

# Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: Passionate Worship

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This morning we continue with our five-part sermon series: Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations based on a series of resources by Robert Schnase. Last Sunday we explored the Practice of Radical Hospitality.

Today our focus moves from Hospitality to Worship. And the practice we will explore is what is called Passionate Worship. First let's explore the definition of each of these words, starting with Worship. What does worship mean to you? What does Passionate mean to you? So what does it mean if we put those two words together?

A valuable resource for me when it comes to exploring the idea of worship is a small book by Robert A. Rimbo. Rimbo is one of those rare ELCA clergy members who have served as bishop in two Synods in the ELCA. The first was the Southeast Michigan Synod. And he currently service the Metropolitan New York Synod. In his book, *Why Worship Matters*, he responds to the question "why do we worship" with these words:

*The heart of the church's ministry is leading people to God....We worship because God is worth worshipping. (Rimbo, p. 13)*

He goes on to define worship with these words:

*Worship is the language of adoration addressed to God and the language of God equipping us for life and witness. (Rimbo, p. 33)*

With this as his definition of worship, he goes on to make the following points:

1. Good worship will be evangelistic, but evangelism is not its primary purpose, for worship is directed to God as its subject and object.
2. Good worship will both nurture the character of believers and the community and form us to be the kind of people who will reach out in witness and service to the world.

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3. Worship is ritual and not entertainment.
4. Worship offers a kind of order to the chaos of human life by providing a sense of stability for this assembly. This assembly raises the name of Christ in a society that is largely post-Christian. This assembly provides for outward-looking community in a culture characterized by, among other things, a rampant narcissism.
5. Worship effects the life of the world: the word and sacraments cast a new light on our situation, lessen or remove the structures and systems that threaten human life, provide agendas for justice and equip people to following those agendas, suggest meaning where before was only meaninglessness.
6. Worship is prayer. It involves prayerful togetherness, prayerful hearing of the word, prayerful concern for the world, prayerful acknowledgement of the gifts of God, and prayerful acceptance of God's commission to go and to serve God in our lives.
7. Worship is not so much a celebration of life as we know it as it is a celebration of the life we hardly expects. Although it uses the stuff of everyday life—water, words, table, song, movement, meeting, touching, chairs, flowers—it uses them all with a sense of the holiness of these things, a holiness derived not so much from their presence in a sacred place as from a recognition of the sacred presence that pervades all places.
8. Worship is service. The German word for worship, Gottesdienst (literally “God’s service”), is a wonderfully ambiguous term referring to our service of god, God’s service of us, and the service we and God offer the world. (Rimbo, pp. 33-35)

As Lutherans, we are a liturgical church. Liturgy is the container in which our worship takes place. Our liturgy is shaped by four distinct activities:

1. The Gathering - The Holy Spirit calls us together as people of God.
2. The Word – God speaks to us in scripture reading, preaching and song.
3. The Meal – God feeds us with the presence of Jesus.
4. The Sending – God blesses us and sends us in mission to the world.

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So let's explore the idea of Passionate Worship. Schnase makes the following points in his resource on Passionate Worship:

1. Passionate describes an intense desire, an ardent spirit, strong feelings, and the sense of heightened importance. Passionate speaks of an emotional connection that goes beyond intellectual consent. It connotes eagerness, anticipation, expectancy, deep commitment and belief. (17)
2. Passionate Worship means an extraordinary eagerness to offer the best in worship, honoring God with excellence and with an unusual clarity about the purpose of connecting people to God. (17)
3. Why use passionate to describe the practices of vibrant, fruitful, growing churches? Without passion, worship becomes dry, routine, boring, and predictable, keeping the form while lacking the spirit. (17)
4. Worship is the most likely point of first contact the unchurched have with a congregation, and in some churches, many visitors do not find genuine warmth, a premium on excellence, or a message presented in a form that engages them. When a congregation loses touch with the purpose of worship, people come and go without receiving God. (17)
5. Passionate Worship is not restricted to any particular style; it can be highly formal, with robes, acolytes, stained glass, organ music, orchestral accompaniment, and hardwood pews with hymnals on the rack in front. Or Passionate Worship can take place in an auditorium, gym, or storefront, with casually dressed leaders, images on screens, folding chairs and the supporting beat of a praise team.
6. Authentic, engaging, life-changing worship derives from:
  - a. the experience of God's presence
  - b. the desire of worshipers for God's Word
7. the changed heart people deliberately seek when they encounter Christ in the presence of other Christians.

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8. All churches offer worship services. Passionate worship means a church cares enough about the service to offer its best, its
9. Churches that practice Passionate worship make this sacred time as free as possible from distractions, annoyances, and inconveniences; and people sense the deliberate care in preparation and intention.
10. In churches, marked by Passionate Worship, people don't merely show up and sit passively in their pews; they are actively engaged, genuinely connected, personally addressed, and deeply challenged.
11. Churches that exhibit passion for worship prepare their services not only with long-term spiritually mature members in mind but also with attentiveness to visitors, young people, and those with little worship experience.
12. In passionately worshiping churches, everything says, "We're glad you're here. Come back. Learn more. We'll help." (Schnase, pp. 17-22)

In this interim period while you wait for the arrival of a new pastor to serve Grace, it is a good time to have a conversation about how we plan and experience worship at Grace. What we think and feel when we gather for worship? What experience do others have when they come to worship here for the first time? What do we do well? What could we do better?

### Resources

Rimbo, Robert A. *Why Worship Matters* (Augsburg: Minneapolis, 2004)

Schnase, Robert. *Five Practices: Passionate Worship* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2008)