutes of music before most people's minds are cleared and they can even start worshipping.

If an extended praise set is new to your church, don't try 20 minutes of worship right off the bat - work up to it. Start with two or three songs in a row and gradually build up to five or six when you sense the congregation starts to "get it" and begins hungering for more worship.

Solution: Music is the glue that ties your worship together. Choose upbeat songs in the same or similar keys so you can flow directly from one to another without stopping. Find keyboardists and guitarists who can improvise and play quietly under prayers and Scripture readings, then lead directly into worship ballads.

Problem 3: Disrupting the mood. Have you ever planned the perfect praise set, ended with a beautiful worship ballad and a holy hush fell over the room, only to have a pastor/elder/deacon hop up on stage and crack a joke? Holy hushes can make people who don't "get" worship nervous so they tend to crack jokes to break the "tension." I call this "worship sabotage." It happens all the time, and destroys and demoralizes the worship leader who has prayerfully spent hours planning the music to lead people into God's presence.

Solution: Only hand off the worship time to people who "get worship." Don't ask people to participate in leading the service unless they're sensitive to God's leading. If you're required to use elders/deacons on a rotation (taking the offering, giving announcements, etc.) creatively move the offering/announcements to the beginning or end of the service where they'll do the least amount of damage. One person I know who had this problem complained that the pastor was the one responsible for sabotage! Even after explaining the problem, the pastor just didn't understand. In this case I'd suggest encouraging the pastor to give up complete control bit by bit. Help him understand that you want to help take the weight of carrying the entire service off his shoulders by giving announcement/offering duties to others.

And if all else fails and you find yourself continually frustrated and unfulfilled, perhaps it's time to be praying and looking for a new ministry opportunity. Remember, anything worthwhile takes time so don't give up. And don't forget to pray for guidance every day.