

PURSuing RENEWAL AND REVIVAL THROUGH LEADING WORSHIP

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GARETH HIGGS SHARES PRACTICAL INSIGHTS ON HOW WE CAN ALLOW PEOPLE TO ENCOUNTER GOD THROUGH OUR WORSHIP. THIS IS AN ADAPTED VERSION OF HIS PRESENTATION WITHIN THE MET DIGGING FOR TREASURE CONFERENCE: PREACHING FOR REVIVAL AND RENEWAL, SEPTEMBER 2023.

Within the Methodist tradition, when most of us talk of preaching, we also mean that as shorthand for leading the whole act of worship. We obviously believe that the opening of God's Word by preaching creates a unique opportunity for encounter (see Acts 2:14ff for an example of expository preaching leading to spiritual renewal), but we also want leaders of worship to offer space within the whole service for people to meet with God.

EXPECTATION

Perhaps the starting point for leading others into an encounter with God is expectation. If you share on this ministry, I wonder what you expect when you preach and lead worship? What do you expect when you attend a service of worship? How are our prayers fuelled by the expectation of the outpouring of God's Spirit so that souls may be saved and lives changed? The writer to the Hebrews in Chapter 12:18-24 reminds us of Who and What we come before when we enter into the presence of God. Do some of us need to raise our levels of expectation? We preach the same God of Wesley and

Whitfield, and so: do we pursue revival with expectation as they did?

PROVIDING SPACE FOR RESPONSE

Good preaching should move people to action. On the day of Pentecost, after hearing Peter preach in the market square, the people respond 'what shall we do?' (Acts 2:37). How are we helping people to 'do' something in response to the word preached or worship led? To what extent are we providing or creating space for people to respond to God's Spirit in the services we lead? If we are expectant of God's Spirit to be at work, how do we help people to respond to that? This may well take a renewed sense of confidence in us, and perhaps a willingness to feel a bit silly.

I have frequently offered opportunities for people to make a physical response in the worship that I lead, an old fashioned 'altar call' if you like. Often nobody responds and I have chosen to be content with that even if there is an awkward moment or two. But creating space for such a response, whether anyone takes it up or not, begins to set a culture of expectation among our people that this is what we do. In our own church, we have (and it existed before I arrived) a long-established culture of responding in worship and having hands laid on, anointing with oil, and inviting the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Often, we might opt for a general invocation, praying for the congregation as a whole, but encouraging and inviting folk to perhaps stretch out a hand in a posture of

receptivity. I hope it goes without saying, that we do this sensitively and naturally. There is no place and no need for speaking in a special way, or hyping up anything. Often in silent waiting, the Holy Spirit will make himself known in people's experience.

I'm not a creative person at all, but other friends and colleagues are, and so they have often encouraged a more creative response following preaching - placing pebbles in a bowl, taking up and holding a cross and much more. For those of us who preside at the Lord's Supper, don't forget this is the inbuilt liturgical response moment and can be used as a time for prayer ministry and response if used well.

In saying all of this, I'm all too aware that other preachers will have other methods for facilitating a response that they have used. So none of this is to be considered as a definitive list.

PRAYER MINISTRY

Many of us will minister in churches where there is an established prayer ministry team with whom we can work. It is good to plan ahead how we might share well together to assist those who are responding. If we don't have an 'established' setup, then I encourage preachers to offer to pray for people in their own right at the close of the service. I never cease to be amazed how many good Methodist folk will say: 'This is the first time that anyone has ever prayed for/with me'. In all of this, it is, of course, imperative that we follow good safeguarding practice.

PRAISE, PRAYERS & SILENCE

Within the act of worship overall, it's good to reflect on how the hymns we choose and songs we sing facilitate a God-ward focus. How does the language or the music draw us towards the throne of God and away from ourselves? This is true also for prayers we lead, not forgetting the power of silence and space within the act of worship to enable people to engage with God.

WINSOMENESS

Finally, we should not overlook the power of the tone we use and set for worship as a place of encounter. 1 Peter 3:8ff reminds people who feel persecuted for remaining faithful, to win people over with the mind and attitude of Christ. Rather than showing aggression and defensiveness, we are to be tender, humble, showing 'brotherly love' (v. 8). We are not to pull back from the truth, but to articulate our faith with gentleness and respect (v. 15). All of us will have faced the temptation to 'sock it to them', but our responsibility as gospel preachers is not to back down from speaking the truth but to consider carefully how we speak it. Jesus was said to be 'full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). He told His followers to be 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matthew 10:16). So let gentleness and respect be the manner by which we are known. Let people know that the joy of the Lord is our source of inner strength. Let people see that we are those who are renewed and revived by the Spirit of the Lord. May we never erect barriers between people and God by our attitude.

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