

Deeper Water

resources for immersive worship

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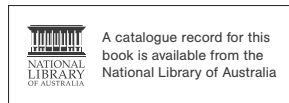
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Contents

Contents	3	God of majesty and mystery	57
Introduction	4	Communion Liturgy	58
Resources	8	Romans 8	60
Gatherings	9	Wordles	61
We bring who we truly are	10	Poetry words	61
Here we can be community	11	Letter to the Ephesians	67
We gather, hoping	12	Stations & Meditations	69
Drink deeply	13	Ezekiel 37 Meditation	69
This is a thin place	14	Lost Son #1	72
An invitation to gather	15	Lost Son #2	73
Welcome to an honest place	16	Lost Son #3	74
Between our breathing	17	The blind one at the pool	75
Deeper water	18	Do you love me?	79
A whispering word	19	Wilderness Stations	83
Psalm 24	20	Word among us	91
Advent & Christmas	22	Stories & Scripts	97
Like shepherds, like angels	22	How many times?	97
Watch! Listen!	23	Mary and Joseph - Why Me?	99
Australian Nativity	25	Following a Star	101
Today God has a human face	27	Angels with a G	105
There is a time	28	Calming the storm	109
Lent & Easter	29	If your brother sins against you	112
Palm Sunday	29	What's that smell?	114
Palm Sunday #2	30	I remember - Holy Week	116
Gethsemane	31	Woe to you!	117
Holy Week #1	33	Doubting Thomas	118
Holy Week #2	34	Blessings	120
Broken loyalty	37	The widening curve of grace	120
Emmaus Eucharist	38	A blessing for uncharted waters	121
Pentecost	41	Blessings for all ages	122
Dry bones	41	Songs	127
Come, Spirit!	43	Be Our Light	130
Circle us With fire	44	God of Creation	134
Memory and vision	46	How Shall We Sing?	136
Paper cranes at Pentecost	48	Like a Candle	144
Worship Words	50	Oh, God Today Has a Human Face	148
Thanksgiving Prayer	50	Sing of a Promise	152
Participatory Communion Liturgy	51	Spirit of Creation	157
Hot shower of grace	53	There is aThin Place	160
If I believe	55	This is Our Story	168
Fame or friendship?	56	Wash Over Me	175
		We Walk On	179
		Scripture Index	182

Introduction

The meeting of liturgy and proclamation is all about ...
a place where people come to receive new materials,
or old materials freshly voiced, that will fund,
feed, nurture, nourish, legitimate, and authorise
a *counterimagination of the world*.

Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation*

Here is a book of invitations to deeper water - to open a strange story and live in its pages, to learn to sing a new song in a different land, to be seared by a burning bush, to board a weathered boat and push out into the depths. Invitations that invoke and evoke the Spirit. Jesus calls his followers to go with him to the depths, to learn from experience and encounter. The Gospels don't read like a weekly liturgy. More like a travel journal. "Dear diary, we were sent out today for two weeks without map or money."

Why "immersive worship"? Because modern Protestants tend to flatten worship in terms of time, space, word, and even music. We have a predictable sequence of worship elements to complete in 59 minutes. There can be little variation. This is rarely the minister's fault. In her wonderful article about improvisation in ministry, Deborah Kapp talks about how small is the acceptable range of improvisation which congregations allow their ministers. [*Journal of Religious Leadership*, 9.1]

Immersive worship seeks to go beyond the predictable. Not that rhythm and repetition can't be good. That's not the point. Worship rarely needs more order. It usually needs more imagination. Have you ever been to a movie and became so immersed in the film that you became a part of it? Have you ever stumbled out of a cinema, blinking, to find that the real world seemed less important than the epic story in which you had been deeply submerged? When have you not wanted a worship service to end? When have you felt lost in wonder, touched by the holy? Give me liberated order, not ordered liberty.

When I began to understand worship differently, I was able to apply my experience of theatre production, my love of film, my appreciation of art galleries, and my sense of sonic space (think "soundtrack"). This is not to make worship all about my tastes. Instead it is to approach it differently as an event. Not every service can be epic. Much of our worship

probably needs less stuff and more space. For me, immersion is about creating the space to allow counterimagination to be cultivated. As a worship leader I have had to unlearn things, and to question and challenge the limits and expectations of most Sunday morning worship.

Immersive worship is *multi-sensory* - not just words, but sights, smells, movement, sounds - not something to be observed at a distance, but to be experienced, up close and personal. Worship is an all of body and spirit experience.

Immersive worship is *participatory* - not just passive spectatorship - it invites active engagement. It is hands-on, brains in gear, hearts stirred, interpersonal.

Immersive worship is *non-linear* - not just a series of items or elements - it has flow and sequence that are not necessarily discrete, and perhaps not neatly ordered.

Immersive worship is *poetic* - not a technical experience but a multivalent one with pluralities of meaning to be explored, jigsaw pieces to play with.

Immersive worship is *cinematic* - a narrative with a soundtrack rather than a song list. It seeks to help people lose themselves in a story in which they might find themselves.

Immersive worship is *political* - if worship is not fundamentally transformative for our lives and our world, then what is it good for? Worship is the arena of juxtaposition and disruption. If you're not disturbed, you haven't been paying attention.

Immersive worship is *interpretive* - it invites, allows and encourages interpretation as a work of the people. Worship is less about providing answers and more about making the space for people to wrestle with the biblical texts and even with God. Yes, good preaching can do that for me, but how about putting the text in my hands and giving me the space and time to grapple with it? Worship is a worthy quest, not a wordy text.

Worship began to change for me about twenty years ago, both as a leader and as one who gathered to worship. Friends in Adelaide started *The Other Later Late Service*, an outside-the-box experiment connecting ritual, spirituality, art, text and context prompted by an experiment in the UK. In their wonderful book *The Prodigal Project*, Mike Riddell, Mark Pierson and Cathy Kirkpatrick opened up a fresh view of church through the lenses of culture, creativity, community and communication. Those are my words, not theirs.

The book gave permission for play, juxtaposition, ambiguity, participation, depth, art and, most importantly, permission for disruptive encounter and response to God in worship. Cultural reappropriation was fine, in fact, it was vital to worship as reimagination of the world. More than that, I discovered a perspective where words mattered, and so did images, space, and music. Most criticism of contemporary worship was missing the point, asking shallow questions about what was in fact a deeper quest to connect past, present and future. Worship creators were taking their art and craft most seriously, and most playfully.

I discovered that worship creation could be worship curation, crafting an experience rather than presenting a bunch of content - hence *immersive* worship - not more information, but deeper engagement. Isn't all worship meant to be like this? I suppose so, but that hasn't often been my experience. I look for worship to require more of me, to involve me more in interpretation, to engage more of my senses and my intellect, to reference our culture (real world), to open up rather than smooth over the dissonances of word and world. The language of spiritual formation speaks about the *apophatic* and the *kataphatic* - the known and the unknown - both the filling and the emptying of our senses. Immersive worship hopefully attends to both.

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall speaks about *high context* and *low context* communication [*Beyond Culture*]. In low context communication, everything is made explicit. Lots of words, diagrams, signs. No room for nuance. In high context communication, the setting itself communicates. There is more non-verbal messaging, more subtle signs, more cadenced coding, more room for interpretation. Compare Western and Eastern forms of communication. Get the idea?

In *Beyond Culture* and *The Dance of Life*, Hall also speaks about *monochronic* (one thing at a time) and *polychronic* (many things at a time) cultures. Compare a Western department store with the hustle and bustle of a Middle Eastern or Asian market. Worship is often one-thing-at-a-time, in orderly, structured sequence. In polychronic worship, time is more fluid. More than one thing can happen at a time, and people's attention may be drawn in more than one direction. This might include music, presentation of images, prayer activities or physical movement, for example. During worship workshops I have reflections combining with a series of images, spoken voice and background music, and then asked people in what ways these elements drew their attention. Everyone gives a different answer.

Immersive worship is polychronic and low-context in relation to structure and communication. This does not necessarily make the worship more crowded or busy, in fact worship as a series of sequential items can be one very crowded hour. Compare going to the theatre with going to an art gallery. Presentation versus exploration. However, polychronic worship can be confusing for people who expect to focus on only one thing at a time. There is always the tension between the familiar and the foreign.

Worship seeks to be a liminal space, a thin place, where heaven and earth are one - the known and the unknown, the material and the mystery, the sign and the signified, the promise and the presence. Time. Space. Sound. Image. Movement. These are the elements of liminality, for sign, symbol and sacrament embody the spiritual.

I wish this was a book about alternative worship, instead it is simply a collection of writings and music that were part of gatherings that you can't easily see, touch, taste or hear. I wish there was a CD-ROM or something, but instead there are some web links along the way. This book simply collects some things that I've done in collaboration with others, out of context and unfortunately without the visual and audio accompaniments. The invocations

are long because they are often a prologue to a series of experiences rather than a sermon. They set the scene and invite people on a journey of expectation and exploration.

In discovering the alternative worship movement, my approach to all worship changed. I can no longer approach Sunday morning worship in the same way, let alone any worship gathering. As Steve Collins has noted, *alternative* simply meant home-grown in the same way that grunge music was made in garages by young people who wanted to be their own band, not succumb to mass market radio pop. Steve along with Andrew Jones blogged insightfully about the place of worship in the emerging church 'movement' in the UK (emergingchurch.info, smallritual.org, smallfire.org). Mark Pierson, Jonny Baker, Doug Gay and others fuelled the fire. Robert Webber later spoke of *ancient-future* worship, although I'm not sure that he got the point entirely.

The risk of producing a book of worship resources is to seem pretentious. I know too many wonderful leaders, writers, songwriters and artists whose craft takes my breath away. The Resources page links you to some of these amazing thinkers and creators.

These resources are offered with gratitude for the following:

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I hope you find some useful stuff here.