

cutting edge

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worth- ship



reports
from the



field

By Libby Harris

A few months ago, a viral video began swirling around Christian circles on Facebook, YouTube, and other social media. The video, produced for and by Christian believers, had originally played as an illustration device at a church conference. It was the equivalent of a “FunnyOrDie” sketch aimed at the contemporary churchgoer.

Playing on stereotypical images of the emergent church worship scene, the video jabbed playfully at hipster worship leaders in skinny jeans, flannel shirts, graphic tees, tattoos, and lip piercings with song lyrics projected on a large screen in debatably hip Papyrus font. Wrapped in satire, the video conveys a lot of truth about Sunday morning worship experiences and a shared anxiety about them. It was a sort of wink-wink

towards a church body, nudging the viewer and saying, “You’ve been there, right?”

While admittedly humorous, this video also highlights a growing trend: People are arriving at a church service half-expecting a prepackaged, formulaic worship that’s about trying to appeal to the masses through failed-hip, contrived, and tired means, rather than genuine adoration of their God.

N.T. Wright describes worship as simply “love on its knees.” But many pastors and church planters find cultivating simple, humble worship to be more difficult than they think.

Worship directors struggle to gather leaders, musicians, and sound crews. They research the latest songs, rehearse until they perfect the performance, and sacrifice hours to make worship happen every week. Soon, the duties and responsibilities of worship leading can overshadow the experience itself. An integral part of any Sunday morning experience, sometimes worship from the heart is given a back seat to stage production, showmanship, and sound systems.

The viral video caused some mild irritation among Christian bloggers who found it mean-spirited. But perhaps they were missing the point: many people have found worship to be nothing more than a Sunday-morning-style rock concert where good volunteers dress up and put on a show for their congregations. For pastors and church-planters, the video poses several questions: Where do we draw the line between professional-quality musicianship and authentic worship? Do we exchange God's presence for a mere presentation?

At North Phoenix Vineyard, Matt Turrigiano approaches worship just like any other ministry. "Like teaching people to pray, we explain to people the process of worship, especially if they haven't experienced it. If you think about it, many church people haven't experienced this. Worship is often treated as a warmup to preaching, or merely a stand-up/sit-down exercise, rather than an experience of the presence of God. Even with time constrictions, we want to clearly explain why we do this, who it is we're worshipping, and how we worship. It's [a process of] baby steps, but it radically transforms us."

Once people have learned the reasons behind worship, Umbaugh stressed the next step in building the process: "We try not to move faster than what people can grasp. Rather than teaching a full song, maybe we'll just do the chorus. Lots of new songs and new lyrics can be overwhelming to people who haven't really been in the church that long. They need a song they can close their eyes to and know the melody."

YOU'RE A WORSHIP LEADER, NOT A PERFORMER. IT IS ABOUT GETTING PEOPLE TO EXPRESS THEIR LOVE TO JESUS

Cutting Edge spoke with several worship leaders from Vineyard churches across the country to talk about the blessings and challenges of the Vineyard heritage of worship: where we've been, where we are, and where we need to go next.

The Balancing Act: Seeker-Friendly and Churchgoer-Challenging

Kate Umbaugh faces a unique challenge. As the worship coordinator at the Denver Hub, part of the multi-site Mile High Vineyard in Colorado, Umbaugh was put in charge of directing the worship for a sister branch of the larger Arvada campus. While Arvada is a wealthy suburb of Denver with many young Christian families, the Denver Hub was created to reach a population that was unfamiliar with church culture.

"That was my own experience," said Umbaugh. "I didn't really experience Christ-worship until I was in my early 20s. So the challenge and the thing I am continually trying to refine [at the Denver Hub] is making worship accessible...and at the same time keeping God at the center, as the focus. We want to be true to worship as something we're called to with passion."

For Umbaugh and her worship team in Denver, reaching the seeking population and inviting them into worship can be a challenge. "Cultivating a love of worship can be awkward at first for people who might not be comfortable with, and/or are new to church culture. Worship at the front end was hard for new people to sit through. Especially if it's 30-35 minutes of nontraditional worship, like the Vineyard's typical style of demonstrative worship, with lifting of the hands, etc. People who have never been to church are generally more comfortable with more traditional songs, like hymns."

Pursuing Diversity, or Breaking Out of the "Music-for-White-Guys-Who-Love-Folksy-Rock-On-Ovation-Guitars" Rut

A common question in worship revolves around the role that diversity plays in the Vineyard movement. Ryan Delmore is a worship leader at Five Cities Vineyard in Arroyo Grande, California. Apart from being a worship leader in his local church, Delmore has been involved in the Vineyard since his teens and has written and released songs (such as "Better Than Life" and "Jesus' Name") included in Vineyard compilations.

"I think the Vineyard worship scene, by and large, has been white-guy folk rock pop music as far as style goes," Delmore observed with more warmth than criticism. "But everyone is so different...It's silly to expect a guy who grew up listening to reggae, or blues, or hip-hop to start playing folky/acoustic songs that someone else has written."

Delmore notes the importance of using differing music genres that reflect the music tastes of the church body. "We live in an iPod culture where we listen to everything from Kanye West to Willie Nelson. The church should embrace that diversity."

Jim Zartman, associate worship director at the Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati, spoke of diversity in worship as "handlebars for people to hold onto" but stressed the importance of authenticity: "The diversity thing is almost code for 'be something you're not.' Worship will always reflect the community you attract. In our community, for example, we have a classical pianist from Taiwan, so we incorporate that type of music. We have some singers from a predominately black gospel church background, and we incorporate that too. But you can't push into

diversity until you have it. Diversity follows friendships. When middle-aged white guys try Fred Hamm because they are told they have to for diversity's sake, it's generally a train wreck. The value is all right, but the approach is all wrong."

Turrigiano's church in North Phoenix is already ethnically diverse, so his focus is on reflecting that in his worship leadership. "We don't want to be something we're not. We want our leadership to reflect our community. Since 45% of our community is nonwhite, about 45% of our worship team is nonwhite."

Raising New Leaders

A major concern for all pastors and church planters is how to approach building their worship team. When starting the worship program at the Hub in Denver, Kate Umbaugh felt the pressure: "It is hard [in church planting] since no one is paid to lead worship. It's volunteer-based, and no one is paid – including myself. Right now, our space is huge, and we have the 6- to 8-hour process of setting up and tearing down every Sunday. It's a huge sacrifice of time. It's hard to know what to ask without being controlling.

"I asked God to show me the priorities to work on within my team and show me how to not worry about the rest. I felt he showed that my priorities needed to be songwriting and empowering others to lead worship. That's where I invest my time and energy, while God takes care of the rest. So far, it's worked really well. It's about relationship within the ministry. When someone comes along whose is new and wants to get involved in worship, we want to serve them and not just use them because we need them."

At the Champaign Vineyard in Illinois, Dan Goulet doesn't believe in "making" worship teams. "We follow Michael Gatlin's I.R.T.D.M.N. model: We Identify, Recruit, Train, Deploy, Monitor, and Nurture worship leaders," Goulet explained. "In almost every service or event, we have two worship co-leaders. The more experienced worship leader can model and continue to give more and more away in this model. It's actually very much how Jesus did it."

Jim Zartman takes a similar approach: "You discover worship gifts in people. You don't do it or create it, but you can feed into it. I look for leaders who a) are passionate and driven and b) have the heart to do it. If you have that – even if the person is rough – they'll be an awesome worship leader. In my church, we have people with mad skills and people with great hearts. But the challenge is to find people with both."

"Raising the team is relational. It's one to one," Ryan Delmore pointed out. "At my church, there are a few guys who love music and love worship. They express a desire to write, and we meet about once a month. After church we go to someone's house and eat. We get together and see what happens. Worship writing is mysterious. It's not like you can turn it on or off, like a faucet. It hasn't been hugely successful yet, but we're starting it. Songwriting that comes from each particular church is so special...even if it goes out and blesses the church as a whole."

Keeping It Authentic

In the process of creating the Sunday morning worship experience, the pressure to create a professional-sounding and engaging set can overshadow the importance of inviting God's presence and leading others to respond. It is perhaps the same sense of consumerism in our popular culture that causes worship leaders to "sell" the experience and worshippers to critique it: "I didn't like that set today. I can't connect to that type of music." Rather than being presence-focused, it can be performance-focused.

Delmore said it's key to remember that "you're a worship leader, not a performer. It is about getting people to express their love to Jesus." Or, as Zartman put it, "It's not about you. The tendency to present professionalism – it's everywhere. But the goal is to get back to presence. It's more about the meal itself than the fancy plates it's served on. It's simply about us being with him."

Turrigiano emphasized, "We don't want to put on a big show. Particularly with the larger churches in America, it's hard to recognize the difference between a weekend service and 'American Idol.' But we need to recognize and fight for the most incredible thing we have, the presence of God. So we do use some technology [in worship], but it can be a fine line...sometimes more manipulative than useful. Don't misunderstand; the better we are musically -- well rehearsed, etc. -- the easier it is for them to lead. But it's about the presence."

Genuine and authentic worship is reflective of community. "The heart of what we're trying to do in Denver is letting our worship be fueled by God and what he's saying about serving our people, our community," Umbaugh said. "Like saying, 'We feel God is saying this is a season of struggle, and we're going to sing songs that reflect that.'"

Worship is also modeled by leaders to the community. "With leading," Goulet pointed out, "the biggest one that I'm going through, and that my leaders are going through, is people-pleasing. You want to help lead people, but you don't necessarily want to be affected by the crowd... If I'm engaged with Jesus, in a vulnerable and personal way, I can invite people into what I'm doing or where I'm going."

Umbaugh reiterated, "I'm not just doing this for the people in the congregation, but it's another [chance] for me to experience God. Unless I'm recommitted and focused on what God is doing in me, people won't get a lot out of it. Learning to worship him is a lifelong endeavor. It doesn't happen overnight. It's a process. That's true for everyone, worship leaders and people in the church."

[END]

key values in worship

A conversation with Casey Corum

Casey Corum is the leader of the Vineyard Worship Task Force and a songwriter and recording artist for Vineyard Music.

Jeff Heidkamp: Let's talk about some big-picture values.

Here's a true cliché: People say that worship is about our whole lives, not just about what happens on Sunday morning. That's true—but Sunday morning worship feels like it matters a lot. It's not quite the same as going to work on Monday. From your point of view, what's unique and important about corporate worship in a church setting?

Casey Corum: Like you said, worship can be bigger than the songs we sing at times we're gathered together — it's really meant to be about our whole life. But I don't think it's automatic, and it can even be a cop-out at times.

My concern is that we can devalue our gathered times. When we use the word "worship," which is shorthand for giving our lives to God or singing to God, I wonder if the word has lost a bit of its good taste just because it's gotten washed out.

From a social perspective, we come from a church culture that used to say worship was

our church service. That's true in a sense; in fact, I just read a recent push-back on this by John Piper, who said that worship isn't just the songs we sing. Preaching is worship too. And he's right.

So we had the colloquial definition of worship as the church service. Then, in the last 30 years or so, worship definitions in the Vineyard and some other churches changed. John Wimber asked, "What does God get out of our worship when we just come here and go through the motions?"

Then some churches started using the word "worship" to describe the first chunk of our service being dedicated to focus on God. Over time, it's come to describe only the singing time or the songs we sing.

That's why this push-back is happening now. So we shouldn't forget the lesson we're relearning, that worship isn't just about the music. There is truth in saying that it's about our whole lives. But I also want to fight for the gathered time where we come together seeking God. It's not solely about the music, but somehow the music is involved. It's a mysterious exchange that happens between us and God. It has just as much to do with the heart as with externals...issues of focus, of our

hearts' intentions.

I don't want to devalue the music itself. I don't want to devalue our gathering time. Yes, those things are the means of grace, and they can definitely get out of whack. But music has been powerful in my own life, and people all over our church movement have testimonies of walking into times of corporate worship and beginning to cry. They say, "I don't know why. Can you tell me what's going on?"

What's happening is that the music is allowing room for the in-breaking of the kingdom of God and for it to come and change us.

Maybe worship is the wrong word. Maybe it's a perfectly good word. I don't know a better word for it.

JH: Could you try to find one?

CC: Some words I think of are perhaps equally well-traveled: "encounter," "in-breaking," "exchange." My perspective is, it's not about just singing songs — it's about singing and believing that someone is listening. There is an expectancy. There's faith. There is so much wrapped into it. It's not just the words, but also that the words come from a seeking heart. All of that is important.



JH: Thinking in terms of the Vineyard community, which aspects and of musical worship are especially important to you? What values are key to you as you lead that kind of worship?

CC: One keyword I think is still relevant is *intimacy*. The Vineyard has also used *accessibility* and *authenticity*. I borrowed these liberally from Brian Doerksen years ago. I still think it was a good idea.

Intimacy

CC: It's good to unpack the word "intimacy." Yes, we should be singing to God, not just about him...but it goes deeper than that, into the heart of where it's all coming from. The expectancy and faith that God is on the other end of the line. At times we can lose that sense of expectancy, which can play out in our practice.

I'm of the belief that God can move in the moment, in a spontaneous way. I also believe that God can speak in advance and we follow that plan "by the book." It's easy to fall to one side of the ditch or the other. But we should always leave room for God to interact with us in the middle of a worship gathering.

Of course, that raises other issues: the timing of service, the quality of musicality, the song

choice, and other things.

JH: You're not saying that spontaneity is in itself a virtue — is that right? Just because something is spontaneous doesn't make it better. But there is something about an openness to that spontaneity that speaks to some kind of faith and belief that there is a living God who can do whatever he wants.

CC: Right. And that experience becomes conversational. We don't come into any conversation with a script. We respond to what the other person says back to us. If there's a rote or going-through-the-motions piece of what we're saying, maybe it's not really a conversation. So when God wants to do or say something unexpected, there is a place for working that out.

It doesn't mean our work should be completely unplanned or spontaneous! But at the times we truly respond in a spontaneous way, it's potentially more connected to what we're actually thinking or feeling or believing in that moment. It's an openness.

I suppose we can be spontaneously false as well. But there is something kind of real and visceral about it: "This is what I am dealing with in this moment, with God, right now."

JH: Could you substitute the word "relational" for "intimacy"?

CC: I think so, yes.

JH: That helps me a lot, because I stumble on the word "intimacy." In my head it means that things have to be soft and people should be crying. But it should also mean engaging in a relationship. We're going back and forth, talking and listening and responding. I can get my hands around that.

CC: I'll walk out on a ledge for a second. Without canonizing everything that I think is equally as cool as what's happening within the Vineyard, I think our values pertaining to worship music can be seen in some external pieces of great art.

There is something about a connected performance. People tap into YouTube performances, for instance. YouTube has created great "in-the-moment" engagement with its audience. It can create moments of connection with the Divine.

There are moments in great art where we see this saying come to life: "Some things are better caught than taught." I can point at these moments when I see them.

A recent musical example I can think of is the video circulating on Facebook of Robert Plant and the Band of Joy. The song is “Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down.” But it’s done in an Alison Krauss and “Raising Sand” style. I watched the video, and there was this huge level of engagement. I’m not saying all the members in the band were worshipping God, but they were really connected to each other. They were connected to the song. And we, as watchers observing it, are wrapped up in that as well. I could definitively point to that video and say, “This has something extra.”



Robert Plant and the Band of Joy
“Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down”
www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnVYhto1q-Y?

There are numbers of moments like that. Another recent moment for me was attending a Mumford & Sons concert. I know Marcus Mumford, and maybe I can say that he has struggled with this or that concept, knowing the direct seedbed of all that. But even if I hadn’t known anything about him, it was one of the most powerful times of worship I’ve had, period.

I know the Vineyard acknowledges there is room for that kind of thing outside the church walls.

All of this is a roundabout way to say that there can be clear communal moments with each other and with God in unexpected places. We call that “worship,” which is right. But if you go back to that place and try to do the same thing again, it may not work. Those moments can sometimes be “lightning in the bottle” moments.

JH: Here’s something I often think about ministry times and the worship service: To me, what truly makes it worship is admitting that sometimes it might be a little boring. That’s because we are actually depending on God to do something. But he’s free, and he won’t always exactly do it. In those times, I feel a little glad, because it means we’re not forcing anything. We’re not forcing emotion from people. It just means that God didn’t do exactly

the thing we wanted this time. But it’s still good. It’s still worship.

Accessibility

JH: You mentioned accessibility in worship as well. Could you talk about that?

CC: A major component of music is providing people with a “way in.” That ties in with the recent Vineyard dialogue about multiethnic ministry and reaching out beyond our own stylistic and racial comfort zones. But there are certain technical aspects to accessibility as well. If part of our goal is to allow people to sing corporately, there are technical things we need to take into consideration.

This goes a little deeper: We are not primarily gathered to have our own individualistic moments. The band is there as servants. The worship leader is there as a servant. All this can have technical and physical ramifications. It also has spiritual ramifications: urging people to come ready, come listening, come expectant...as I mentioned.

The musicians try to prepare other people to be faith-filled and expectant too. They work to set the stage. So you must consider some issues. What might you be doing that is leaving people out? Are there ways you are doing music that is creating barriers? How can you remove those barriers? Do you need to build a wheelchair ramp up the stairs? Do you need to diversify the language, or diversity the sound, or diversify the ethnic makeup of the team without lowering the hurdle?

JH: It strikes me that my own church has become diverse in age as the Vineyard becomes a multigenerational movement. We have to realize that “accessibility” will mean different things to different people. There will be compromises about volume and song choice and song style and language.

CC: Yes! And we should honor previous generations without leaving out the young ones. As our own movement ages, that gets more challenging.

I am about to lead worship for a group called Christian Churches Together, which is a group the Vineyard is part of. It’s an ecumenical group that bridges liberal and conservative denominations. It has pulled in church leaders from what’s

loosely termed the “five different faith families”... classical Protestantism, African-American tradition, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and evangelical Pentecostal.

Many times in ecumenical groups, there can be some watering down and trying to meet in the middle. That’s the opposite of what we’re talking about with this group. They wanted the Vineyard to come and be the Vineyard.

Everyone does their own thing when it comes to the worship time. When the Russian Orthodox people lead, everyone worships Russian Orthodox-style. It is probably the most diverse group of people I have ever worshipped with in my life. It’s everything from Pentecostals to the Catholic priest in his full regalia; the Russian Orthodox bishop in his robe and with his long beard.

Here’s how this plays into our own movement: The more diverse the Vineyard gets, the more challenging it will be to find the common ground... to remove the barriers and let people in.

JH: It’s good to remember that it’s going to have to change over time. Otherwise the form or the value “hardens.” People start saying, “It has to sound like this.” Then you lose the idea of simply letting people in.

CC: When we think of the movement or the Vineyard church as a whole, it’s interesting, because there is a lot of musically broad diversity from church to church. Maybe one church is very gospel in style. One church is straight-up alternative rock. And one church has more of a country thing.

From a regional perspective, it makes sense. There are different parts of the country and different population groups. But we can go beyond marketing sensibilities and just let our artists be who they are. That leads us to more musical authenticity.

Authenticity

JH: That could be the trickiest part to define. Talk about what you’re thinking when you say authenticity.

CC: We talked about coming ready and honestly before God with an open heart. But there’s another piece. We’re allowed to be who we are. Even without thinking of the specific

musician playing or singing at the time, there is something generally powerful about individual people expressing themselves. What they believe. What they think. What their voices sound like. What their fingers do on a particular instrument. There is something profound about people being who they are.

You can see and feel the value of intentionality. Bert [Waggoner] sent a letter out recently, talking about all the fullness of tension that we potentially live in. It's hard to live in tension. But that's the beauty of thoughts and ideas pulling and pushing against each other.

Speaking of these artists...Robert Plant and Mumford & Sons and others...part of the connection I think we're dialing into is that these people are being fully alive and fully themselves without holding back. They are letting their true selves be shown.

JH: That could go back to accessibility too, because the musician has a form of self-expression...but he's got to live that out in a way where other people can join him to produce intimacy.

CC: Right. There is something to be said for that, especially as we try to tackle different styles or different moods. There is nothing more hollow and inauthentic than people trying to do something that's just not "them."

I believe people need to exercise the muscles they have without making every single thing push toward this multiethnic conversation. I think you can exercise certain muscles that maybe you don't exercise as much. For me, maybe that is a blues-y gospel sort of edge. But, if I don't have those muscles, or if they are more in a classical vein, I think there is something that communicates beyond style and beyond my personal preferences.

When I see somebody being herself and coming through powerfully and artistically, it's beautiful. I can appreciate it. I'd rather see that than someone trying to do what she thinks she has to be for somebody else. We shouldn't change our playlist or tweak to the point where we are potentially losing ourselves in the midst of it.

Considering the Questions

JH: When it comes to worship, everything changes all the time. Every time somebody

plants a church in a place, it has a worship team, and those team members are trying to figure out what intimacy, accessibility, and authenticity looks like for their specific place.

What might be some false starts, in your experience? And what are good steps to take as people try to embody these values in a new place? How should they navigate the new tensions?

CC: One negative thing that's happened in recent years is the growth of a "top-40" church culture. It becomes easy to grab onto the latest record and try to duplicate it. For better or worse, even a church plant doesn't have to do quite the heavy lifting, musically speaking, that people had to do years ago.

But maybe we should actually do some heavier lifting. Let's not just take the popular song on the radio. Or maybe we take it, but we think about it a little bit. Let's exercise our creative muscles, consider who is coming into our church, and pray about it. You can do songs that are on the radio that are going to work, since people generally know them already (depending on their cultural choices).

But consider this: Are those songs saying something that you want to say to God? That's a basic question that I ask when I am going to introduce a new song. After that, think about who you have on your music team, think about who your congregation is, and don't be content to take a song at its face value.

There will be some wrestling with all of that. People who are not the most skilled musicians will counter, "I can't just reinvent something." But you probably shouldn't be just another cover band anyway. It's easy to be good at that. It takes a lot more intention not to do that.

The questions people ask when they begin a church plant are the same questions they should ask themselves over time: "Are we making things accessible to others? Are some things we're doing getting in the way? Are we being authentic before God? Are we actually being ourselves? Are we allowing those expressions to come through? Are we engaged? Are we leaving room for God to break in? Do we actually believe that God is listening? Do we believe the things we are singing?"

JH: Here's my last question. Many non-Vineyard people read this magazine, but are there some

worship music trends in the Vineyard that you especially like or that you have been reflecting on lately?

CC: Something I really like is the rise of indigenous music and songs. In many ways, that's simply following the trend of our music culture in general, kind of like the rise of the indie band in recent years. It makes it more challenging for us at Vineyard Music, but I like it.

People are exploring new styles and also local expressions; handcrafted worship instead of mass-produced worship. That's exciting. Of course it makes it harder to go to a larger conference and pull together a common hymnbook. We still have our top-40 chart! But it's not quite as "top-40" as it used to be. So it's a double-edged sword, but all of this is alive and good.

I think we may find the next big worship song, the next song I really want to sing to God, coming from unknown people finding who they are in God and expressing it. It's easier and easier for people to record now. So that's an interesting, exciting trend.

I also feel that maybe there is an ebb and flow in the spiritual life. There has been a move away from the performance-oriented or "soulless" presentation of corporate worship music. There is a hunger and something starting to happen. People are saying, "I want to go deeper with this."

It's almost like a throwback to the early Vineyard excitement. With these new generations, it's like a first-time discovery. Lots of these young people grew up with drums and electric guitars in church — that's not especially groundbreaking anymore — but it's something more than that. It's the encounter. Young people are saying, "Wait a minute, this is life-keeping. I want to give my life to this."

That's what happened to me initially. It goes back to why I don't want to lose the music, the gathering together. There was a drawing and a pulling in through the music. I am encouraged by what I think I am seeing in the Vineyard movement — an increased hunger.

[END]



how leaders grow worship

Insight from Dan Wilt

Dan Wilt is the Learning Community Director of WorshipTraining.com, which provides online and live training programs for the contemporary church. He is an internationally respected worship leader, songwriter, author and trainer. Dan has been the Director of Vineyard Resources in the past. He lives with his family in Nashville, Tennessee.

What is your general picture of the current community of worship leaders?

Let me say that I love the church, and I love worship leaders and pastors. I love the gifts given to us in the contemporary worship experience. I'm a person who sees the flowers in a garden before the weeds. But there are certainly particular "weeds" that linger in our worship community, choking and disorienting many young and old worship leaders. So it's worthwhile to focus on those weeds; what must be done with intention and focused resources as we move into 21st-century worship.

After over 20 years of being a worship leader, training worship leaders, and caring for the spiritual formation of worship leaders, I am more convinced than ever that the young worship leaders of today – but also other pastors and leaders – need training in the fundamental concept of what worship is truly about.

What would you say that is?

If worship is really all we mean it to be, trust it to be, and expect it to be, then it could be the most important word in human language. There is currently so much white noise surrounding the word "worship." We give equal weight to words like "music" and "allegiance" when we talk about worship. As a result, most worship leaders in church life can't see the forest for the trees. This is a grave problem.

Worship does include music, but music is an expression of something that may or may not exist outside of it. Worship is an infinitely bigger idea than the music we often define it by in our contemporary worship settings.

Without that fundamental issue settled, along with some thoughtful training on the vast topic of worship, young worship leaders tend to believe that what they are working toward creating is great music and some experiences that make people warm toward God.

But we're not. We are engaging in a spiritual act of self-offering in response to God's great love. And music happens to be one of the vehicles through which we do that. There are a thousand other vehicles as well; we just happen to have had a worship renewal in the church in our day related to music.

Are there consequences that have come from that?

The renewal has been a gift, certainly. But we have over-emphasized musical renewal to the point of confusing a generation of Jesus-disciples. Worship leaders are trying to mimic form without reflecting on the content of worship. They work toward getting great sounds and creating beautiful moments in

gathered worship...but they often do so without a strong context in their minds.

What is the best way to address key training elements that creative leaders need?

The most important issues to be addressed are these: the meaning behind the gathered worship experience, worship theology, worship values, and the heart of the one leading gathered worship.

As I have trained new worship leaders through the years, I always begin with 1) an exploration of worship's meaning and theology, 2) a reflection on the vast resources of worship history, and 3) a foundation in worship values and leadership.

Worship theology should address the nature of God (Creator, King, Trinity, Savior), the nature of the human beings who worship (sub-creators, image bearers, community builders and salvation storytellers), and then the nature of gathered worship itself.

Worship history must remind us that music is just one of the many worship languages the church has spoken throughout the ages. The worship languages of time (daily, weekly, yearly and lifetime expressions of worship), space (architecture and environment), public prayer, public scripture reading, sacramental actions (baptism, the Eucharist, foot-washing, the Kiss of Peace, high fives), visual art and music have all been vital ways that we respond to God corporately and express loving surrender to him.

Worship values can reorient worship leaders to vital discipleship themes that must shape corporate worship: intimacy, integrity, accessibility, cultural connection, and nurturing a Kingdom expectation as a leader.

Once some of these ideas are in place and are stirring conversations in the worship leader's mind and heart, I find it much easier to start talking about music, creativity, visuals or lighting.

The reality is, our surveys and other surveys yield all the same answers. Every church worship team primarily seeks musical and creative training. After this "felt need," they want practical, technical training in everything from sound to hip visual worship

to songwriting. But I'll challenge these needs. I don't believe what is wanted is actually the first thing that is truly needed. What we need are theologically reflective, creatively dynamic, values-rich, and historically/culturally aware worship leaders. That's what keeps me up at night.

What other advice would you give to pastors or worship leaders?

If I had the ear of every worship leader and pastor at this moment on earth, I would say this: We need to prioritize inspiring passionate worship leaders who are musically strong, richly inspired and innovative – by giving them the time, opportunity, and resources to reflect on what the human worship story is really all about.

I've met thousands of great musicians, artists and very effective worship leaders. But I've met few who have given their lives to also be astute in ministry skills, their own spiritual formation, and their understanding of the holistic nature of worship. If we can begin to care as much about that worship leader's formation as we should the formation of the lead pastor, then we may actually begin to crack the code on the church impacting the postmodern world through the arts.

How can church planters and senior pastors better equip worship leaders in their churches?

Every pastor and planter I know has a world of needs at their door, needs that knock hard every day. Energy is as scarce as time and money. There is often an ache in their hearts to see the worship life of their communities – and themselves – rise to the richness of which they have dreamed.

But here's the rub: It takes time, resource and energy to equip a worship leader. If the worship music and arts component of Sunday services are going well, they divert time, energy and resource to building up weaker parts in the church's gathered worship life.

The focus of equipping begins with a firm, clear and unrelenting decision in the heart of the pastor: "If I want us to grow rich in our worship life together, I must invest something into the equipping of my worship leaders. If I don't, we'll get short-term results that will fizzle out when the first big change has to occur in our community."

I'll speak from my 20 years as a pastor:

The best thing a pastor or church planter can give its worship leader is a ticket to get some education and spiritual development from like-minded creative leaders. Expecting them to learn in the same way (and by the same forms and approaches) as any other ministry leader just won't work in the long run. Creative leaders need a different approach to their development. Equipping needs to be relational, story-based, metaphor-rich and even slightly geeky. Yes, that includes cool technology.

So, what do we do? We typically bring in live guests (which can be fantastic, I might add) for a shot in the arm and some quick discussion about the needs of the worship leader. After shelling out that cash, we hope for the best in the future. In hard economic times, we even back off of the live events and trust God to keep us all inspired by less costly means.

Value development. Expose your worship leaders to other great musical leaders. Pastors must think like investors, not buyers. The skills of your worship leader will gather people. The heart and mind of your worship leader will keep people and disciple a healthy community for a long time.

[END]

worship training

WorshipTraining (www.worshiptraining.com) is a completely online training program for worship leaders and teams. We train your worship teams under your direction. The program was designed by worship leaders, for worship leaders. We empower your church's worship ministry with engaging educational curriculum in an online learning community, including over 5000 worship leaders and musicians from over 50 countries and denominations.

Six worship values comprise the core of our Essentials Courses. We have an entire 3 Year Training Plan for churches to implement, and we provide all the resources through downloads, streaming and social technology.

Hundreds of instrument tutorials (often the "felt need" of worship teams) are all ready to be learned online, in high and low resolution formats for projecting on screens or using on a laptop. There are over 30 elective courses (e.g. "The Role Of The Background Vocalist" and "The Role Of The Drummer") which address both heart and skill issues in your band. For example, one video is called "How Do I Care For My Attitude As A Musician?" How many worship leaders wouldn't want to forward that to their bands?

Anyone can join for free, and access great training tools. To access all of our courses and streaming formats for using the Media, a church or individual can become a member and purchase a very inexpensive yearly subscription.

We have over 1200 video learning segments, soliciting insight from everyone from N.T. Wright to Brian Doerksen to Kathryn Scott to Paul Baloche to Tim Hughes to Jeremy Begbie of Duke University Theology and the Arts. Worship leaders, artists, pastors and academics all contribute. Individuals or teams grow together in your local church.

Whole Essentials 4-week curriculums can be downloaded and used as curriculum in your church. Some of the best worship training DVDs available today are all there, online (e.g. Vineyard Music's "What Is Worship?", "Leading Worship," and "Songwriting For Worship").

For less than the cost of sending one person to one worship conference each year, our annual church membership gives your worship leader and teams all the training material and experiences the church could need. We come and do live training as well, which can be irreplaceable. The value is far beyond the cost. Our current subscription prices are very low for local churches, due to the challenges of the recession.

A close-up, low-angle shot of a wooden piano keyboard. The keys are illuminated with warm, golden light, creating a soft glow. The perspective is from a low angle, looking up at the keys, which recede into the distance. The lighting is dramatic, with deep shadows and bright highlights on the keys and the wood of the piano.

worship
basics
for
church
planters

A conversation with Steve Nicholson

Cutting Edge: There are new church planters who have never been on a worship team, never led worship...and now they need to start thinking about it. Where should they begin?

Steve Nicholson: Figure out your basic worship philosophy: "What are we doing here, and who is it for?" There are several aspects to that.

One goal we have for worship at our church is that it is participatory. A big goal is to get wide participation. We want everyone singing together as much as possible. That turns into an immediate goal. It's not so much about the performance as it is oriented toward what gets a group going. So the songs you choose must be singable by the average person.

Another aspect of worship philosophy is, how are you going to handle the people who have never been in church before and then come through the door? The lyrics must be understandable without somebody having to know Bible terms or religious lingo. For example, we don't sing songs about the Lion of Judah, because that won't make any sense to some people. They might think, "What is this? Some kind of cult that worships lions?" So we don't do that.

If you're going to do a song that has an obscure word or a biblical reference, either don't do it, or explain ahead of time what it's about. Once in a while, a worship leader can get by with putting an asterisk

in the lyrics and then something at the bottom that explains what it is. But the point is, you must consider all these things. What are your requirements for the worship team? Do they need to be members? Do they need to attend the church at all? Are you going to pay them?

There are a lot of churches that pay all their musicians. You receive a certain quality when you do that, but you also give up certain things when you do it.

CE: Many non-musicians don't understand how complicated music is. There are instruments and sound systems and lyrics and chords and rehearsals. How can we bring this whole set of issues to their awareness, particularly on the technical side?

SN: The more people that are involved, the more difficult any job is going to be. In particular — for example, with sound systems — it's important to consider whether a key value your church is going to have is volunteer usability. When you're making those decisions, you may not want to buy a sound system that is so complicated that only a professional could run it.

Usually it's better to have something that's both simpler and more limited in what it can do. If it's easy, you can train volunteers to use it. By and large, volunteers are who you're working with unless you get

to be a really big church. If you're Willow Creek, it's not an issue, but it is for just about everybody else in the universe. Those are important questions.

Also, the worship leader is probably the most important part. A pastor needs to understand that a worship leader leads people into worship with his voice — not with his instrument.

A worship leader might accompany her voice with an instrument, but there are many very good worship leaders who actually don't play an instrument. And you don't have to have somebody who plays something. Far more important is the ability of somebody to worship "on the outside," so to speak...a person who can emotionally connect with a group of people such that she draws the people into worship.

Some people are excellent musicians, but they can't do that. Being able to play an instrument fantastically doesn't mean you can be a worship leader. Even if you can sing fantastically, it doesn't mean you can be a worship leader. There is a very particular emotional relational component that is absolutely essential. That is far, far more important than the musical capability.

Now certainly, if a person can't sing at all or they can't hold a note, that's a pretty significant inhibition! But you just need to understand what you're looking for.

The best worship leaders are able to have just the right touch of not just singing, but also the right words, the right exhortation, the right prayer just at the right moment. They stick things in at certain places, not only between songs, but sometimes in the middle of a song. They do things that emotionally impact the group and draw them deeper into the worship. If you can find somebody who can do that, then you have gold.

CE: Is there a way to train people in those things?

SN: I have never been able to train somebody to do that. They've either got it or they don't.

CE: They can get better?

SN: They can, mostly by hanging around somebody who is better, and sometimes by gaining confidence. Occasionally it's just a confidence issue. Maybe someone is just not used to being in front of people. But in general, somebody who has difficulty relating to other people emotionally is probably never going to be able to get there.

CE: That said, let's talk about quality control. When a church is smaller, the quality can typically be lower. It generally increases as the church gets bigger, and there have to be trade-offs. Sometimes there have to be difficult conversations. What does a pastor have to be ready to think through and do as the church is growing?

SN: I think the biggest thing is that you should never make long-term promises to anybody. Maybe have people join a team for a set term. At the end of the term, you have to decide whether you're going to "renew" with them or not.

Ask them, "Would you consider being on the worship team for the next six months?" The key is "*for the next six months.*" Maybe this is where pastors and leaders fall off the wagon. But after the musician says yes, you should send a letter or e-mail back that reiterates what you said: "My understanding is that you've agreed to do this for the next six months," etc. Then keep it on file. Six months later, you can pull it out and say, "Our agreement was for six months."

That's generally good advice for dealing with any kind of commitment that might be ticklish in the church. Have the conversation. Then put the conversation in writing right away so that the person has the record on the front end, rather than a cloudy memory six months later.

CE: In the relationship between a pastor and worship leader, tension and even a sense of over-dependence can sometimes exist — especially with a pastor who doesn't have musical experience and who relies on the music leader. How can you work to set up this relationship in a healthy way?

SN: I'll say two things. First, the biggest thing that leads to tension with pastors is when there is not a clearly articulated philosophy of worship. What happens is that the pastor tries to micromanage worship: "Show me your set list." "Tell me exactly what you're doing." "Don't sing this song — but do sing this one." That generally creates conflict.

The most important way to avoid conflict is to clearly articulate your philosophy. Lay down some lane boundaries. For example, you might agree that songs have to be singable and understandable.

The goal is to get everybody participating in worship. Your boundaries are simple, basic things. But if you can agree on them, many conflicts go away right there. I think sometimes pastors micromanage because they haven't actually stated the common philosophy. But worship leaders are generally artistic people. And artistic people have a tough time when someone else is trying to micromanage them.

On the flip side, the second thing I'd say is, sometimes the problem is the worship leader. The pastor has simply chosen the wrong person.

Occasionally, I've heard statements which indicated that a few worship leaders felt like the main purpose of their worship was self-expression. It was the self-expression of their artistic abilities. I would immediately say to them, "Then this is the wrong business. This is not where you belong, because this isn't about your self-expression. It's about you facilitating a group's expression."

In a very real sense, the worship leader needs to be more pastor than musician.

CE: When would you advise starting to pay a worship leader?

SN: I would pay somebody when we've developed enough where we have multiple worship teams that need pastoring and training; where there are now three, four, maybe five actual worship leaders. I'd pay somebody to train them and coach them and so forth. That's what we pay people for in the church in general. We don't pay people to lead. We pay people to coach people who lead.

CE: There are so many opinions about worship. Opinions come from the people in church. They come from the outside. They come from other worship leaders. Early on in a church, especially, when there are so many ideas being tossed around, how do you weigh things? How do you know which opinions to take seriously?

SN: Someone leading worship needs to have a pretty thick skin, because it's very typical to get at least a couple of comments every week. "I went to heaven. That was the best worship ever. I loved the way that song went." And two minutes later, a different person will come up and say, "I couldn't worship at all. I hated that song. It was terrible. Please don't ever do that song again."

It's really a no-win scenario. Trying to please everyone's worship taste is a losing battle. So you have to decide up front not to do that. The only measure that counts is widespread participation, and the only way you can measure that is by looking.

Look at people. Look at their bodies. Look at their mouths. Are they singing? Are they participating? Look at these things, because likes and dislikes will kill you.

CE: If the main value is participation, you may have to bring that in gradually — correct? For example, you might also be working on a degree of ethnic diversity or theological diversity.

SN: I've certainly done that. I'm not afraid to challenge people to stretch their "worship muscles." In a sense, it's like introducing a new song. When we introduce a new song, I understand that participation will be low at first. But we're looking for it to get picked up. And there will always be early adopters. But that's a reason why we don't do new songs all the time.

I generally think that one new song a week is probably the limit that you want to do. That way we stretch people a little bit, but they still get to have something familiar the rest of the time. You can stretch people, and you can introduce new things a bit at a time, but your goal is still participation.

CE: That's the overriding goal.

SN: Yes...that they will worship God.

CE: In the last few decades, how have you seen worship music change? And where do you see it going?

SN: Thirty years ago, the kind of worship we were doing in the Vineyard at the time was very new and revolutionary. That is no longer true. Many churches do the same kind of worship. You could walk into a Presbyterian church or a Catholic church or a Baptist church and, in many cases, hear much the same kind of music. There are still some really old-fashioned, traditional churches still out there, but not very many.

The concern is that it has all gotten very commercialized, particularly in the last 10 to 15 years.

With the commercialization has come a tremendous loss of creativity. There is this mainstream taste that everything commercial caters to, and that's all you ever tend to get.

Even if somebody comes up with something really good that's different, how do you find out about it? It's difficult. Someone can put it on YouTube, but how do you find this needle in the haystack? Sometimes it can be harder for creative people to get a hearing. Maybe young people today seem to be a bit slower at putting their own style of music into worship songs than my generation was.

But then again, maybe it's more complicated because there really is not just one style anymore. The flip side is that some things are easier. Again, you can do songs on the web, on YouTube, and so forth. There is a positive side to that too.

CE: It seems that in your generation, the music style was probably 200 years behind, and your generation of the Vineyard got it up to speed! Now, for us, it's still relevant, even if we haven't put our complete young-people stamp on it. It's still rock music.

SN: Yes, maybe it doesn't need to be as revolutionary now.

CE: And now good worship music exists without us having to be quite as creative. Modern worship's not bad...even when it's kind of bad.

SN: I think that's a significant change in the past few decades. It has its pluses and minuses.

One other thing is this: I don't think we have enough worship music that caters to men. I think the general repertoire of available worship music leans pretty heavily on the "Jesus-is-my-boyfriend" concept. I think it can leave many men kind of cold. The Vineyard's tradition leans to intimacy, but then it also might mean it leans towards the feminine side.

CE: I don't want to kiss Jesus at all.

SN: Right! I, at least, find that a little difficult to relate to. My feeling is that men need songs they can yell to.

When you think about where men sing outside the church, it's at football games, or soccer games. They'll sing fight songs. Sometimes in armies, men would sing. But it was a particular kind of singing. It was war songs. Fighting songs. That's something we can work on. We need more songs you can yell to.

The overriding goal is for everyone to worship God.

[END]

global worship



An interview with David Ruis

David is a well-respected worship leader, songwriter and communicator who has planted Vineyard churches in Canada and the U.S. with his wife, Anita. Cutting Edge sat down with David to discuss how Vineyard values relating to worship can be translated across cultures.

Cutting Edge: Even though you've been somewhat of a legend in the Vineyard when it comes to worship, you've never allowed yourself to grow comfortable there. Where has God been leading you over the past few years?

David Ruis: I haven't stopped traveling as a worship leader and speaker. But God has slowly been putting a calling on my life to plant another church – specifically, a faith community in northeast Hollywood named Basileia. It's a gritty urban environment, but we've been in the public arena for the last nine months. We're having a blast.

CE: How did you originally connect with the Vineyard and with Vineyard worship?

DR: My roots are in a very conservative denomination in Canada. I was classically trained in voice and piano, but music didn't seem to be really relevant to ministry for me. Personally, it paled in comparison to my idea of preaching. But when I began planting my first church many years ago, there were some paradigm shifts. I had been in more of the cessationism camp. But my theology became more robust, and I embraced the presence of the Holy Spirit working in the community. There was so much of that happening that the musical expression of worship became inescapable.

I encountered Vineyard worship early on in this paradigm shift. I was trying to find music that our community (which had a big new Christian population) could relate to and something I was also comfortable leading. I was drawn over and over to Vineyard songs. Vineyard music became essentially the core of what we explored liturgically.

CE: You have a reputation for being passionate about seeing God's church established throughout the developing world. Where did that come from?

DR: We planted a Vineyard church in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1995. One of my central prayers during that time was for our church to have a relationship connection with someone outside of North America.

In fact, what happened was this: I was on my way to Winnipeg to begin the church planting process. My truck was loaded with everything we owned. Then I met a young man of Bhutanese descent who was from northeast India.

It seemed clear that the Lord had set up this connection. Two weeks after our first public service in Winnipeg, I went to northeast India and Nepal, exploring the potential of a mission partnership. We kept things very relational. Over the years, we developed a more structured procedure for church planting, education, and justice initiatives there. It was based on our friendship with people there, but also on the connection that comes from being part of a global Vineyard family.

CE: How has the initial work in Nepal and northeast India developed?

DR: It's been 13 years since the first Vineyard was planted in Nepal. Today there are 15 of them all along the Himalayas. In India there are also around 15 Vineyards, several of them in the northeast corner closest to Nepal.

CE: When we talk about our core worship values as a movement, how realistic is it to expect that we can reproduce these values in other cultures?

DR: The beauty of being a "centered-set" movement is that pretty much all of our values are translatable across culture. In fact, when we are not trying to emulate one particular style or sound, it's an adventure to see how our values find expression in various cultural settings.

CE: So how can a core value such as "intimacy in worship" be translated across cultures so that it resonates in a reserved cultural setting like Finland as well as a far more expressive culture such as Jamaica?

DR: It's only difficult to translate "intimacy" when you define it as a form rather than as a value. In other words, the value of "intimacy" doesn't find its expression in any particular form or style or tempo. Instead, intimacy is about a believer making an authentic heart connection to the Father. That can happen through any form of music, across all cultures.

But it needs to be authentic to the particular culture, or else that heart connection probably won't be there.

It can look so different from what we're accustomed to or what leads us personally toward a heart-connection with God: "How can a rock worship set be intimate? This can't be intimate!" But it can if you measure intimacy as a deep connection between the person and God. For us, this requires that we listen and pay attention to entirely different dynamics in relationship and community than what the "program" usually entails.

It's important to wrestle out the things that are more about kingdom culture than about our own culture. Then you must fight to see those things expressed as part of a distinct liturgy and worship. If our immediate culture can enhance or reflect kingdom values in particular musical expressions, then those expressions are appropriate. If they're in contradiction, or they're stifling, then give way to the Kingdom instead.

CE: Are there any parallels to how Vineyard worship developed here in the U.S. and Canada with how you see it developing overseas?

DR: It's hard to draw too many parallels. Historically, Vineyard worship didn't develop outside of the U.S. in the same way it emerged inside it. By the time Vineyard worship was moving into other countries, it had already been significantly shaped.

The early Vineyard swirl was about documenting what had organically bubbled up in various Vineyard settings across North America. But that structure changed with the introduction of distribution deals, contractual obligations and a rapidly shifting marketplace. The worship music genre emerged. This significantly impacted how Vineyard worship played out in other countries.

The exciting thing is that we have been able to translate our values to a significant degree. We're now seeing Vineyards outside of the Western Hemisphere writing their own music, in their own styles and languages,

using their own unique instruments, having courage to express who they are and who God is. I can't wait until some of those songs are translated into English and sung here.

CE: How have you seen Vineyard worship develop in Nepal and northeast India?

DR: As I traveled back and forth into northeast India and Nepal in the early years, the hunger for worship was very evident. I distinctly remember one of our earliest gatherings. People really wanted to worship. But even though I knew I could bring something to the table, I didn't want the first model of musical worship to revolve around something Westernized (especially me!). They thought the real ideas were from the West, and I was a white guru who could show them what to do. Some people even believed I should take care of all the worship because I was higher up or more "anointed" simply because of where I was from.

But as I pulled back from leading, it was clear that the Holy Spirit was up to something new. I encouraged people to step forward with their own language and instruments to see what might happen. There was one night, finally, when the most incredible spontaneous time of worship took place. I was in awe. The gathering lasted several hours. I had to leave to go to sleep! Later I found out that the gathering had lasted well into the morning hours.

The people were so blown away that God would receive their sound, through their language, using their instruments, that once it was unlocked, it was unstoppable. I still hear reports today of how many musicians, artists, dancers, and songwriters were released out of that experience together.

Most of the time that I visit there, I don't do much publicly. Typically I'm careful to serve behind the scenes rather than up front. When we started church planting in Nepal in earnest, the first people we sent over were very gifted. One man in particular was a very good worship leader. But yet, the people we sent focused exclusively on equipping and mentoring people in small-group settings, rather than leading from the platform.

CE: What would you say to encourage a young Vineyard worship leader in Central Asia or elsewhere, regarding how he or she might express our values in worship? How might it compare to advice you give to an up-and-coming worship leader here in the U.S.?

DR: I would say the same thing across the board: Be authentic and keep it real. Remember that the place of spirit and truth, as Jesus described it, is about deep vulnerability and transparency. The language here of "spirit and truth" isn't talking about emotions and doctrine being in balance. Instead, it's an expression that comes from the deepest places of redeemed humanity where the connection between our hearts and God's heart is bridged.

Although we often treat them as the same, there's a big difference between inspiration and imitation. Be inspired by other cultures. Be stretched and encouraged by people you respect and can learn from. But rather than simply imitate what's obviously touched you, let it serve as inspiration that motivates you to create your own unique voice in worship.

CE: What can churches here in the U.S. learn from our Vineyard brothers and sisters around the world about using worship to reach our communities?

DR: We know that worship is saturated in music (Ephesians 5, Colossians 3). And music is the language of the heart. At the heart of most cultures is the expression of rhythm and melody.

Daniel Levitin has written an incredible book called *This Is Your Brain on Music*. It is a must-read for those who care about culture and the place of music in shaping who we are. We must allow for multiple expressions of culture to breathe across our movement.

Much of our faith is articulated through our liturgy, so it must be authentic for it to be real and transformative. If it becomes disengaged from our natural cultural expression, it can quickly become rote and empty. Spirit and truth are lost.

CE: How has your experience of Vineyard worship around the globe impacted your writing and worship leading here in the U.S.?

DR: The main impact has been the desire to keep things authentic. When people sense that something is authentic and vulnerable, that seems to cut across generational and cultural lines in a very powerful way. So even if we discover a particular format that can potentially open the door for someone to connect with God on a heart level, people will still struggle to enter into worship if the leader lacks authenticity.

I've become keenly aware of making space for diversity in the expression of our liturgy. I still think it's important to know what your core sound or approach is, or else things can become unmanageable. But there is always more than enough room for another voice at the table. Space just needs to be made.

[END]

Book Recommendation:
Daniel Levitin, "This Is Your Brain on Music"



A dark, moody photograph of a wooden chair against a textured, aged wall. The chair is on the right side, and the wall is on the left. The lighting is low, creating a sense of intimacy and history. The text "creating a place for people" is overlaid in white on the left side of the image.

creating a place for people

A conversation with Nicole McAdoo-Popovich

Nicole McAdoo-Popovich is the Denver Hub pastor of the Mile High Vineyard in Arvada, Colorado.

Jeff Heidkamp: Could you give us some background about how you ended up at your church, then how you planted the Denver Hub and how it works?

Nicole McAdoo-Popovich: I was not a part of the original church planting team that went out. I didn't plan on coming at all; I was a college student when the team left. But God spoke really clearly to me in a dream about moving out here. I actually didn't know Jay Pathak, the pastor, at that point. But I came and visited with them about it. Nine months after they'd started, I moved out after all. So I got in right at the ground level of involvement.

I switched colleges, got a degree in photography, then did church ministry after my undergrad degree. I helped lead the church in some key positions, which helped construct the architecture of who we were as a church.

I went into my normal career after that. I was a fashion photographer and a boutique designer while leading at church. It was almost exactly two years ago that I quit my job designing stores for Anthropologie and started to dive headlong into helping plant our hub in downtown Denver.

Arvada is out in the suburbs, which is about a 15-minute drive out from Denver. Arvada and Denver are lightyears away, as culture goes. We also noticed that we had probably 40 people who were living in the city but were driving out to Arvada for church. That was their only reason for going to Arvada.

It was hard for those people to invite their friends to church, because their friends never went out to the suburbs. They lived, worked, and played in the city. So when they would invite friends to church, their friends would say, "Why on earth would I drive out to Arvada?" It was strange to them.

At the same time, we saw a lot of movement and momentum in what God was doing in people's hearts regarding the city. So I quit my job two years ago to start planning for the city church plant. We built teams and raised money to have another church hub of activity downtown. We officially planted just over a

year ago. I'm now the site pastor there, and I also oversee outreach for both locations of the Mile High Vineyard.

JH: Has moving into the city helped the church reach more people for Jesus than it would have if you only had the site in Arvada?

NM: Absolutely. Initially there was an immediate pop because people who went to our church already lived in the city. They've been investing in the city for years, and sharing life and building relationships, so they couldn't really become part of the Arvada church community. We'd do events downtown, benefits concerts and such. We saw all these city people come to the events and love it. But we could never get them out to our church in Arvada.

So we created that space for them in the city, and people immediately started to show up. Now there are people who have been going to our church for over a year that have never even stepped foot on our Arvada site before. They have their own community now.

JH: This is interesting, because it sounds like it really wasn't a convenience factor in terms of the drive. There was actually sort of a cultural change that had to happen by moving into the city.

NM: I would say so. Since we left to plant, it's interesting how the Arvada crowd has become a lot more family-oriented. There are a lot of older people and gray hairs when you look out in the crowd. Part of that was the decision to change which leaders people saw up in front. The small group leader dynamic changed too. So we let each church community develop into its own thing.

I think if you live in the city, but you love Jesus and you're already involved in a particular church, then it's not an inconvenience to drive 15 or 20 minutes to a suburb. But if you don't know Jesus, it's enough weirdness to go to church in the first place. Then, in addition, you're being forced to drive to a place that you would never go otherwise.

So now the Denver Hub is a really neutral environment that city people are comfortable in. We give them freedom to explore Jesus, and we tear down as many walls as we can.

JH: Typically, when people think about sites as tools to help reach people for Jesus, they think about physical distance. But you're really more talking about cultural distance.

NM: I think it's both. Some of it is the physical distance, but for us it really was a cultural thing. If we show that we value the reasons people live in a city, that is a way to reach people for Jesus. A certain type of person lives in the city. A certain type of person lives in the suburbs. There are different life stages, different desires and needs and passions. People choose where they live intentionally.

Each place is an environment where people can explore Jesus. But it's different from hub to hub. There's an amazing full-blown children's ministry in Arvada right now, because that ministry is reaching families.

In Denver, we're going out with people. We're doing lots of outreach things and hosting parties. We're inviting people to different events, because that's what how they spend their time already. They're into bars and the social scene, usually young adults who don't have kids. A lot of our people downtown are married, but maybe they have one child or are just starting their families. That's a different life stage from the people in Arvada. I think we've strengthened by diversifying.

JH: Let's talk about some of the things that you have tried at this new place in the city, as you have been working to reach folks who don't know Jesus.

NM: We did something that worked in Denver that we thought would work in Arvada, but it flopped horribly. For a while now, we've done benefit concerts where we pull together different bands. We have lots of artists and musicians in our community, as well as many show-goers. That's my background too. I grew up in a family of musicians and artists and worked in the fashion industry. So I had strong connections to the art community.

Denver's a young people's city. Most people are somewhat involved in those things. So we started having benefit concerts where we'd pull in some different bands and different artists for silent auctions. They would sell items, and we'd have bands come in and play. We identified lots of nonprofits who weren't necessarily strictly Christian organizations, but they had behind

them some of the mission values of Jesus. So we started to support them.

In that way, we've been connecting with all these new people. No one necessarily played worship music or preached the gospel from the stage. It was mainly a big party. But that's really how our church has always grown.

Within that, our church members are coming in with a real intentional mindset: "We're here to meet people. We're here to build relationships and then share Jesus with people." Throwing parties and benefits was part of that. We're seeing people come into the church, and we love it.

Anyway, we thought it was sad that our Arvada community wasn't able to participate in the concerts as much. They weren't showing up or helping to plan much. So we thought, "Let's just do one in Arvada and see if it works."

We went a little bit north of Arvada to rent out a comedy club and thought we would do a comedy night. It was a stand-up improv thing. We decided you could only get a ticket if you bought a ticket for a friend as well. We thought, "This is cool. We're going to make people come, and invite their friends – and it's in the suburbs. They're going to be so excited about it."

We had the entire theatre rented for the night. I'm pretty sure there was a total of 15 people that came, and most of them were ours. I think we maybe had two people show up that didn't know Jesus, and they were family members. It was the most awkward thing, because improv relies on the crowd so much. It couldn't have been a more horrible night. I actually left because I couldn't even handle watching it.

JH: So for all the Jay Pathak superfans out there, that happened at his own church, okay?

NM: Exactly! People probably think we know exactly what to do, but we don't always get it right. We have failed so many times. I guess some people go to comedy clubs, but people in Arvada didn't. So you try to create things that you think are going to be really cool, but people aren't actually already doing that, we're fighting an uphill battle.

JH: But the benefit concerts do work in the city. Do they take place at your church?

NM: No, no, no. That's really important to us. We go to a bar or a venue. Generally, we ask the manager of the venue, "When is your slowest night? When is the night you know you're going to be absolutely dead next month?"

Then we say, "So...could we bring 200 people in that night?" We have a mailing list that we've made over time. We'll advertise using that. Then we'll try to create a tiny perk. Maybe there's a cover charge, but then people will get a free beverage ticket when they pay.

From there we connect with different bands. We try to book bands that are actually talented and known around town. I would say maybe a third of the bands we've had are people in our church who happen to play in bands. The rest of the bands don't know Jesus. They might drop an F-bomb on stage. They might be drinking. But we think that it's worth it to be connected with them and to reach out to people who have influence in the city. We make these benefits a thing people actually want to go to. Maybe it's a band people were already hoping to see at some point.

After that, we decide on a nonprofit that we want to work with. We'll call them and say, "Hey, great news. We're going to raise money for you. 100 percent of our proceeds are going to go to your organization." Every organization has been thrilled.

It's gotten to the point where bands who don't know Jesus and organizations that aren't Christian organizations are calling us and saying, "Can we play next time at your show?" "Can you raise money for our organization?" I have a meeting today with an amazing venue in town that wants to set up calendar dates for the rest of this year and 2011, because we've gotten them business. It's a win-win for everyone.

But these are also highly intentional environments. A concert might seem laid back, and it might simply seem like a really fun night, but our members are people who love to share Jesus and want to build relationships. So they're working the room.

Plus, our church gets a place where they can invite people that is not in a church building. It's not an environment that's odd or weird, where we're all singing to one wall, or where

we're praying and doing things that are uncomfortable for people. Newcomers see that people who love Jesus don't have two heads. They see that Jesus followers can hang out too and have a good time and raise money for a really great cause. For us, that works incredibly well in downtown Denver.

JH: It sounds like people can have a lot of creativity in their churches, even if live shows isn't what's going to work. But they need to look at their church and community and figure out what works in their own contexts. Right?

NM: Yes. There's nothing worse than thinking that people are going to like something because it's worked somewhere else. Maybe you'll try to replicate something in your city, but nobody likes to go to live shows, or nobody cares about nonprofits. Or you're in the middle of Nebraska somewhere, and there aren't any nonprofits that are really doing anything great in your city. You're just trying to replicate the model.

It's more about reading your town or city. Where do the people go? What do they like to do? Jump in on that and take hold of it. Even if you can't create the environment to start, go ahead and work in someone else's environment. Go to the park. Go to the classic car show. Participate in what already exists to gather people. You can create an intentional situation to reach people for Jesus.

JH: Is preaching a sermon or presenting the gospel in some way part of what you're doing at these places?

NM: No. There are rooms where we can be preaching the gospel and speaking out clearly and calling people to Jesus, but you have to decide which "room" you're in at which moment. In the moments I've been talking about, we're in a "gathering room" where we're building relationships.

We'll engage with the gospel later on. We'll create a different intentional environment to call people to Jesus. But you have to decide which room is which. There should be an environment of many different rooms that cater to people who are in different parts of the process of moving to Jesus.

JH: You said there was something else that worked really well for your church. Could you talk about it?

NM: This is a brand new thing for us. When we moved out here, we had a bunch of people from Ohio, and people in Ohio don't have anything outdoors that they can do at all. So they eat at restaurants. They go to malls and watch movies.

It took a few years for us to realize that we need to become Coloradans – not just people from Ohio who happened to live in Colorado. We weren't reaching people that are truly from here; people excited about the outdoors, who go skiing and do the different things that people in our city do every single weekend.

If it was a nice weekend, our church attendance dropped by a certain percentage. It was because people were out in the mountains. Or if there was a great snow that weekend, they went skiing and skipped church. Every weekend the city has a mass exodus out to the mountains, so we weren't having a chance to connect with people.

We actually had several people in our church come to us and say, "Your staff is basically terrible at this. You're not making this happen. Can we make some sort of outdoor group that we could gather people for? It could be similar to what we do at benefit concerts, but with people who are interested in the outdoors."

So a small band of people created a meet-up group, which I had never heard of before. It's mainly for people who all form around a common interest, and it's formed online through MeetUp.com. People join groups formed around common interests and create outdoor events. The website isn't a Christian thing; it already existed.

In no time at all, there were over 400 people on the mailing list. People were going camping and hiking and climbing. There were hut trips, where you would hike up a mountain and then stay in a little cabin or hut.

Our church members were getting this amazing intentional time with people, getting to do things that people here love. We started this meet-up group earlier this summer, and in the past month we've seen new people give their lives to Jesus and show up at church.

They're getting involved in our community. The group is great for young transplants from other cities. They are just looking for friends and a place to belong.

One guy I just met with yesterday had moved to the city because of a new job. He had no friends yet, so he went to this meet-up group. Over the course of a little time, he realized, "Hey, these people all go to the same church. That's kind of strange." Later on, the meet-up group threw a big party and the guy met some more people from the church. He came to church the next Sunday and gave his life to Jesus. Now he's involved in our newcomer classes and figuring out what it would look like to be baptized. He's living this whole new process.

The church plant works so well. I love the verse that says, "You are not a people, but I will make you a people." That's kind of what God has been able to do with us. There are all these people who are not part of "a people," but we are getting to see them get to know the kingdom of God's people.

JH: So are you an outdoors person now? Do you do those things where you didn't used to? Minnesota also does the outdoors thing, and I always go, "I don't want to camp. You're never going to talk me into it."

NM: Right! You know, I've tried, because I love people and so I'll try anything to meet people and to share Jesus and share life with them. I'll go camping a couple of times a year, but you're not going to see me snowshoeing or doing ultra-marathons or any of the crazy stuff that people do here.

JH: Did your church have to invest much in the meet-up group happening?

NM: I think there's maybe a \$30-per-month fee to run an actual group that you create, so it's a small investment financially. Also, I should mention that the church waited to see the initial fruits of the initiative before we completely backed it. We said, "Sure, create this group. See how it goes. We're not putting our name on it for right now. If it works, we'll help you out in every way. But let's see the fruit of it first."

And besides money, there is an investment into new leaders. For example, we had a couple

people that were new to the church thing. They were not tried and tested. There were people throwing parties where things would get a little messy. You didn't know exactly what would happen. But because they were a little messy, these people would actually create great environments.

There was one specific girl helping to lead the meet-up group. At first it was hard for us to trust that things were going to work with her. She seemed a little unreliable. But she developed into a girl who is in love with seeing people come to know Jesus. God's been changing her heart in the process. So God's raising up new leaders through this.

JH: What would be some general principles you would give to the average pastor in America for coming up with creative ways to connect with the place you live?

NM: Whether you're planting a church, or whether you're trying to reach out to a city that you've been in for a long time, remember that you can never create the churches or the outreaches that you want. It actually doesn't really matter what you want. It's more about what your city wants; what's already happening there. What are people excited about? Where is the average person in your city going to spend her Saturday afternoons?

Then identify potential leaders and gatherers and invest in them like crazy. They have to know how they're growing. In the case of the girl I just talked about, we sat down with her and said, "Okay, you threw a party. 200 people showed up, and some things went wrong. But you were able to gather 200 people in your home over the course of a night. That's actually something God can use. I know you're upset about all the things that felt out of control, but let's see how God could use this gift that he's invested in you." Then I continued to follow up with her, which demonstrated how important we thought it was for her to keep growing and to develop leadership skills.

Identify those leaders, even if they are messy. But they're gatherers, and they're the people that have friends that don't know Jesus.

Another key one that comes to mind is that you need to model this kind of gospel on your own, as an individual. It's harder as a pastor, but I have to keep intentionally having hobbies

and making friends that don't know Jesus. People like that are not projects – they're actual friends. Then the other leaders and people in my church realize, "Nicole has friends that don't know Jesus. She spends time with them on the weekends. She invites them out with us and introduces us into their lives."

You can probably preach as many sermons or try as many programs as possible, but unless you're personally invested in doing it, your church is not going to do it. Just creating a moment isn't enough.

JH: There's one thing you said that has a tension. You said that you can't just throw the outreach that you want. It has to be what the people want. I feel like there's a little bit of a flip side to that. It also can't be so far away from who you are that it's fake. Like, if I said, "I'm organizing a big giant camping outing because everybody in Minnesota likes camping," it would be weird. I would hate it, and they would hate it.

NM: It would be awkward.

JH: So maybe instead of me saying, "Everybody likes camping, right?" I should find the true camper in my church who should put the thing on.

NM: Exactly. And it doesn't have to all be about the senior pastor. Yes, a senior pastor has to lead people to do these things, so there is that side of the tension. But on the other side, we should be investing in leaders and giving them freedom to try things...to fail, to see how it goes. Hopefully your church reflects your city and what the people in your city are interested in. Hopefully you're not so removed from the heartbeat of the city that your church looks completely different from how the rest of your city looks. That seems like it would be a real hindrance to growth.

Find that person who enjoys camping or likes the car show. Tell them, "Hey, this isn't my thing, but you're already involved in the community this way. So I'll help you out. I'll give you some resources, since you might not know how to build it or run an event completely. But I need you to be on the forefront of this."

Allow people to grow in that place. If I had done the meet-up outdoors group, it would have

failed. I would have been dragging my feet every week to do something with these people. Instead, it took investing in some other people, trusting them, and taking a risk on them.

[END]

Book Recommendation:
James Choung, "A Christianity Worth Believing"



Events

CHURCH PLANTING BOOTCAMP IN SPANISH

When: April 8-9, 2011

What: This church planting boot camp in Spanish is for anyone remotely interested in exploring the possibility of planting a Spanish-speaking Vineyard church in the U.S. If you happen to know of someone in your congregation who might be considering the possibility of planting a church in Spanish, let them know about our boot camp. We will address fundamental questions such as “Am I a church planter?” “How do you plant a church?” and “Where do I start?” We will also have time for discussion, worship, fellowship, and prayer.

Where: La Viña, Mundelein, IL

More info: Contact Homero Garcia at (847) 845- 7941 or email hckkgarcia@comcast.net.

NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2011: REACHING THE UNREACHED

When: May 2-5, 2011

What: How does Kingdom of God theology correlate with reaching the unreached people around us?

Where: Glendale, AZ

More info: Visit <http://www.vineyardusa.org/site/nationalconference>

CAUSE CONFERENCE

When: July 22-23, 2011

What: Jesus taught us that the Kingdom of God is the pearl of great price. As His kingdom people, we have been given a great treasure. Let's share it with the world! Join us this summer in Houston, Texas as we gather with others to seek the heart of the Lord and to listen for what He has to say. We'll be inspired to step out into the dreams, callings and visions the Lord has for us. The kingdom is a cause to live for and a cause to die for. Will you join the Cause?

Where: Stafford, TX

More info: Visit www.slvineyard.org

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