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**Jonny Baker**

## **Curating Worship**

Drawing on many years involvement in 'alternative worship' and in particular on interviews for his recent book *Curating Worship*, Jonny Baker offers reflections on worship as curation and highlights a number of key themes arising from this creative liturgical and missional movement that are of value for the wider church.

The last twenty-five years have seen a creative surge of new forms of worship and church in the western world in a movement birthed out of what became known as 'alternative worship' in the UK. This was picked up and reworked in New Zealand and Australia in the early nineties and then impacted the US and Canada along with parts of Europe a few years later. What began as a question about changing the forms of worship moved to wider questions of church. The language shifted to 'emerging church', 'emergent', 'fresh expressions', or 'missional church' depending on where you found yourself located. In this article I will use the term 'alternative worship'. <sup>1</sup> Alternative worship communities have developed the notion of 'curating worship' as a different way of thinking about what is involved in leading. It's a wonderfully fresh and creative idea that has been around for about ten years. Mark Pierson is thought to be the person who came up with it. <sup>2</sup>

### **What is curation?**

'Curation' is a term that comes from the art world. The curator is the person who has the role of imagining and overseeing an exhibition in a gallery or museum. This includes working with an artist or group of artists, selecting and commissioning which pieces of work to display, and arranging those in the spaces. The curator may also be the person who looks after a museum's collection - the 'keeper', which is what the role meant more traditionally.

When you visit an exhibition it is highly unlikely that you will see the curator there or even be aware of who they are, unless you read the small print in the catalogue. That is a sign of good curation - if the work is done well then the curator disappears behind it. Their role takes place over the months and sometimes the years before you arrive. By the time you are there, it is done: the environment has been created, the art has been framed and an articulation has been made. If it has been done well, it is a space that can be navigated seamlessly and visitors can immerse themselves in it without giving a second thought to the curator. As the art is encountered there are moments of epiphany, delight, provocation, questions are evoked and the work of the artist or artists on display is appreciated more. If it's been good it can linger in the imagination.

Applying the notion of curation to worship affords a very different way of thinking about what is involved in leading. It imagines a very different kind of leadership - leadership that is back-stage rather than front-stage. 'Worship leading' generally seems to have come to mean one of two things: (i) the role of the president or person who presides over liturgy in a denominational church or (ii) the role of a charismatic personality who fronts a worship band. One way of thinking about both of these is as genres. They have a certain discourse, a logic,

known rules of engagement and sets of expectations to them and within these the leader and congregation know how to operate. Curation is a very different genre.

## ***Curating Worship: The research and the book***

I recently conducted a dozen in-depth interviews or conversations with people who are curating worship in order to try and get below the surface of what is involved - the generation of ideas, the theological explorations and the practical production of worship spaces and events. The research is, much to my surprise, published in the book *Curating Worship*.<sup>3</sup> This is a surprise because it was genuinely stumbled into rather than a planned piece of research. I was early for a wedding in Oxford and went into the art gallery there and bought a book called *Curating Subjects* which was a collection of essays on curation.<sup>4</sup> I found it so interesting that I subsequently bought another book by one of the contributors, Hans Obrist, which was a collection of interviews with curators.<sup>5</sup>

I blogged some thoughts (inevitably!) and started an interview via e-mail with Cheryl Lawrie. It ran to 8000 words and was utterly compelling. So I started e-mailing a few other people. What followed was so interesting that I sent the idea to SPCK and, to my amazement, they picked it up and published it. Initially, I was thinking I would publish the interviews on [my blog](#) or [www.alternativeworship.org](http://www.alternativeworship.org) or [www.emergingchurch.info](http://www.emergingchurch.info). Although I have a statistics degree, this research wasn't planned in advance. It's probably technically all wrong. I'm sure if it were for a doctorate I would have constructed something different. But somehow, through the conversations, I think there is a rich tapestry of insights on what has been, to my mind, a movement that has subverted, shaken, deconstructed and brought newness to the Christian faith in the soil of postmodern cultures, both at the edges and in the heart of institutions. The research is completely biased. I love these people and what they do and I am an insider to the movement. It's also research where I interject a lot into the conversations and take each one in different directions rather than act as a detached observer asking everyone the same questions.

There seemed little point - at the Durham conference or here in this paper - in re-iterating the content of the research. Instead, what I have done is to re-read the interviews several times with a little bit of distance from them in order to reflect on what themes emerge and tentatively offer them for wider consideration.

## **Curating Worship: Reflections on themes**

### **Culture**

The posture towards culture revealed by the interviews is a sacramental one. By this I mean the belief that God is present in the everyday, in culture, in popular culture; Godself is encountered there, rather than in a parallel (Christian) sub culture or in a particular aesthetic of culture (high culture or 1970s soft rock for example). Culture is therefore not something to be suspicious or afraid of.

In this sense it is a catholic rather than evangelical theology of culture that is being stumbled upon. Steve Bevans describes sacramentality as the vision that 'discovers God in and through

the things of this world...in which the secular can reveal the sacred, the immanent can reveal the transcendent, the particular and partial can reveal the unity of the whole'. 6

Four examples of this approach are evident from the interviews:

- Martin Poole says that God is in everything
- Steve Collins says that alternative worship was about cultural re-connection - 'We seem to have got into a position where church buildings and rituals are disconnected from the general flow of cultural and technological change. Nobody thinks it's subversive to explore how ubiquitous computing affects shopping or work or sport or art. But spirituality is assumed to be ancient and immutable, something removed from the rest of life, in opposition to technology and newness. Historical wisdom and a critique of society are good things but Christianity as heritage or escape will be the death of it. It's not meant to be like that.' 7
- Sonia Mainstone describes setting up *Come Home*, an installation with rooms of the house and ordinary objects
- Cheryl Lawrie describes *Holy Space* in the basement of a car park in Melbourne asking people to reflect on where burning bushes are that they walk by every day.

This is a very missional instinct. Kirsteen Kim, in her latest book *Joining in with the Spirit* suggests that the first task of mission is discernment of where God is already present and active in the world so as to join in. 8 Graham Cray also explores this theme in his recent Grove Booklet *Discerning Leadership*. 9

## Context

Context is so important. I think it's one of the things that this approach to worship has (re)discovered. This is in contrast to the kind of worship that gets served up the same nearly everywhere, seemingly with no regard for locality. It is incredibly powerful to make connections and resonances between the local context and community, between people's unique human stories and the bigger story, setting them alongside each other. It's where moments of grace occur.

Cheryl Lawrie, who has curated lots of worship in church and city spaces, found herself in the unique context and challenge of being invited to lead worship in prison in Melbourne. Searching hard for how to make those connections, Easter Saturday and Christ's descent into hell ended up being a part of the story that she explored with the prisoners:

We did three days of worship / sacred space in the women's prison. Friday and Sunday were fairly traditional [although quite image and music based]. On Holy Saturday, the church traditionally doesn't worship - God is dead, there's nothing left to worship. In traditional versions of the Apostles' Creed, there's a line that says Jesus descended to the dead, or to hell. If you talk to any prisoner, they'll talk about how prison is their hell, so it seemed the perfect day to do stuff in prison - the one day of the year that has the possibility of redeeming the experience of prison [and perhaps the one day of the year that redeems the Christian story, for those who are living in prison]. 10

There are numerous other examples:

- Dave White, in his Stations of the Cross in Hamilton Public Gardens, in the wake of a horrendous murder case where children had been hung on a washing line and beaten to death has children's clothes on a washing line blood stained as part of the crucifixion.
- Vaux's urban mass and concrete liturgies in Vauxhall in London stunningly reflected on Christ's presence in the city.
- Using beach huts in Brighton for an advent calendar experience is so 'Brighton'.

## Theological reflection

There is a depth of theological reflection going on in the communities that are producing this kind of worship. But what I have reflected on is that worship production is the process of doing theology. It may be in seeking where God is in the city or on lingering every year with a group of artists who produce the Stations of the Cross, trying and find new layers in the story as they 'make story the lover'. It could be in the process of people trying to pull the rug from under their own feet to interrogate their own faith and doubt (as in *Ikon*) or in connecting the Easter story with prison. In various forms, it's a reclaiming of theology as a communal and experiential process away from the academy, away from the trap of provider/client relationship of priest/congregation.

What follows is a poem by Harry Baker, an eighteen-year-old who engaged in this process as part of a service where punters had glasses with red or blue filters. According to the filters they saw different things in the space and in the liturgy and they had to engage in conversation with someone with different filters to get a wider perspective: they needed the other in the body of Christ.

Christ's piece is you,  
Christ's piece is me,  
It is those that do,  
And it is those that be,  
Without one another we can't cover 360 degrees,  
Because we don't need 'I's to see, we need We.

As every image that we see of ourselves is reflected,  
Every image that we see of the world is subjective,  
We need two points of view to gain some perspective,  
And the ability and humility to accept this.

Because in our vision lies division,  
A polarised view of action and pacifism,  
But contradiction doesn't mean fact and fiction,  
more like discordant harmonies in the melody of wisdom.

I need you, like red needs blue,  
You need me, like do needs be,  
And life shouldn't be binary,  
Our eyes shouldn't be primary,  
We need to trade in reds and blues for indigos and violets see:  
We need to try and be purple.

Not just protest march bruises as we go out and do,  
Or blood filled cheeks as we hold our breath and be,  
I mean purple.  
Full circle.  
The hares and the rabbits,  
the tortoises and turtles,  
Purple.

So let us be moved to be mauve,  
Maroon and mulberry,  
Lilac, plum and lavender,  
May the red and blue poles of our souls and our minds combine to be magnets of magenta,  
Purple.

May we take the opposites and make the composite,  
As every image has its limits  
And every picture could be richer,  
If we have someone else to see that we are in it,  
We need to be purple.

Here an eighteen-year-old has reflected and articulated inter-contextual theology through experiencing being part of a process of planning worship rather than reading Steve Bevans masterful book on the subject [11](#) (and, much as I love that book, there is no way this 18 year old is going to read it). It has an incredible depth to it.

What is going on is the equivalent of Laurie Green's approach to communal theologising in *Let's Do Theology*, [12](#) though I don't think these communities have thought this is what they are doing! It's why I am a little nervous about the party line from Fresh Expressions on worship that seems to see it as something that comes very late in the process of church planting. I understand that listening, service, incarnation and discipleship are being held up. I understand our nervousness. But maybe the problem isn't worship - it's a colonial imagination in the minds of planters. New communities get birthed in all sorts of ways and worship might just be a great way to start some especially if people are invited to participate in the making. Jonny McEwen made the point in his interview that for those involved it's all about the process rather than the event.

## **Creativity**

The importance of creativity is so obvious that it hardly seems worth mentioning. But the imagination involved is so inspiring. In the introduction to the book I reflect that I often think the angels are wondering what on earth these people are going to come up with next. It's easy to forget just what a gift the church has in such imaginative, creative, artistic, passionate people.

If you travel to some other places in the world and come back and you will be reminded of what an astonishing level of creativity there is in and around the edges of the church. We need to pay much more attention to how we cultivate environments where such creativity flourishes: space to explore, to ask questions, places where ideas are welcome rather than a threat, where it is basic that participation is the norm, as is an environment where all gifts are

celebrated and welcome (not just those of music leading and public speaking). Art and prophecy are close friends. Let the artists loose and something prophetic is often not far away. But it's a speech that won't be controlled.

## **Public Space**

The move into public spaces is hugely encouraging. We've seen beach hut advent calendars in Brighton, stations of the cross in public gardens in Hamilton, installations in the basement car park in Melbourne, containers for advent in the town centre, postcards for spiritual tourists. All these capture a fresh energy in mission. It is heartening to see this trend.

For Christian communities or groups involved in curating worship, moving into public space can be a practical challenge - doing a monthly event for the community takes enough energy and effort so that sometimes there's not a lot left over. Steve Taylor, in his interview in the book, offers some good thoughts on this challenge and how building capacity in terms of a base and a body of creative people can create opportunity to encourage groups to focus in different directions, including outwards in public spaces. Grace have also tried to move in this direction by developing small creative teams led a by a curator. Other groups function more like art collectives putting on events in public space - that is their sole focus as opposed to curating worship as part of the worshipping life of a community or church. This art collective model is simpler in that by definition it does stuff in public spaces.

## **Leadership**

Laura Drane, in my interview with her, suggests that in the art world control is the elephant in the room - it's not just emerging churches who struggle with how to deal with issues of leadership, power and control! What points emerge around leadership in the interviews?

In many places in church life there seems to be a model of leadership that is constructed along provider/client lines. Whether that leader is a priest/president or a band worship leader, either way they are the ones up front, the experts, doing the leading and serving up services to passive congregations. In many of those circles the only gifts that are valued for worship are musical (and even then often of a small range of music) or speaking well. Alternative worship introduced the idea that the 'priest is the posse' (ironically from NOS where the leadership turned out to be abusive), emphasising that liturgy is truly something that comes out of a community's life, a bottom-up process rather than top-down, the work of the people rather than of church committees in far off places. And all gifts are welcome. The voice in worship can be literally any form, so alternative worship embraced poets, photographers, ideas people, geeks, theologians, liturgists, designers, writers, cooks, politicians, architects, movie makers, story tellers, parents, campaigners, children, bloggers, DJs, VJs, craft makers. Just anybody who came and was willing to bounce ideas around could get involved.

The role of the leader as curator is to hold open a creative and generous space where these gifts might be shared and to manage a process whereby worship can be created through a creative team drawing out people's ideas and contributions. The curator is a midwife. Ideas often seem to emerge around food, conversation and a bit of chaos. So leading is relational and environmental - it creates an environment where this process can flourish. For some communities this environment is encapsulated in the values or ethos to which the leadership

holds. Steve Collins uses the word 'guardianship', saying that this new leadership needs to protect or guard against an old style leadership that is dominating. 13

A curator therefore needs to be able to address dominating voices and, at times, their own voice if it is too dominant. Being able to hold open a space generously for ideas and contributions and then over time to move that in a focused direction is a real skill. It requires trust - of the process and of people and of God. It also requires being mature enough to be able to navigate different theological takes and positions, sometimes enabling both to be expressed in tension in the worship or space. Managing different opinions and being able to select and edit with a group so as to distill the ideas into a narrative that everyone owns is a more complex skill than it sounds.

Depending on the context, leading is being a middlewoman, negotiating between communities and institutions, creating space and building trust and gaining permissions. In the interviews in the book, the phrase 'light touch' is used several times and the suggestion made that swerving is what is required - taking the momentum and working with it. There are different styles of curation, but learning to hold back on control, to let go and trust people with their contributions, especially in the early stages, is a difficult skill.

Participation is highly valued in most of the communities and this is often a balancing act with quality. Perhaps it is here that there is a difference between a group that functions like an art collective and a community where everyone and anyone is encouraged to get involved. The desire in most communities seems to be to want to be an inclusive and open space - whoever comes are the right people to be involved. The desire to help people feel 'they can do it too' means a bit of looseness around the edges makes it feel more human and inviting but in public space things have to be top notch.

What are some of the other features of leadership when curating worship?

- Leadership is helping a group achieve consensus in making decisions and at times showing the direction where the group can't decide.
- Leadership can be catalytic - making things happen, drawing people together, sparking ideas.
- Leadership is practical - thinking through the small details.
- Leadership has power but that is best given away in a team and best rotated.
- Leadership is dispersed and involves different people at different times.
- Leadership for a pastor is being encouraging but being the help desk welcomer and resisting taking over, or it's lying on a pew at the back out of sight.
- Leadership/curation can also mean a lot of hard work and doing lots of different jobs to make the thing happen.
- Leadership is curating when no one else has any energy!
- Leadership, hopefully this goes without saying, but leadership is male and female - the interviewees are about 50% men and women.

In a review of the book, Ben Edson raised a question about the age profile of the people interviewed. Where, he wondered, were the next generation? The interviewees are all in the thirty to fifty age profile. That is not surprising given that this is a movement that has arisen and developed over the last twenty-five years. I am forty-five and inevitably, having been around for a lot of that movement, the people I know best have also been around. I think there

are younger people exploring worship in creative and contextual ways. I can certainly think of some. But hopefully they will carry forward insights stumbled upon, learn from our mistakes and create some new edges and approaches into the future. Maybe there should be some intentionality about mentoring a new generation of leaders as curators.

## Renewal

Many have sensed a move of the Spirit in the church in and through the new forms of church and mission that have emerged through alternative worship, emerging church and fresh expressions. But how newness comes is an intriguing question. The interviews show that there is a wrestling to carry forward the heart of the Christian faith into the future but not in the forms it has been expressed. And there is a pain in that process. I think there are a few threads around this newness and want to highlight three here.

First, there is what I have called 'world making'. Curating worship imagines a world, nothing less. Perhaps the single most important question is 'what kind of a world is imagined and made by those creating, leading and constructing worship?'. If we are happy with the way the world is now we should continue to make worship as before and repeat the formats. But if we are not content with the world we are in, then we will have to produce other worship. Restlessness is a sure sign that the world being made by other imaginaries doesn't ring true and that a counter-imagination is called for. In this sense alternative worship is not simply about stylistic difference and tweaking around the edges. It's not - as the cliché would have it - about putting on some ambient music, singing some chants and lighting candles. It cuts deeper. It is and has been about imagining new worlds, new relationships, new strategies and tactics. It is and has been about saying that other worlds are indeed possible, that business as usual in the church, in worship, in theology, in consumer culture, in the world at large, in life simply will not do.

Second, there is the relationship between the centre and the edge. The movement, as reflected in the range of people interviewed, contains people who have done things outside of the church structures and beyond the canon, those that have found space on the edges and those (such as Sue Wallace) who have been loyal radicals at the centre. Newness emerges in the interplay between all of these. If practice is happening at the centre and the edge then renewal is much more likely to be lasting and wide-ranging. The church in the UK has had something very special in this regard.

There is a parallel here with the art world (as I draw out in the book) where you have curators working in the large institutions. Robert Stoor of MOMA reflects on how curators were once those criticising the institutions but they now find themselves on the inside of the establishment and only have themselves to blame if the tradition is not renewed: 'If the art world is not responsive to the needs and achievements of artists there are all kinds of people to blame for that but mostly we must blame ourselves'. <sup>14</sup> He appeals for working creatively with the institutions rather than reactively against them. Okwui Enzor, on the other hand, had me smiling when he says that the only option is to curate beyond the canon - ie in culture - and the day you take a full time job in the institution you have reached a threshold! <sup>15</sup> These same positions and identities are at play in these renewing movements in the life of the church. Both/and centre/edge is the way to go. Let's have it all.

Third, another thread is continuity - how the tradition is carried forward. The improvisations out of the tradition are in contrast to the modernising moves in worship in charismatic circles which tended to turn away from, even discard and reject, tradition rather than reappropriate it and improvise out of it as a resource. Sue Wallace explores digging deep wells by indwelling the traditions, locating Transcendence in a cathedral and suggesting that she likes raiding granny's attic for treasures! <sup>16</sup> People like Sue play a key role as middlewomen, as negotiators between the centre and the edge. This, I think, is a hidden thread: those who have dug deep have riches to bring to the (re)mix and to the process of theological reflection as the faith is reworked for the incoming future.

## Speech

Several times the tone of language is discussed in the interviews with phrases such as 'an offering not a handout', 'evocative not descriptive', 'if it's too prescriptive it's like propaganda'. Whilst there is an articulation that is made in the worship, it is offered as a gift - tentatively, humbly, as something to explore, something that is multivalent, has multiple layers, is questioning, inviting participants to connect their story with the bigger story. Ana Draper describes it as being the multi/versa. It reminds me of Walter Brueggemann's suggestion that the sort of preaching we need is the speech of poetry rather than prose. <sup>17</sup>

## Epiphanies or encountering the Spirit

I explored with several people what they variously called 'serendipitous moments', 'moments of epiphany', 'spaces for encounter', 'God breaking in', 'beyond what was in the moment', 'a window through which the Spirit blows', and 'revelation which blows you apart'. I think this is an area that would merit further research. The art world has a parallel language which I found fascinating. It also lives for such moments of transformation - the phrase 'moments of epiphany' came from one of the books on curation. Language of the Spirit and God encounters is something that people seem quite tentative about and yet clearly are experiencing. Maybe a new language is needed.

One thread that seemed to run through the interviews was that people found they were moved or touched when things that were unplanned took place.

- Laura Drane describes a child offering her a dried half eaten mango slice in communion!
- Nic Hughes describes being choked up by an unexpected inverted lift in a contemporary dance around the eucharist.
- Kester Brewin remembers the tender unplanned regathering of the elements in communion after they had been thrown in the dirt.
- Cheryl Lawrie reflects on the unplanned 10 minutes of silence in the women's prison.

Lawrie says that worship isn't just about what is planned but the moments of grace - what God actually does - that the worship then makes possible. It seems to me that this is also strongly related to trust - the work goes in to plan and prepare but then it requires trust: trust of God, of the process, of the people who come; trust that connections will be made, that God will indeed breathe in the space and in what has been prepared; trust that whoever comes are the right people.

## Amateurs

I have been reflecting more generally on the trajectory of alternative worship, emerging church, fresh expressions, missional communities, new monasticism and whatever we call it next. Most of those communities have been led collaboratively by lay people, amateurs who have discovered that they can produce, organise and publish independently of institutions, and who have found themselves leading communities.

Some of these amateurs have then gone on to get ordained (some as pioneers, some not). I suspect the leadership they have discovered as lay people will give them confidence to be their own persons in the system. But I also have a hunch that if it had been done the other way round and they had simply gone straight away to be ordained, it might not have worked because they would not necessarily have found the freedom and confidence to experiment creatively that they discovered as amateurs.

The communities are also not filled with professional installation artists and DJs. They are also amateurs exploring playfully. That's not to say that professionals don't have a part to play. But they come to the table to offer their gifts alongside others. Amateurs do it for love not money.

Above all they are lovers - lovers of God, of worship, of creativity, of the tradition, of people, of their culture. I loved talking to these amazing people.

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**Jonny Baker** works for the Church Mission Society training pioneer mission leaders. He is a member of Grace where he has curated many worship experiences, a partner in proost, a small creative company producing resources for worship, and a blogger. The themes and interviews in this article are explored in more depth in his book, *Curating Worship* (SPCK, 2010) and are used with permission.

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## Endnotes

1 For an overview of alternative worship see the introductory essay in Baker and Gay 2003.  
See also the web site [www.alternativeworship.org](http://www.alternativeworship.org) for a good overview and  
[www.smallfire.org](http://www.smallfire.org) for a comprehensive collection of photographs and explanations of  
alternative worship services

2 See Riddell, Kirkpatrick, and Pierson 2000

3 These interviews form the major part of Baker 2010

4 O'Neill and Søren 2007

5 Obrist 2008

6 Bevens 2009: 190, 191

7 Interview at Baker 2010: 28

8 Kim 2010

9 Cray 2010

10 Baker 2010: 67

11 Bevens 2009

12 Green 2009

13 Baker 2010: 31

14 Marincola and Storr 2001: 15

15 O'Neill and Søren 2007: 120

16 Baker 2010: 113

17 See Brueggemann 1989, here at p3