

THEY WANT ME TO DO WHAT? WHEN YOUR TRADITIONAL CHURCH STARTS DISCUSSING CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

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We've all been there: things are going relatively smoothly in worship planning, and *someone* brings up contemporary worship. *Again*. Naturally, all heads turn to you. For the average churchgoer and lay leader in mainline denominations, contemporary worship is an extension of the music ministry. Surely it's just a one-to-one substitution of organ and choir for keyboard and guitar, right? Of course it isn't, but humans are wired to prefer solutions that are simplistic and linear. Eventually, you will lose this fight. Setting aside for the moment that your musical education had more to do with Matthias Weckmann than Matthew West, where do you start?

The first thing to know is that the job of a contemporary worship leader is considerably different than that of a traditional worship leader—that is, a choir director, organist, cantor, or chorister. At first glance, it can be tempting to assume that it's merely a matter of competence in a specific musical genre or on a particular musical instrument that qualifies someone to stand in front of a contemporary congregation and lead them successfully. It is not, and your leadership planning team will need to be made aware of what is involved before moving forward.

For most of us, the role of a traditional worship leader is easily defined. If it involves music, it falls under our purview. (To be clear, this is meant as a commentary on who *accomplishes* specific worship actions, not the planning thereof—that will vary from church to church.) In the contemporary idiom, the lines between musician and clergy are blurred; a leader in a praise band will frequently be expected to fill roles that traditional worshippers comfortably think of as a pastor's job. For example, it is not at all unusual for a contemporary worship musician to lead a congregation in prayer or to offer a summation of the sermon in transition to the offering. These actions don't necessarily need to be extemporaneous, but if they are done without authenticity, then your contemporary worship experience will die on the vine. It truly is a different world from traditional worship, where the most a congregation hears from us is "Please turn in your hymnals to number 464 as we stand and sing together."

It is the responsibility of the contemporary worship leader to supply connective tissue to the service order,

so that worship actions flow into one another rather than appearing as standalone elements. Imagine if, in a traditional worship service, the organist improvised during all transitions. They would play quietly underneath the prayers of the people, reacting with sweet consonance for thanksgiving and harsh dissonance for difficult petitions. The music would reach a fever pitch and crescendo into a congregational hymn (in the same key, of course), after which the organ would die away to a *pianissimo*, borrowing themes from earlier pieces in the service to cover the movement of the liturgist to the lectern. The improvisation would continue through the scripture reading in the same manner, until the pastor was in place at the pulpit, and only then would it stop to give space for the proclamation of the Word of God. By traditional scruples, the above scenario would easily be far too much. People would leave asking, "Why was the organist calling so much attention to themselves?" and perhaps they'd have a valid point. But in contemporary worship, supplying this sort of through line is absolutely expected, and its absence is nakedly obvious. Contemporary worship without this sense of flow feels halting and stilted.

Of course, it goes beyond music. Creating this sort of easy flow in worship is one of the most important jobs of a contemporary worship leader. It's much more than "play a little guitar here for some travel music." That's why so much of the planning of contemporary worship is left to the music leadership and their team.

And that's the real difference between contemporary and traditional worship leadership. In essence, traditional worship leadership is a background role. We are *behind* the chancel rail, and we rightly take our servant leadership seriously. Contemporary worship leadership, on the other hand, is very much a foreground role. We *front* the band—and in many ways the worship service and its planning as well. While related, contemporary and traditional worship leadership are different skills that will necessarily attract people with different temperaments and disparate backgrounds.

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