

## Joys and Concerns About Joys and Concerns

by Jeanne Lane

Ask ten people what worship should feel like and you know you'll get ten different answers. This is a truism well known to the Worship & Music Committee of Session which has recently been charged with considering changes in the way that one element of worship - Joys and Concerns - is best incorporated within the context of the entire worship service.

A bit of history; At First Church, spoken Joys and Concerns was introduced into worship under Reverend Bill Phillippe's interim leadership. In this mode of doing Joys and Concerns, members of the congregation awaited an usher's microphone to voice their sentiments publicly for incorporation in the pastoral prayer.

The current method of doing Joys and Concerns is to invite parishioners to write on specially-designed cards that are in the pew racks and available from the ushers when bulletins are distributed. The cards are collected when the offering is taken; pastors read the cards and incorporate the written concerns into the service's pastoral prayer. This system will stay in place until early 2012. The Worship and Music Committee is considering some post-worship coffee hour discussions in January so members can express their views on the two methods.

For some, spoken Joys and Concerns feels real and of-the-moment. Fans of this method feel that spoken Joys and Concerns have the ring of authenticity; the voice of the people spoken within the trusted environment of worship. Some have even said that for them, these personal comments make communal worship feel honest because it assumes and cements an atmosphere of shared compassion. The recent adoption of the card method have left some members feeling that Joys and Concerns feels 'sanitized' or 'secondhand'.

However, for others the transcendent quality of worship is jarringly interrupted and diminished by amplified commentary from the pews, particularly when it strays from the requested realm of 'joys and concerns' into 'infomercials' or meandering individual observations. While the pastors always invite those who lift up Joys and Concerns to recognize that it is a time for expressing personal and communal gratitude and/or compassion for the blessings and challenges in our lives, there are occasions when the time is misappropriated for general announcements, informational comments or reminders. Fortunately, our church has many appropriate vehicles for the latter including: the printed Sunday Bulletin, *Faith Connections* newsletter, all-church emails, phone trees, bulletin board posters or mailings.

While Joys and Concerns may at first appear to be a straightforward element of worship, both the Worship & Music Committee of Session and the Worship Planning Team are aware that it has characteristics that influence the entire order, timing and character of worship. Consider these points:

### **The Presbyterian Book of Order states:**

The Church has always experienced a tension between form and freedom in worship. In the history of the Church, some have offered established forms for ordering worship in accordance with God's Word. Others, in the effort to be faithful to the Word, have resisted imposing any fixed forms upon the worshiping community. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) acknowledges that all forms of worship are provisional and subject to reformation. In ordering worship the church is to seek openness to the creativity of the Holy Spirit, who guides the church toward worship which is orderly yet spontaneous, consistent with God's Word and open to the newness of God's future.

Manifestations of the Spirit in worship edify the whole church. When actions in worship are present only for personal expression, call attention to themselves, or are insensitive to the congregation at worship, they are not in order and call for the counsel and guidance of the session.

The ordering of worship should also reflect the richness of the cultural diversity in which the church ministers, as well as the local circumstances and needs of its congregations. While the authority for ordering worship belongs to those so designated and leadership in worship is assigned to those with gifts, training, and authorization, the order for worship should provide for and encourage the participation of all.

### **Worship Timing**

The Worship Planning Team (WPT) strives in weekly meetings to carefully and intentionally plan authentic worship that conforms to one hour. This includes thoughtful selection and timing of hymns, choir anthems (and/or offertory music including handbells, Eggs Benediction, soloists, etc.), children's story, scripture readings, pastoral prayers and sermon length and depth. This task involves detailed coordination among pastors, liturgists, choir, organist, soloists, ushers, musicians and invited speakers.

The flip side of the spontaneity of spoken Joys and Concerns is that, by its very nature of being unplanned and untimed, it derails the WPT's minute-to-minute planning. It can - and has - resulted in criticism directed at pastors when a 60 minute worship service unintentionally stretches into a 70 or 75 minute service. When Joys and Concerns are handled by 'open mic', the pastors cannot predict the length of the worship service in advance.

### **Individual Expression**

In its exploration of how best to balance the many facets of Joys and Concerns, The Worship & Music Committee has learned the old maxim of 'different strokes for different folks'; that is: there is an entire component of our congregation who will *never* stand and speak into a microphone regardless of the sincerity or intensity of their joy or concern. It is well-known that public speaking is not everyone's cup of tea; therefore this mode of sharing, by its very nature, eliminates those voices.

This factor was a primary driver in the Worship & Music Committee's decision to pilot a different platform of sharing that would invite the outspoken as well as the reserved to share their joys and concerns for inclusion in the pastoral prays of the people.

### **Confidentiality**

Church leaders are mindful of the important issue of confidentiality. Revelations of private information, even when done with the most compassionate intentions, have legal implications. Yes, there have been times when a joy or concern was expressed in church before its subject was ready to 'go public' with their situation. This shared discussion has raised everyone's awareness that this should be the first consideration when sharing information publically.

The Worship & Music Committee of Session, in conjunction with the Worship Planning Team is thoughtfully and mindfully working to balance each of these elements by considering the ways that Joys and Concerns can be most effective. They recognize the strongly-held and sincere emotions on all sides of this facet of worship and respectfully invite the congregation to walk along with them as they work toward the most inclusive solution that, in all ways, brings glory to God.

If you would like to add your well-thought-out comments on the subject of how best Joys and Concerns can be offered, please feel free to contact any member of the Worship and Music Committee:

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