

THE UNITED REFORMED CHURCH
EASTERN SYNOD
WORSHIP MINI-SESSIONS - SESSION 4:
PITFALLS AND PRACTICALITIES IN LEADING WORSHIP
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Welcome to number four in this series of mini-reflections on leading worship. My name is Paul Whittle. I am the Moderator of the Eastern Synod of the United Reformed Church, who are presenting these sessions, and I am sharing the leadership of them with Lindsey Brown, our Mission and Training Officer, and Nicola Grieves, our Children's and Youth Development Officer. They replace a series of roadshows that we were planning to take around the Synod. However, lockdown has made that impossible – but we are enjoying this way of working which has its advantages, as well as its disadvantages. For one, they stay there, and you can look at them when you wish.

Anyhow, the theme for this session is 'Pitfalls and Practicalities in Leading Worship'. A couple of sessions ago, Lindsey helped us think about how we might approach structuring a service in a good way. Last time Nicola added to that by helping us reflect on all-age worship, in particular reminding us that all-age should be what it says on the tin. We tend to just aim at the 5 year olds and forget that we should be equally aiming at the 95 year olds.

Of course, despite our best endeavours, it may not always be that things go well, and that might be our fault, or it might not. I think that my top tip on worship leading would simply be – do what you have been asked to do, that is lead the worship. Very much for the most part, congregations will not worry if you make a mistake. They know that happens. The really important thing is not that you must avoid mistakes, though clearly that is preferable, but that the congregation doesn't fear that the service is lapsing into chaos because nobody knows what to do.

I like this quote from Cheryl Lawrie, who is writing about worship and how we use our worship spaces – *"I've been thinking recently about our temptation to try to become more like God – more holy, more sinless, more perfect. Perhaps the thing we should be working for is to become more human – more fragile, more vulnerable, more unfinished; to be better at being human. We try to give people a chance to be more human in a space; then it's up to God to do what God can do."*

Lots of errors in leading worship are easily corrected, and often it is best just to admit it, and put things right. More than once, I have gone to announce a hymn and realised that the number I have written down is not the same as the one on the board. It is usually best to simply ask the musician what they think it is going to be in that situation. If you just announce one, you can be sure they will have the other. I have announced the final hymn and realised we haven't had the offering. It was best to stop and put it in. All sorts of little things like that can happen, and are easily put right. You don't really want to ask for advice or information in the middle of a service you are leading but, better that, than to create major confusion.

My two worst experiences of pitfalls were not so easily rectified, and, hopefully, you won't share. I was chatting to one of the elders just before the service one Sunday when it suddenly dawned on me that it was All-Age Worship, which was not what I had planned. That was an interesting service. Another time, we had a really busy

service with lots happening, and we were heading for an overrun of time, and the reader read the wrong reading. I would often have either stopped the service and graciously said something or read the right one as an additional one at the beginning of the sermon but, as I was clearly going to have to massively cut my sermon, I just went with it on that occasion, and managed to say something that fitted.

I have forgotten to take my sermon notes – and, if you put notes on individual sheets of paper, do number the pages. It makes it a lot easier if you drop them.

So, across almost fifty years of leading worship, things can go wrong, and they have done – but, pretty well always, looking as though I knew what I was doing, even on the occasions when I didn't, and often admitting the mistake has served me well. God doesn't expect more from us than our best and, actually, neither do most congregations.

One other pitfall I want to mention is the increasingly complex area of copyright. There is lots of guidance available but, to be honest, it is not always easy to follow. There are also lots of licences available, but it is not always easy to know that you have got the right one. If you are using your own stuff, words you have written, photographs you have taken, then you are going to be all right. But, almost certainly, you will sometimes want to use somebody else's words. Again, reading them aloud in any form, is unlikely to be a problem, but publishing them in any form might be, though there is lots of copyright free stuff out there. But, in these days when we might use PowerPoint, we might use video clips, we might play music, I do advise caution. Fines do get imposed sometimes, and they are expensive. The URC has a booklet 'Getting to Grips with Copyright'. It is also worth noting, in the current situation, that there are copyright implications for online worship, whether live, using the likes of Zoom, or placed online on websites or YouTube.

Well, so much for pitfalls. What about some practicalities? There is so much good stuff out there, and these days when so much resourcing comes from the internet, a lot of it is very accessible. Of course, there is also a great deal of bad, or substandard, stuff out there also. So, a level of discernment is required, and not always entirely easy.

We are going to look in future sessions at prayer and leading public prayer and, mostly, I will leave any suggestions on resources in that area for then. Equally, we will be looking further at all-age worship, so I won't really be identifying resources on that, though, of course, there is crossover in the various aspects that are part of leading worship. So, I want to suggest one or two other things that might be helpful.

However, I am going to begin by breaching the criteria that I have just set myself, and pointing out to our United Reformed Church Prayer Handbooks which are published each year. They take you through the year with brief prayers relevant to the lectionary. I don't think they are going to give you all the prayers for a Sunday, but there are some real gems in there. I have built up quite a collection over the years, and I often look back and find good earlier material that I use. However, even just to have the current one is well worth it. Some of the material is more a reflection on a Biblical passage than a specific prayer, but that can be really useful. There are a lot, for example, that amount to a modern version of a psalm, good reflective material for use in worship.

CWM – the Council for World Mission also have a prayer resource that takes you through the year and has contributions from around the world. It has a suggested reading, a reflection, and a brief prayer for each Sunday. It is downloadable - <https://www.cwmission.org/resources/prayer-books/> - but I have to confess that I have rarely used it.

Secondly, I want to commend two (what I'm going to call) series of resource material. The first is the work of Nick Fawcett. He has produced a lot of worship material, and I find it useful. What I find particularly useful is his series of books in which he thinks himself into the position of one of the characters in a Bible story and reflects from that perspective. He has a series of three 'A Most Amazing Man', one for each of the lectionary years. They give the gospel reading, then a reflection on the part of one of the characters in the story, and then a brief prayer. I tend to just use the reflection, but I often use that as the introduction to the theme. The downside is that they are expensive, and I have collected them over a few years. They also contain suggestions for putting some of the material together into reflective services. There are another couple around the life of Jesus, No Ordinary Man, and one around the Old Testament, The Unfolding Story. I have occasionally tried to write my own reflection in that style.

Then, secondly, a group of books that is less easily identified as a series, but there are a number of worship resource books produced by the Iona Community and compiled or co-compiled by Ruth Burgess. They collect together reflections, prayers, the occasional hymn etc. and tend to be focussed on different particular parts of the Christian year. One is titled 'Fire and Bread', another 'Barefeet and Buttercups', another 'Egg and Ashes' etc. Slightly older material, but still with stuff of value, would be works compiled by the likes of Donald Hilton and Edmund Banyard, though Edmund published his last book only last year, around his 99th birthday.

Another to look out for, if you want re-telling of Bible stories, especially with an all-age appeal, is anything by Bob Hartman.

Websites, of course, there are loads – often, these days, done through blogs. I am, therefore, just going to mention a couple. Ally Barrett is on the staff at Westcott House. She has some really good stuff – you can check her material out at reverendally.org/. Another, I have used a fair bit, is Engage Worship - engageworship.org/. You do have to register, but it's a free account. They quite often have material from Bob Hartman, who I mentioned a moment ago.

So, just to conclude, we live in a visual age – and pictures, and even symbols, can be helpful. Many churches now have digital projectors but, with a small congregation, I have occasionally just handed a picture round. I will just repeat the warning about copyright, which can be very valid here – but it is true that a picture can paint a thousand words, and it can be helpful and, if I took it myself, as with this rainbow that I shared on Zoom last Sunday, when talking about the story of Noah, then I'm not going to have a problem. One last point. Don't worry about what you can't do – and certainly don't let me put you off. Do what you can – and God will bless it!