

An Alternative Worship Project Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

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for the Commission for Mission
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The Alternative Worship Project has been part of the Commission for Mission for the past 12 months.

The Project began with only two intentions: to offer opportunities for worship to those who can find no other place to worship, and to reflect on what those opportunities and experiences tell the church.

It was a deliberate decision to make the shape of the position so vague. We have often created positions for change in the church; we have normally assumed that we know what the change needs to be, and how it will best happen. The church and society is in a time of such rapid transition that we can no longer assume that we know what change needs to happen. It was decided that this position would start with a different set of assumptions: that we did not know what the new way for the church could be, but we needed to be willing to take a risk in order to find it. We had a hunch that if we let the position unfold, and were flexible enough to respond to the opportunities, that we might end up in places that we could never have predicted. As it's turned out, we could never have anticipated where this position would get to, and the shape it would be taking now. Of course, we aren't used to doing this kind of thing in the church. Having the freedom to try some stuff, get it wrong (which we have, often), get it right (which we also have, often) and then try some more has meant that we've taken risks that would never have been taken in any other style of position.

Where has it taken us?

For much of the year, it seemed that the project rolled from event to event. I planned and led worship for Synod, the Victorian School of Ministry, for the National Youth Leadership Certificate, for camps in presbyteries, for Sorry Day in Narana, and for the Synod staff at Christmas. These were a valuable way to showcase what we were doing, and to offer people an experience around which they could shape an understanding of alternative worship. It began to raise both the profile of the project, and to add another dimension to the conversation about worship within the Uniting Church. We began a small worshipping community in Healesville that met every month – a fragile group of 'exiles' from the church, many of whom proudly named themselves as being of the Uniting Church, but could find no other expression of the church where they could belong.

I offered a few spaces that were specifically designed for people who aren't part of the church – during advent and Holy Week. I dreamed of doing many more, but often found that the requests and expectations from the 'Church' for alternative worship took up too much time and headspace. The year could probably be defined by the tension we discovered between trying to work with the existing church, and the unlimited possibilities available outside the church. I wonder whether doing both is possible. I used to be confident that it was. I'm no longer sure.

Things I no longer know.

I've worked within the church for a number of years, in a variety of consultative positions. Over that period of time, I've built up a large base of knowledge – some 'truths' I could confidently assume when I went into a congregation to work with them. These included the following:

That people need to know each other to worship well together.

That people are longing for community, and that the church is the best place to offer it.

That offering worship that's intelligent, creative and well-designed will mean people will come in off the street to find it.

That there is a natural (and right) progression from attending to participation, to belonging, to 'owning', to leading...

That society needs the church to point it towards the work of God in the world.

That our buildings and structures aren't what put people off.

I've discovered throughout this last year that these are not 'truths' that I can assume in this project. I'm in the process of discovering what to replace them with.

Things I have learnt

The privilege of being invited to lead worship within the church sometimes seemed a mixed blessing. One thing that was highlighted when I curated alternative worship within an existing church context was that often the church wanted something new, but it didn't really want anything to change. I'd often be told I had a blank sheet of paper to work with... but then be asked what hymns I'd like the organist to practise. People wanted the new, but they didn't want the new to be any different to the old.

I realised quite early on that the alternative worship project was becoming a microcosm of the change that the rest of the Uniting Church was struggling with. We know we need change, and we even think we're ready for it, but we've always managed by incremental change in the past. I wonder whether innovation, or transformational change has moved beyond our imagination and capacity. The Uniting Church has maybe been too generous in the past with its capacity to tweak and adapt – we've assumed that if we expand a little more, change our shape slightly, that we can fit everyone in to the one space. By being so accommodating, perhaps we've lost the ability to truly innovate.

What I discovered was that when I curated worship that wasn't for a particular event, but purely worship for the sake of worship, we had an interesting mix of people coming along:

- There were those who came because they had a desperate longing for this. The worship we offer has become 'home' to a remarkable group of people.
- There were also many people curiously peering in from the edge, wanting to know, to dip their toe in, but not wanting to fully commit to being a part of the experience. Some had been burnt by the church too often and they need to tread slowly and carefully. Some thought they might be interested, but wanted to make sure first that they weren't going to be part of a failure, however glorious that failure might be.
- The most curious group, however, were the spectators - those who (mostly) were long-standing members of the church - they'd come along, but they would just stand on the edges, watching, rather than actually participating.

I'm coming to wonder whether the Uniting Church has become a worshipping church of dispassionate observers... whether we've bred that in the church through our mainstream worship, which is largely 'performance liturgy' (or where participation involves reading the words in bold to a prayer in a newsletter that someone else wrote on our behalf) ... we critique, rather than immerse. The alternative worship we have been offering expects an entirely different kind of participation. It's hands on. That kind of difference is a very big crevasse to jump... The trouble is, if you don't get your hands into this kind of worship, it's kind of hard to understand what it is. Alternative worship is an interaction, not a performance.

- There were also a number of people who got involved, and then realised that we were actually talking about something very different to what they imagined. Many people were hoping that they could simply find a list of creative ideas, in order to transform their own worship. Often people would carry a sheet of paper and pen during worship so that they could write down ideas as they saw them... They were hoping for experiences that would offer another creative idea to carry them through another week... We do that a lot in the Uniting Church. We grab ideas, take the sharp edges off them, and make them fit into what we are already doing. It can be a great skill for a church to have. But I've also watched a lot of the alternative worship stuff we do be diluted. I know this sounds really precious, but the concept of alternative worship is much more than just the finished product as it comes 'packaged'. The alternative worship that we have been experimenting with over the last year involves a reworking of our whole theology of worship, leadership, the church... Putting the individual components of an alternative worship into another context is a fabulous thing to do - but we also need to recognise that the changed context (the community and space it's put into, the understanding of the role of leaders and participants in that community, the understanding of what actually happens in worship) will change what that 'component' of worship will do.

[As a side note, I can't count how many 'mainstream' worship attenders told me, quietly, that they could no longer go to worship... or how many ministers told me, quietly, that they thought they would go mad if they were to continue to lead 'mainstream' worship as they always have done.]

- And there were also a number of people who got involved in worship and somehow discovered something of God in the experience. It has been the most extraordinary privilege to be part of a project that has helped that to happen.

Looking forward

Over the last months, 2006 has begun to take a more intentional focus. Firstly, we have decided that we will continue to focus the project around those who are on the fringes of the church and society, exploring the inextricable link between liturgy and mission. Alternative Worship seems to take a far sharper edge when it's planned for those who do not normally go to worship. By necessity, it assumes a different kind of 'wondering'. It honours the context from which people come in a far richer way, and honours the journey that people will take when they leave. It doesn't assume that it holds an answer - it assumes that it's part of the question. In planning, it always feels like we're walking on holy ground. Adding this demographic to this approach to worship, seems to be leading us into perhaps the greatest of unknown territories.

The coming year is being shaped, firstly, by practical, on the ground events: continuing worship with a little community in Healesville, curating worship for the Bandy conference, working with Jenny Hayes in the correctional centres, exploring new forms of sacred spaces in the city at particular times in the year. Another focus will be the resourcing / skilling of people who are venturing into alternative territory of whatever kind by continuing with the website which currently gets around 300 visits a day from around the world, leading workshops with hospital and prison chaplains, and offering a series of workshops for those who want to explore in depth the theory and practice of alternative worship, and coordinating a national event for people involved in alternative worship.

Alongside all of this will be the ongoing exploration of how positions and projects like this can inform, and be informed by, the life of the rest of the church, while each holds onto their own integrity and individuality.

[Attached to this report is a reflection written for the alternative worship website after my first visit to the Women's Correctional Centre. The website can be found at www.alternative.victas.uca.org.au]

It's all about context

February 5th, 2006

I've spent most of today in the women's maximum security prison in Melbourne. I was asked by the prison chaplain to go to worship, because she thought that maybe we could do some alternative worship there together this year.

I've spent the last year telling people that alternative worship is not about style - that it's about reinterpreting the ways we worship so that they speak to and from our culture/s and context. Of course, the mental image I've had in my head as I've said those words is of worship that's media rich, grungy, ambient, politically subversive, theologically cutting edge... I never quite pictured it in a prison...

So I've been a little apprehensive about today. The worship I create (as you'll have noticed from this site) is wordy. It's prop-heavy. It comes from a peculiar theological bent, and requires a certain kind of elastic thinking. And that was just the start of the apprehension... I haven't spent a lot of time in prison before... What on earth could I do that would be appropriate? How could I ever hope to be able to proclaim a contextual gospel within a context I know nothing about?

(I don't have any answers to those questions!)

I think I've always had this image of worship in a prison being something the rest of the church offers to the 'prisoners'. I discovered, instead, that this is a congregation. They're as much a congregation, and as much a part of the Uniting Church as the congregation that meets down the road from my house every Sunday morning. So when I talked to some of the women after worship, they asked me to come back... not to give them better worship (the worship was pretty damn good already), but to help them tell a story that they hoped would change the worship of the rest of the church 'outside'. They wanted to say what life had been like for them... and what their fears were about going out... and they wanted to tell their stories of faith. They want to tell a story that defines them as more than sinners, more than prisoners, but as people who are loved by God. They were very clear - insistent, really - that they want these stories to be told to the church so that when they leave prison there might be communities, somewhere, that will understand something of who they are, and be ready to understand more.

So I'm going back. We're going to do a few different things throughout the year. First up, we're going to do a six week bracket of exploring some of the stories Jesus told in the new testament (the prodigal son, the good samaritan, etc.). We're going to put ourselves into all the characters in the stories, and to begin to tell some of our own stories through theirs (Godly play would be really interesting to try, but I'm not sure about getting that number of props through the security system). At the end of that six weeks, we're going to create some liturgies together. And I'll keep telling the story as we go...

The only three things I'm confident of after today are that I'm woefully inadequate for this... and that pretty much everything I know will be deconstructed through the process... and (this bit really surprised me!) that I'm really going to enjoy it...

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