

Going with the Flow: Structure and Spontaneity in Worship

By Davin Seay

You're ramping up to one of the congregation's favorite choruses; that point in the service when the music achieves maximum traction and the soaring voices, lifted in praise, sound like nothing so much as a heavenly choir of angels. This is what it's all about – the Sunday morning moment when worship is a natural outcome of a supernatural encounter. It's what makes it all worthwhile: the long nights of rehearsal, the well-meaning critiques from armchair experts, the search for good songs, the struggle for balance between innovation and tradition. It's what made you want to be a worship leader in the first place.

Then, right at that breakthrough moment, you hear a still small voice in the back of your brain telling you it's time to switch the set list, to throw out the favorite and substitute that new and untried song that still feels tentative and uncertain. Is it the Spirit leading you to a deeper realm of praise or simply some bizarre impulse that you can't seem to shake off? You look at your worship team only to find them staring back at you, waiting expectantly for a cue. You step to the mic, take a deep breath and throw up a last minute prayer. Whatever decision you make in this juncture, whichever prompting you choose to follow, may make all the difference in the impact and outcome of the service. Suddenly, leading worship is more of a burden than you bargained for. In what direction is God pointing you? Where does He want you to lead and how can you follow His flow?

Structure and spontaneity are only two in a long list of considerations that today's music ministers must take into account as they seek to create a meaningful worship experience for increasingly sophisticated congregations. It's an agenda that has fallen under the catch-all heading of "flow," a concept that defines the delicate balance of artistic and dramatic, as well as technical and spiritual elements, that combine to accomplish the goal of worship – a goal that can be expressed thirteen different ways among twelve different people.

So how is "flow" established and maintained? What is the equilibrium between sticking to the script and leaving room for inspiration? *Worship Leader* magazine asked these and other pertinent questions to a select group of respected and experienced worship leaders, all of whom have thought, and prayed, at length about the most practical and pragmatic aspects of any leader's facilitating role.

"I think it's always better to prepare than to plan. Scripting a service too rigidly can close off the flow you're seeking to establish. But, if you're prepared for the unexpected, then spontaneity can be accommodated." So says Robb Redman, Pastor of Forest Hills Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, Texas and author of *The Great Worship Awakening* (2002), one of the most prescient examinations of the quickly evolving state of postmodern worship. According to Redman, the preparation that best sets the tone and starts the flow "is profoundly pastoral." "Effective worship is about sensitivity," he asserts. "The first question to ask is what God is doing in the moment. A close second comes in gauging the congregation. What is their mood, their receptivity and their willingness to step outside their liturgical tradition? Without their willingness to follow, you can't lead, no matter where you want to take them."

That willingness, according to popular worship composer, recording artist and Integrity Music in-house producer, Paul Baloche, is dependent on three tightly interrelated elements. "Any worship leader has to master Theme, Key and Tempo,"

Baloche explains. "I call them the 'Flow Factors' and they are the building blocks to creating a seamless service. These factors aren't a big secret, nor are they particularly difficult to learn. It's just a question of becoming more aware of what you're doing from moment to moment. But, as I go around the country teaching at worship seminars, you'd be surprised how often I'm confronted with worship leaders who are only just beginning to grapple with the question of flow. We think picking the right songs is what matters and, of course, that's a vital consideration. But it's what happens between and around those songs that really make for a successful service, no matter if it's on a Sunday morning gathering, a Wednesday night bible study or a Friday night youth group."

"There are developmental curves in worship," explains Andy Park, worship leader of British Columbia's North Langley Vineyard and author of one of today's essential worship primers, *To Know You More* (2002). Park agrees wholeheartedly with Baloche's emphasis on tempo. "Rhythm affects the body," Park explains. "It creates a holistic response which helps to bring the rest of the person – mind and spirit – into the flow. That's why the transitions between fast and slow songs are so important. It's really an Old Testament model, beginning with entering the gates of praise and continuing into the awe and wonder of the Holy of Holies. Of course, you've got to filter that approach through modern values."

It's that filtering function which is another key ingredient of Redman's approach. "The issue of flow looks very different depending on a particular tradition," he says. "What may seem chaotic from one liturgical perspective may feel completely predictable to another. It's for this reason that it's essential to know what your congregation is bringing with them to the service. It's only then that you can make an informed decision as to whether they will want to go with you into something new and different."

The metaphor for worship flow that most appeals to Baloche is that of a journey. "By thinking through your point of entrance, where you want to go and where you end up, you are striving to assemble the beginning, middle and end of a journey. I think that template remains consistent no matter what the setting or time frame might be. The smoother the journey the less the congregation even notices these transitions. And that means you, as a worship leader, have to anticipate and be comfortable with the process. I often see attempts to present something profound, a scripture or exhortation, at every transition point. There's no need for that. But what is important is to know where you want to go and how to get there. Outline the structure of the service. Rehearse everything, even what you're going to say between songs and practice it until it becomes second nature."

Thorough rehearsal, according to Park, is essential for both the structure and spontaneity of a service. "The response of people, like the response of God, can often be very unpredictable," he explains. "When something different than what you planned begins to happen, it can be very exciting, because it implies that the worship is reaching a whole other level. But when that comes up, you and your team have to be familiar with the full range of your repertoire so that you can bring in material appropriate to the moment. Set lists should be constructed with lots of flexibility so that alternate songs can be slotted in without a lot of confusion."

"The awareness of a good worship leader happens on an intuitive level," adds Redman. "You must constantly ask questions, seek input and be willing to learn. The good news is, you can grow spiritual antennae. They can be developed and

improved. You start to pick up very subtle messages from the congregation which, in turn, can attune you to what God is seeking from you as a leader."

Park puts a slightly different spin on the subject of congregational response. "A lack of reaction can be very discouraging," he acknowledges. "And sometimes you just have to ignore it. You've got to purpose to go for what you're after, no matter what. The people have to make a choice to follow on their own. You can invite and encourage, but you can't manipulate. The whole point is to create an interaction between human dynamics and God's presence."

"You can't just close your eyes for a half hour and hope everyone's following you," Baloche concludes. "Flow is about developing sensitivity and that means being fully aware of what's happening, even as others are totally lost in the moment."

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