

Permission to Worship Creatively



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During a recent event in Asia, I was a bit discouraged that the locals leading singing each morning used songs I knew. They did a very good job and I realize that the event had an international audience that used English as the language medium. The irony was that the same people had done a traditional dance/song performance at the beginning of the event—but never used any of those instruments, styles, dress or movements after that point. Somehow, in cultures all over the world, Christianity has not given “permission” to use cultural dress, music and styles in appropriate ways.

I’ve heard the same kind of reports from all over the indigenous world for years.

When I travel to conferences around the world, I always hope I will hear what I think might draw the average person just outside the meeting room toward the Lord. I want her/him to be attracted by the worship. I realize I could be misunderstanding the situation—I am no expert in every culture. And, I realize that the world is becoming so “globalized” that worship is becoming more and more like the pop music culture—with “Christian” words, simple lyrics and lots of repetition. Perhaps that attracts some.

There are, however, many cultures who rightly resist this trend. Yet, we continue to send teachers around the world to put on seminars from

a Western worldview. And that includes worship leaders and teams teaching what they know well, but which is often disconnected from the receiving cultures. In fact, one of the specific points our Asian brothers and sisters made at this event was that this kind of training is often done without a clear understanding of the culture where it occurs. Funding from the outside gets a larger audience, whereas a local teacher or worship leader can not do so.

This whole topic may seem like it is not related to “frontiers in mission.” Think about that a little harder. If the only “kinds” of believers that non-believers see are just like what they see coming from the secular west, will that draw them to Christ? Sometimes it does—but not within many of the remaining unreached peoples.

My hope is that you who read this might share it with worship leaders you know to help them grow in their global awareness. Encourage them to consider additional aspects of worship and to think globally—even when they are leading worship here in the U.S. And, there are some great books on these subjects that can prompt our thinking. One published in 2013 by William Carey Library is *Worship and Mission for the Global Church* (Ed. Krabill). It also has a companion workbook: *Creating Local Arts Together* (Schrag)

Here are a few ideas.

- Observe and ask how they sing, celebrate, suffer, struggle, etc. in the broader surrounding culture. What does that tell you about what the emerging fellowships could do?

- Ask God to give church leaders and global workers insight into what should be done in worship in each situation. Perhaps he will grant something special, like he did in China through the “Canaan Hymns” in the house church movement.
- Spend time working on how to integrate the reading of the word in worship more effectively. Be sure to practice that also, like worship teams do with songs.
- Think and plan for the use of creative energies from those in your church—or those you might attract—who have non-musical worship giftings. Is your church “plain” looking? Perhaps that is what you want, just be sure to be intentional. Are there ways to include meaning-filled art or other expressions to prepare hearts and minds for worship and learning—individually or corporately?
- While I love the great classic hymns of the faith and many Christians around the world feel an ownership of these, they may not work in new cultures where the gospel is just breaking through.
- Consider how to “sing a new song.” (Psalm 96:1-2) Are we writing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs ourselves?

Please share your own ideas and stories in our comment section. Look up this issue at www.missionfrontiers.org and scroll down to my page “Further Reflections” at the bottom. 