

WikiWorship Lets Church Members Edit Pastor's Sunday Sermon

Turning part of the message over to church members is the concept behind a new worship model called WikiWorship.

Yes, that's wiki as in Wikipedia.

It was developed by the Rev. Philip Chryst, pastor of a United Methodist mission in Wilmington, N.C., as part of an evangelism course when he was finishing his degree at Duke Divinity School. He's using it as part of a Lenten series at 9:45 a.m. each Sunday through April 13 in the bar called Hell's Kitchen.

The week before each WikiWorship, participants submit questions on religion, ethics, life or God via the mission's website. Then Chryst chooses one to spur discussion at each service.

Releasing control of the pulpit without mashing up the message is the challenge, the pastor said.

"WikiWorship, in many ways, is kind of evangelism but in a very post-modern way," Chryst explained. "It's scary like those children's preaching moments in church because you don't know what's going to come out of a child's mouth."

Despite the term "wiki," there are no computers involved at these events. The concept refers to the collaborative nature of the venture, where people take ownership of the content, in this case sermon ideas and responses.

WikiWorship is less replicable than other evangelism experiments because the success of the venture is highly dependent on the skills of the leader, said Duke evangelism

professor, Stephen Gunter.

"It requires creativity, high energy, high intelligence, and lots of hard work every single week," Gunter wrote in an email. "Chryst has all of the above, and he has worked at this now for half a decade."

Chryst likens the skills needed for WikiWorship to those of a stand-up comedian, ready for whatever comments or questions the audience throws at him or her.

In Hell's Kitchen on March 9, with its Miller Lite sign glowing, band posters plastered on the back wall and advertisements for the local St. Patrick's Day Kegs and Eggs Bash, Chryst chose a difficult question about non-Christians and damnation.

Chryst asked: "Are Buddhists, Jews, Muslims and other non-Christians damned if they never claim Jesus Christ as their personal savior, even after they have heard about him?"

The pastor answered it first, explaining he does believe in hell, and some people will end up there.

"But all that being said, I don't really have the authority to say yes or no. God does. Let God judge the destiny of people's souls. Ultimately, I'm suspicious of humans who try to decide others' destiny. But the important part of WikiWorship is, I want to hear you."

One-by-one, people at Chryst's event raised their hands offering their take on the topic. The pastor walked the microphone out to a crowd of about 50 people in the bar.

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill student Christian Bennett told of a recent mission trip he took to Malaysia where, after being mugged and losing his money, a Muslim man he met on the street fed him at a mosque and helped him get home.

“That was a huge testament in my faith,” he said, “and to have this man help me like he did and then to have someone say he’s not going to heaven, that doesn’t add up to me.”

Inviting the congregation’s opinions and questioning is fulfilling a modern willingness to question faith and is “a great way to engage people who are disengaged with the church,” said Gunter. “Attracting them is only the first step, however. You have to then genuinely engage the newcomers by continuing to offer new questions and viable answers.”

Afterward, most of the people attending stayed for lunch and asked follow-up questions of the pastor.

“That question could have been a shouting match really, really easily, but it didn’t turn out that way,” he said.

Chryst hopes one day to write a book teaching other pastors the lessons he’s learned from WikiWorship sessions. Chryst may also model his growing community around the concept.

“I think churches that have guts should be able to say here’s the microphone,” he added. “I’m not willing to say truth is all relative. I’m just proud to be around a group of people who have the guts to do that.”

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