**Worship Wars Are About Distance Not Style**

By

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I continue to hear of worship wars and rumors of worship wars.

If you are still battling worship wars in your congregation, you may be in conflict over the wrong issue. Worship wars are not really about the style of worship, particularly the style of the newer service. Worship wars are about the distance between the various worship services.

Northern Hills Church had for most of its 50-year history a worship style that would be called traditional within their denominational family. After many years of transition and change in their community context, and with the calling of a younger pastor, the congregation added a style of worship that would be called emergent. It was way beyond contemporary.

Not only did the congregation initiate this emergent worship service, but it also held it at the sacred hour of 11:00 a.m. on Sundays. In the recent past, the church had two worship services on Sunday mornings, but they were both traditional.

From the very beginning, there was a medium intensity of conflict in the congregation over the new worship service. In addition to being held at the 11 o’clock hour, the emergent service seemed strange to the people who had been around the church for many years. In fact, it seemed so strange that they were not quite sure that it was Christian worship.

Another challenge was that not only was the service successful, but its numbers were growing to where it appeared that within another year it might be larger than the numbers present for the traditional worship service. Long-term members saw their church slipping away. Several people verbalized the question “Who stole my church?”

By the way, the emergent worship service participants also had difficulty understanding the traditional service truly as worship of the Triune God. So, the lack of perspective and the distance felt, was characteristic of both groups.

Surface evaluation of the worship services might indicate that the problem was the style utilized by the new emergent service. However, another way to look at the situation is to not criticize or blame the style of emergent worship but to talk about the distance between the emergent worship service and the traditional service.

To do this, visualize a horizontal scale from 1 to 10. Use this as a continuum on which to plot the worship styles in your congregation. Lower scores would indicate more traditional and even more liturgical worship. Higher scores would indicate more contemporary to postmodern to emergent worship.

The first action is to plot your worship services on the scale. In Northern Hills, they evaluated the traditional worship service as a three. The new emergent worship service was seen as a nine. Obviously, this was a subjective evaluation, yet felt very real to the congregation. What does this mean?

It means the distance on the scale between the traditional worship and the emergent worship is too great for worship service attendees in one service to be comfortable with the other worship service because the distance between them is too great.

**Key Point:** *The simple idea regarding the scale is that any worship service that is more than three points along the scale away from an existing worship service is at a greater distance away than the congregation can embrace without unnecessary and unhealthy conflict.*

Therefore, I suggest the challenge is not the style of worship, but the distance along the scale that the new worship is from the old worship.

Another point of distance is that the people who attend the traditional worship service and the people who attend the emergent worship service, with a few exceptions, really do not know one another. There is too great a distance of friendly and family relationships between the two worship services. Typically a person is going to be more accepting of diversity if they know the other person, care about them, and can in their own words express the characteristics of their appreciation for other the person as a Christian sister or brother.

If participants in an emergent worship service do not know and are unable to express the character of their love of the people who attend a traditional worship service, then the relationship distance is too great. The same would apply to people who attend the traditional worship service in terms of the closeness or distance from the people who attend the emergent worship service.

If your congregation has two or more worship services of two or more styles, what is the distance between them? How should you respond to this distance? What relational actions do you need to take in your congregation?

**Worship Distance Scale**

**<<< Liturgical – Traditional – Convergent – Contemporary – Emergent >>>**

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| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |