

Reimagining Worship: Finding God in What We Love
The Rev. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew

“Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.”
(Psalm 67:5 NRSV)

People of faith are drawn to worship God, praising the One who created them and blessed them with life. Augustine begins his famous *Confessions* by declaring of man: “The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”¹ Christians come together as the Body of Christ to praise and worship God; to learn from Scripture and traditions of the Church; to share in the Holy Eucharist and prayers; and to build community. Good worship not only attains these goals, it also prepares Christians to go into the world and live as witnesses to their faith. As James K. A. Smith says, “The capital-*L* Liturgy of Sunday morning should generate lowercase-*l* liturgies that govern our existence throughout the rest of the week.”²

Many priests and pastors find themselves in a conundrum when worship services seem to be successful in the Sunday morning setting, yet do not appear to generate the desired weekday connection. This may be especially frustrating when participation is minimal in ministries such as Bible study and Christian Formation, which are designed to enhance the correlations between Church on Sunday and everyday life. Many parishioners are therefore minimally familiar with the Bible and

¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961), 1.

² James K. A. Smith. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 113.

basic Christian history, theology, and practice, as well as with concepts of spiritual gifts or practices. They may lack the knowledge and confidence necessary to live out their faith fully, either in Church ministries or in their everyday lives.

Project: The project was to create thematic worship events that integrate an alternative worship service with Christian Formation, are offered as a complement to traditional worship, are developed and led by lay people, and are given a framework by the priest or pastor. Each worship event is based in a subject the group of lay leaders love, and in which they find a connection with the Holy in their everyday lives.

Project Theory and Design:

1. The concept was that an alternative service would "...change the culture of the Church without damaging what is already good,"³ thereby resulting in transformation. The process was designed to: engage lay people in identifying something they loved; help them either affirm or shift their perception of that facet of their lives as a place where they encounter God; provide a unique context in which they could offer their experience in a worship event; integrate worship and Christian formation in a way that was lay led, attracted the interest of others, and revitalized their faith, particularly as it is lived on an everyday basis. The worship events were named *Finding God In...* to highlight the myriad ways in which people might encounter God in their everyday lives.

³ Wesley de Souza, conversation with author, August 15, 2016.

Because *Finding God In...* would be offered in addition to the traditional Sunday morning worship service, it was designed to complement rather than compete with it. People could continue to be grounded in worship that includes The Holy Eucharist according to *The Book of Common Prayer* and music primarily from *The Hymnal 1982*, while also attending or leading an occasional alternative worship event designed to create a clear understanding of how they might live out their faith during the rest of the week. By having lay people lead the worship event, it would demonstrate the many ways in which ordinary talents, abilities, and interests could be understood as spiritual practices and used to deepen faith, glorify God, and reach others. The idea of having *Finding God In...* serve as a complement to traditional worship was that it could build onto the strengths already present in the worship of the community, and enhance the areas of Christian Formation, daily discipleship, spiritual practices, and leadership, thereby leading to overall revitalization.

Noted anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace introduced the concept of “revitalization movements” as a uniform five step process through which cultural systems are changed. Wallace defines a revitalization movement as a “deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture.”⁴ According to Wallace the slightly overlapping stages of the process are first, a Steady State, in which the techniques used by a culture for meeting the needs of its people work without undue stress on individuals; second, a Period of Increased Individual Stress, in which the culture is no longer able to meet needs

⁴ Anthony F. C. Wallace, “Revitalization Movements,” *Dynamics in Religion*, reading 29 (March 2013): 421, accessed January 28, 2017, <http://hiebertglobalcenter.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Reading-29-Anthony-Wallace-Revitalization-Movements.pdf>.

without significant stress being experienced by a growing number of individuals; third, a Period of Cultural Distortion, during which ongoing stress over unmet needs, the inability of current techniques to address the situation, and anxiety over the possible need for change creates a variety of conflicting responses; fourth, a Period of Revitalization; and fifth, a Return to a Steady State. In order for revitalization to occur, several tasks must be completed: Reformulation of the “mazeway,” Wallace’s term for an individual’s understanding of his culture’s paradigm and physical surroundings, often led in religious contexts by a leader with a vision or dream; Communication of the new vision to others; Organization allowing others to experience the new vision; Adaptation to local context; Cultural Transformation, when a significant part of the population accepts the new vision and is changed; and Routinization, when the vision becomes the ‘new normal.’

Using Wallace’s theory, Christ Church is in the overlapping periods of Increased Individual Stress and Cultural Distortion, where the stress over unmet needs in one’s everyday discipleship, Christian Formation, and preparation for Church leadership is realized to varying degrees. Christ Church is not alone in suffering from these concerns, particularly regarding Christian Formation, as was made evident in a video from The Episcopal Story Project entitled “The Way We Do Faith Formation Is Not Working.”⁵ In the video The Rev. LeeAnne Watkins verbalizes the stress of continually creating a wide variety of Adult Formation offerings, only to have few if any people attend. Finally after years of frustration and disappointment, she canceled all of St. Mary’s adult programs and midweek services.

⁵ “The Way We Do Faith Formation Is Not Working,” Episcopal Story Project, accessed January 28, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/36724840>.

Her stress is clear when she says, “I feel like confessing. It might be that St. Mary’s is just this little enclave of failure... They don’t really want to talk about Jesus with me, even if they know that’s what I want them to do.”

The project was designed to see if *Finding God In...* could initiate the Period of Revitalization as described by Wallace. Revitalization is defined as “the process of infusing new life or vitality.”⁶ The lay led alternative worship service, based in something people love, may be a way of reconfiguring the “mazeway,” allowing people to envision a new or renewed way of understanding their relationship to God. The Communication of this new vision takes place in both the process of the leaders preparing for the worship event, and in the event itself. Organization, during which others experience the vision, occurs during the worship event. Adaptation is implicit in having local leaders who begin with something they love. As a result, Cultural Transformation is initiated, having begun with the response of those who were worship team members, and including those who attended the events. It remains to be seen if a significant enough number of people might be changed by these events to create true Cultural Transformation.

2. What we love shapes who we are. James K. A. Smith quotes writer Geoff Dyer “Your deepest desire is the one manifested by your daily life and habits” and goes on to elucidate, “This is because our action – our doing – bubbles up from our loves,

⁶ Michael A. Rynkiewich, “What is Revitalization?” *Revitalization* 12, no. 1-2 (Fall 2005): 2, accessed January 31, 2017, <http://place.asburyseminary.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=revitalizationrevitalization>.

which ... are habits we've acquired through the practices we're immersed in."⁷ The things we love to do may be seen as spiritual practices, as the ways we cultivate and express the love we feel, whether or not we are consciously aware of a spiritual aspect. By providing an environment in which pastoral and theological grounding were offered for a new perspective on their everyday practices, the worship team leaders might be able to understand their own experiences in a way that affirmed them as holy. As M. Craig Barnes observed, "One of the reasons that people need pastors is precisely that God is always present but usually not apparent. In addition, other participants and those who attended the events would provide an attentive listening community, which could help confirm the value of what each participant loved and honor their experience. Jay McDaniel highlights the importance of having a receptive audience: "We have too often forgotten that there is a receptive side of love: a side that listens to others on their own terms and for their own sakes and that is transformed in the listening without trying to change them according to preconceived purposes."⁸ Not only could the practice of doing what one loved be a way to encounter God, so could the practice of sharing one's story and the practice of listening to another's story.

Although people may not be motivated to participate in a regular adult Christian Formation class, this would be a new approach based in something that interests them or someone they care about. The Rev. Jeremy Lewis said, "People may not care about what you want them to care about. All of us love, so ask the

⁷ Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 29.

⁸ Jay McDaniel, "In the Beginning is the Listening," in *Theology That Matters: Ecology, Economy, and God*, ed. Darby Kathleen Ray (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 27.

question differently: What do you love?”⁹ There have been two exceptions to the lack of interest in adult Christian Formation at the project parish. The first was an interactive prayer workshop. The second was a current discussion group that emerged organically from the required prophetic sermon for DMin 712 and encourages people to engage in thoughtful, courteous conversations about controversial topics as a way to live out our baptismal vow to “respect the dignity of every human being.”¹⁰ These two exceptions showed that people in the congregation do respond when it touches an area of interest for them and when it has practical application to their lives.

This project is based in the theory that beyond the traditional setting of Sunday morning worship, people are particularly open to the Presence of God, or to an experience of the holy, or a sense of wonder or awe, when they are engaged in doing something they love. While initially they might not identify what they love as a context for encountering the Divine, given appropriate biblical and theological language and imagery, along with a group of others who share similar experiences, and a receptive environment, their perspective could change. While everything one loves to do may not be a spiritual practice, broadening the scope of what might be considered a spiritual practice allows one to consider whether and how an activity might encourage and deepen relationship with God. The idea was that in creating a process that allowed individuals to participate in a group of similar interest in which

⁹ Recounted by David Jenkins, “The Reflective Practitioner as Community Leader” (class lecture, DMin 711, Atlanta, Georgia, April 9, 2014).

¹⁰ The Episcopal Church. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 305.

these resources were made available to them, they would expand their capacity to experience the connection between God and their everyday lives.

3. The process for *Finding God In...* reflected the method used in discerning the mission statement for Christ Church, which is *Transforming ourselves and our community through the unconditional love of Jesus Christ*. One of the major insights in creating the mission statement was that the priest was not going to craft it for the congregation, as previous rectors had done, nor share with the Vestry or congregation her vision for them. Instead, they discerned together where the Holy Spirit was leading and worked collaboratively. Among the primary tasks of the priest was to lead by example and invitation, while listening to and affirming the contributions of lay leaders. By creating and maintaining an open process for conversation, participation, and discernment, it was far more fruitful, a realization noted by John Paul Lederach: “The more I wanted to intentionally produce a particular result, the more elusive it seemed to be; the more I let go and discovered the unexpected openings along the way, at the side of the journey, the more progress was made.”¹¹

The hope for transformation, as expressed in the mission statement and named by Wallace in his term Cultural Transformation, is grounded in several sources. The first is in God’s promises that God is with us. Jesus assured his disciples, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20 NRSV) Jesus said to the Pharisees “the kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke

¹¹ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115.

17: 20-21 NRSV) Paul reminded the early Christians “God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’” (2 Corinthians 6: 16 NRSV) The second is that God is willing to work with us, often through the most ordinary of circumstances and materials, to effect transformation. The most recognized transformative occasions occur in the sacraments, which are, according to the Catechism “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace....”¹² The two primary sacraments, baptism and Eucharist, use ordinary water, bread, and wine to convey the grace of God. These transformed elements become mediums for our transformation. God may likewise use other ordinary materials and opportunities as vehicles of grace for our transformation. The shift in perception in which the ordinary comes to be understood as extraordinary is illustrated in a tale made famous by management consultant and writer Peter Drucker:

An old story tells of three stonecutters who were asked what they were doing. The first replied, “I am making a living.” The second kept on hammering while he said, “I am doing the best job of stonecutting in the entire country.” The third one looked up with a visionary gleam in his eyes and said, “I am building a cathedral.”¹³

¹² The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 857.

¹³ Peter Drucker, *Management*, (HarperCollins e-books), accessed January 30, 2017, <http://youth-portal.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Peter-F-Drucker-Management-Rev-Ed.pdf>, 258-9.

The third basis of my hope is in the belief that “there is *no separation* between things spiritual and material, religious and political, sacred and secular in our lives. God is in all of it, calling us to make connections....”¹⁴

The concept of curation as applied to worship comes from *Curating Worship* by Jonny Baker, who says, “A worship curator makes a context and a frame for worship, arranging elements in it. The content is provided by other people.”¹⁵ The term ‘curation’ is used to describing the task of listening to the stories of others; praying with them; envisioning how their individual contributions might fit together into a cohesive flow; and suggesting biblical texts, theological perspectives, and other ideas to create a framework for the worship event. By functioning as a curator the priest or pastor is able to provide a theological and pastoral lens for the process, to serve as a mentor for the worship team members, and to validate the value of their contributions, while still placing the focus on God as present in their experiences.

4. James K. A. Smith declares the centrality of liturgy in forming us:

Liturgies – whether ‘sacred’ or ‘secular’ – shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we *love*.¹⁶

¹⁴ Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, ed. J. Shannon Clarkson and Kate M. Ott (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), 11.

¹⁵ Jonny Baker, *Curating Worship* (New York: Seabury Books, 2010), xiv.

¹⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

David Foster Wallace asserted that, “There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.”¹⁷ Because people are shaped by worship it is important that we are both attentive to and intentional about how we worship. Our liturgies, or worship practices, have tremendous power to shape both who we are and what we believe.

The Episcopal Church teaches *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which translates as ‘the law of praying [is] the law of believing’ or, “more accurately *legem credenda lex statuat supplicandi*, which means that the way we pray determines the way we believe.”¹⁸ The ways in which we worship shape our primary theology, and are the source of how we think about, talk about, and interact with God. For Episcopalians this means that *The Book of Common Prayer* is much more than worship resource. It is the guide to our primary theology. Episcopalians posit that it is orthopraxy, or right practice, rather than orthodoxy, right belief, that forms us. Our liturgical worship is our orthopraxy, the practice that shapes both who we are and what we believe. The liturgies of *The Book of Common Prayer* are biblically based and reflect Anglican theology, so that the practice of doing them shapes us. True orthodoxy therefore comes from orthopraxy rather than the other way around. The project seeks to complement the primary theology and orthopraxy expressed in the liturgies of *The Book of Common Prayer* by creating a process which includes

¹⁷ David Foster Wallace, “Transcription of the 2005 Kenyon Commencement Address.” Perdue University. (Commencement Address for Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio, May 21, 2005), 8.

<https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf>.

¹⁸ Leonel L. Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on the Book of Common Prayer* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 1.

another insight into the connection between prayer and belief: “*lex amandi*. How we pray and what we believe both shape and are shaped by what we learn to love.”¹⁹

The Project: In order to evaluate whether members of the congregation reflected the premises of the project a survey was distributed. The first question was, “What is your response to the current format for worship at Christ Church with The Holy Eucharist, Rite II (with traditional hymnody at the later service, accompanied by organ or piano)? The responses were: 37 positive, 9 content, 5 neutral, 2 dissatisfied, and 0 negative. The second question, “Do you feel a clear connection between worship on Sunday and living out your faith the rest of the week?” received a response of 31 yes, 20 somewhat, and 2 no. Question three, “Do you participate in any kind of adult Christian Formation (reading, class, Bible study, etc.)?” received replies of 18 yes and 35 no. The final question, “Do you feel confident in your ability to lead a ministry or offer your gifts and abilities at church?” garnered answers of 32 yes, 10 somewhat, and 11 no. The surveys confirmed that those who responded are positive about or content with the traditional worship service celebrated at Christ Church (86.79%) and that few participate in adult Christian Formation (66.03%). A large percentage affirmed a clear connection between worship on Sunday and living out their faith during the week (58.49%) and felt confident leading a ministry or offering their gifts at church (60.37%). Subsequent conversation lead me to believe that more nuanced questions would have received different answers, specifically if the second question differentiated between living out general principles of faith,

¹⁹ Ron Rienstra, “Good Worship: Articulating Standards of Excellence in Worship without Becoming the Liturgy Police.” *Liturgy*, 29, no. 2, (January 31, 2014): 4.

such as the Golden Rule, and having ongoing spiritual practices; and if a distinction had been made in the fourth question between participating in ministries where knowledge is not specific to church, such as music, property, and finance, and those that are more particular to church, as are Bible study, teaching Sunday School, and leading youth group.

Through parish email, the newsletter, bulletins, announcements, and conversations members of Christ Church were invited to participate in forming worship teams based in something they loved. The result was three teams of volunteers for *Finding God In* music, nature, and serving others. Each team met once to talk through the concept of the event and to share the basic idea for what they wished to contribute. We created a rough outline of the flow of the event, order of participants, physical placement, lighting, music, and refreshments. The team members then had time to work individually in preparation for their part of the event. We communicated through both conversation and email to address questions, ideas, and concerns. We then met a second time to run through the event and make changes if needed. Each of them had begun the process with a vulnerable willingness to participate, not at all clear about what the process entailed. As they told their stories and we talked through structuring the event and added components like Scripture, poetry, and visual aids that gave their testimonies support and clarity, they grew more confident and excited about the process. Finally, each worship event was held on a Sunday evening in October at 7:00 p.m. in our multipurpose space.

The Worship Events: The first team was for *Finding God in Music*. Seven parishioners volunteered. Our organist, volunteer handbell choir director, and six choir members participated. The organist offered her time for, and was part of, all three events. The six choir members included a music teacher and three high school students – two young men from Christ Church who sing in a quartet; and two who are siblings. The group was very enthusiastic. Each of the participants was experienced in performing publicly and all of them value music. As they talked through what they might do, each one took a risk. The music teacher and her husband led two songs in which those attending were invited to participate. The first was lighthearted and included dancing and the sharing of slinkies, which were used in the refrain; the second was prayerful and was led as the conclusion from the center of the room. He also read a poem about being encouraged not to sing due to lack of ability and played the trombone accompanied by piano. The handbell director played a complicated solo, supported by piano. One woman who is very reluctant to do public speaking wrote and shared a moving reflection on the meaning of music in her life. The one young man who is in the quartet invited the others, including two young men who go to other churches, to participate. A young woman played a challenging violin solo. We placed the participants around the room and put lamps beside each of them. The leaders then took turns turning the lamps on and off to spotlight whoever was performing at the moment. Everyone in the room was seated near at least one of the performers. The room was set up with everyone seated at small tables. Simple, quiet snacks were on the tables and drinks were available during the event. A reception was held immediately following the

event and people nibbled on cookies shaped like music notes and other snacks while they talked and completed surveys.

The second team was for *Finding God in Nature*. The team had seven volunteers in addition to the organist: two gardeners, one hunter, three mountain climbers – two of them also campers; and one who loves spending time in nature. Most of them had attended *Finding God in Music* and were feeling intimidated. They were not at all sure that they had anything as wonderful to offer as the first group, which seemed ready made for performance. However, as we listened to their stories they spoke of awe, wonder, holiness, and presence. Their experiences gave voice to the insight of Iranaeus, “The initial step for a soul to come to knowledge of God is contemplation of nature.”²⁰ The more they shared, the more excited they got. During the interlude between our first and second meeting they emailed and spoke with me about new ideas and insights. The group members were surprisingly creative. The group embodied the power that comes from listening to one another respectfully and appreciatively, as described by proponents of Appreciative Inquiry:

... collaborative, innovative, and strength-based processes emerge when people dialogue in an appreciative mode. The process itself enables them to co-create a future that is ‘owned’ by all involved in the dialogue; and this ‘ownership’ results in collaborative processes for co-creation.²¹

The quiet woman who told a story about being on a beach at night with her family where their footprints glowed phosphorescent green cut out little fabric footprints of iridescent green and put them on the tables for people to take home. The woman

²⁰ “Blessed Earth: Suggestions for Honoring God’s Creation,” accessed January 30, 2017, <http://www.blessedearth.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Creation-Care-Quotes.pdf>.

²¹ Jane Magruder Watkins, Bernard Mohr, Ralph Kelly. *Appreciate Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2011), 4.

who loved to camp with her family made tiny s'mores on pretzel sticks for the reception. One gardener arranged fall leaves in bouquets and brought freeze-dried peas to complement her story about shelling peas from her grandmother's garden. The hunter wrote a reflection on the deeply spiritual experience of spending hours in a tree stand. When he discovered a work conflict the evening of our event his wife, our organist, read his piece dressed in camouflage beside his tree stand. She interjected a few thoughtful comments and told us about learning to sit in a tree stand from her husband. Several team members dressed in character, donning hiking, camping, and gardening clothes, along with appropriate gear. All three of the mountain climbers showed slides of some of the many peaks they had climbed and brought display materials for people to examine during the reception.

The third team was for *Finding God in Service to Others*. The group had five volunteers in addition to our organist. This team was different, given the smaller number of participants, a majority of introverts, and the fact that they had difficulty envisioning what they did as anything special. In the team were: one woman who initially thought she would simply serve as backup to others, helping them and serving refreshments; one man who is a youth group leader, is very cerebral, and reluctant to speak of his own extensive service to others; one man who is quite humble and serves in innumerable ways, both locally and in international mission work; and an extroverted couple who are very involved with our diocese's medical mission to our companion diocese in El Salvador, among other significant ways of serving. Getting this group to talk, to see themselves as having a story someone else would want to hear, and to feel confident in sharing their experiences was a

challenge. They seemed to think they did not have the same level of inherently interesting experiences to share as the first two groups, with the exception of the couple who does the medical mission work and who are passionate about it. Much more active leadership was needed with this group to draw them out, to affirm the value of what they did, and to create flow among their various contributions. In keeping with their dedication to serving others, the majority of this group volunteered in order to be supportive of the doctoral project and stretched themselves beyond their comfort zone to do so. The tone of *Finding God in Service to Others* was quiet and thoughtful throughout, which reflected the people who participated in leading it. People spoke either standing with their notes on a music stand or seated on a stool, with a few simple props and visual aids from mission trips. The couple that goes on the medical mission set up an entire display and brought small crosses for everyone to take home. The reception tables were decorated with art from mission trips and included food from El Salvador and other mission areas, as well as more familiar treats baked by our very hospitable female contributor.

In working with the worship team leaders it was surprising how little it sometimes took to lead to a significant change in the way that someone saw themselves or their place in the community. Initially the hunter volunteered jokingly, thinking he would not be welcome to participate, but he was encouraged to speak his truth. He appreciated the suggestion that the Mary Oliver poem "How I go to the woods" follow his meditation, and was stunned at how well it captured his experience. It made a visible difference to him to be included and to have his

experienced validated as spiritual. As Serene Jones stated, “Feminists who study community...never do so as disinterested academicians...they encourage the flourishing of all.”²² In the case of the woman who didn’t see herself as having anything to offer than behind the scenes assistance, the suggestion of a common thread of loving service through her several vignettes provided an affirming concept. We read a poem that begins, “There’s a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn’t change.”²³ That image altered her perspective so much that she included it in her presentation.

In the preparation process the worship leaders shared joy, fun, quiet reflection, science, humility, and simplicity. Each presenter chose the appropriate way for them to share and was excited for the opportunity, humbled that others were interested in their experience and valued their story. Most of the participants were lifelong, faithful people who had not really thought of doing what they loved as an encounter with God. Through the process of preparing for *Finding God In...* several of them came to realize, like The Rev. Ed Bacon, that they had “experienced what it feels like to be connected with the Beloved, the source of the most powerful tool in our lives: *love*.”

Worship Event Leaders: Following the *Finding God In...* worship events team members were asked to complete a survey to assess whether participating in the

²² Serene Jones. *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 131.

²³ William Stafford. “The Way It Is,” in *Leading from Within: Poetry That Sustains the Courage to Lead*, ed. Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 11.

process of preparing for and leading one of the alternative services led to a new or renewed understanding of their relationship with or understanding of God, or what Anthony F. C. Wallace would call reformulating the “mazeway,” and begun a process of transformation. First they were asked to consider their responses to the four questions on the initial survey, adding two clarifications and an additional question to address the nuance lacking in the initial survey. Added to the question about whether they participated in Christian Formation was, “If so, what and how recently?” Also added was the question “Did you feel familiar with the Bible and basic Christian history, theology, and practice, as well as with concepts of spiritual gifts or practices?” Finally, those who were comfortable offering gifts and abilities to the Church were asked, “If so, were the ministries or gifts in areas cultivated within or outside of church?” To contrast the before and after perspectives, there were two questions: “Have your answers to any of the above questions changed? If so, how and why?” and “Finally, please write a description of what it was like for you to participate as a worship event leader and what effects, if any, it has had in your life.”

One woman who is very active in church gave answers that exemplified what I thought would be common for parishioners. Before the *Finding God In...* worship events she was quite happy with the services. When asked about living out her faith during the rest of the week she said, “I had never really thought about my faith outside of the church service and formal prayer. It never occurred to me that there are other ways to be with God.” She did not participate in Christian Formation, yet said she felt familiar with “basic Christian history, theology and practice.” To the clarifying question about formation she added, “No to any kind of extended thought

or practice of spiritual gifts.” The area in which she feels most confident in terms of gifts is music, indeed she is a music teacher, but surprisingly she reported,

My elementary school did not offer general music, so my only exposure to singing was through Sunday School, Youth Group, and the church choir. My first voice teacher was a member of our congregation. Church music totally made me who I am today.

Because helping lead the music worship event is similar to what she already does professionally she wrote, “The change for me was after attending the *Finding God in Nature* service and seeing all the ways I can/am making spiritual connections and experiences that I never realized.” What led to growth for her was “hearing and seeing others experiences, particularly, Deirdre’s writings on music and faith.” She personified the practice of orthopraxy for transformation as described simply by Richard Rohr, “We do not think ourselves into a new way of living; but we live ourselves into a new way of thinking.”²⁴

One man similarly expressed contentment with traditional worship services. He was able to take a focus from the sermon each week and tried to apply it to daily living. He had briefly participated in Christian Formation and had a basic familiarity with Church teaching, but felt he had a lot to learn. As a medical professional he did not have a lot of confidence in applying his skills in a church setting. His participation definitely made a difference for him. He wrote:

I took the assignment of *Finding God In Nature* very seriously and surprised myself in finding that it led to a very personal examination of my reflections about being in the mountains and how it affected specific interpersonal relationships with friends and family and how, in looking back, I can see that

²⁴ Richard Rohr. “Orthopraxy Leads to Real Orthodoxy.” The Center for Action and Contemplation. <https://34dj3l269uzv2uy0oh3yzb0w-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/8-ORTHOPRAXY-LEADS-TO-REAL-ORTHODOXY.pdf>, 1.

a greater power was a work then and sustains me now. I know the experiences that I related were only one of many paths to faith but I was glad for the understanding of it and happy to have been able to share it with others. So my answer to #5 would change since I have now actually participated in a ministry – thanks to you.

Through the process of preparing for and participating in the worship event, he was able to discover God as present in his life in a way he had not realized. As The Rev. Ed Bacon's graduate advisor once told him, "You can be exposed to the finest thinking available, but it won't do you or anyone else any good if you don't cook it on your own stove."²⁵

A woman who is very active in church and ministry answered yes to everything, but clarified that her ministry is something that was cultivated outside the church. This gardener said, "*Finding God In* was a wonderful opportunity to share my story with my fellow parishioners. It is a very vulnerable position to express feelings you hold deeply. I was surprised how easy it was in that context and felt free to do so." She also emphasized a theme heard among many responses: "It was a chance to get to know their stories as well and they ALL brought fascinating insights as to where and how they found God...It opened my eyes up to see how many ways I could find God that I had not yet considered."

The first gardener, an extrovert, experienced her storytelling very differently from another gardener, an introvert. The introvert said, "I am not one to speak openly about my faith or spiritual life. Sharing my perspective on intentional gardening experiences with the level of openness I chose felt a bit too intimate for the setting. I felt exposed." Yet she said that the process of writing what she shared

²⁵ Ed Bacon, *8 Habits of Love: Open Your Heart, Open Your Mind* (Boston: Grand Central Life & Style, 2012), 35.

left her with a deeper appreciation for her meditation practice in the garden. She also had an insight that affirmed the premise of one connection making others possible:

Listening to the other participants share their perspectives has helped me realize more fully that there are a multitude of areas that people can share the experience of God outside the boundary and language of church and that those common areas might actually make the connection to God and community easier.

Yet a third leader reflected upon the challenge of sharing deeply personal experiences. He also introduced the idea that his participation began a process that is continuing:

Being one of the leaders was a very significant and emotional experience for me. I think this is mainly because it forced me to really look at and share my life and beliefs with people I know well and not so well. I am a very private person and usually don't speak about what I (actually Debbie) presented and shared. I'm not sure I could have read and what I wrote because of the emotional content ... Lastly, even though the services were done, I spent a lot of time going over my "paper" while sitting in my tree stand until my operation, and then would come home and edit and add things to it. It still is on my desktop and I'm sure I will revisit again.

Another woman who is very active in church perceived a clear shift. In responding to whether she had a clear understanding of how she might live out her faith during the week, she said, "I thought I did – I thought trying to make time to pray every day and live my life trying to be a good person was living my faith." But after participating as a worship event leader she wrote:

This has been by far the biggest change...the *Finding God in Nature* service has left me more appreciative of the gifts of God and more able to see even the things I don't love as gifts. I never would have thought of weeding the garden (one of my least favorite jobs) as a way to be closer to God, but I do now!

Through the process of preparing for the worship event, taking part in leading it, and listening carefully and respectfully to the other participants, this woman showed an increased awareness of the many diverse activities that can be understood as spiritual practices, if indeed they are places where one encounters God in the midst of doing something. Spiritual practices are not limited to a few religious activities, but can include almost anything that cultivates an awareness of God's presence, wonder, awe, or gratitude. As Brian McClaren asserts, "Spiritual practices are about life, about training ourselves to become the kinds of people who have eyes and actually see, and who have ears and actually hear, and so experience...not just survival but *life*."²⁶

Two long time members who are steeped in their faith did not experience as much change as others. One man said that his understanding of living out his faith has changed over time and "I now have come to think of much of what I do during the week is either consciously or unconsciously a prayer offering to God, or not." The aspect of participating as a worship event leader that he valued was "to be able to listen to others describe how their service has affected and changed their lives. Listening to someone's life story, or a piece of it, can always be powerful." A clergy widow said, "Although content with current services, this series provided a new, creative, effective and enjoyable way to learn about God's gifts to us and how we appreciate and make use of them." As with her colleagues, she highlighted the impact of hearing the stories of other leaders: "The greatest benefit from

²⁶ Brian McLaren. *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of Ancient Spiritual Practices*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 16.

participating was learning about the interests of others in our congregation and how they are using their God-given gifts.”

The organist spoke positively of the worship events, particularly her part in reading her husband’s reflection “Feeling God’s Presence in a Tree Stand.” She wrote,

When people are allowed to express themselves creatively, we learn a lot about each other, and our minds are opened to new ways of looking at life, faith, and God. It was an honor for me to read my husband’s account of how he finds God in the outdoors. So many people don’t understand so many things that actually inform his faith – this was an opportunity to open their minds.

One gentleman was not able to meet with the team in preparation for their event and approached his narrative more like a research paper than personal sharing. As a more analytical person it suited him, but also did not reveal much about him. He reported the least change saying, “My participation lead to a new understanding of giving from perspectives I was not previously aware of and which I believe will be useful in the future but the experience was not particularly helpful in my spiritual journey.”

Worship Event Attenders: Fifty people attended *Finding God in Music*, 27 of whom completed surveys. As anticipated many said they came to support someone (48.14%); a significant number cited their reasons for coming as a love of music, and an equal number were curious (29.62% each). All were pleased with current worship services. When asked their response to the event and whether it influenced their perspective on music and finding a connection with God responses included the very positive: “JOY! Yes, music is a form of prayer”; “Music is the beautiful

connection between us and God”; “Any music that seeks truth inspires a closer connection to God”; “It was tender, moving and authentic”; “Magnificent – Holy Spirit flowing.” Twelve respondents (44.44%) echoed the sentiment expressed by this person: “I have always found music helpful to my worship experience, this event strengthened and deepened it ... lovely to see others express this.” Two said no, “music not my thing.” One was disappointed, “A bit generic – I don’t know why we listened to pop songs.”

When asked if the event prompted any action or interest on their part, people said: “I take away thoughts that I will reflect upon in terms of my life & God”; “It opened my eyes to being more intentional about letting music connect me to faith”; “Always interested in new things. It shows a different path to God”; “Encouraged by son and my self to do more music and through this exp. to be close to God”; and numerous people said they would like more such events. Finally, in reaction to whether this event helped them imagine a connection to God in their everyday life through something they love people wrote: “It does help me imagine & provoke thoughts about God & spirituality”; “As I try and often fail to have God with me in my everyday life I will now try to find new ways to have that connection”; “I play and sing privately as it is a part of my spiritual life. This event will deepen my experience”; “It helps me to appreciate God more in everyday things”; “That’ll be nice and let God work on me and my family to find a connection in the future.”

Thirty-six people attended *Finding God in Nature* and 19 returned surveys. I divided the surveys into two groups, a survey identical to the one for *Finding God in Music* for first time attenders, and a separate survey for those who had come to the

first event. Ten of the completed surveys were from those who were new to *Finding God In...* series. Four attended because of their love of nature and six to be supportive. Eight were content with present worship services, one attends church occasionally, and one does not attend. Their responses to the event were all positive, with an “Awesome!” among them. The influence it had on their sense of a connection between God and nature included: “Tonight’s event had a calming effect. I know I’ll be thinking about all that was shared in the days ahead.” Five people expressed a sense of affirmation, “This evening has reinforced my belief in the relationship between God and nature.” One person applied the experience to considering broader personal application, “It gives me pause to see what in my regular experiences might do the same.” Two people echoed the sentiment expressed in the music event, “I feel like I have a better connection/understanding of those who presented.” When asked what change this experience might prompt for them, people said: “I plan to attend the next event, and [my middle school daughter] would like to join me” and “Go hiking and gardening!” A woman who coordinates nature outings in our congregation wrote, “Reinforces my interest in providing others a chance to explore nature.” One said, “It does but as I have many diverse interests it is sometimes difficult to think of what will bring me to this level”; another “To remind myself to be present.” A visitor from another Episcopal parish said, “I think this kind of worship experience would be welcome in my home congregation.” When asked if the event helped them imagine where they might find a connection to God in their everyday life, many simply said yes, while others elucidated: “I will look closer to finding those events in my life, or looking at those

different things I do in a better light towards God” and “It has encouraged me to look at love and my relationships differently.”

Among the nine who had attended *Finding God in Music* previously and completed a survey, four came to *Finding God in Nature* to support others, two were curious, one had a love of nature, and three were there because they had a positive experience at the first event, one saying, “Last week I was offered many different avenues to seek God and was hoping for more this week.” Asked if they attended other worship services how these compared respondents said: “These are much different & create a new worship perspective & focus”; “They’ve made me personally reflect on my own experiences”; “Yes, this has been fun and a learning experience”; “A very intimate approach to God.” Three focused on others, “These are very personal. I understand my fellow parishioners on a much deeper level.” In terms of a personal response and finding a connection with God, they wrote: “It has made me think differently”; “They took me to a special place, one of appreciation, relaxation & joy”; “I’ll think more about God on my next run”; “They’ve made me personally reflect on my own experiences.” Three found the alternative services reinforced what they already knew. The final question, whether the events prompted any changes in how they think about what they love and what they might do with it, led to these answers: “To be able to share it with other people especially young people”; “More reflection than change”; “It’s prompting me to think carefully about how I approach the possibility of looking for a new job” and “I’m working on that.”

Thirty people attended *Finding God in Service to Others*. Eleven filled out surveys and another 9 attended all three worship events and were not asked to complete another survey. Among the first time attenders two had an interest in service, two wished to be supportive, two were curious, and one saw it advertised in another church's bulletin. All attended church services regularly. Among their responses and possible changes in perspective were: "Wonderful listening to their stories and experiences"; "Thought provoking"; "Broadened my perspective"; "Volunteering has always been a priority but often do not associate it with God" and "More fellowship and learning than worship." As to whether the event prompted any action on their part people said: "Help others – be thankful for all I have"; "Learn about the service aspects of other Anglicans"; "Enjoyed listening to people reflect on their own experiences and would enjoy learning more" and "Already pursuing a path of service." The four who attended a previous *Finding God In* service came because they were interested in the topic, to be supportive, thought the first one was "very worthwhile", and one was "Inspired to see how people in our congregation see God in their service to others." All attend other services and valued these events, "It helps give an appreciation of other ways to experience God's presence." All four were positive in response to the events and most found connections: "Very thought provoking and spiritually nurturing and challenging"; "Encourages me to find ways to serve others outside of regular worship and parish work" and "Finding ways in my own life to do more to serve others, and by doing so seeing our Lord." As for changes in how they think about what they love and God they said: "I try to 'seek God in all things.' These events are helpful reminders of

how pervasive that search can be”; “Might spend more time in charitable/volunteer work” and “Finding ways in my own life to better serve others.”

Project Effectiveness: We were able to successfully create three thematic *Finding God In...* worship events. Each of these alternative services was offered as a complement to traditional worship, was led and developed by lay people based in something they loved and in which they find a connection with God in the daily lives, and curated by me. Through emails, sign up sheets, and conversations, people of the parish identified what they loved, which led to the three foci for the events: music, nature, and serving others. According to returned surveys and conversations, the process of preparation for and leadership of the worship events helped all but one leader either affirm or expand their perspective to see the activity they love as a place where they encounter God. The *Finding God In...* alternative services created a unique context in which they could share their experiences as part of a worship event. Finally, the events did integrate worship and Christian formation so that it was lay led, attracted the interest of other people, and, according to the comments on the surveys, revitalized the faith of many leaders and attenders.

The theoretical question was whether *Finding God In...* as a lay led alternative worship event based in something people love, would lead to a period of Revitalization, so that new life would be breathed into the people of Christ Church and beyond. The three *Finding God In...* events were an experiment to see if this approach could create a reformulation of what Anthony F. C. Wallace called the “mazeway,” thereby allowing people to envision a new or renewed way of

understanding their relationship to God. If so, I believed that these distinctive events had the potential to initiate a process of Cultural Transformation, as well as spiritual transformation, changing the culture of Christ Church without harming the existing good.

My conclusion is that the *Finding God In...* worship events do have the power to initiate revitalization. Clear change was evident in the words of one leader, who moved from not having a concept of interaction with God other than church services and formal prayer, "It never occurred to me that there are other ways to be with God," to having a significantly broader understanding of God's presence in everyday life, "...seeing all the ways I can/am making spiritual connections and experiences that I never realized." Leaders commented both on a change in perception for both their own experience and from those of others, which expanded their understanding of where and how people could encounter God: "It opened my eyes up to see how many ways I could find God that I had not yet considered," and "... there are a multitude of areas that people can share the experience of God outside the boundary and language of the church." The impact of personal experience changed their understanding and empowered them to hear others as well, demonstrating the truth of Richard Rohr's teaching about the importance of orthopraxy:

Somehow we need to engage in hands-on experience, emotional risk taking, moving outside of our comfort zones, with different people than our usual flattering friends. We need some expanded level of spiritual seeing or nothing really changes at a deep level.²⁷

²⁷ Rohr. *Orthopraxy Leads to Real Orthodoxy*, 1.

Among the people who attended the worship events and completed surveys 16 (32%) of those from *Finding God in Music* said they had experienced a changed perspective on the relationship between music and finding a connection with God or finding a connection with God in their everyday life through something they love, and 10 (20%) said it affirmed a connection they already felt. The surveys from *Finding God in Nature* showed 11 (36.66%) people experiencing a positive change in their understanding and 7 (23.33%) feeling their perspective affirmed. Lastly, the surveys from *Finding God in Service to Others* indicated that 9 (81.81%) respondents had experienced a positive change in understanding. In addition, the level of energy and enthusiasm following each event was remarkable, and I received numerous requests for Christ Church to have more *Finding God In...* worship events, and people volunteered to lead and support them.

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Appendix: Surveys and Responses

Doctor of Ministry Project Initial Parish Survey The Rev. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew

Please fill out the short survey below and return it to the office. Please feel free to add comments or explain. Thank you.

1. What is your response to the current format for worship at Christ Church with The Holy Eucharist, Rite II (with traditional hymnody at the later service, accompanied by organ or piano)?

- Positive
- Content
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Negative

2. Do you feel a clear connection between worship on Sunday and living out your faith the rest of the week?

- Yes
- Somewhat
- No

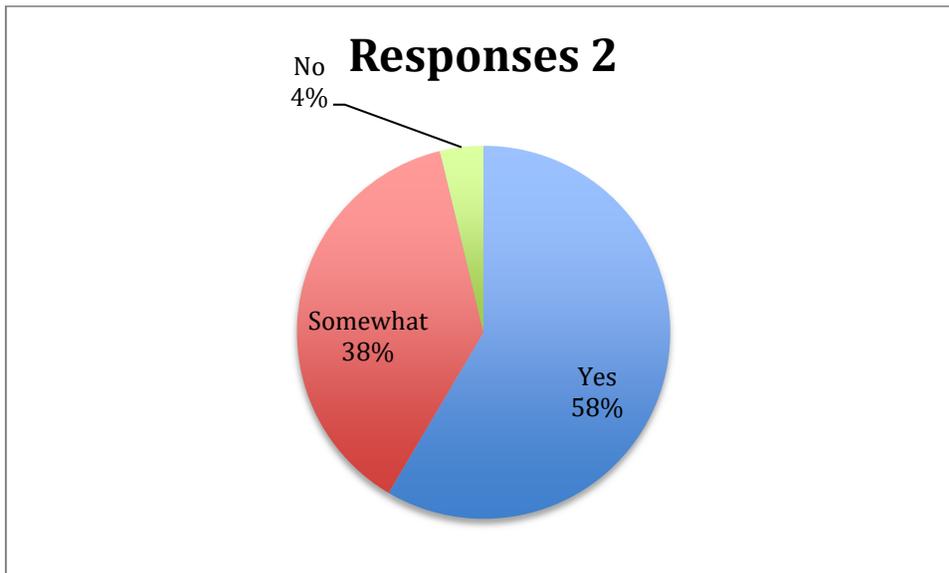
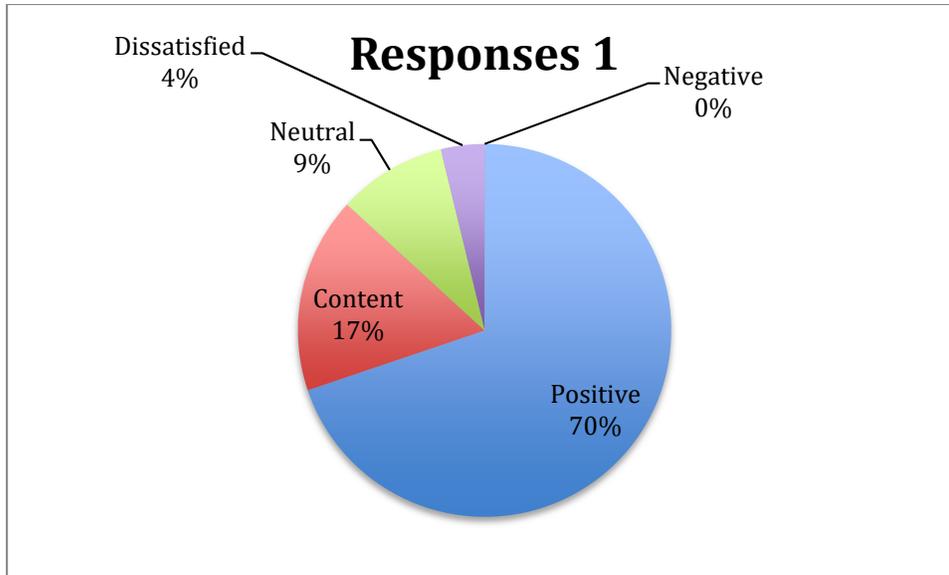
3. Do you participate in any kind of adult Christian Formation (reading, class, Bible study, etc.)? If so, please describe.

- Yes _____
- No

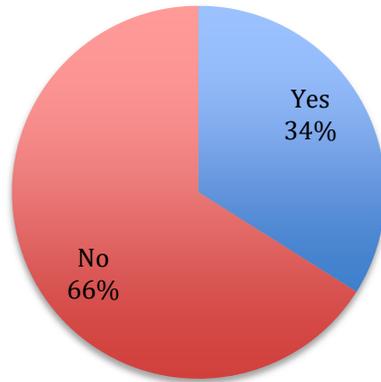
4. Do you feel confident in your ability to lead a ministry or offer your gifts and abilities at church?

- Yes
- Somewhat
- No

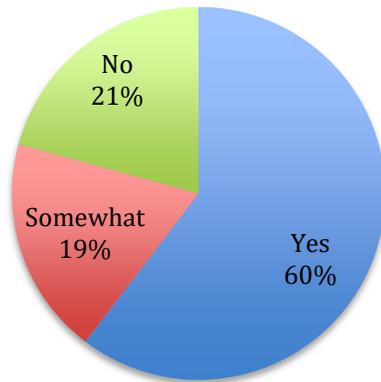
Doctor of Ministry Project Initial Parish Survey Responses



Responses 3



Responses 4

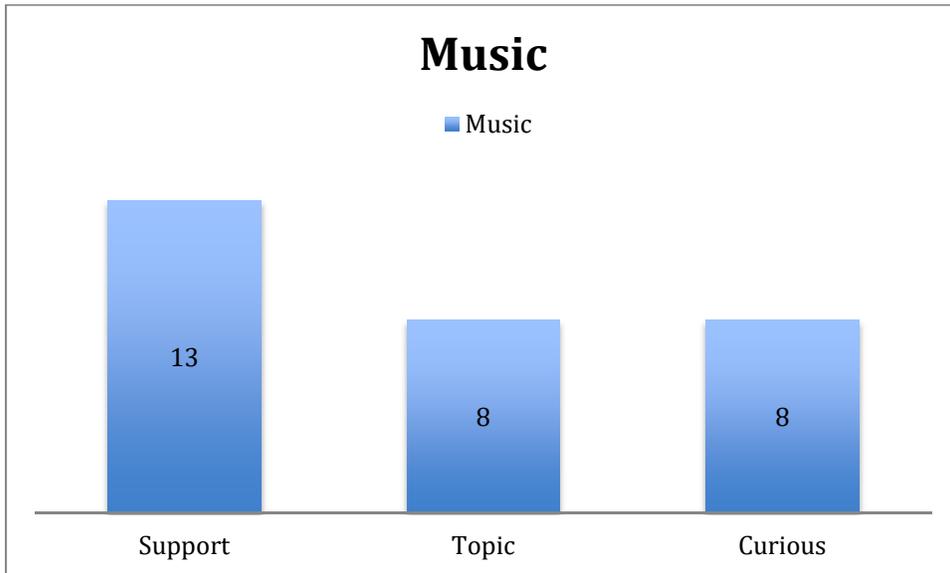


Finding God In Music survey

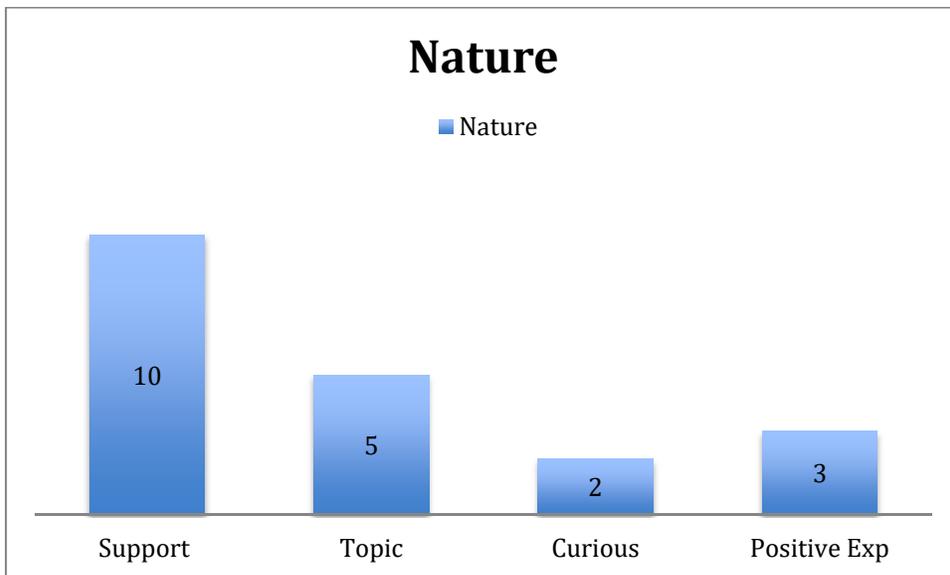
Thank you for coming to Finding God in Music. Please respond to the following questions for Mother Dena's Doctor of Ministry project. Please feel free to write on the back if more space is needed.

1. What encouraged you to come to this worship event?
2. Do you attend other worship services? If so, how would you describe them?
3. What is your response to this event? Has it influenced your perspective on the relationship between music and finding a connection with God?
4. Does your experience of this event prompt any action or interest in future events, relationships, or activities? If so, what?
5. Does this event help you imagine where you might find a connection to God in your everyday life through something you love? Could you envision yourself being part of a worship team for an event like this?

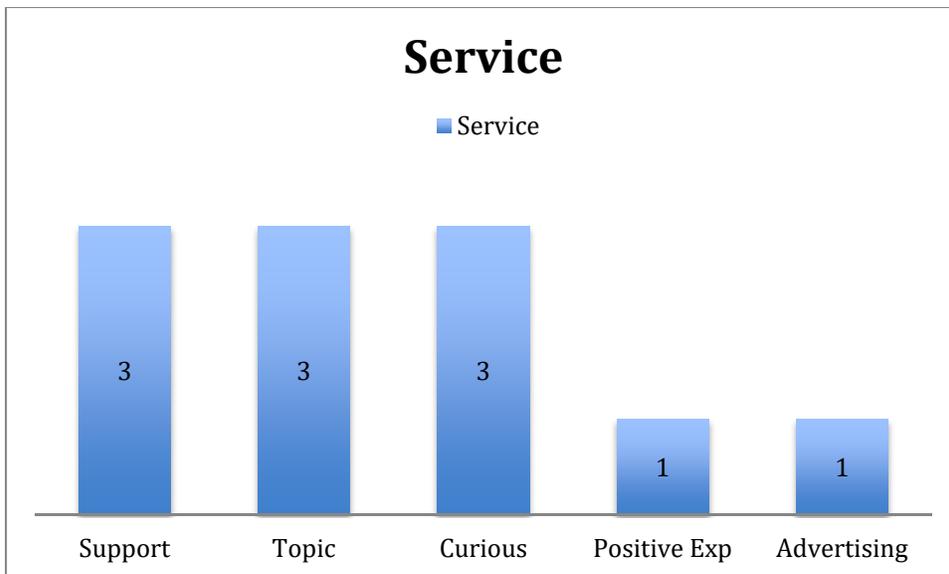
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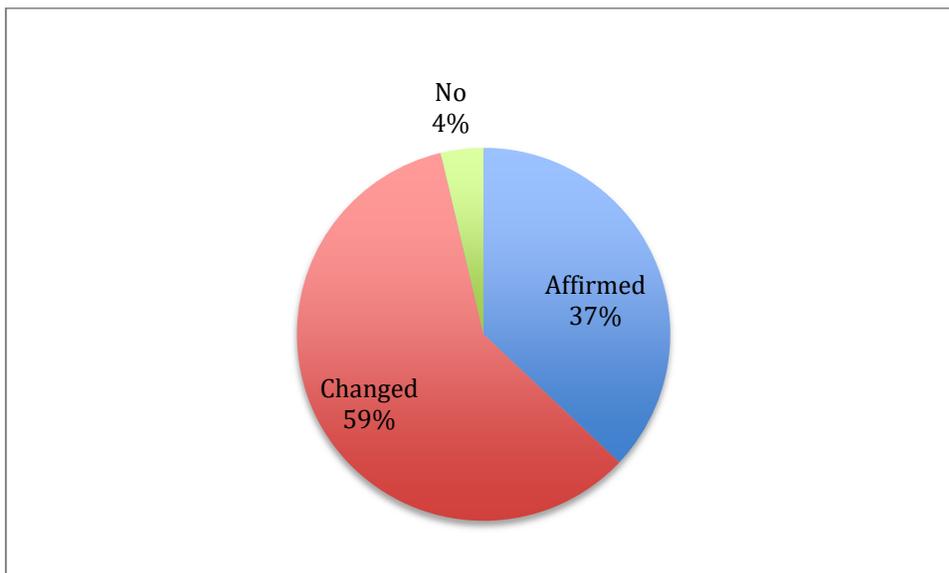
Finding God in Nature Reasons for Attending



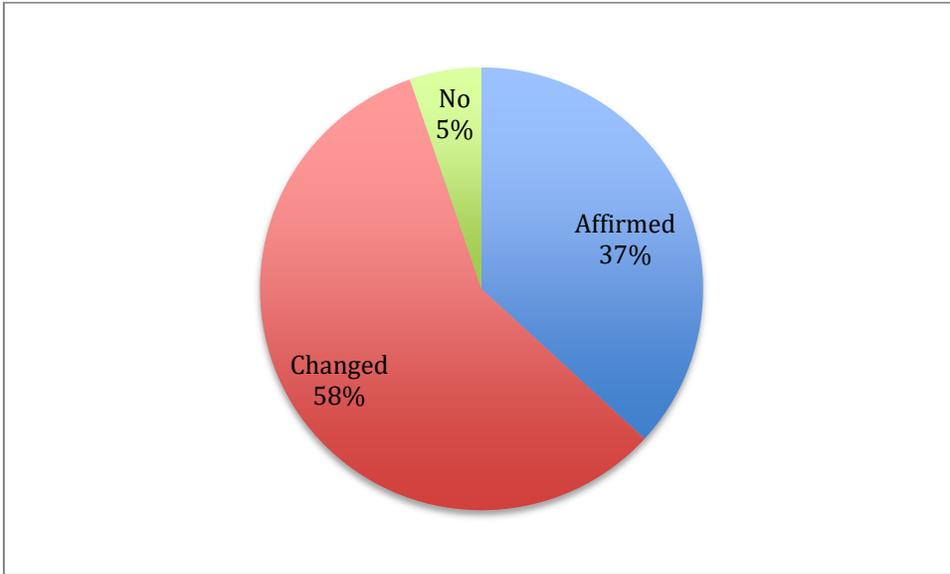
Finding God in Service to Others Reasons for Attending



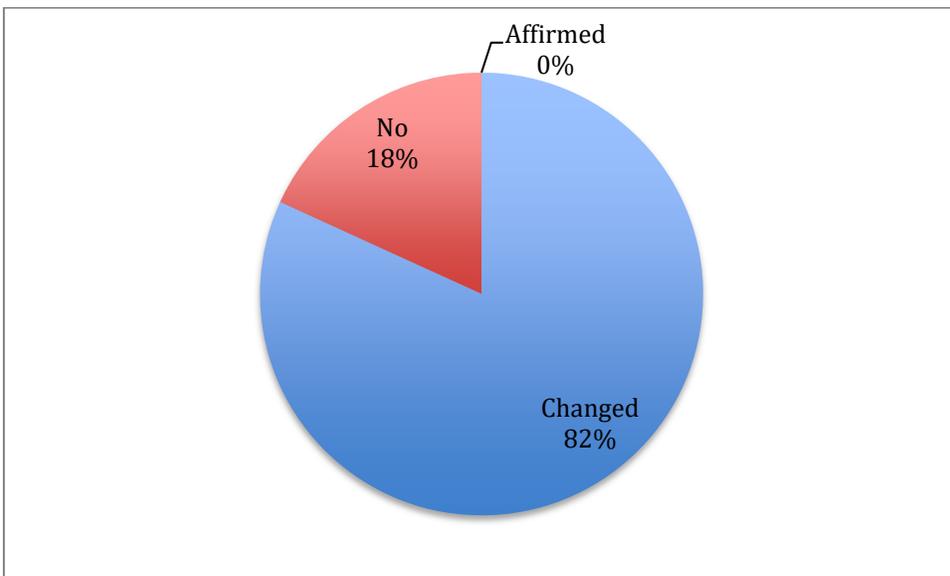
Finding God In Music Influence on Perspective (Questions 3-5)



Finding God in Nature Influence on Perspective



Finding God in Service to Others Influence on Perspective



Finding God In Nature survey

Thank you for coming to Finding God in Nature. Please respond to the following questions for Mother Dena's Doctor of Ministry project. Please feel free to write on the back if more space is needed.

1. What encouraged you to come to this worship event?

2. Do you attend other worship services? If so, how would you describe them?

3. What is your response to this event? Has it influenced your perspective on the relationship between nature and finding a connection with God?

4. Does your experience of this event prompt any action or interest in future events, relationships, or activities? If so, what?

5. Does this event help you imagine where you might find a connection to God in your everyday life through something you love? Could you envision yourself being part of a worship team for an event like this?

Finding God In Service to Others survey

Thank you for coming to Finding God in Service to Others. Please respond to the following questions for Mother Dena's Doctor of Ministry project. Please feel free to write on the back if more space is needed.

1. What encouraged you to come to this worship event?
2. Do you attend other worship services? If so, how would you describe them?
3. What is your response to this event? Has it influenced your perspective on the relationship between service to others and finding a connection with God?
4. Does your experience of this event prompt any action or interest in future events, relationships, or activities? If so, what?
5. Does this event help you imagine where you might find a connection to God in your everyday life through something you love? Could you envision yourself being part of a worship team for an event like this?

**Finding God In Service to Others survey for those who attended a previous
*Finding God in event***

Thank you for coming to Finding God in Service to Others. Please respond to the following questions for Mother Dena's Doctor of Ministry project. Please feel free to write on the back if more space is needed.

1. What encouraged you to attend another Finding God In...worship event?
2. Do you attend other types of worship services? If so, how do these compare?
3. What is your response to these events? Have they encouraged you to think differently about where and how you might find a connection with God?
4. Does your experience of these events prompted any changes in how you think about what you love and what you might do with it?

Doctor of Ministry Survey for Worship Team leaders

Thank you to each of you for participating in one or more of the *Finding God In...* worship events. I have a few brief questions for you below. Beyond that, I would truly appreciate whatever additional feedback you are willing to share about the experience of being a worship event leader and any lasting impact it may have had for you. Please answer on a separate sheet of paper, preferably with your name on it.

Mother Dena+

Prior to participating in *Finding God In...*

1. Were you content with the worship services at Christ Church? Please say which service you attend.
2. Did you have a clear understanding of how the faith expressed on Sunday in worship could be lived out during the rest of the week?
3. Had you participated in Bible study or other types of adult Christian Formation? If so, what and how recently?
4. Did you feel familiar with the Bible and basic Christian history, theology, and practice, as well as with concepts of spiritual gifts or practices?
5. Did feel confident to lead a ministry or offer your gifts and abilities at church? If so, were the ministries or gifts in areas cultivated within or outside of church?

Since participating in *Finding God In...*

Have your answers to any of the above questions changed? If so, how and why?

Finally, *please write a description of what it was like for you to participate as a worship event leader and what effects, if any, it has had in your life.*