Active Participation

Reboot Article for Week 2: Enhance Congregational Participation

Worship is not a spectator sport. It is not something done to us or for us by the folks “up front.” Worship is done by all God’s people in participatory ways that form us into disciples who “go and do likewise” in the world. If liturgy literally means “the work of the people,” then let’s put the people to work! If your worship is more “sit and soak” when it comes to the people’s participation, your reboot may need to include a look at how your worship can be more engaging. I hope the following will inspire you to think outside of the box as you draw people into the action!

“If your doin’ doesn’t dance with your sayin’, you haven’t chosen life.” One of my spiritual mentors, Rev. Cecil Williams of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco wrote this in his book I’m Alive. As a professional dancer at the time I read these words, they hit me hard with the metaphor of dancing life with integrity. It was then that my inklings about using my artistry in worship became full-blown dreams and it wasn’t long before I enrolled in seminary.

These words also have stuck with me through a PhD in worship and ethics. You see, I believe that what we do in worship matters deeply. I believe that we must “practice what we preach” through the actions of our worship. Worship must be a time when we truly embody what we proclaim. In other words, we don’t just talk about hope, peace, reconciliation and right relationship, we come together in worship to “try it on for size.” Do we look and act like what we believe? If we really believe in the priesthood of all believers, do we see all worshipers actively engaged—serving, proclaiming, praising and praying… not just watching the “professionals” do it? The way Jesus gathered a great diversity of people at tables was his way of showing what it was to be a neighbor. We are called to follow his example in worship and then go out into the world and do likewise.

Try this:

1) a few weeks before a series, invite people to a “fill in the blank” on slips of paper, such as “I see hope in ____________” and then fashion these into Affirmations of Hope for each week of the series, so they hear their own words as liturgy;
2) if prayers are always “pastoral” (one person praying on behalf of all the others) try inviting lay persons to pray each week of a worship series (they could be written out if this is more comfortable), or use a format of intercessory prayer where people can lift up names or places for prayer;

3) if you usually receive communion individually at a rail or by intinction, try inviting people to serve one another in small groupings or in a circle, depending on the size of your church.

We must speak of the “deepest things.” My dear friend Nina Reeves was a conference youth coordinator for decades and is a nationally-known professional storyteller. In retirement she continues to be much-beloved by those whose lives she touched along the way. I only get to see her occasionally, but one of her greatest traits is to sit me down, look into my eyes and say, “Let us speak about the deepest things we know right away!” What a wonderful way to see our valuable time together as friends and our time together as the family of God. In worship, we have the opportunity to share something of our life stories with one another as they intersect with our faith Story. And because each person’s experience is unique, sharing our diverse perspectives helps us to learn more about the myriad ways God is working in the world.

Try this:

• use stories as a part of worship team brainstorming about a theme. Ask people what stories from their lives come to mind around the theme;

• during a worship series, invite different individuals to share a story from their lives that is applicable to the theme;

• every once in a while, invite the congregation to share something with each other in pairs or small groupings as a response to the sermon or in the midst of a sermon. I use this with small and very large groups of people and it can bring a level of intimacy to both.

We must “do together!” When my friend Zachary was three-years old, he loved to say, “Do together!” as an invitation to work and play with him. Whether your church has a large professional staff or a couple of part-time folks with a few volunteers, the whole community must hear the invitation to “do together.” When the planning, leading
and participation in worship includes the whole community in all of its diversity, we will be formed as active disciples who know God’s power and presence in all things.

Try this:

• incorporate the visual set-up for a series as the opening action of the first worship experience of the series, inviting people to help spontaneously (which doesn’t mean not-thought-through!). For instance, give someone a piece of cloth to drape on a table any way they want, give someone else a vase of flowers or plant to place on the cloth; give someone else a Bible, another a glass bowl of water, another a candle. No matter how they place these things, it looks GREAT because we all saw it being created on the spot;

• if your choir or band usually does an introit or sung invitation to prayer, for instance, on their own, use a congregational refrain instead for a season. Treat the congregation like a choir, offering more times for them to sing as part of the liturgy;

• if you don’t already, invite new people to help out with worship just for a season (we’ll talk more about this in the third week of the Reboot).

Little Zachary knew that things are more fun and more fulfilling when shared with others. Are you getting the idea that engaging the people can be something different than simply trying to get more folks in the choir or sign up more scripture readers or liturgists?

Ritual Action is one of the best ways to engage people more actively.

We often relegate ritual action to communion Sunday or a once-a-year remembrance of baptism. But there are many more ways to include action, from simple to more complex. One of the most important things to remember is to “break the fourth wall” (a theater term that means we get off the “stage” and into the people). Here are some things I have done:

• invite people to stand and turn to face the center where the acolyte has brought the Light of Christ from the back. This embodies that Christ is the center of our community. Do a call to worship, creed, sung refrain or affirmation from this position.

• invite all the people to raise their hands in the ancient “orans” position during the part of the communion prayer where we ask the Holy Spirit to be poured upon us.
• create “side altars” in the worship space with activities for people to do as meditative music is playing as a response to the sermon and inspired by the theme: writing prayers on a map of the world, lighting small candles, writing regrets on pieces of dissolving paper and placing them in water, planting seeds, tying a ribbon on a walking stick, placing a written prayer in a “wailing wall,” etc.

• invite several readers to lead a litany, each reader having one line

• let the people’s response in a litany be a repeated short phrase so they can participate without their heads in a bulletin and those who cannot read can also participate

• choose readers based on their role or personality that would add a layer of meaning to a reading such as a rambunctious youth reading from the balcony “get you up to a high mountain and shout praise to God!” or a known care-giver reading Isaiah’s “comfort, comfort my people” as they progress down the aisle, laying a hand on several shoulders

A common complaint is that people don’t participate in singing.

There are several possible reasons for this:

• The space isn’t resonant enough and, especially if people are spread out in the space, they won’t sing out because they feel like they are singing alone.
• The instrumentation is drowning them out and if we can’t hear ourselves, we won’t sing out.
• They aren’t being actively and strongly led in the singing.
• The song choices are not conducive to congregational singing. This especially applies to some contemporary music that is written by bands and soloists for bands and soloists (for more on this point, have your praise bands read this from my blog: http://marciamcfee.com/index.php/new-tunes-new-spirit/)

For my suggestions on the antidotes to these things, join me on the Q&A call this Thursday or listen to the recording of it afterwards!