

# Alternative Worship for the 40s-90s?

## A Case Study of Introducing 'Alternative Worship' to a Parish Church

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This is a description of the introduction to a parish church of 'alternative worship'. The point of writing this is to encourage folk who want to be more creative in their worship, but whose churches have never seen anything more alternative than the ASB. We try and pull out some of the main principles which made this work, and lessons we learned in this experience.

### Background

Having been involved in an alt.worship group for several years ([Paradox/Visions](#), York<sup>1</sup>), we moved house, and started attending a moderately large parish church in a small market town (Buckingham). The leadership got enthused when we described some of the things we'd been doing with worship in York (and after loaning them some videos of recent TV programmes, including the *Nine O'Clock Service* BBC Everyman documentary<sup>2</sup>, to surface any concerns there might be as early as possible). We were asked if it was possible to do something creative in their church. We said of course it was - it's not just for the dance scene - but that making it appropriate would be the important thing. The local churches ran ecumenical services during Lent, and we were asked if we would like to plan the Good Friday evening service.

### Getting as many people involved as possible

It was important that this didn't turn into a two-man show (us). We made regular announcements about the first planning meeting, and had encouragement from some folk in the congregation. However, the only people to show up to plan the service were the vicar and his wife, and one of the lay preachers. It's likely that most folks just don't seem to consider that they're equipped to plan services - that's what professional clergy do.

However, as the service got nearer, volunteers came forward to play instruments, lead Taize chants (including a solo), take part in dramatic readings, and operate OHPs and projectors.

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<sup>1</sup> Vision website now: <http://www.visions-york.org>

<sup>2</sup> *The Nine O'Clock Service*: BBC Everyman documentary archived at: <https://youtu.be/QxwdyF3qZi8>

## 'alt.worship' for the 40-90's...?

This was the tricky bit - most of the church congregations who would be attending were aged 40 on, with a smattering of mid-30s. Opening the service at 120bpm was not deemed helpful. We decided that given that it was Good Friday, this should be a meditative service, a journey through darkness into light, following the stations of the cross (Christ's last 7 sayings on the cross).

Once we had a general mood and theme in mind, we found that the same principles that have worked in many different services and groups applied:

- **Change the space:** luckily no pews, so we rearranged the chairs into a circle in the middle of the church, with prayer cushions on the floor in the inner circle, all around a low altar table (folded trestle table). Together with incense, and low lighting this made the space much more intimate.
- **Change the lighting:** schedule the service for 8-9pm (instead of usual 6pm); turn the overhead lights off, and use back and front lights only, plus lots of candles.
- **Change the visual environment:** we hung triangular sheets (had to make them) between the side pillars and projected onto the backs from the window alcoves. The images changed twice on each screen as the service progressed, from darkness (e.g. turin shroud; crucifix icons; suffering planet; baby with crown of thorns), to transition (e.g. lighting), to new life (e.g. dove; sunflowers). We projected a large celtic 'knot-carpet' from the balcony down onto the floor, completely covering the congregation. Images were copies from Warehouse (big help!), as was the floor projection technique. The vicar's wife is very artistic, and together with another couple in the congregation who were good at calligraphy and art, produced stunning prayer stations - some words of Christ on the cross (e.g. "Father forgive them, they don't know what they're doing") illustrated in some way (newspaper headlines and images of suffering); "Father, I place my life in your hands", with photos of babies and patients on life-support machines; "I thirst", on a painted background of a cracked desert. Some of these were metaphors for darkness, others for the turning point, and the others for hope and new life. The visual image of the service was also changed by distributing flyers to local churches and around town, which made it clear that this would be a different service from normal.
- **Change the power relationships:** Jackie led throughout, speaking quietly into a mic, from a floor cushion. All readings were by three volunteers sitting within the congregation but with mics. There was no teaching from the front, but instead the congregation made their own conclusions and prayers from their visits to the 'prayer stations' we set up at the back and front of the church.
- **Change the music:** Easter liturgical chants, Taize chants (with live music and solo), classical music, Iona, a rock and a dance track, with readings and news samples overlaid (pre-recorded, not by us). (See service plan at end)

## **Finding resources**

Starting from total scratch, we begged without shame. God provided. A local school teacher caught the vision and borrowed several high quality projectors; others dug their's out the attic and loaned them. We made sheeting into triangular screens (thanks for the idea LLS!). We borrowed a portable PA system from some new workmates, which had been bought by them specifically for... alternative services - their own, and anyone else who'd need it. We had no idea this would be available when we started out. Candles, cardboard for the prayer stations and incense provided by the vicar and wife. Slides provided by Warehouse, our previous group. Music from our own collection. Power extension cables we had to buy. OHPs and screens provided by other churches.

We had about 7 weeks from agreeing to do it, to the service night. About one night a week was spent for the first few weeks planning. This increased steadily, and two weeks before, a week which we'd booked for holiday turned into more or less full-time service preparation! In other words, if you're not taking time off, you may need 2 months to prepare for the first service, there's so much infrastructure to lay! Set-up began at 3.30pm, after another service (sound familiar?!). We had made sure there were sufficient bodies (about 7) to do the work of hanging screens and moving chairs, etc.

## **The result**

We had more people than anyone expected (approx. 100). With a few exceptions (and one unfortunate woman who about-heeled as soon as she smelled the incense -- she was asthmatic!), people have told us they were inspired by the service, and want to know when the next one is! (Oh yes, there was also the old lady who told the vicar she wouldn't be coming on principle, since it wasn't right to be having a slide show on Good Friday...).

Several said that they were stunned by how the familiar old space had been transformed by creating a circle.

Others have said that they had long wanted to see worship move forward, but didn't want happy-clappy choruses, which was the only alternative they knew of.

## **Now what?**

Following this initial effort, which by any measure was extremely encouraging, the church now faces the next step. We are in the interesting position of needing to help resource the people to continue this themselves, because (i) we're only attending the church as a temporary measure while we house-sell and hunt, and (ii) they need to begin to own it more themselves. We managed to create a service for folks a generation ahead of us, and managed through being able to envision how a service could go, and having learned a load of practical techniques from other services. Being able to imagine how things can be different is the key -- many of us may have forgotten just how powerful and exciting it can be to walk into an alt.service environment for the first time -- it really blows you away. Is this church? Now that folks here have seen what's possible, we have to hope that the seeds of creativity, fanned by the Spirit, will start to flourish in lots of different people, as they begin to figure out how to develop their own worship, and make it accessible to the

local community. Our role, we think, is to help out for as long as we're around, but the service planning group for the next service ("Vicar: How about Pentecost?...") is going to have to be a lot bigger! -- and we think it will be.

### **Postscript - 1 year on (added June 1997)**

Following that service, enthusiasm was such that they wanted to do another. With more people participating in the planning this time, we did a harvest evening service, which was extremely creative - outrageous even - with real smelly rubbish piles, skeletons, guns, barbed wire etc. on one side of the church (the 'field of deprivation') and a veritable western, bountiful harvest paradise on the other side ('field of blessing'). The people were placed in the middle and at various points in the service given time and space to visit these, and then 'do what comes naturally to you; meditate; act; pray'. They spontaneously cleaned up the rubbish, watered the dry plants, and shared out the fruit and flowers. We then unveiled screened off areas of the poor and rich side, which had the 'shadow' that is so often forgotten: we discovered the richness of community, wisdom, and art in the 'poor world' that we miss so much; in our 'advanced nations', the cost of western lifestyle in crime, community breakdown, mental health, etc etc. - just in case they were planning on leaving with the concept that We're rich and They're poor... It was tremendously exciting. Our goal was to get them to construct and own their own meaning/significance from this environment, and we felt that a step was taken towards this.

We've since left that church having moved house, but they are continuing to do creative services, albeit on a lower key due to lack of resources. One of the most 'radical' things that we did as newcomers was rearrange the seats (breaking a spell of several hundred years)! This changes the space so drastically, and this has since been adopted as common practice in their monthly special child-oriented family service (although it's apparently not considered appropriate for grown-ups yet...).