



Sacred Space: A Hands-On Guide to Creating Multisensory Worship Experiences for Youth Ministry
Copyright 2008 by Dan Kimball and Lilly Lewin

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Chapter 1

What Is Experiential Worship— and Why Should I Care?

Imagine a wall covered in butcher paper where your students are writing their prayers in colored markers, pouring out their hearts, their pain, and their fears. Writing prayers to God that they'd never speak out loud in a million years.

Imagine them running their fingers through a bin of sand to finally find a large pearl—and then realizing that God searches for them like that, and they're to search for God like that, too.

Imagine them walking into a room with an inflated raft in the center, and they're asked to physically stand in the boat and actually consider what they feel as Jesus calls them to follow him. What things keep them stuck in the raft? What fears do they feel as Jesus calls them? Then they each talk to Jesus about leaving their nets, their families, their lives—everything familiar to them—to become, like Peter, fishers of humanity.

Those are just a few of the multisensory ways to pray that involve us as participants as we respond to the Bible not just with our ears, but with our whole selves. This was the response Jesus was after—and the means by which he communicated the Kingdom of God.

Jesus told stories, painted word pictures, and used common objects that were familiar to people in his time (e.g., the lily, the fig tree, the bread on the table) to capture minds and hearts.

What if we did the same?

What if the Holy Spirit involved all of our senses in worship in addition to listening to words? What if worship weren't just black and white and scripted?

When designing worship we have to ask the question, “What do we want them to take home? What do we want them to remember, to actually *get* out of what we're teaching and doing?”

That's where experiential worship begins.

It empowers us to embrace Scripture and prayer in new ways.

It provides God encounters—opportunities to go deeper in our relationship with Jesus. Experiential worship helps us connect our stories with God’s story.

So...What Is Experiential Worship?

Experiential worship brings all five senses into play. It’s fresh and alive. It’s active, not sedentary. It’s engaging, not passive. It’s new to each person, each day. It tells the story—the good news of the gospel—with touch, taste, scent, sight, and sound. It evokes tangible responses. It involves imagery—not just words. It involves individuals as well as the group—and everybody gets to respond, not just the leaders or the paid professionals. There’s always something to see and do. It involves us in powerful prayer. It encourages us to respond to the biblical content.

Think about the instances in the Bible that describe the Creator’s visual, tactile revelation—and the created’s visual, tactile worship in response: Jacob pouring oil over a stone where he encountered God, Joshua and the stones of remembrance from the Jordan River... just to name a few.

Experiential worship means using all the means at our disposal to open similar doors to encounters, communion, and connection with God.

A Few Lessons Learned along the Way

1. We remember what we *do* twice as well as what we’re *told*. Experiential worship opens the door to a higher degree of learning for youth who learn more experientially.
2. Experiential worship ideally allows youth who otherwise may not have a place to share and express their creative gifts (not just musical or speaking) to do so as part of a worship gathering.
3. Don’t be discouraged if a prayer station or prayer experience doesn’t connect. Just as with teaching messages, sometimes some youth may not connect with what you’re doing at that particular meeting.

Chapter 2

Why We Need Experiential Worship and Sacred Space

We need experiential worship because our culture no longer “gets” or even knows the story of God. Most of our students can’t tell you the difference between the Old and New Testaments or even the names of the four Gospels. Even our “churched” students don’t always know how the Bible relates to their lives.

We have a problem in “church land,” too. We’ve forgotten how to tell the story of God. And why is this?

In the late 1970s and in the 1980s, many churches viewed pews and stained glass (and other symbols) as boring and outdated. It didn’t help that many of these people had negative church experiences in more traditional settings. So they changed the atmosphere and created more user-friendly churches. Worship spaces were designed without the traditional trappings such as altars, or even crosses. Now many church buildings resemble movie theaters with their stadium seating, cup holders, and large video screens.

But when they got rid of the symbols, they got rid of elements that helped “tell the story.” In medieval times, elements such as stained glass and other artwork actually told the biblical narrative to many in the church who couldn’t read. Even the ceilings in some church buildings were designed to look like upside-down boats to remind believers of the call to be fishers of people. The spires and steeples were reminders of God, pointing churchgoers to heaven.

On the flip side, today’s liturgical/traditional churches still have loads of symbols and rituals. In the traditional liturgy each piece of the worship service tells a part of the story—even the congregants’ physical movements enhance the story (e.g., making the sign of the cross, kneeling, reading a Bible passage in the midst of the congregation to show that it’s God’s Word for everyone). But the problem is that many in liturgical churches no longer know why they use these symbols and rituals. They’ve lost their meaning.

Experiential worship brings the living portions of both styles and traditions together. It gives symbols new life and helps emerging generations fall in love with God.

What's more, our lives are so visually driven today that we often don't even need words to describe things or get our point across. Therefore throwing out symbols (and then forgetting the meanings of these symbols) as a church has eliminated our ability to tell the story of God to an extremely symbolic, visual culture that's no less hungry for the good news and the story of God than any other generation. Our culture needs churches that learn again how to use symbols. People need churches that teach in ways that engage them, help them engage with God, and enable them to experience with all their senses how God relates to their everyday lives.

A Biblical Mandate

An important chapter in *The Emerging Church* discusses the Bible and worship.¹ Revisiting what was covered there, it's easy to see that the Bible very clearly speaks of worship using other means than simply words. Since *Sacred Space* discusses incorporating a variety of expressions of worship and prayer that involve various senses, it's good to understand that the concept of experiential worship and prayer does have biblical backing. For instance, when you look at worship in the Old Testament, you see that the temple in Jerusalem used much more than sermons to "get God across." Every sense was involved: You could smell the burning sacrifices and incense, hear the trumpets and temple choirs, see transcendent architecture of soaring pillars and expansive courtyards. Even the texture and colors of the priests' clothing communicated specific things about God and God's covenant with Israel.

In other places in the Scriptures you can read about other forms of worship and prayer that involve the senses:

Sense of Smell. We see in Revelation 8:4 how incense is used in worship. Throughout the Old Testament incense was common in worship (Exodus 25:6; Malachi 1:11). We see the Magi presenting Jesus with gifts that were multisensory (Matthew 2:11). Philippians 4:18 refers to "a fragrant offering...pleasing to God." Even the church itself is to be the "aroma of the knowledge of him...the pleasing aroma of Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:14-15).

Sense of Touch. We also know that the sense of touch was involved in all forms and practices of worship. Believers laid hands on others when they prayed (Acts 6:6), clapped their hands (Psalm 47:1), felt the water as they were baptized (Acts 8:38), and touched the bread in communion (1 Corinthians 11:23-24).

Sense of Taste. The sense of taste is acknowledged quite often in the Bible. Psalm 34:8 says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Psalm 119:103 reads, "How sweet are your words to my

¹Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2003) 127-131.

taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” In Revelation 10:10 John writes: “I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour.” The taste of bread and wine are involved in communion (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Sense of Hearing. We all know to what a great degree music was involved in worship—every kind of sound of praise happened, whether from voices or from musical instruments (Psalm 150). Jesus sang (Matthew 26:30). The Scriptures were preached (Acts 2:14).

Sense of Sight. Throughout the Scriptures we see in great detail how visual worship has been. Whether it’s the beauty of worship in the tabernacle (Exodus 25:3-7; 26:1-2) or in the temple (1 Kings 6:29-30), we see detailed descriptions of color, texture, and design.

The Scriptures also show God using object lessons, miraculous events, and supernatural displays of power to help people learn about and respond to the Almighty in worship. God didn’t just “speak” using words; God spoke with a burning bush. God didn’t just dictate the law; God wrote it with his own finger. God didn’t just lead Israel through the desert; God led them with a pillar of fire. Jesus didn’t simply heal the blind man; Jesus made mud with his saliva and smeared it over his eyelids.

God’s prophets did outlandish things in order to communicate truth using more than words: Isaiah walked around town naked for three years; Ezekiel lay on his side for weeks on end, building little miniature villages out of mud; Jeremiah carried around rotten fruit. Even if people refused to obey the prophets’ instructions, they certainly wouldn’t forget what they had heard, seen, and smelled. When you look into the prophecies and descriptions in the book of Revelation, there are all kinds of colors, visuals, smells, and even tastes involved (10:10).

The Bible shows that involving more than words in worship and teaching is a valid and powerful thing to do. There isn’t a biblical mandate for worshiping in only one way. When we’re locked into only one way of worship and teaching, we’re worshiping according to our opinions, not according to the Bible. In fact, the way in which we worship has changed through time. The Magi worshiped Jesus by bowing down (Matthew 2:11). The disciples worshiped Jesus by falling down and clasping his feet (Matthew 28:9) and sitting in a boat (Matthew 14:33). But even beyond the where’s and how’s of worship, the most important questions are, *Are we engaging with God?* and *Are our lives changing?*

One question we hear as we teach around the country is “Do you still believe in teaching the Bible with words?” Our answer is an emphatic “yes”! We hope you’re picking that up by now. Teaching the Bible is critically important. Teaching with words is critically important.

UNDERSTANDING THE LIMITATIONS OF THE “SERMON”

Studies have shown that within a week, an incredibly high percentage of people can't recall what was taught in the sermon the week before. Think about it. *How much do you remember from the sermon last week? How about two weeks ago? Three weeks ago?* I've found you can ask the preachers themselves what they taught two weeks before—and even *they* have a hard time remembering. I'm not saying sermons aren't needed, or that they don't help people grow. At Vintage Faith Church, the sermons run 35 to 45 minutes long each week. Sermons are important.

But let's be realistic. In terms of listeners remembering and internalizing sermons—even a week or two weeks later—we often believe sermons have greater staying power than they actually do.

What we desire through experiential worship is to enhance the learning and enhance the remembering. It's important to also create ways for students to be in the Scriptures and learn outside of the worship service. In youth ministry, perhaps we can be teaching theology, apologetics, church history, and how to study the Bible as a normal part of what we do. Small groups are another major way we help students learn and develop the skills of personal Bible study. But our single gathering each week must be designed to have the maximum impact on students' lives. That's why we believe paying attention to how students learn in our main youth gatherings is very important.

—Dan Kimball

What we teach about God shapes our attitudes toward God. However, we need to also consider that teaching nonverbally is a valid and necessary (and biblical) way to teach as well.

We should always be asking ourselves, *Is how we preach based on the Bible, or is it our own particular preference?* For example, the Bible never says that we should give three- or four-point sermons. The Bible never says we should always end sermons with application points. What it says is to watch doctrine and preach with the wisdom and power of the Spirit, not our own wisdom and power. So there may be many valid ways to preach—and we rather should be asking ourselves, *Is our preaching accurate according to Scripture?* and *Is our preaching effective and changing lives?*

This book is designed to assist you in proclaiming the truths of Scripture and doing it in new ways to more deeply reach your students.

So please understand; we don't view experiential, multisensory worship as simply a fad. We don't see this as watering down the Scriptures. We see this as teaching the Scriptures in ways that help students learn and remember them.

Knowing How We Learn Is Crucial to Spiritual Growth and How We Teach

Did you know that research shows that only 20 percent of the world learns through their ears? Thus, if we want the other 80 percent of us (and our students) to “get” the story of God, then we need to teach the Bible in more ways than simply auditory (i.e., sermons or talks).

Of course this doesn't just mean simply adding a video or a slide show to your “up front” time. The latter visuals are fine, but they still make the members of your group

the “audience,” not the participants. Instead we need to involve them in the story—to touch it, taste it, discuss it, and place themselves in it. To experience it.

THE FOUR LEARNING STYLES

How are you using these in your worship gatherings or when you teach?

Tactile/Kinesthetic – you best learn by doing/touching

Visual – you best learn by seeing (words and pictures)

Auditory – you best learn by hearing (Fleming’s VARK approach adds “**Writing/Reading**”)

By the sixth grade we’ve usually developed a learning style that will generally remain constant the rest of our lives. According to Marlene LeFever, for every 10 students in an average sixth-grade class, one will find²:

- 2 auditory learners
- 4 visual learners
- 4 tactile/kinesthetic learners

That means eight out of 10 people aren’t taught in the ways they best learn—yet 90 percent of teaching in our churches is auditory! (What’s also interesting is that most preachers are auditory learners—i.e., most preachers communicate and teach in a way that reflects their learning style. Which only is the best way that 20 percent of people learn!)

An old Chinese proverb says, “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand.” This is core motive of experiential prayer and worship—that students see, remember, do, and understand the Scriptures.

²Marlene LeFever, *Learning Styles: Reaching Everyone God Gave You to Teach* (David C. Cook, 2002).