

The Show Is Over

Church music has never sounded so good ... but a growing  number of worship pastors want nothing more than true worship

The elaborate flags and banners that adorned many charismatic churches 15 years ago have since been replaced with lights and cameras. The focus on being relevant and producing quality music has increased significantly, and along the way, churches have struggled to balance entertainment and worship.

“We are all such technological junkies,” says Daniel Bashta, worship pastor of RiverStone Church in the Atlanta area and president of Go Motion Worldwide. “We love the bright lights, the big screens, the sexy Vegas shows. Somehow our churches now represent all of these things. How many HD projectors and LED walls must we have?”

Despite the latest in techno-savvy production trends, numerous key worship pastors interviewed for this article believe a passion for true worship is arising in believers nationwide. “I think all the lights, camera and action that we’ve embraced over the past decade is making us hungry again for something purer, truer and more genuine again,” says British worship artist Vicky Beeching, whose ministry was established at the Oxford Vineyard in England. “I think it’s an exciting time right now to see what happens next.”

“The church is tired of hype with no results,” says Kim Walker-Smith, worship director for Jesus Culture, a youth movement that sprang out of Bethel Church in Redding, Calif. “People are hungry for a real encounter with God and not just words on a screen and the mundane motions of a Sunday

morning.”

The uncertainties and economic challenges of this age have helped set the stage for a fresh move of God. To that end, a diverse group of worship pastors and artists is committed to using their gifts to see hearts and lives changed.

Where Are We Now?

Robert Morris, senior pastor of the 18,000-member Gateway Church in Southlake, Texas, recalls that in the '70s and '80s, many worship songs came right out of Scripture. Then in the '90s, a lot of songs were in first person, with a focus on self: “I need” and “Lord, what can You do for me?”

“It concerned several of us,” Morris says, “and we would talk about it. A lot of the songs being written were more me-centered than God-centered, but I think it was a lot of what the body of Christ was going through at that time.”

Today Morris believes we're moving back to songs that are based on Scripture and centered on God. Some of these new songs are being introduced by Gateway's songwriters, such as Kari Jobe (see p. 44).

Randy Phillips, lead pastor of PromiseLand West in Austin, Texas, and a pioneer in worship with the group Phillips, Craig & Dean, says one of the biggest changes he's seen in worship over the last decade or so is the increased skill level of worship and production teams. “It's comparable to anything you could find in a secular event,” he says.

Misty Edwards, a worship leader at International House of Prayer (IHOP) in Kansas City, Mo., has been part of a team that has delivered nonstop worship for 11 years. She is amazed at the quantity and quality of worship songs sung in congregations around the world. “Even 10 years ago, there was only a handful of gifted songwriters writing songs that churches were singing globally,” she says.

There's a downside to the achievements, however. "An industry has boomed out of the sale of CDs and CCLI licenses, and we find ourselves with a lot of commercialism to wade through that didn't seem to exist in the same way back in the '80s and '90s," Beeching says. "There is a risk of getting distracted in all of that. It's crucial that we are aware of the changes going on, as being aware of them will help us to be in control of them."

Substance Over Style

Charlie Hall, an Oklahoma City-based singer/songwriter who has been affiliated with Passion since 1997, remembers playing for a large group of youth in 1999. Several youth pastors pulled their kids from the event because they were offended by the drums and music style. "Just a slither of the church had that mindset," he says. Today, the acceptability of styles has grown to the point that Passion events draw people representing nearly every church stream.

Peter Haas, pastor of Substance Church in Minneapolis, ministers to about 2,600 people each week in five different services. More than 70 percent of them are under 29 years old—and roughly 40 percent didn't attend church at all before going to Substance. Haas says that nearly every week rap is part of the worship experience (with a DJ and turntables). "I wouldn't say we're a 'hip-hop church' because we mix in a lot of styles; but we definitely push the envelope.

"We've learned that the 'style' of the music is often totally unrelated to the 'vertical' nature of the music," Haas says. "Christians act like 'the anointing' of the Holy Spirit is addicted to certain instruments. We simply don't believe that."

Phillips of PromiseLand West says it's key for churches to understand their demographics. "You can't move into a rural country area and expect to do Hillsong material," he says, "or

move into an ethnic place and do Phillips, Craig & Dean songs.”

Walker-Smith of Jesus Culture has an edgier sound that targets youth and young adults, though the audience has begun to span across multiple generations. “As far as whether or not something seems entertainment-oriented,” she says, “when the presence of God shows up, there is no denying it regardless of what it looks like or the package it comes in.”

At The Faith Center Ministries in Sunrise, Fla., music minister Jonathan Nelson has been leading worship since July 2009. The 8,000-member congregation is multicultural, with a strong Caribbean influence. Church members represent many nations, which “causes everyone to be very open to every experience and every choice of songs that we bring to the table,” says Nelson, whose previous experience in an African-American church in Maryland wasn’t nearly so diverse.

“I love my church,” Nelson says. “It allows me to write from a more kingdom-centered perspective, to be inclusive of every culture from the standpoint of lyrics, sound and tonality.”

Cultivating True Worship

Several years ago when Passion worship artist and songwriter Matt Redman was living in England, his pastor, Mike Pilavachi, decided to “strip away” many of the things church members had come to rely on in worship, including the sound system and band. “We were reminded what worship was essentially about and who it was for,” he says. “I’ve had the privilege of leading worship in some really exciting environments. ... But the lesson remains the same: God is not impressed with the outer things. He is ultimately concerned with the heart of our worship.”

Out of Redman’s experience, he penned the song “Heart of Worship,” which is sung in churches everywhere today.

The fact is, true worship isn’t a style or method. Says IHOP’s

Edwards: "True worship is honest and open, and it is a response to something that is seen. You have to see Him to have true worship. If all you see is the band, the lights, the smoke machine and how cool the musicians look, that is not worship."

Redman believes worship pastors and artists who go on the road need to remind themselves regularly that what they do at a Sunday church gathering is fundamentally different from a Saturday night concert. "I hear many worship leaders these days say, 'I'm playing at this church or that church.' That's not good language. We need to embrace the spiritual dynamic of what is happening—that we are just about to lead the people of God in the praises of God. 'Playing' is simply the tool we're employing to carry out this awesome task.

"Honestly, I think one of the great calls of the hour is to fully embrace the wonder of what it means to draw near to the almighty God in worship, and to shape our language, motives and everything we do around that," he says.

To go deeper in worship, churches must be purposeful about it. "Worship and praise must be taught and not just experienced," says Nelson. At The Faith Center, senior pastor Bishop Henry Fernandez has given him a platform to teach the congregation about worship. Nelson also trains his praise team and choir during rehearsals.

Teaching the congregation also has been key at Gateway Church. According to Jason Tam, associate worship pastor, the worship experience went to the next level after Morris taught a series on the subject.

Morris believes it is important for the senior pastor to set the vision and the values for the church's worship experience. "I think the senior pastor is the chief worship pastor," he says.

During the hiring process, Morris believes it is important for

church leadership to first look at a potential worship pastor's character and depth in the Word and Scriptures—and then at his or her musical ability. He prefers the term “worship pastor” over “worship leader” because he believes the title conveys to the congregation that this person literally “pastors people in worship.”

The Fruit of True Worship

The benefits that spring from true worship go beyond just experiencing God through music. For one, it opens people's hearts to hear the Word of God. “Scripture says Judah plowed the fallow ground,” says Morris. “*Judah* means ‘praise.’ After we've been in worship, my job is simply to get up and just drop the seed in prepared soil.”

“We believe that half of the gospel is preached before the sermon even starts,” Haas says. As a result, he puts a heavy emphasis on lyrics. “Like Wesley thought, theology can be taught through worship music. So we are wary of doing too many songs that lack theological substance.”

Brian Johnson, worship pastor at Bethel Church in Redding, Calif., and vice president of the new record label Bethel Music, is a proponent of prophetic worship. In recent years, he believes many churches have been turned off by this term because “it feels like it's rambling and nonsense where nobody knows what is happening.” But he believes worship pastors should tastefully experiment with it.

“Sometimes I'll be leading worship and will feel like God wants to release hope in the room, for example,” he shares. “We'll just let the instruments play, I'll back off the mic and come up with a little chorus. As people are singing that melody, they are actually singing themselves out of that situation of depression, or whatever it is.

“I believe we should be singing prophetic declarations over our churches, over our lives,” he says. “We should be singing

what we want to see God do in five years—it will bear great fruit in our lives.”

Finally, a byproduct of true worship is that it often leads unbelievers to Christ. “I think many people feel that if you have interactive worship, a lost person might feel left out,” Morris says. “I think worship is one of the best things a church can do for evangelism. Worship is actually what brings people to Christ.”

Today, it’s imperative for worship pastors and believers to set a new standard if the church is going to be known for true worship, rather than just quality entertainment.

“I long to see a body of Christ that recognizes its role as worshippers,” says Walker-Smith. “I want to see a standard that is unwavering in its devotion to God’s presence and seeks Him above all else.”

Carol Chapman Stertz, a freelance journalist in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, is thankful for the Scripture songs she learned as a child.

Go to to find out the seven things J. Lee Grady says every worship leader should know

Why Singing Isn’t Enough

How worshipping God has less to do with music than we think—and more to do with the ‘doing’

Secular bands such as U2 aren't the only ones promoting social justice these days. Many worship leaders recognize the importance of being the hands and feet of Jesus and are actively recruiting believers to help change society.

One of the largest endeavors is "Do Something Now," created by Passion founders Louie and Shelley Giglio. Passion worship artists Chris Tomlin, Matt Redman and Charlie Hall have helped raise awareness for this movement at conferences and on tour. To date, they've raised more than \$3 million, providing funds to build wells in India, set up loans for families to start their own businesses in Afghanistan, sponsor children in Third World countries and more.

"The heart of Passion," says Tomlin, "is seeing worship and justice walking side by side. Passion will always champion songs of worship to God and will always stand in the gap for the least of these in the world."

Redman points to the underlying reason for combining worship and acts of justice: "Biblically it's been made clear that injustice and poverty break God's heart, but working toward justice and caring for the poor brings Him pleasure." Redman is gearing up to partner with The Message a group in Manchester, England, that works with youth in various schools and young-offender institutions.

"The plan is to raise up some young urban evangelist worship leaders who have a heart for the poor and are writing some brilliant songs from within that environment," he says.

Fellow British worship artist Vicky Beeching believes Isaiah 58 clearly describes the link between worship and justice. "It tells us that the kind of offering God wants is acts of justice and mercy," she says. "Often, we think He wants songs—but really, He wants us to change society and bring it into line with His kingdom values and love."

Worship pastor Daniel Bashta of RiverStone Church near Atlanta

has founded a nonprofit called Go Motion Worldwide, which has a threefold ministry: music, media and missions. "God has commanded us to take care of the widows and orphans," he says. "If we are not living out our faith in motion, then we are dead."

Bashta and his wife recently adopted their first child and launched "Project Gift" to provide financial assistance to couples wanting to adopt. "It would be an injustice for me to just write nice little worship songs and to live a comfortable existence. We are on a ferocious mission to see an adoption revolution erupt in our local churches worldwide."

Charismatic believers have often been at the forefront of giving generously to feed the hungry, provide Bibles in closed countries and countless other outreaches. Yet a social justice movement that grasps the "doing" part of worship can take this to another level.

"I hope it's an awakening," Tomlin says. "If it's just a response to the materialism and self-centeredness, then I'm afraid it may just be a passing trend. However, if it is really something birthed from vision and the calling of God, it will be a life work. It's surely not a passing trend to the heart of God, so it shouldn't be for those who carry His name."

Blood Worship

Worship takes on new meaning when it's a life-or-death matter

While we in the Western church dispute song selection or

musical style, such issues are often irrelevant in the East, where believers can risk losing everything to follow Christ: families, jobs, social status, inheritance and even their lives.

Daniel Yohannan, vice president of Gospel for Asia (GFA), says many Eastern believers are first-generation Christians who haven't been saved for long. "All they know is they love Jesus, Jesus saved them, and it was worth everything," he says. "They see that even giving their life is an act of worship to Jesus."

As a young child, Yohannan visited Nepal, which at that time was a closed nation. Those who worshipped in an underground church risked being beaten, arrested or imprisoned for four years for changing their faith.

"To get to the gathering, we had to be quiet and walk one by one or two by two so that it didn't look like a huge crowd," says Yohannan, whose father, K.P., founded GFA and serves as president. "The believers would show up over a period of an hour. We sang songs together quietly. If anyone clapped, it was very quiet clapping."

Today, one of GFA's pastors in Nepal walks eight hours to attend a weekly service that typically lasts for five or six hours. "When they worship together, they are worshipping as one body glorifying Jesus," Yohannan says. "This is the pattern I see in the book of Acts."

Many of these believers understand the real possibility of being martyred. Recently a GFA missionary in northeast India met some men who told him they were interested in hearing about Jesus and asked him to return at a designated time. When the missionary returned with a friend, he was stabbed and killed; his friend was stabbed but able to escape.

Solomon Socher, who has planted churches, Bible schools and orphanages in Burma, has experienced people throwing stones at

his church during worship. On one occasion, a few soldiers entered carrying M-16s. To appease them, his father gave them money, and they left.

Despite the risks, Socher says “gathering to worship and listen to the Word of God is the finest moment we have. It helps us to forget the pain in life for a while and ignore the pain that surrounds us.”

David Shibley, founder of Global Advance, says that in 2008 he traveled to Orissa, India, and spent time with about 25 displaced pastors. Some of them had witnessed the burning of their homes and churches. Some had just sent their families into hiding for their safety. They told stories of believers who had been driven into the jungle by radical Hindus and were assumed dead.

“How humbling and what a privilege it was for me to stand with them—with tears running down all our faces—as together we sang: ‘I have decided to follow Jesus / No turning back, no turning back.’”

Most of these believers in the East, Yohannan says, know persecution will come if they receive Christ, so they expect suffering. “They follow Christ for who He is; not for what they can get. ... If persecution ever comes to America, it will make us want to seek Christ more and stop fighting over silly little things that don’t mean anything. Also, it will help us to clarify what the real issues are.”