

Will a Praise Band Help Our Church Grow?

A Leader Reader by Michael Waschevski

Introduction

As many congregations in our denomination experience flat or declining worship attendance, many church leaders turn to examples of growing worship services in other settings and seek to replicate the success. Some church leaders look to praise bands as the hope for the future.

Will a Praise Band Help Our Church Grow?

The quick answer to the question is . . . maybe! What lies beneath the question of a congregation considering a praise band is often the experienced reality that worship attendance is not growing. Perhaps worship music is classical in nature, with the organ as the primary accompanying instrument. Perhaps worship music is a mix of traditional hymnody and psalmody with sprinklings of music from other cultures and traditions led by either professional musicians or avocational musicians in the congregation who are generally comfortable with one particular style of music. Perhaps musicians are scarce, and it is a struggle to have a reliable accompanist at all.

Given the wide diversity of scenarios, there is certainly no guarantee a praise band would do anything to change the worship experience and lead to growth. In fact, in many settings, quite the opposite could occur. Several challenges facing the introduction of a praise band, and therefore a change in worship music style, need to be noted:

- Praise bands imply involvement of several musicians, often from varying degrees of musical training and experience.

Prayer

Gracious God,
out of your love and mercy
you breathed into dust the breath of life,
creating us to serve you and neighbors.
Call forth our prayers and acts of tenderness,
and strengthen us to face our mortality,
that we may reach with confidence for your
mercy;
In Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy
Spirit,
one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

- The repertoire appropriate to a praise band may not be the repertoire a congregation understands or embraces.
- Performance practices, musical scores (charts), and rhythmic considerations for much of the repertoire for praise bands are very different than what a typical church organist or pianist might be accustomed to.
- Not all classically trained organists and pianists can or want to make a shift in performance styles and practices.
- Congregations have general preferences for musical styles as well as a core of communal song that is uniquely their own, whether they are voiced or not.
- Worshiping communities are resistant to change for change sake.

Given the challenges facing the issue of praise bands in worship, it is helpful to have a common understanding

of the function(s) a praise band might fulfill in a congregation, as well as congregational repertoire appropriate to a praise band.

Michael Hawn, an active church musician and professor of church music at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas, writes about congregational song using the image of a river. The main channel of the river has for several centuries been fed by what we might refer to as classical hymnody and psalmody. Examples abound in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990). Think of hymns like “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” “Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty,” and “Amazing Grace”—four-part, rhythmically predictable, multi-verse compositions, readily accompanied by organ or piano, which have been a mainstay of our tradition. This is not the repertoire of a praise band, in general.

Over the last several decades, congregations have experienced music different in style and composition. The river is fed by many different streams: global music, gospel songs, African American spirituals, Taizé chants and refrains, liturgical folk music, and contemporary praise and worship songs and choruses. Each of these streams adds to an increasingly eclectic experience in congregational song for worshiping communities. Each stream has its own unique performance practices and styles. Each stream is rich and diverse in its own repertoire.

Defining Worship

One definition of worship comes from the word *liturgy*, literally “the work of the people.” Worship is what all the people of God do as they come together to praise and serve God in response to God’s call. . . .

The language of worship, then, must be contemporary language since the words of the liturgy are in the people’s mouths. . . . Good liturgy does not call attention to itself but points foremost to God. In our prayers, creeds, hymns, and anthems, we praise God as fully as we can with all God’s people, using the best language we have at our disposal.

—Donald Wilson Stake, *The ABCs of Worship: A Concise Dictionary*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 108-9.

Given the increasingly eclectic reality of congregational song, it is no small wonder that praise bands, guitar choirs, and inclusion of instrumentation well beyond piano and organ have come into our experiences. In fact, much of the literature outside of classical hymnody and psalmody is not particularly suited to organ accompaniment. To experience the different genres well means to provide appropriate accompaniment for the congregation. The more eclectic a congregation’s repertoire becomes, the more varied the accompanying needs. Praise bands are much more natural and effective with contemporary praise and worship, global, and liturgical folk styles of music.

Is Our Current Music Excellent?

Thomas Long, in *Beyond the Worship Wars*, notes that vital churches experience music in worship that is both eclectic and excellent. This observation brings to light a helpful question: Is our current worship music led with excellence? If not, the worship experience suffers. Churches rarely grow if the worship experience is not supported well musically.

Before unplugging the organ, a congregation first needs to increase the quality of the musical experience within the current style. As the music improves, the church should increase its repertoire of congregational song to become more eclectic while providing encouragement, support, and appropriate training so that musicians are equipped to offer excellence in their leadership.

But back to the question: Will a praise band help our church grow? Maybe. If a congregation is able to successfully experience musical excellence in worship, changing styles and expanding repertoire can occur more easily. Whether in the context of an existing worship service that incorporates a praise band or the creation of a service that utilizes a praise band as the primary musical accompaniment, excellence will go a long way in increasing the vitality of worship. Perhaps increased excellence and eclectic repertoire will add the vitality to worship your congregation has been seeking without creating a praise band.

Questions to Consider

Should the church decide to create and incorporate a praise band into the musical leadership of worship; the following questions need to be carefully tended to by appropriate church leaders:

- Do we have the talent, instruments, equipment, and resources needed in our congregation for praise bands? If not, will they be well budgeted for and intentionally developed? This may include exciting invitations to community musicians in the schools or local music scene to become a part of your worship leadership.
- Will the church's leadership (elders, pastor(s), musicians, and influential folks everyone looks to) agree to be supportive and encouraging (in prayer and in recognition) of the praise band and its members? This includes making a commitment of some length before evaluating whether the praise band has been effective in worship vitality.
- Will the praise band be a legitimate, integral part of the worship life of the church? If it is in anyway a second-class ensemble, or treated as a tolerated necessity,

chances are conflict and strife will be the unwelcome guests in the congregation.

Conclusion

We live in exciting times in the realm of worship and congregational song. Congregations are navigating uncharted waters in seeking direction for growth and vitality in worship. Asking good questions and carefully thinking through the issues are critical to deciding whether a praise band is right for the congregation.

About the Writer

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