



CELL, CONGREGATION, CELEBRATION

M A T T R E D M A N

Worship Leading in Three Contexts

Jesse Owens, Carl Lewis, Michael Johnson—some of the greatest athletes ever known. But what makes them so remarkable? What distinguishes them from other great athletes of their time? In a word, versatility. Many athletes over the years have had victories in one track event or another. But much rarer is an athlete who can tackle more than one distance and make it their own. The 100 meters, for example, is a totally different event from the 400



meters. And somewhere in between lies the discipline of the 200 meters. All involve running but they're completely different races. Each needs a different approach and a different pace.

It's the same with worship leading. And again, versatility is the keyword. Some of us may be able to lead in a cell-group, or home-group, setting, but how good are we at adapting ourselves to leading a congregation (lots of cells or home groups joined together)? Some of us may be called to lead in a celebration-type meeting (a worship gathering of more than one congregation), but what different approach is needed for that?

Whether we're leading worship in a cell, a congregation or a celebration, there are certain key values and principles that all have in common. Yet in another way, they're totally different "races," and each one requires a slightly different approach.

So, in which of these three settings is it the hardest to lead worship? I've thought about this for a while and have come to the conclusion that they all come out about the same. There's not really one setting in which it is harder to lead than in the others. Each group has its own advantages, but each also comes with a specific set of challenges for you to get your head around as the worship leader.



CELL

You can't beat the cell group for that intimate, raw, community vibe. If you can get it right, there's something special about singing out to God in someone's front room with little more than an acoustic guitar. It feels so uncomplicated, so free of distractions and so New Testament (apart from the acoustic guitar of course)! If we can lead people to the secret place of praise in this small setting, it can be a beautiful thing.

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The first step is to help people realize that what we're doing goes way beyond this little room—that when we lift our voices together (however weak or thin that may sound), we reach way beyond the confines of this room and we touch heaven. Maybe we get this sense across by the way we introduce our worship, or maybe through what we pray at the beginning; however we do it, it is an essential key to unlocking a meaningful time of worship in this



environment. In the down-to-earth setting of a home group, it's so important to prepare our hearts for a spiritual event. Once that happens, suddenly none of us will be focusing on what our neighbor's voice sounds like or if our own voice is in tune. We become caught up with the living God.

One of the biggest challenges of leading in this setting is that it feels so vulnerable. There is no band to hide behind, nor is there the security blanket of a microphone. It's important that we sing out confidently—this creates an environment where other people are likely to feel free to sing their hearts out, too. Sing loudly enough so that people can hear you well enough to follow along, but not so loudly that you become a distraction. Build up a vocabulary of songs—partly so that you don't have the complication of turning pages every other minute, but also so that you can flow spontaneously with a new idea at any moment. Practice tempos to songs—songs can drag very easily in this setting, in which there's no band to fill in the gaps.

Once you've got beyond some of these initial practicalities, the biggest challenge in a cell-group setting is to keep it fresh. This is a challenge when leading regularly in any worship setting, yet in a cell group it's even more acute, because you generally have fewer songs to choose from. If you take a list of all the songs you sing on a Sunday



morning in the congregation, you will realize that many of these aren't appropriate or attainable when it comes to the home-group setting. Some songs have notes that are too high—you can belt them out when there's 200+ people and a rousing band to accompany the anthem; but when it comes to 5 people in your front room, with nothing but a lone acoustic guitar, things are a little more, shall we say, exposed. Other songs get ruled out because they've got male and female repeat lines. In reality, most home groups can't cope with those kinds of songs (unless the group has particularly strong and confident singers).

The most common reason why songs don't make the transition from congregation to cell is that they're too wordy. It's simply not feasible for the average person to have memorized a load of lengthy songs that they get to sing now and again on the weekend. I guess in theory you could have an overhead projector or word sheets (if you've covered the copyright aspects)—but this somehow jars with the raw, uncomplicated and intimate environment of a home group.

For me, the key is to work with sections of these songs. Maybe the chorus is instantly memorized and stands up well on its own. Or maybe you take just one easily learned verse from a hymn and segue into it at an appropriate moment when you're ending another song. You could even



take just one particularly repeatable line from a song and tag it onto the end of another song, just to bring some freshness. Finally, you might want to take an up-tempo song, bring it down a few keys and use it as a slower, more tender offering. Again, this can breathe a fresh lease of life into an old song and help keep you fresh in your worship leading.

The beauty of the cell setting is that there's room to be spontaneous. The computer guy doesn't need a list of songs (because there isn't a computer guy), and you don't need to worry whether or not the band know a song (because there isn't a band). In a sense, leading worship in a cell group is like driving a little speedboat—it's easy to make various twists and turns, whether they're planned or unplanned.

CONGREGATION

When it comes to the congregation and celebration settings, you're captaining a very different ship—comparable to a big tanker ship, which takes more thought, effort and experience to make unexpected turns in.

That's not to say spontaneity is impossible in the congregation (and celebration) setting. It just has to be a little



bit more rehearsed (however contradictory that sounds). In other words, you need to train your musicians (and computer operator) to be able to flow with the spontaneous. Make space in practice times to flow together spontaneously: try running songs one into the other seamlessly; try different endings; try playing songs in various keys, so you can adapt them to link with different songs. Create a team that respects the discipline of a well-rehearsed song yet is ready and able to flow with any changes of direction and approach that seem appropriate.

In reality, it's a huge step to go from leading worship in a cell group to leading in a congregational setting. The number of practical things you need to consider doubles. Anyone can play in time with themselves (well, nearly anyone!), but leading a band is a whole different thing. Practice starting and ending songs cleanly. Find some subtle hand signals (which don't resemble rude gestures!) to direct the band during unplanned moments. Make sure both you and your musicians and singers memorize as many songs as possible—so you can pay maximum attention to flowing together musically, joining with the congregation and, most of all, fixing your eyes on Jesus.

Working as part of a team is probably the biggest difference from leading alone in a small group. There are so many people to connect with and to learn to flow with:



the speaker, the band, the sound engineer, the congregation and, of course, the pastor. (Remember, the pastor is in authority—if you do not “get a witness” from your pastor on the matter, don’t turn your amp up to 10!) When you arrive at church to lead worship, remember that you are coming to serve and not to be served. That will have a hugely positive bearing on your relationships with all of the above people and will ease you through a whole host of tensions that could otherwise build up.

When you lead in a cell group, it’s likely that you’re all of a similar age and, to some degree, the same sort of people. There’s a good chance you even all like the same kinds of music. But when you come into the congregational setting, it’s a whole different picture. There most probably will be lots of different age groups and types of people, with different preferred songs, styles and sounds. Again, the key is servant leadership. Find an appropriate volume for the band, one that will not alienate or offend. Don’t just choose songs from your own personal preferences, but begin to find out which songs are the most helpful to various groups, in terms of leading them into worship.

As well as presenting a challenge, leading lots of different ages and types of people at one time is an amazing blessing. How many other places on Earth do you find so many different voices singing one song? If you can foster



that sense of the family of God worshipping with one voice, it is an incredibly powerful thing.

CELEBRATION

Whereas the congregation feels like a great big family gathered together to worship God, the celebration setting tends to carry more the sense of a great big army. It is an amazing sense to be among many hundreds (or thousands) of worshippers gathered from a wider area.

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Having said that, beware the allure of big things. In Kingdom terms, bigger does not necessarily mean better. For sure, a big meeting can provide a most incredible encounter with the almighty God. But if it is to be truly meaningful, we need to approach leading the meeting with a purity of heart and a focus on what we are doing.



Lesson number one for me is always this: a great band does not automatically equal great worship. In these settings there are often more musicians and singers for you to choose from, so in reality you may end up with a pretty decent band. Wonderful—as long as we don’t end up losing our dependence on God. Too many times I’ve been tricked into thinking, *Great band, great sound system, lots of people—wow—it’s going to be a great night of worship.* As soon as you catch yourself descending into this sort of thought pattern, repent and get back on track. It’s essential that we stay in the place of complete dependence. Great music alone cannot usher in great worship—we must look to the Holy Spirit’s promptings and be as dependent on Him as we were the very first time we ever stood up to lead.

Keep an eye on the practical things which present themselves in this situation. The band needs to be loud enough so that people can “travel together” yet not so loud that they can’t hear themselves sing. Be ready to sing some songs just with voices. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking you need to use the band on every single song just because it is there.

Out of the three worship settings we’ve looked at, this is the one where it’s most likely that not everyone will know the same songs. That’s definitely a big consideration. It’s important to make sure that somewhere in the



mix of songs are ones that every churchgoing person in the room is likely to know. Again, it's all about traveling together—it's a terrible shame if people return home having never really lifted up their many voices together as one choir.

If we can get it right in this situation, our eyes of faith will be opened up in an amazing way. Joining together like that is powerful in itself; yet deep inside we know that what we are seeing is a mere glimpse of the day when every tribe and every tongue will gather together to sing the great praises of Jesus.

Let's be versatile as lead worshippers. In every situation, learn to lead with pastoral wisdom, creative insights and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's every whisper.

the one thing...

C H A R L I E G R O V E S

The one thing I'd say to musicians and those involved in leading worship is, "Keep going!" It's essential to take the long view when getting actively involved in God's Church. To those outside, it can seem like worship leaders and band members have really made it and that they just surf along on a spiritual high! That's not always the case. Sometimes it feels like being in the front line of the battle—worship is a highly contested area (see Eph. 6:10-12). Sometimes private anxieties, self-doubt and accusations seem to arrive from just about every angle. Combine those together, and you'll find that leading worship is not always the easiest place to be.

Many of us have had moments when we felt like throwing in the towel and advertising our guitar in the local magazine. But like Paul, we've got to run the race. We need to "throw off everything that hinders and . . . run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Heb. 12:1; see also 12:2-3). It helps to have a sure knowledge that God has called you to do this work. Keep praying, keep rejoicing, keep being a team player, keep serving the people—keep going!
