Q&A: How does the church move away from the “singing group leader” = “worship leader” model?

Anonymous asks:

How does the church, especially the evangelical/charismatic wing, move away from the “singing group leader” = “worship leader” model?

The same problem exists in the traditional robed choir churches. I recall hearing one Dean talking about the cathedral choir delivering “high quality” worship. I remember my first vicar preaching a sermon telling us that the same word is used for “worship” and “service” in Greek. I think we could do with some teaching on this issue at some point.

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

Thanks for the question.

To get to your final point first. What you describe is a

cultural problem. It's something for which "teaching on the issue" alone is not enough. I can give something of a theoretical and theological response, but in the end this matter is one of the heart, of desire, of the orientation of our lives. It is, absolutely and in fact, a matter of devotion and worship.

I'm reminded of the complaint received by a pastor one Sunday: "Pastor, I didn't really enjoy our worship this morning." The response? "Well, that's OK, we weren't worshipping you."

To be frank, an honest assessment of our motivations for turning up on Sunday morning would probably reveal how self-centred we tend to be. That's not *necessarily* bad; we can come to church seeking relief, solace, or comfort, and while these are self-centred, God loves us and delights to graciously give us good gifts. However, we can also come to have our egos stroked, our angsts papered over, and our privileges decorated in virtue. "I'm not getting what I want from church! I'm not being 'fed'!" can be the genuine complaint of the spiritually hungry soul, or the entitled whinge of an acceptable form of ecclesiastical narcissism. Usually it's somewhere in between.

As a vicar, when I field complaints about church, ("The children were too noisy", "The livestream isn't family friendly", "I didn't know the songs", "The sermon was too long", "The sermon was too short" etc. etc.), I have learned to parse the feedback through this frame. Is it genuine feedback that I really should listen to? (It often is.) Or is it a self-centred demand for a better performance from myself or others? (That happens as well.) I have learned to look for the issue behind the issue. I ask myself, and sometimes the person who's talking to me: "That's interesting. What are the expectations that are not being met? Is it actually my job to meet them?"

This, of course, raises the question of what the "job" of Sunday actually is. Your suggestion is helpful here. Yes,

“worship” and “service” share some semantics, and the original greek words are worth exploring:

> **λειτουργία** (leitourgia), from which we get “liturgy”, relates strongly to the sense of “serving.” It pertains to things such as a military or civic service, or the duty of giving alms to the poor. In a religious setting, the priests in the temple *serve* God, through offering sacrifices or administering other rites and ceremonies. It sounds dry and dusty, but there is a real depth to it. It is right to come to church for spiritual succour and solace, but we also come to serve God and to minister to one another.
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> **λατρεία** (latreia) takes it further. We find this, for instance, in Paul’s exhortation to the Romans. If only we heeded it, Sundays would look a lot different! “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper *worship*.” (Romans 12:1) Here worship is a self-offering, a *giving of ourselves* to God. It is this form of worship that we should be modelling for our children, every day, rather than the consumerism that our generation has bought into.
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> **προσκυνέω** (proskyneo) is a verb and speaks of adoration and devotion. This is worship in the form of a kiss of reverence, or of lying prostrate. In the gospels, many worship Jesus in this way, including the disciples in Luke 24:52 at the time of Jesus’ ascension – “they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” This is the worship of surrender, and *love*, deep love of God.

To answer your question: The extent that our church culture can align with these forms of worship is the extent to which our focus will move away from the “singing group leader.” Rather, the focus will be on a self-offering to God. In fact, the other reasons why we come to church will find their place.

We come on Sunday for **worship**, and also **discipleship** and **fellowship**. *Discipleship* is about having our whole lives taught and shaped by Jesus by the truth of his word and the power of his Spirit. *Fellowship* is about doing that together, spurring one another on to righteousness (Hebrews 10:24-25) and being united around Jesus. All of that is *worship*. And in that sense our "worship leaders" will be our pastors, and prophets, and teachers, and all the other gifts at work.

But in the end, just as we said at the beginning, this is a matter of our collective heart. To make that move would require cultural change, including the need for repentance. Many, if not most, of our churches enable self-centred consumerism. When worship is about me…. If I go to a church *service* so that I can be well *served*… then I will be attentive to how well the *servants* are performing for me. And so I will prefer the high quality choir, or the anointed "singing group leader", and that's where the focus will be. I will value the *performance* because it adheres to my self-absorption.

The irony is, of course, that it's actually in *real* worship, in *the* ministry (leitourgia) of our devoted (proskynew) self-offering (latreia) that worship actually becomes a moment of real fulfilment and self-discovery. I am "fed" by worship when it's not about me, and, consequently, not about the person on the stage.

Musical excellence is not irrelevant, of course, and it's worthy of some investment. But the musical leaders who truly serve (leitourgia) us are marked by humility, and self-effacement (latreia) and turn us to devotion (proskynew), not adulation. It's not easy for them. We love our celebrities, and we will always be attracted to those people through whom we have encountered the presence of God in some way. It is understandable that we will turn to them to seek more of the Lord. We will want to pitch our tents there, as Peter desired to stay on the mountain of Transfiguration. The wise worship leaders will simply echo the voice from the cloud on that day:

“It’s not about you, it’s not about me; here is Jesus… *listen* to him.”

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