"McFee is one of the most masterful worship guides to appear in decades." – SALLY MORGENTHALER

THINK LIKE A FILMMAKER

Sensory-Rich Worship Design for Unforgettable Messages

STEP-BY-STEP HELP FOR WORSHIP PLANNING
FROM THE WORSHIP DESIGN STUDIO

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Chapter 1

Conceptualizing the Story

As long as we've been humans, we've been telling stories. The ancients even recorded their stories on the world around them, etching and painting the earth's surface with their symbols. We lived among our own stories, and the images embedded in them came alive as we used them to make sense of our place in the world—sharing information, preserving memories, and expressing dreams, beliefs, and fears. We spoke, sang, painted, acted, and danced our stories. We used all of our senses in order to create indelible memories so that the stories would be repeated and handed down through the ages.

"Story is everything," says documentary filmmaker Abigail Wright. "We are hardwired to understand stories. What are stories? They are sequences of events that help us to understand the tidal wave of sensations that come to us. They put order into our world. They tell us what to do, who we are, where we come from. Is there justice in the world? How do we die? All the important things of our life."[2] As humans began to seek deeper meaning about their world, their stories took on another role, communicating messages that could *bind together,* connecting people to each other and all the mystery of existence.

Those of us who design worship have the same task as our ancient ancestors. We must call on all of the senses through every expressive

medium we have at our disposal. The stories handed down to us through our sacred texts come alive when we do. Our goal is to tell the most amazing Story—and the stories that point to that liberating message—in the most compelling ways that invite people to live with hope and conviction for the "good news" that we share.

But more than simply being story-tellers, we are invited to create an *experience* of the story—to invite the congregation to be "story-dwellers."[3] In his book *Powerful Persuasion*, theologian Tex Sample uses the terms "critical distance" and "critical immersion" to describe an important difference between modern and postmodern sensibilities in communication.[4] Audiences were once encouraged to "listen-from-afar," putting distance between themselves and the message they heard. Whether delivered in the lecture hall, beamed to radio and TV towers, or spoken from the pulpit, the message was something happening "out there" that the hearer could think on and evaluate without actively participating in. Things are different now. Communication styles have changed as audiences crave the opportunity to learn by experience. People now want to be immersed in the messages they receive rather than merely hear them. Advertisers focus more on the products' fit with consumers' lifestyles rather than on their specific benefits. Museums have moved to more sensory-rich experiences that immerse patrons in a moment in history or a far-off place such as the deep sea or outer space. Long airport corridors are filled with art, light shows, and soundscapes. Documentaries for film and television are moving away from simple "talking-head" expert shots to images and re-enactments that help us imagine what "being there" is like.[5]

Jon Boorstin, author of *Making Movies Work,* says filmmakers know that "people don't just want to watch a movie, they throw themselves into the experience—they want to lose themselves in what they're seeing."[6] Director Steven Spielberg tells the story of losing himself in his first movie-going experience as a young child. His father told him he

was going to take him to "the greatest show on earth" and described the lion tamers and circus acts. Spielberg was ecstatic and waited the week out with anticipation. The day of the show, they stood in a very long line next to a red wall. Why weren't they seeing a tent, he wondered?

> "Finally we walked into a dimly lit room … and the ceiling looked like a church. It felt like a place of worship. The curtain opened, and the lights went down. A dimly lit image came on the screen, and suddenly I realized my father had lied to me, had betrayed me, and we were not going to see a circus—we were going to see a *movie* about a circus. I had never seen a movie before. The feeling of disappointment and regret and betrayal lasted only about 10 minutes, and then I became another victim of this tremendous drug called cinema. And I was no longer in a theater, in a seat, I wasn't aware of my surroundings, I was no longer in a church—it was a place of equal devotion and worship, however. I became part of an *experience*."[7]

When worship acts more like a meeting agenda of items to be completed, with little attention to the flow of the storytelling endeavor, it loses its power to move us. We keep our distance from the story, from *our* story—observers of the trappings of ritual rather than participants in an unfolding journey of discovery. Becoming immersed in a story means that we allow ourselves, for a while, to suspend the minutiae of our lives and take a step back to examine and reflect on the bigger picture—how we are living our lives, the choices we make, and how we relate to God and to each other. To be immersed is to allow an holistic engagement of cognition and emotion and physiological response. It puts us in touch with the depths of our selves, what we think and feel. It puts us in relationship with our companions on the journey through shared

experience. Religion, after all, is derived from a Latin root that means *to bind together*. And as we allow ourselves to slip into time-out-of-time, we are so bound, closer to each other and to the divine.

Martin Scorsese has said, "I can … see great similarities between a church and a movie-house. Both are places for people to come together and share a common experience."[8] Of course, there is much more, we hope, to the interaction that happens as people worship together rather than just watch a movie together. But what goes on in an immersive experience of a story through film can also be akin to something we hope to achieve in our worshiping communities. Clive Marsh describes the way films often draw us in without us realizing the effects. "The complex way in which they move us, get us thinking, compel us to make links and draw contrasts with life-experience past and present indicates that films are doing something important to their viewers"—namely, inviting people into theological reflection.[9]

How much more could we invite people into deep theological reflection about our narratives of faith by immersing ourselves in the sights, sounds, color, and drama of the message? How can such sensory-rich storytelling invite more participatory worship? In this book, we will learn how all of the worship art forms can contribute to the storytelling endeavor, making sure that every element of worship moves us toward the expression of unforgettable messages.

Unforgettable messages

Anyone who has been to one of my workshops has heard me speak of "M-M-Good" worship—worship that is "meaningful and memorable." These are worship moments that, years later, we can still remember. Such moments go beyond their literal meanings as they kindle the embers of emotion we experienced when we first encountered them. The images and emotions of indelible memories are connected together in our brains

Chapter 3

Think Like an Art Director: Visual Arts in Worship

The visual arts have had a long and, sometimes, difficult, career in the life of the church. Once the primary way for illiterate people to learn the faith narrative, visual images suffered a devaluation during the Reformation—with some people considering the focus on images to be idolatrous. Much of this was backlash as the Protestant church tried to separate itself from what it considered the abuses of the Roman Catholic tradition, including what many thought was an obsession with iconography and statues. This also coincided with the move to prominence of word-centered communication as the printing press made it more possible for the masses to become more literate and the Enlightenment era brought the idea that the best way to God was through more cognitive means.

But, as we discussed in chapter one, images provided the very first recorded expression of our stories, and modern science has since learned the important role of imagery in even the most logical of brain functions. In 21st-century expressions of worship, churches are embracing once again the power of visual arts in meaningful and memorable worship. There are so many exciting aspects of what a visual arts team can consider in their work. We aren't just talking about what color the paraments are for the

liturgical season. That was a nice, gentle step back into the use of color by Protestants, somewhat fueled by the rise of liturgical-supply stores. Rather, like the art director of a film who considers the context, the settings, the visual "palette" and the symbolism and functionality of props, we must deal with the total picture, including the space in which we worship, the colors and textures that will express each worship series message most powerfully and the objects and symbols that evoke that message.

The space

Being immersed in the story requires attention to every aspect of the environment of the space itself. The art director on a film is essential to the whole "feel" of the movie. Jon Boorstin explains, "If the art director does the job well, his [or her] environments are a metaphor for the actions and emotions of the story." He goes on to say that "people love to be taken to a place that's like nothing they've seen before."[24] Our job as ritual artists is to take people to places in their imagination and hearts by presenting the same space they've worshiped in for years in a different way—one that propels them deeper into the story.

When we enter a space, we get an immediate "hit"—a visceral snapshot of what we imagine will happen here. Several factors contribute to how a space feels. Color, light, architecture, and spatial relationship communicate energy dynamics. We perceive and react to light waves, movement of architectural lines, the "heat" or "cool" of color, and the arrangement of seating which forecasts the kind of relationships and movements which will take place in a worship space. Spaces, says liturgical theologian Rainer Volp, are "texts" with many levels of meaning. We have the ability to "read" space through the response of our bodies to the space.

> Even blind people can read spaces, and not merely by touch: they feel and sense, for example, whether spaces are lofty or

> low, whether they stifle sound or let it resound, whether they are close or airy, oppressive or open. Faced with space, no one is illiterate. Each of us is a body and, as a body, responds to the body of that space. This is more than a vague sensitivity. It is a reading of space, a reading by means of which we define situations and thereby, in some sense, our very selves.[25]

The space itself has a dynamic that shapes the way in which speech, action, and music are performed, received, and interpreted. Art directors on a film are the "second-most-important thing in a film" says Chris Allen Tant. "The acting will make the film, but the art direction makes the actors."[26] In other words, the space where the action happens, words spoken, and music sung will make a difference for how we take in those messages. Liturgical theologian James White explains,

> Church architecture not only reflects the ways Christians worship, but architecture also shapes worship or, not uncommonly, misshapes it … In the first place, the building helps define the meaning of worship for those gathered inside it. Try to preach against triumphalism in a baroque church! Try to teach the priesthood of all believers with a deep gothic chancel never occupied by any but ordained clergy![27]

When I am consulting with a church, one of the first things I want to know is what the worship space looks and feels like. When I walk around the space and begin to comment about the lines, ceiling height, sight lines, colors, and textures, people often say to me, "I really haven't looked carefully at our space for a long time. It's just there, and I don't really notice the effect it has very often." The worship space is the container in which everything happens. Unfortunately, we don't get to pick special locations for every series like a film director would, so

we have to know our space well and find out what we can do in it to create differences in "the look"—and therefore, the "feel"—that brings us closer to the story.

I want to encourage you to lead your whole worship team in examining your space carefully—even and especially if most of you have been worshiping there for years. Start with the size and scale of your space. *Scale* is one of the "building blocks" in designing religious space, says Fr. Richard S. Vosko, a liturgical consultant on architectural projects.[28] In much of church architecture, historically as well as recently, *height* and *light* conveys "spiritual uplift." Diffused light in these lofty spaces "evokes the ethereal qualities of meditation." Large structures with lots of glass are described as radiating an "openness towards the world outside."[29] On the other hand, spaces that are not so lofty create more of a sense of intimacy and allow more focus on the community. In some spaces, "solid walls provide a sense of protection and thus solitude," and grotto or cave-like environments give a strong sense of interiority.[30] In these cases *depth, texture,* and *darkness* provide an entirely different bodily response when we walk into them.

What feeling does the scale in your worship space evoke? If you have a big, airy space with high ceilings and you have a series where you want the community to be more aware of each other or create a more intimate feel, how will you do that, or vice versa? (I'll give you some ideas later in the chapter for that question.) How is the inherent (permanent) paint or wood color affecting the mood? What about the lighting? What is the balance of natural and artificial light, and what control do you have over that balance? Is that lighting warm or cold in hue? Is there enough, and is that lighting flexible (we'll dive deeper into this in the Media Arts chapter)?

What *lines* are prominent in the space? Are the walls large and flat, with little definition, or are there windows, stained glass, molding and paneling that create line and shapes? If the only thing you

are doing visually is to hang rectangular banners on walls with a lot of already boxy architectural molding, you may need to consider *non-linear* swaths of cloth to cut through the lines and create a more fluid feel occasionally.

Next, notice the "furniture" placement in the room. Pathways for movement and seating arrangement dramatically affect the experience of worshipers. The often-used configuration of straight rows of chairs or pews can convey a *firm* ordering of space and the sense that the only worthwhile view is toward the front, limiting our ability to see each other and sense the community as a whole. Other configurations such as diagonal aisles or labrynth-like pathways into a worship space engage worshipers in a *fluid* sense of space.[31] Circular, antiphonal (congregants facing one another) or three-sided arrangements of seating wrapped around a focal point such as the font or altar/table create a sense of *intimacy*, unity, and connectedness between people.[32] Different *levels* and *barriers* of a space, especially those between worship leaders and participants, affect the flow of energy in worship.[33] Do you have openness between the chancel and people, or do things "up front" feel distant? What can you change about the space's layout? Is there room to create worship centers or side tables for ritual action, or was the space designed mostly for sitting and listening or standing in place occasionally? How is your space contributing to or restricting a sense of community and movement? What are the sight lines of all participants, including from the choir loft and chancel? Can leaders and congregants see each other even when seated?

What is clear is that "the built environment affects us in real, predictable, physiological ways."[34] Space really can be "read." Consider your own worship space. What does it "say" about the Christian community who worships there—is it hierarchical or communal—and what do you *want* the space to say about that? Art directors for film know that answering such questions first will guide their later decisions about the location or

Chapter 4

Think Like a Screenwriter: Verbal Arts in Worship

When I was in college, I played the role of Eliza Doolittle in the musical *My Fair Lady*. One of my favorite songs to sing began with Eliza blasting Higgins and Pickering about their incessant running-on-of-the-mouth. "Words, words, words, I'm so sick of words! I get words all day through first from him, then from you, is that all you blighters can do?!" She finally pleads with them not to *tell* her in words, but to *show* her by their actions. As a Missouri gal from a little town in the "Show Me" state, I liked that argument. The ironic and comical thing about that song is that it is a "banter" song, with words tumbling out of Eliza's mouth in a rush!

But "show me" would also be good advice for our worship. We Protestants have given words the center of our attention ever since the Reformation when, at the same time in history, the printing press created much excitement about this form of communication newly accessible to the masses. We've even sometimes gone so far as to call the sermon the "meat" of the service with everything else the "preliminaries."

In our postmodern age of reclaiming sensory-rich communication, "wordsmithing" takes on vital importance, although we might wonder what role substantive verbiage has in our society these days. From "sound bites"

in advertising to carefully crafted oration in political speeches, we wonder if we can say something of substance and hold our congregation's limited attention spans. Francis of Assisi is credited with this quote, "Preach the Gospel and when necessary, use words." There's a tension between "talking the talk" and "walking the walk." We do need words for our worship, but we need to shift our thinking from words *versus* visuals and action to verbal forms in the hospitable company of all the arts in worship. While a film begins as a screenplay—essentially words on a page—a screenwriter knows that the words are not carrying the whole weight of communication like a book does. The majority of words on the pages of a screenplay are not always the actual dialogue but also the descriptions of settings, scenes, movement and action. As we "think like a screenwriter" in our verbal artistry, we too must imagine much more than just *what* is said, but *how* it is said, by whom and where, with what dynamic, in the midst of what other sounds, and with what action into and out of the dialogue.

Verbal artists are those who carefully consider the verbal effects at play in our worship. These people on the team include not only preachers but also those who may be writing liturgy, choosing liturgy from various resources, leaders who provide verbal transitions from one element of worship to the next as well as those who format the words we use on the page or the screen. Those who love words and wordsmithing will relish the opportunity to be involved in this part of the worship team.

But terrific "wordsmithing" is about more than just a flourish for language. Screenwriter Allen Palmer says,

> While the best screenwriters tend also to be great wordsmiths, I don't think that we are fundamentally in the word business. Words are not the end product. It's not enough that what you put on the page sounds good to your ear. The words ultimately are only there to serve a higher goal. What is that goal? … to move the audience.[49]

Words are symbolic

In screenwriting for films, similar to writing for worship, we are not writing for the written page that will be read by folks in their own good time. We are writing words that will be spoken and then vanish in the next moment. We are writing for optimum *hearing* that doesn't stop at the ear but enters and changes the heart. And, in worship, we are writing words for living, breathing bodies to speak aloud. Words become living symbols embodied in the gathered community.

Liturgical theologian Don Saliers has had a great influence on my own belief in sensory-rich communication. He advocates for worship "come to its senses."[50] The human languages mediated by the senses are the only languages which we have to experience God. To be attuned to the senses is to be attuned to God. To fully engage human language with all our senses is to enter more fully into the action of worship and thus to be more fully formed by it. There are three problems inherent in Protestant practice that have to do with "words, words, words." The first is the problem of "Word alone"—a dependence on text and speech to the exclusion of other human languages like those we use to create sensory-rich elements of worship. This is an over-exaggeration of the "word alone" legacy of the Reformers to the exclusion of the vast array of human languages. The complexity needed to fully articulate the Gospel goes beyond the text, linking meaning with our experience through not only words but also visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic symbolic forms.

But, ironically, we also have the problem of "not enough Word." Biblical minimalism experienced in churches with a practice of engaging with only one selection of sacred text within a worship experience means that what Saliers calls the "great chains of imagery"[51] created in the relationship between texts, prayers, gestures, and visual symbols are limited because of our exposure to so few texts. Our sacramental practices suffer when we fail to use rich verbal imagery to tease out the variety of theological meanings associated with them. Communion

becomes a singular focus on forgiveness of sins rather than mining the depths of imagery evoking right relationship with our neighbors, economic justice, and great thanksgiving for God's action in all of creation and human history. Without the deep and rich recitation of water imagery used throughout the scriptures, baptism is relegated to a kind of "christening"—a simple naming—practiced without a sense of the liberation, cleansing, death-to-life, and community-grafting connections in this powerful sign-act. This diminishes the "multilayered" capacity of symbol.

And thirdly, Protestant practice ails from "too many words." Overly didactic explanation leaves very little room for cultivating symbolic imagination and the congregation's own interpretive skills. Words take up so much room that there is little time and space left for the mysterious nature of symbols to draw us back to them time and again to discover the "more" to be found there.

As verbal artists, we can constantly check our worship against these three "word" problems. Are we working closely with all the art forms so that words are not carrying the whole weight of the message? Have worshipers entered the story through what Saliers calls a "matrix of words *and* sign-acts" from the beginning of worship?[52] Do our words mine the depths of imagery from our sacred texts so that the connections between the narrative and our world are many and diverse? Or is our worship filled with too many words, especially words that fail to engage our imaginations?

The experience of words

That words in worship are experienced orally (speaking) and aurally (hearing), sometimes without the time to read or re-read them, means we must continually edit for clarity, rhythm, and ease of cognition as we write. Filmmakers pay great attention to the economy of words—editing

Chapter 5

Think Like a Composer: Musical Arts in Worship

Music is powerful. A swell in the music can swell our hearts. A single instrument playing a plaintive melody can set the stage for an intensely poignant moment. Music underscoring words can help us hear the words in a new way. And going from music into silence can usher in a breath-held moment of suspense. Simply put, the power of music is in its ability to evoke emotion, an integral part of what worship helps us do—acknowledge the magnitude and intersection of life and faith. Our life stories are filled with the drama of moments of waiting, listening, fearing, rejoicing, longing, hoping, dying, and so much more. Our faith story is filled with the intensity of human failings, God's promise of presence, the stories of Jesus' radical ministry of hospitality, healing, teaching, and passion. Worship crystallizes this intersection when we engage our cognition and our emotion.

Music was one of the first ways that humans helped to establish rapport within communities. In his fascinating book *Music, the Brain and Ecstasy,* Robert Jourdain describes French archeologists who explored prehistoric caves by singing in them. What they discovered is that the chambers that had the most resonance for singing were also the places where the most prehistoric paintings were found on the walls of the cave.

Storytelling and music-making and ritual seem to have always walked hand-in-hand for our species.

> In the view of many anthropologists, music first evolved to strengthen community bonds and resolve conflicts. This idea is anything but far-fetched. Many animals employ their vocal apparatus to convey fine gradations of emotions and intention … As humans evolved language, with intonation inherent in every word, it seems inevitable that formal expression of emotion would gradually coalesce into something like melody.[67]

Music and emotion

Music owes much of its development to its connection to our need for emotional expression. The rhythm, melody, pitch, tone, and movement of music create physiological responses that literally trigger feelings. Janalea Hoffman, a music therapist, was inspired by a study which showed that rhythms we encounter in our lives have power over our own heartbeats. She began to explore using music at very slow and steady rhythms to relax her clients. "The listener's heart responds to the external stimulus of the slow, steady beat of the music and her/his heart rate begins to synchronize."[68] "Power instruments" such as brass or organ can facilitate feelings of inner power. Flutes and strings may help free the imagination.

"Every sound is a bundle of different qualities," says music theorist Theo Van Leeuwen.[69] For instance, music which emulates a "caress" may be realized by *melodic* means (a slightly descending and undulating melody) combined with a *rhythm* choice (a medium tempo), in a particular tone that evokes a *distance* (soft and close), and a vocal *timbre* depending on the location of the sound in the nasal passages. Change

even one of these attributes, and you end up communicating something else—a caressing tone can become a whiny one. The dynamic range associated with musical components such as pitch, timbre, rhythm, and melody has a "semiotic force" based on a range of "holding more energy in" or "letting more energy out," which Van Leeuwen calls the emotive confinement or expansion.[70]

Film composers are expertly attuned to the mix of sound and content in human expression. It is their business to know how musical qualities affect us because their very role is to intensify our emotional experience of any given moment in a movie. Poignant moments in film create physiological responses in us as we see images, hear words, and—sometimes only subconsciously recognized by us—hear music that underscores the story's emotional impact. There are several ways that music contributes to a film, says Roy A. Prendergast in "The Aesthetics of Film Music." He says that music helps "realize the meaning of a film" and makes potent "the film's dramatic and emotional value."[71]

The energy dynamics produced by film sound are perhaps the most important components in this discipline, rather than melody. The term "color" describes film music that creates an atmosphere and a mood, much like the way visual artists' use of color affects our emotions. A particular instrumentation can evoke a place, or a "feel." The effect, says Prendergast, is immediate, visceral, and therefore psychological and emotional. The ability of music to underscore or refine "the unseen implications of a situation" is subtle, making it one of the most valuable contributions to the film story. Music conveys feelings and thoughts "better than any other element of a film … It has a catalytic ability to change the audience's perception of images and words."[72]

Thinking like a film composer has dramatically affected the way I think about the role of music in worship. By the end of this chapter, you will see your role as a musical ritual artist expanding much beyond simply "filling in the slots" of songs, hymns, and "special music." I want

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Marcia McFee, Ph.D., is the Creator and Visionary of the *Worship Design Studio*, an online coaching and resource website serving hundreds of congregations. Over the last 20 years, she has taught countless workshops and led worship for regional, national and international denominational gatherings. She is the author of *The Worship Workshop*, has been a guest-lecturer at 13 seminaries and is a sought-after consultant and keynote speaker.

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