

Young worshippers thrive on relationships, crave sense of God's mystery_110104

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Vicki Beeching, who has a degree in theology from Oxford, leads the Worship Together Band at Baylor University's Hearn Symposium. (Craig Bird Photo)

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By Craig Bird

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WACO-The faith of their fathers doesn't impress youth and young adults very much. But the faith of the early church fathers is a different story.

And it increasingly is their story as a generation starved for stable and genuine relationships-and entranced rather than frightened by the mysterious nature of God-"do church" their way, participants at a Baylor University symposium on "Music and Worship in an Emerging Culture" heard.

"How dare we talk about the church 'emerging' when that happened thousands of years ago?" Randall Bradley, professor of church music and director of Baylor's Center for Christian Music Studies, asked in the opening session. "Because we see that the church is obviously changing today, and it may not be recognizable to those of us who don't get out much. But there is no evidence to suggest we are ever going back to the way we were-or the way we think we were.

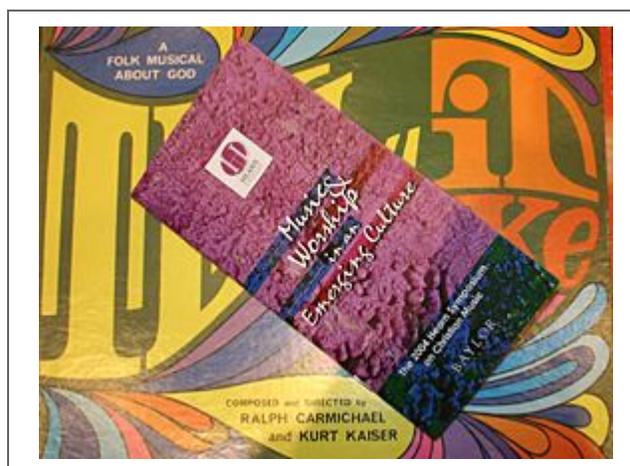
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“In this new place, we run the risk of vastly misinterpreting our surroundings. We can take two extremes—one, that all change is evil, or two, that all change is good. Neither is accurate. We need to hear from the prophetic and learn how to ask new and bolder questions and learn how to preach and worship truth in a world that questions if there is truth.”

To that end, the second Hearn Symposium on Christian Music brought together a wide-ranging selection of musicians, authors, pastors and academics to provoke and interact with about 450 conference participants who crossed denominational, geographic and age boundaries.

Young adult “Millennials”-also tagged “the Bridge Generation” and “Mosaics” by sociologists-number between 70 million and 75 million, roughly one-fourth of the U.S. population. They have more formal education and are more racially mixed and multi-cultural than any previous generation. Heavily influenced by the Internet, they process information differently and think more globally. They have grown up in a society of broken marriages and dysfunctional institutions.



A record album cover of "Tell It Like It Is," an early Christian youth musical that helped alter the way evangelical churches sang and worshipped in the 1960s, provided a historical context for the changes in worship style showing up in the Emergent Church-the focus of the Hearn symposium on "Music and Worship in an Emerging Culture" at Baylor University.

They ignore traditional Christianity in massive and growing numbers. And when they do pay attention, it is increasingly in churches with strange names and diffused organization-congregations that stress relationships

and where music and art and dance meld with short, interactive conversations about truth and the sacred.

Not surprisingly, traditional churches often are unsettled, at best, and frightened and angered, at worst, by the variations from their norm.

Which leads to an unexpected historical parallel—the reaction of the establishment church in the 1960s to the Jesus People movement and, within evangelical circles, the appearance of the first Christian youth musicals.

Ironically, many of today's church leaders who as youth battled to get guitars and drums into the sanctuary now disdain Millennial innovations as irreligious.

“The church is as rigid today as it was in the 1960s,” said Peter York, whose roster of contemporary Christian music artists include Steven Curtis Chapman, Rebecca St. James, the Newsboys and Switchfoot. “There is the same sort of fear and confusion about what young people are trying to bring into the church.”

Three bloodied veterans of the 1960s church worship wars—Ralph Carmichael, Kurt Kaiser and Billy Ray Hearn—shared their experiences. Though they good-naturedly kidded back and forth about who should get credit for originating the concept of Christian youth musicals, they agreed on the reaction.

“It was brutal,” Carmichael said. “After Kurt and I wrote 'Tell It Like It Is,' Billy Ray set up 50 workshops over the next year all across the country. And at each of those 50, right before we got started, someone would stand up and say: 'I know this young man thinks God has told him to do this, but this is of the devil, and I'm leaving. Who will leave with me?' And some would leave. And we had to do a workshop after that.”

Hearn, who later headed Word, Myrrh and Sparrow record companies, debuted "Tell It Like It Is" at Glorieta Baptist Encampment's summer music week.

"The next day in all the workshops, no matter what the planned topic, the discussion was about how evil it was," he recalled. "No one defended it. But a year later, they were all performing it at their churches and asking for more."

Eventually, even the bookstore at the conservative Moody Bible Institute was able to stop "selling copies of the album from under the counter and wrapping them in a plain brown paper bag lest anyone see them selling that sinful music."

Chuck Fromm, founder and publisher of Worship Leader Magazine and a central player in the Jesus Rock that also developed in the 1960s, drew a comparison/contrast with the 1960s Christian youth music and today's emergent Christian music.

"'Tell It Like It Is' had a rebellious core to it," he said. "Remember that chorus that said, 'Quit talking about the good old days?' Now the young people are telling the church: 'Please start talking about the good old days. But not your old days—the days of the early church.' It's a creative plundering of the past for things that communicate to them about God."

Brian McLaren, commentator on the emergent church movement and a pastor from Washington, D.C., reminded participants that such challenges to the established church are not new—and that four of them were ultimately successful.

In A.D. 50 to 100, "the gospel was liberated from cultural Judaism and the church flourished" because of the Apostle Paul's work "of disengaging from but not rejecting" the Jewish culture, he said. In A.D. 300 to 500, the Desert Fathers and Celtic Christianity disengaged the church from the

Roman Empire—and the church flourished. By A.D. 1500, Christianity and the medieval worldview were enmeshed, but the Protestant Reformation disengaged them—and the church flourished. In the 1900s, faith was enmeshed with rationalism, but evangelicals disengaged them—and the church flourished, he pointed out.

Now the church is enmeshed with modernism, he asserted. The question then becomes, “Will we be part of the fifth reformulation/rebooting/disengagement?”

“We may be far more confused about our message than we realize,” he continued. “Before we talk about marrying the postmodern culture to the church, we need to figure out what went wrong in the marriage between Christianity and modernity—a movement that was anti-Christian in many ways. We may realize we are so damaged from that earlier marriage that we need a lot of counseling before we marry anybody!”

Throughout the symposium, speakers emphasized the key role worship leaders can play both in welcoming in the healthy and Holy Spirit-inspired innovations of the emergent church and in providing balance and correction.

“We need to be both priests and prophets,” Fromm said. “As priests, we protect the institution of the church. But as prophets, we hang out with the movements. Some things need to be preserved, but some need to be examined. Remember that brass snake that Moses made at God's command so that people who looked at it in faith could be healed? Well a few hundred years later, Hezekiah had to destroy it because people were burning incense to it and worshipping it instead of God. The emergent church is asking us to check if we are worshipping the right way.”

The emergent church also can call the church back to the community it originally was, several speakers noted.

“We're not in church together because we necessarily like each other,” Marva Dawn, a teaching fellow in spiritual theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. “We are in church together because how else are we going to practice loving our enemies? ... We should all learn from each other, and that is what the emergent church does so well.”

Using her own misshapen leg as an example, Dawn noted: “Because my leg is curved, it would snap if I didn't wear this brace. But if it were straight, I could walk and run like I was created to do. In the same way, if we don't have in common a doctrinally sound 'leg bone,' then our churches will splinter. But if that bone is straight and strong, then the flesh, the different styles of worship, can grow on it in all kinds of interesting and healthy ways.”

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