

Some Creative Thinking About Worship Renewal

An excerpt from *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship* by John D. Witvliet

In our work at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, we have been privileged for the last seven years to administer A Worship Renewal Grants Program, which has awarded over 300 grants to congregations in a wide variety of denominations. As grant recipients prepare their proposals, we invite them to consider the following statement:

- “Worship renewal cannot be reduced to a formula or generated by a set of techniques. We invite you to prayerful consideration of the dynamics or hallmarks of worship renewal, which we continue to learn about from congregations:
- Worship renewal is not something that human ingenuity or creativity can produce or engineer, but is a gift of God’s Spirit. Renewal is a gift for which we pray, rather than an accomplishment we achieve.
- Worship renewal mines the riches of scripture and leads worshipers to deeper encounters with the message of the gospel.
- Worship renewal arises out of and leads to the full, conscious, and active participation of all worshipers—young and old, the powerless and powerful, newcomers and lifelong worshipers.
- Worship renewal leads a congregation beyond itself, to give itself away to minister to the needs of the local community and the world.
- Worship renewal happens best in healthy congregations, which are marked by honesty, integrity, unity, and pastoral concern for each worshiper.

Pastoral worship leaders who yearn for renewal begin by asking thoughtful questions about the purpose and meaning of worship before addressing the style or mechanics of worship. A worship committee, a board,

pastoral staff, or worship team might begin by asking questions such as:

- How can we help our congregation to pray more honestly and deeply through the words we speak and the music that we sing together?
- How can we proclaim the gospel message more meaningfully through preaching, music, and the arts?
- How can we practice Christian hospitality in worship more intentionally?
- How can we celebrate baptism and the Lord’s Supper in more profound and significant ways?
- What practices will form our congregation more richly in the contours of the Christian faith?
- How can we improve patterns of communication among worship leaders and between our leaders and all members of the congregation?

These questions will eventually lead to suggestions regarding worship practices and style, but they begin by probing deeper issues about worship.”

A collaborative effort to lead a community in praying the Psalms more intentionally would speak to nearly every one of these basic questions. In working through this volume, it occurred to me that over the past seven years that we have not yet received a proposal (from among over 1500 submitted) that approached worship renewal by attempting to promote praying the Psalms. But what a good idea that could be—with or without grant funding!

Suppose, for example, that a congregation’s leadership:

- chose a balanced diet of fifteen (or thirty!) Psalms,
- looked for contextually appropriate musical settings for each,

- agreed to use one Psalm in worship each week for 6 months or a year,
- featured the Psalms in sermons and educational settings, with people of all ages,
- provided resources for praying those Psalms in personal and family settings,
- prayed those Psalms in pastoral care settings,
- created resources for spiritual seekers that could demonstrate the power of these texts to speak to and from their situation in life,
- engaged local artists, dramatists, and songwriters in preparing creative and thoughtful ways of engaging these texts, and
- used them in any number of other ways of engaged the congregation that its leadership could come up with.

An approach to praying the Psalms need not be complicated or inaccessible. It simply needs to be intentional and pastoral.

So often, worship renewal is approached in North America in terms of programming. We add new worship services, purchase new equipment, and look for more engaging modes of preaching, technology, or singing. These efforts have their place. Yet, if history has anything to teach us, it could be much more fruitful to put our energies into forming congregations through some of the most robust scriptural resources available to us.