

*With a foreword by Dan Kimball*

# THE ART OF CURATING WORSHIP

*RESHAPING THE ROLE OF WORSHIP LEADER*

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sparkhouse press — Minneapolis, MN

**THE ART OF CURATING WORSHIP**  
**Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader**

**Buy online at [amzn.com/1451400845](http://amzn.com/1451400845)**

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### 3

## *Curation: The Glue That Holds it All Together*

**B**efore I explore a variety of terms old and new that we can use when talking about and designing worship, one single term, *curation*, needs to be unwrapped before that conversation will make sense.

Understanding the role of a worship curator is the key to changing the way we design worship and, therefore, the way we enable people to engage with God in public corporate worship. I first coined the term *worship curator* after having two very different and unconnected experiences. The first was the high-school reunion I mentioned earlier where I was struck by the number of spiritual seekers who either hadn't considered looking to the church for answers or had done so and not found anything helpful. The second occurred a few years later when I visited a quite bizarre art installation titled, *I Had a Thought*. I first described this in the book, *The Prodigal Project*:

The entrance to the art gallery had become a dressing room. My daughter and I were each fitted with a clear plastic body suit (stapled to fit around our contours), plastic bags were tied over our shoes, surgeon's rubber

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gloves put on our hands, and the outfit topped off with a white hardhat with full clear visor. Looking like we were ready for a DIY tour of Chernobyl we were ushered through a décor of hanging plastic strips into a huge white space. Floor of white polythene. Wall and ceiling painted white. Large floor-to-ceiling flexible mirrors along the walls distorted our movements.

A dozen or so big circular children's paddling pools were spread around the space. Each of the pools had a fountain—spurting paint. The pools were each filled with a different coloured paint. Occasionally paint sprayed down at random intervals from shower hoses hidden in the ceiling. The space and audience were splattered in paint! It was confusing—not what I expected in an art gallery—and wonderful; we were part of the installation. Participants, not just spectators.

I have no idea now what the installation was meant to be about. I don't think I did back then! According to the gallery notes it was something about “forcing a confrontation between audience anticipation and participation.” All I could think about as we slipped around the paint-splashed floor between the fountains and pools, and stood under paint drips and sprays in our child's-play version of space suits was: “Wouldn't it be great if we could do worship in a setting like this?” Active participation with open-ended interpretation. Room to move physically and cognitively. Creative context and content. Andy Warhol goes to church! If I could find some way of providing this kind of

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context and setting for theologically sound Christian worship, then maybe I'd have something that my old school friends could relate to. Maybe even a setting in which they could begin to understand something of how the gospel might be good news for them. Another journey of discovery had begun for me.<sup>10</sup>

That journey led me to develop my understanding of the role of worship curator. For some years, I'd been putting together weekly community worship events, theme-specific ambient-worship spaces (at Pentecost and Good Friday for example), and what I would now describe as transitional worship events. These drew heavily on ideas from art installations I had seen and read about, and, while they were interesting, I was also aware that the worship I was designing and experiencing was too often isolated from its surroundings—both physical and cultural—to say nothing of the people it was intended for. I felt there should be more integration and integrity between context and content.

I felt that the context was at least as important as the content, perhaps more so from a communication and engagement perspective. I kept thinking of the old Marshall McLuhan idea of the medium being the message and the more recent “context as content.”<sup>11</sup> Picking up the term from art exhibitions, I started talking about myself as a worship curator rather than a worship leader. If I understand worship as “a person or person's responding to the Trinitarian community of God with heart, soul, mind, and strength,” then it seems clear to me that this will be something that is curated rather than led.

## THE CURATOR

The term *curator* comes from the Latin *curare* meaning “to care for.” A British website advertising the job of curator says, “A museum

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or gallery curator acquires, cares for, develops, displays and interprets a collection of artifacts or works of art in order to inform, educate and entertain the public.”<sup>12</sup> Interestingly it is also a legal term for “the guardian of a minor, lunatic, or other incompetent.”<sup>13</sup> Perhaps both have some implications for worship curators!

The rise of the curator in an art gallery and museum context is—while not new—newly developed, and definitions abound. Until the early twentieth century, artists showed their work either privately or in collective exhibitions that they organized themselves. The increasing professionalization and specialization of this role gave rise to the curator. Traditionally, the curator was seen as a rather academic presence in a museum, researching, archiving, cataloging, collecting, and restoring artifacts of historical and aesthetic value. Today a curator may do everything from dealing with staff, to running the publicity for an exhibition, to writing explanatory notes for gallery installations. It is somewhere in the midst of that spectrum that I situate the role of a worship curator.

The curator of an art installation is responsible for the selection and design of that installation. Imagine a large room in a gallery. In the center of the room stands a collection of packing crates and boxes. Each has within it a piece of art chosen by the curator or delivered to her as part of a specific exhibition. She will be unpacking the artifacts and placing them around the space. She will be taking into consideration—and maybe even altering them to better suit her purposes—the color of the walls, the size and shape of the space, the height of the ceiling, the lighting levels, the temperature, where people enter and exit, and so on. All these factors will affect where and how the artifacts are placed. Will they go against the walls or out from them? Will people be able to walk around an object or just view it from the front or sides? How high will an object be placed? How close to other objects? What will be included and what omitted? In what order will they be presented

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and with how much or how little explanation? These and dozens of other factors—many of them intuitive and learned from experience, training, and the expressed desires of the artist—will determine the final look and feel of the exhibition.

## THE WORSHIP CURATOR

In a similar way, the worship curator is responsible not just for the singing part of a church service (as the misnamed worship leader usually is), but for the whole event—from the moment people enter the door until they leave and everything in between. A good worship curator unpacks the elements of the service in a particular space she has thought about and deliberately arranged. She is aware of lighting levels, temperature, seating, projections, sound, and every element that contributes to the worship experience. She decides what should be printed on handouts, a data projector, or an overhead projector. She determines how much or how little explanation is needed for people to be able to participate fully in the worship. She guides people through worship and connects the various elements of the service together into a flow, including selecting songs or readings as needed. She understands why the church exists and what worship is about. She knows the church calendar and is engaged with the world outside the church. She is theologically trained, pastorally attuned, and draws on her intuition and experience to facilitate the best possible worship experience for the community that is gathered.

Of course this is the ideal—the big-picture view. The role of the worship curator in any actual worship event varies considerably and depends on the context in which worship is being curated. The role will be different in a liturgical 11 a.m. church setting than it would be in an outdoor sacred-space event. I should also add that while the



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curator is in overall care of the whole worship event, she is not doing everything. She is coordinating the participation of others.

It is also possible to be curator of a single element of the event—say, the prayers of confession. This limits the scope of the curator but is no less valid as a function. The curator might be the pastor but is just as likely to be a layperson. At the church where I initially developed this concept, we eventually had a group of four curators who rotated through each month. These four people were led by a paid staff person, but they had a great deal of autonomy; whoever was assigned a particular week was responsible for coordinating and holding together the various elements of that worship event.

Curating worship, as opposed to leading worship, allows me to shape a worship event with both internal and external integrity while still being open ended in the ways I think worship should be. This perspective on the art of worship is not about a certain style or format. It's about how the curator works in a particular medium—worship. The principles are transferable across all styles of worship and all cultures.

I'll get into more detail about how all of these pieces play out and come together shortly. But before moving into that practical level, I want to go deeper into the values and ideals behind worship curation. I'll begin with two essential processes a curator needs to go through each and every time she is putting together a worship event: aggregation and pruning.

### **Aggregation**

In a web post about digital music and other media, Mike Shatzkin describes the importance of aggregation in any curated context. He writes, "Aggregation is one of the core concepts of content present-

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ation. . . . [It] simply means pulling together things which are not necessarily connected.”<sup>14</sup> Before curation can begin, aggregation must take place. Resources must be collected—ideas, materials, songs, liturgy, music tracks, video clips, slides, images, people, and so on.

Failing to go through the aggregation stage can lead to bland and boring worship that, even if curated in other ways, is mostly a repeated or regurgitated version of the week before. Aggregation is what keeps the worship curator fresh, inspired, creative, and better able to encourage engagement with God despite the broad range of lives, and loves, and hates of the worshipping community. It also takes a lot of time and is easily neglected when under the pressure of time.

Rather than thinking of aggregation as a task, however, I suggest thinking of it as a lifestyle. It involves developing an ability to see the stuff of ordinary life—stuff going on in the culture around your community—and bring it into the worship event in ways that enhance the ability of the worshipers to engage with God with heart, soul, mind, strength. It might involve visiting art galleries (especially installation art), reading architecture and design magazines, talking with artists about their processes, and exposing yourself to as wide a range of aural and visual experiences as possible.

Recently I purchased a work by artist Amanda Watson. She had taken canvases rejected from earlier painting sessions and cut them into two-inch squares. She then impaled thirty or so of these pieces on a nail driven through a piece of timber. The works were called *Dud Stacks*. I saw in this the possibility of the “dud” or failure parts of our lives being impaled on a nail and offered to God as a confession. I used this idea as an interactive worship station on a recent Good Friday.

A friend of mine had a pile of cheap white umbrellas, so I purchased one hundred of them. I later used twenty-four to make a projector screen for an ambient video loop in one of our services. A

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recently discovered book on simple shelters from countries around the world has me thinking about putting together a worship event around the idea of hospitality and the sacred places in our lives. I'll use the book when the idea finds its right time and place.

Most of us are good at collecting readings, prayers, and songs, and perhaps the odd drama or film clip that we will choose from when setting up next week's order of service. Aggregation goes wider and deeper to include every aspect of the cultures and subcultures that make up the lives of the people who will be worshipping. This takes us back to the "anything goes" statement in the previous chapter. There is nothing that can't be included in the worship curator's aggregation, no matter how disparate items might seem. I keep track of my aggregation by scribbling ideas, quotes, words, and comments in a notebook, and by tossing articles and objects in small boxes. I go through all of these regularly looking for inspiration.

But aggregation is not curation. It's a necessary precursor, but good worship is not simply the result of putting a bunch of interesting elements in the right order. Curating first calls for pruning.

### Pruning

Mike Shatzkin illustrates his thesis with a description that is helpful to our understanding of worship. He says, "Newspapers are obviously aggregators and curators. The differences in their curation create their brand. *The New York Times* leaves out the comics. *The New York Post* leaves out the multi-syllable words. *The Daily News* beefs up its sports section and, for years, was known for having the best pictures. But one thing has been common to all of them and to all other newspapers: they all cover the waterfront."<sup>15</sup>

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Each newspaper sells its advertising against its brand, the result of its pruned aggregate, i.e., what it keeps in. No newspaper prints everything available to it. So, over time, their aggregation gets narrower. If readers or advertisers, or both, start to not like the way this pruning is being done, they will look for newspapers that better connect with who they are and how they live, or want to live, their lives. Realizing this, the newspaper may broaden its aggregate and change its criteria for pruning in the hope of attracting readers back, or of keeping new readers. If it doesn't, it goes out of business.

I'm sure you can see the ways this concept connects with the church, and, in particular, with worship events. The stakes are more than financial for the worship curator. We are involved in the business of designing worship that will enable people to engage with God in ways that will be transformative for them individually, communally, and ultimately for the world.

The church faces many of the same issues that newspapers do in contemporary culture. Most people buy a newspaper for a few articles or sections, not for everything in it. I rarely read the sports pages and only glance through the automotive section, but I read most articles of local and national news. I always read the business section of my paper but never buy the *Financial Times* because it doesn't have much local or national news in it. You need to determine what your community needs from the worship event you are curating, knowing that not every piece of the worship experience will connect with every person.

That's why every church worship event needs to contain a variety of content born out of the aggregation/pruning process. Ideas might have been discarded because the curator didn't like them, or identify with them, or felt they weren't theologically sound or appropriate to the setting. They might have been considered unrelated to the theme or understanding of worship. Whatever the criteria, people will participate

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in that worship and that church because they find that some or most (rarely all) of the elements are helpful to them, connect with them, or nurture them spiritually. These elements are the reason—whether stated or unrecognized—individuals stay at a particular church or attend a particular worship event.

If one of the elements changes, say, an academic preacher is replaced by one more likely to quote a movie star than a theologian, then the worshiper for whom the academic-preaching element was especially appreciated will likely decide that God is telling her to move on. She can do this more easily than ever before because in our contemporary world she can get the preaching she wants from a hundred sources, without having to get in her car and travel, sit in a pew, or even get out of her pajamas if she doesn't want to.

That's why the role of a worship curator is more important now than it has ever been. Good curation, based on solid aggregation and careful pruning, enables the worship event to better connect with the realities and desires of a larger proportion of the congregation than carelessly curated or unthinkingly repeated worship does.

### **CURATING WORSHIP**

Curation isn't about any particular shape or style of worship, or about the inclusion or exclusion of any particular element. I would hope that by the end of this book you will be thinking about ways to improve the worship you design and curate, but the elements you start with next week may look exactly like those you started with last week, and the week before. And that's okay. Curation is as much about the attitude you bring to the worship event as it is about the elements of worship. It's the understanding you bring from the process of asking the questions described in the previous chapter—questions about who

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makes up your worshiping community and how you can help them engage with God in ways that will nurture and sustain them. But when you adopt the worship-curation model, some things will change right away.

Since the curator oversees the whole scope of the worship event, people participating in that event need to know how they relate to the curator. This is not a control or authority relationship. This is not a worship leader given a new name and more power to dominate. The number of songs that will be sung, and where the offering will be, and when the children will leave are decided by the community itself, or, perhaps, by a senior pastor. It's not the role of the curator to move the community into a new form of worship—unless that is what the community has asked for. The curator at a gallery is not the artist or the gallery owner. She doesn't take up a paint brush or chisel. Her responsibility is to do the best she can for the audience with the parameters and the works of art given to her. The worship curator is no different. Her role is to take what she is given—the elements of worship expected by her given community—and reshape where she is able and thinks it necessary in order to present these elements to the congregation at worship. To do this, she has to have a reasonable idea of what elements she has to curate. She will take this and curate, pruning and adding from her own aggregation of creative possibilities.

When the elements are tightly controlled by other forces, her role might involve little more than creating transitions between elements and setting up the space. This is still a significant contribution to the worship event. At other times, she may have more space to be creative with some of the elements of the service. Done with sensitivity, wisdom, and humility (three essential character traits of any worship curator), even a seemingly minimal contribution can have a deep impact on individuals and a community at worship.

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## Curating Community Worship

Let me illustrate what curation looks like with an example from a community-worship event I worked on. (I consider *community* worship the week-by-week worship that usually is done in the same place, primarily for Christians. Other types are *transitional* and *guerrilla* worship. These will be discussed more fully in chapter 10.) One Palm Sunday, I curated morning and evening services for the Vineyard Church I'm connected to. There were seventy adults at each service. The church meets in a converted-warehouse setting with white walls, movable chairs, and no religious symbols. It's not a large space, and it has several pillars in unhelpful places and a low concrete ceiling. Not the most worship-inducing setting, but it's what I had to work with.

Apart from choosing the songs we'd sing, the whole service was mine to curate. In addition, I would be preaching the sermon and talking about Palm Sunday. I would be following their standard minimalist order of service:

- Prelude—live music by the worship band
- Welcome by the song leader
- Single worship song
- Children leave for their program
- Thirty-five minutes of sung worship
- Notices
- Preaching
- More sung worship and prayer perhaps with a call for ministry (that is, praying and laying on of hands)

Since it was my first time curating worship for this community and because I was working with a community that knew little to nothing about the church year, I made only minor alterations to the order of elements in the worship event. I decided I would introduce them to

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the church year, put Palm Sunday in context, preach, and offer just four simple stations<sup>16</sup> that would facilitate responses to the preaching. (This would equate to the usual call for ministry.)

I set up my stations carefully, thinking about how people would flow through them, what kind of instructions would be provided, what materials I would need, and so on. I wanted people to feel comfortable in the context of an altered order of service, so I was careful not to make too many changes to the usual layout of the space. I removed junk from the areas around the stations, tidied up the curtains, lampstands, and coffee tables. I tested the light switches to see what lighting suited the mood I hoped to create. I was curating the space and environment I was given as effectively and as simply as possible, always aware of the compromise between what I wanted to achieve and the limits of how far I could push this congregation.

I inserted a call to worship after the first song, including a short ritual in which we lit a Christ candle and did a responsive reading. The band played the rest of their set as usual. So we started as expected. Nothing too different. My sermon, in the regular slot, began with a brief comment about the church year. Then I hung a clothesline. I had a basket of clothes representing the major festivals and days in the church year and asked people to tell me where on the line they thought each item should hang. I had deliberately chosen just six or seven major church festivals—I wanted to teach them, not humiliate them. I concluded that section with a spoken segue suggesting that the value of the church year was that it helped us to think deliberately about the main parts of the Christian story, including Palm Sunday.

The sermon centered on a contemporary work of art by Jan Hynes called *Entering the City*. It's her interpretation of Jesus entering Jerusalem, set in her hometown of Townsville in Australia. Everyone



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had a small color copy of the work. I projected it on the front screen and a large print hung at the rear of the space.

Following the sermon, which was a monologue but shorter than usual, I invited people to respond by using one of the stations I had set up at the front, center, and sides of the room (see below)—these are the areas people would usually come to for altar calls and prayer. I explained what stations were and how to use them. I also mentioned that they had the option of staying seated and rereading the biblical text. (This gave people who weren't quite comfortable with the station idea a way to opt out yet remain involved in the event.)

I had chosen to use water instead of wine for communion for several reasons: it levels the playing field between those who are and are not able to drink wine; it has connections to the biblical stories of water becoming wine and springs of living water; it also reminds us of people in prisons and those without enough clean water. After explaining why we were using water and saying the words of institution (not usually done in this community), I played some ambient electronic music, and people moved around.

I waited until it seemed like everyone had finished moving, let the last track fade out, and led the community in prayer. We then stood and read a benediction off the screen together (they don't usually have a benediction), and that was it.

This is what was in their handouts, along with images and Luke 19:28-48, the biblical text for Palm Sunday.

### STATIONS

**Intro:** Have a quick read through the possibilities. Find something that catches your attention. They are in no particular order. You may choose to use one, several, all, or none of them to guide your reflections.

Move around the space when you are ready.

#### **Station 1: Sit with Jesus: Bread and Water**

(The elements were set on a large, low table so people had to kneel to serve themselves. We provided jugs of ice water, midsized glasses, and a full loaf of bread. I wanted to create a sense of graciousness and abundance in the form of good food and a long, refreshing drink of water.)

After you have taken bread and water, reflect on what is ahead for you in the next week, month, year. What do you most need from Jesus today? Clarity? Understanding? Courage? Insight? Wisdom? Forgiveness? Strength? As you share the meal in community with your fellow followers of Jesus, encounter the risen Christ and receive what you need to move forward.

#### **Station 2: *Entering the City*, Jan Hynes.**

Look carefully at the painting—on the screen, the large print, or in the Lenten Reflections booklet. What do you think the artist is trying to say about the event? Where would you put yourself in the painting? Mark that spot on the painting in your booklet. Is this where you want to be? Mark where

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you would like to be. What needs to happen for this movement to take place?

### Station 3: Expectations

What about following Jesus isn't what you expected? Is this good? Bad? Does it matter? Does it say more about you than about Jesus, or the other way around? Do you need to change anything? Write a note to Jesus, or to yourself about this. When you have finished, burn it and move on. (We provided small pieces of paper and pencils for writing, and a large wok for the burning.)

### Station 4: Crying for the City

*O Lord of all encounters, forgive me for being a spectator.  
I watch the passing parade by hiding in the crowd.  
I would rather avoid the cost of getting involved, of  
standing out, of being noticed.*

*I say my hosannas and watch the city die.*

*I wave my palm branches and go on my way.*

*O God of the lowly, teach me how to feel with others*

*Let me share in the hurt and hunger of the street.*

*Help me to turn my apathy and distractedness into  
creative care.*

*Renew me with the experience of your grace and the  
reality of your mercy.*

*Through Jesus Christ, who is my Lord as well as my  
save-r, Amen. (Source unknown. Modified)*

Light a candle as a symbol of your prayer for yourself and the city. (We provided candles and sandtrays.)

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People appeared to be completely engaged, and the feedback was extremely positive. The format was a bit different from what I might have done if the community was used to using stations and understood the church year. Either way, it is the role of the curator to take responsibility for the whole space and what happens in it as we enable the community to engage with God.

Curating a regular weekly worship event at Cityside Church in Auckland or Urban Seed Church in Melbourne would call for a different set of elements and expectations. Both of these communities have the expectation of participation by a variety of people leading different segments of the worship, and stationed responses in the service are commonplace. In these communities, the curator's job involves managing the segues between all of these people and elements. So while the order of service is set in quite a liturgical way—a prelude followed by a call to worship, a song or meditation, a prayer of confession, and so on—whoever is leading that segment can do so however she wants. So the prelude might be a recorded track off the Top Ten, the call to worship might be a ritual action, and the prayer of confession might be a responsive reading, each led by a different person. Establishing a flow from one element to the next is a difficult task to do well and requires quite specific skills and intuition. A good curator makes it look easy. In fact, she will be invisible and not even noticed.

### Curating Transitional Worship

The next example of the curator's role in community worship moves toward what I call *transitional* worship. (This will be explained fully in chapter 10.) This worship event involved a fully curated space as well as a fully curated order of service. It was Good Friday at the 150-year-old downtown Baptist church of which I am a part. I rewrote a 2006 service I had cowritten and cocurated with Cheryl Lawrie

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and others in Melbourne. I wanted to make it more overtly biblical and make it a better fit for a conservative congregation that had zero experience with stations.

The Baptist church building is old and has a semicircular balcony like a theater and fixed theater-like seats in a large arc on a tiered floor. The main floor seats 350. To make the space smaller and more intimate, I hung a five-foot-wide white vinyl apron from the balcony to create a kind of “back wall” for the main floor. It also served as a screen where I projected a video clip in two places. This “wall” stopped a few feet short of the floor, so people had to stoop slightly to get into the space.

The large main platform is on two levels. On the bottom level, I spread 1700 pounds of crushed white sea ice and 100 pounds of 5-pound ice blocks. Above the pristine white ice hung a barbed wire crown of thorns with eight red icicles dripping onto the white ice below. I lit the red icicles with spotlights, and they shone like red patent leather. Around the front and side areas of the platform were five stations repeated three times each. I lit the space with six ultraviolet lights as well as some light spilling from the projector and through the blind-covered windows. It wasn’t dark enough for the ultraviolet light to give its full effect of making white paper and cotton clothing glow vividly, but it worked well enough.

The event didn’t follow a normal order of service. This was a one-off special service, so I could get away with that. People had been informed through the newsletter for several weeks that this would be an art-installation-based service of reflection. People entered and were given a handout with information on the order of the service, the stations, and all the reflection questions for the event. They were seated for the first twenty minutes of readings, then the stations were brought out in a ritualized way by a person dressed in a hooded CSI-type white suit.

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After a careful explanation of ways to explore the space and reference to the printed instructions in the handout, people were invited to move around the space and engage with God through the stations and the responses they called for. The same black-and-white video loop ran throughout, and a variety of music tracks ran in the background. After an hour, the service ended with U2's "Wake Up Dead Man" and a responsive reading. People were asked to move out quietly and not disturb those who wished to stay in the space a bit longer.

There was a lot of preparation work to make sure the space worked well, that people could physically move around the stations, and that the order of service would flow easily. In particular, I wanted to make sure people were prepared with enough biblical content and context to engage with the stations. The responses from the apparently fully engaged, mostly older adult congregation of 150 were overwhelmingly positive. This may have been their first experience of this style of worship, but they loved it and met God through it.

I realize how frustrating it may be for curators who are not yet able to curate worship experiences like this for their communities. But curating is about going on a personal and communal journey with your people. It's about leading the congregation to engage with God, not about me showing how much I know or how creative I can be. It's slow, and you may encounter many potholes of criticism and failure along the way. But the journey is as important as any destination and, like any journey, starts by taking the first small step.

Almost a year after the Good Friday service described above, I curated an allocated twenty-five-minute slot in a regular Sunday morning service at the same church. I was to introduce Lent—particularly Ash Wednesday—in the context of communion. I would not be responsible for any more of the service than my part. So I took a curator's approach to my slot.

## Curation: The Glue That Holds It All Together

During the week before the service, I negotiated with the generous and gracious senior pastor to have people come out from their theater seats and be served communion at the front and back. While unusual, this had been done once before. There would be more than 300 people present, spread over the upstairs as well as downstairs areas, which made for some logistical challenges. In consultation with the pastoral staff, we decided that there would be five pairs of servers downstairs and four upstairs. One person in each pair would hold the bread plate and the cups tray, while the second person would offer the imposition of ashes, (the making of a cross sign with ash on the forehead of worshipers). My intention was to do a very brief introduction to the church year, move to an extended explanation of Lent and Ash Wednesday, and use communion as the response to that. Communion and the ashing would be opportunities to commit to following a Lenten journey of renewed commitment to following Jesus.

When I arrived for the service, the pastor told me that the church administrator had found it difficult to find enough people to serve communion as a number had refused to serve when they discovered ashing would be part of the service. It wasn't that they felt uncomfortable doing the ashing, they were opposed to it happening at all! No reasons were given nor, unfortunately, asked for. The senior pastor had been fielding complaints for several days but had chosen not to burden me with them. We talked about the possible ways forward. I offered to withdraw the ashing if that was what he wanted. He wasn't sure what he wanted. I offered a compromise where I would be the only person offering ashing, and the communion serving pairs would stay as arranged but serve one of the elements each. He agreed, and we got set up for the service.

As I said earlier, the role of the curator is to find the best ways of encouraging people to engage with God. It is also to make sure the environment is safe for all participants. The balance between risk and

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safety is a shifting one. I felt that ashing was entirely appropriate and would be significant for at least some people. I also wanted to move the community just a little bit in its understanding and acceptance of what are very ancient Christian traditions. I was also loathe to bow to the lowest common denominator, despite some people clearly feeling uncomfortable with what I was intending to do.

When it came time for communion, about 25 out of perhaps 280 people came to my station. As I anointed them with eucalyptus oil mixed with ashes, I said, “You are dust re-created in the image of God. Go in peace.” I could sense that this was a significant moment for many, and, following the service, I heard nothing from the critics but much from people for whom the content, communion, or ashing had been meaningful.

## TRAINING A WORSHIP CURATOR

I hope these examples serve to give you some idea of what curation might mean in different settings, and that the role of the worship curator isn’t an easy one. An article on the Princeton Review website describing the characteristics and training needed to make a good art gallery curator says:

Both graduate education and practical experience are required for people who wish to become curators. Aside from an extensive knowledge of history and art, it is useful to have a basic understanding of chemistry, restoration techniques, museum studies, and even physics and public relations. Curators must have basic skills in aesthetic design, organizational behavior, business, fund-raising, and publicity. Many employers look favorably on foreign language skills as



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well. To become a collection manager or a curatorial assistant, a master's degree is required. To become a curator at a national museum, a PhD is required, as is about five years of field experience. The market is competitive, and academic standards are very high. Useful graduate degrees include restoration science, curatorship, art history, history, chemistry, and business administration. Nearly all curators find it helpful to engage in continuing education. Research and publication in academic journals are important for advancement in the field.<sup>17</sup>

While those criteria are hardly appropriate for a worship curator, they indicate the seriousness with which agencies outside the church take the role. How seriously does the church generally take designing worship?

Curator Suzanne Page made a comment that I find especially applicable to the art of curating worship. She said:

I don't like to put myself into the spotlight, but I like to illuminate the backstage. What I suggest is actually very demanding. It takes an effort not to emphasize your own subjectivity, and to let the [worship] itself be at the center. . . . To a certain degree it is a question of learning to be vulnerable. . . . It's about forgetting everything you think that you know, and even allowing yourself to get lost. . . . [W]hat I am after is a form of concentration that suddenly turns into its opposite, being available for a true alternative adventure.<sup>18</sup>

I long for the day when churches will take the role of their worship curators as seriously as the art world does, the day when seminaries and theological colleges will offer training in worship curation and

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sponsor “curator at large” and “curator in residence” positions. In the meantime, you will need to make up your own training schedule.

While a good worship curator requires a different set of educational and work experiences than a museum or gallery curator does, the task is no less difficult, complex, or serious. In particular, I believe an attention to detail is important—it’s difficult to curate well if you are not a detail person. I think it is the details that make or break worship. I’ve seen many great ideas executed poorly. If participants don’t understand what you’re asking them to do in relation to your fabulously creative idea, if they can’t read the beautifully designed and intricately folded handout you have given them because the font is too small for the lighting level, if they are in a building that is bitterly cold, then much of what you are curating is wasted. It comes down to being able to put yourself in the shoes of a participant and to imagine what each step of the worship experience might be like for him.

In my experience, good worship curators are people who are pastoral in approach, who have at least some theological insight if not education, who are intuitive and teachable. They don’t have big egos. In fact, a successful worship event is one in which they are almost invisible.

## THE CHALLENGES OF CURATION

The task of a worship curator in our time and culture is complex. Our relationship to what were once considered basic images and symbols of the Christian faith keeps changing and needs to be recontextualized. The cross, for example, is strongly associated with Christianity—so much so that in Muslim countries, the Red Cross disaster-relief agency is known as the Red Crescent. At the time of Jesus, the cross was an instrument of state execution, a sign of disgrace

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and scandal. The followers of Jesus picked it up as an act of subversion, upending the values of the empire. It was a sign that followers of Jesus were willing to follow him in suffering, that the empire had no real say over their lives. Christendom took the cross on as a symbol of power and honor, a badge to be worn proudly. By the time of the Crusades, taking up your cross didn't imply a willingness to die but a readiness to kill! In our day, it has become a fashion accessory. Madonna is reported as saying, "Crucifixes are sexy because there's a naked man on them!"<sup>19</sup>

The changing perceptions of and uses of the cross remind us how difficult it is to curate worship these days. It is difficult because we can mess things up much more easily. There is no waterproof, fireproof model laid out for us to follow, only nuances, emphases, and guidelines that can leave us struggling and uncertain. And they can get us criticized. That's why it is so much easier and safer to use the same book, sing the same songs, and speak the same words week after week.

Worship curators, particularly young people working in older congregations, need the help of mentors to help them navigate the complexities of the contemporary church. Yes, we need emerging leaders, but we also need emerged leaders who will work alongside them. The tech-savvy twenty-year-old can teach and learn from a veteran of forty years of pastoral leadership, and the veteran has much to teach and learn from the beginner.

Trust is an important ingredient in this. The curator and community enter into a symbiotic relationship that requires each to know they can be trusted and are trusted by the other. This can only come about over time by working together as equals and sharing successes and failures.

It's also difficult to be a worshiper in worship you are curating. Worship curating requires a focus and attentiveness to what is happening for other people. In a fully curated, ambient, stationed space, it is often possible to engage with a few of the stations. But the

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curator only rarely experiences these events with the openness needed for true spiritual reflection and change. If you want to worship, it's best to find an event curated by someone else. You might also find, like I do, that in many cases the preparations for a worship event become your worship experience.

No one person will have all the ideal characteristics of a worship curator. I don't; you don't. A good curator will find ways and people to compensate for her weaknesses. I'm always looking for someone who is good with language and for a great graphic designer. I need long lists to help me get through an event I've curated because I am prone to forgetting small details. Other curators need to work with someone who is more pastorally aware or who understands theology better than they do. All curators need to be on a journey of personal transformation.

What I have described in this chapter is a relatively high-level view of curating. It's a bit more than might be expected of, say, someone who's been asked to find a prayer of confession for Sunday. But even if you're responsible for that small task, you can enhance what you do by seeing your role through the eyes of a worship curator. The attitude or processes of a curator should not be reserved only for full-blown worship events. They apply in smaller, equally significant ways to every element of a worship event.

Anyone can describe him or herself as a worship curator—the more the term is used the better. But it is not just a trendy term. It carries real meaning and implications for those who use it. Those of us in the church are very good at taking a term or process from the surrounding culture and skimming the surface of it, sucking off the icing and leaving the cake behind. By developing the term *worship curator*, I want people to take the design and preparation of worship more seriously and to understand more deeply what they are doing.

## **Curation: The Glue That Holds It All Together**

I want worship curators to put together more transformative and engaging worship than they ever did as a worship leaders. At the very least, use the term with intent and to remind yourself that you are on a deliberate journey toward becoming the best curator of worship you can be.