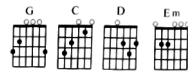


1
Here I Am
to Worship



You're new at the church, and the worship leader you are replacing holds a place next to sainthood in the hearts of the people. He retired from leading but chose to stay at the church. He is free with his opinions and not shy about his influence. He offers his insight and assistance to you as long as you agree with him.

Not too long after I began my first assignment as a worship leader, a friend offered some powerful insight I found more valid with each passing year. He said, "There is no difference between a large church and a small church when it comes to how hard you work." He went on to explain that in a large church, while there are more responsibilities, there is usually a larger staff and many more people to share the responsibilities, so the workload is essentially the same.

When I look back at some of the lessons I learned over the next few years, I realize he could have added some other things as well. He could have told me the only thing part-time about a part-time staff position is the salary, because most of the time people will have full-time expectations. Maybe he could have warned me how the church would always take as much as I was willing to give or discouraged me with the grim reminder that at any given moment someone would not agree with what I was doing or how I was doing my job.

Would this advice have mattered? Most assuredly not, because I was confident that what I lacked in experience and technique I could more than compensate for with optimism, creativity, and a good work ethic. Add to that a peace in my spirit, which could have come only by knowing God's Spirit

was at work in my heart, and off I went. That should have been enough. Right?

I soon discovered one thing the church has in common with politics is what is known as the “honeymoon period.” If this phrase appeared in the dictionary, it would read like this:

honeymoon period |'hənē,moōn' pi(ə)rēəd|

***noun**—a length or portion of time when people celebrate your arrival even as they begin to speculate on your departure. Duration is flexible and at the sole discretion of anyone who has an opinion on said matter. On or before completion of this term, any previous attempts at decorum are no longer needed.*

That may be a little harsh and somewhat cynical, yet it is nonetheless all too often real. I remember asking my wife, who grew up in a parsonage, if this was just a music thing or if my parents had protected me from this kind of stuff while I was growing up. Her reply was “No and yes.”

I heard someone say once that you cannot teach until those you are teaching trust. It is therefore crucial during this honeymoon period for you to build up as much trust equity with the people as possible. Don't be afraid to go where they are and embrace them. Appeal to their hearts before you try to appeal to their intellect. Get your hands dirty. Let them know you came not only to lead but also to walk with them. I have always found that as important as it is for followers to know their leaders, it is even more important for leaders to know their followers.

First impressions, whether positive or negative, tend to last a long time. On some level you have to operate under the

assumption that if the previous program worked, you probably would not be there, so don't be afraid to take your followers to some new places. It is equally important to remember that you cannot lead people *to* this new place unless you have a good idea where you are leading them *from*. Sometimes this comes from asking questions, other times from simple observation. You can be assured that when you ask an opinion you will always get one; so bear in mind that it is just that—one opinion. In other words, if you don't want to know, don't ask.

I remember a young worship pastor telling me about his new assignment. He said he couldn't wait to get there and rock their world and show them how to worship. As you might imagine, his tenure at that church did not last nearly as long as he expected.

Choir room bookshelves and old orders of worship also offer great insight. If a choir book is too worn out, it was probably used too often. If it looks brand new, there may be a reason why it was not used. I will address the hymns-versus-choruses debate in a later chapter, but it is important to know the landscape of where the church has been musically. What you discover may or may not determine your direction, but if nothing else, it will help prepare you for the people's reaction.

Something else to remember when it comes to the small to mid-size congregation is that these are traditionally the churches where change comes most slowly. I have even heard of situations where people felt obligated to hold on to past musical styles or traditions out of some perceived loyalty to a deceased relative. In a larger church, those two or three families make up a very small percentage of the whole. But in



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a small church, a few families can easily represent the majority. It bears mentioning here that I have been at my church for seven years, and I am still finding out who is related to whom. In the same way that it would be wrong to discount everything that was, it is as dangerous to try to mimic the footsteps you inherited. Yes, the pastor encouraged you when you were hired to bring vision and implement change. Yes, he or she told you the congregation was ready to be more progressive musically. No, he or she didn't mean to do it all at once starting on your first Sunday.

If you are presently serving a church, it is safe to say you have already discovered that you will be compared both positively and negatively with the previous worship leader. In my situation it was extremely rare that not just one but two former worship leaders still attended the church. Even rarer was that, unlike the opening scenario in this chapter, they remained my biggest supporters, and if they had personal agendas, I never saw them. If you have the opportunity to get to know the previous leader, most of the time you can do more good by acknowledging his or her leadership than feeling threatened by it.

After I had been at the church for about a year, our choir was preparing to do a live recording. I called one of the former worship pastors who still lived in town and asked him if he would come and lead the choir in prayer before the evening service. While the intent was genuine, it also accomplished a couple of things in the process. It let him know he was still very much loved by the choir, and it gave me a chance to thank him for his part in preparing the way for where God

was leading. I should also admit that I thoroughly enjoyed watching the surprise on the choir members' faces.

Somewhere along the way I fear we—meaning the Church—have lost the art of good transition. We tend to primarily use this word when we are leaving a situation, but I believe how we transition *in* can go a long way toward setting the tone for the day we transition *out*.

The Promise: “God has made us sufficient ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6, NKJV).

The Prayer: *Lord, you know my desire is to have a heart after you. Cleanse this temple where you have called me to serve, and cleanse this temple of my heart as I daily lay it at your feet.*

Contemplation Questions

1. What was your biggest surprise between the interview and the first six months?

2. If you could go back and change the first impression of you, what would you change?

3. What did the church do right during the transition?

4. What would you change if you were senior pastor?

5. What are you doing to build some trust equity in the short term? In the long term?