

CONNECT WITH SPIRITUAL SEEKERS THROUGH THE ARTS

Sandra Lommasson rediscovered the value of art in response to violent trauma. In its aftermath she found that Bible study, journal writing, dance, poetry, and drawing restored her faith in life's beauty. "The door to God had been cracked," she remembers. Twenty years ago, she founded Bread of Life, a program that uses the arts to help people recover from brokenness.¹

The arts, including painting, sculpture, music of all kinds, dance, theater, and creative literature, can provide a bridge to spirituality. Connecting spiritual seekers with the arts can lead them to new life and it offers an important key to revitalizing the congregation as well.²

Interest in spirituality has surged in the last quarter century, and about one-third of these spiritual seekers (29%) are "spiritual and religious," that is, they attend church regularly. Another group, the 18% who identify as "spiritual but not religious," has received the most media attention in recent years, but most of them still identify with a religious tradition, and a majority of this group (50-75%) reports being moved or inspired by watching television or listening to music. The church can reach spiritual seekers of all kinds by supporting spirituality and revitalizing worship.³

Supporting Spirituality

Mental overload is a big problem in our time—too much to think about regarding work life, family issues, and daily news. Music and the arts can help to declutter the mind and set the mood for spirituality. Here, prayer moves beyond talking to God or reciting prayers from a book and becomes something felt by the whole body.

Churches can connect with spiritual seekers who make use of the arts in personal spirituality. Classes, prayer groups, sermons, and spiritual direction can acknowledge the value of art in personal growth. Convergence, a new church in Alexandria, Virginia,

makes use of the visual arts, dance, music, poetry, and theater to enhance its ministry with spiritual seekers. Convergence began as the restart of a struggling Baptist Church about ten years ago. The church now has a core group of forty members.

The Reverend Lisa Cole Smith, the pastor and artistic director, leads congregants to explore biblical themes using a variety of artistic forms. Church members participate in role playing, write haikus, examine famous artworks, and create original art. After each activity, Smith draws connections with spirituality. At one worship gathering, everyone rifled through old magazines, using scissors, glue sticks, pastels, and colored pencils to make collages with images of joy. In 2011, the fifth birthday of Convergence, Fair Port Baptist Church bequeathed its building to the new church start, which now uses it to rent space to artists. A church member says, "Here's a place where you can



"THE PASTOR SAID WE COULD INCLUDE ART IN OUR SPIRITUAL PRACTICE BY LOOKING AT A SACRED OBJECT."

be your funky artist self and it's OK. We're unabashedly Christian. We just go about it in a different way."⁴

Churches can also provide housing for dance or theater groups requiring space. The result can be satisfying on several levels: churches subsidize a worthwhile organization by offering rent at below the market rate while also putting to use building space that often goes empty during the week. In Philadelphia, Partners for Sacred Spaces seeks to build partnerships between churches and art groups. Partners keeps track of congregations with unused space and art companies needing space, then helps draw up the lease agreement. Artists tend to be younger than congregants, more energetic, and they often love the old buildings. For the church, it's a way to reach out to the community.⁵

Revitalizing Worship

Multimedia, with its combination of text, audio, and visual imagery, has saturated every corner of contemporary culture. Given this, worship styles that only rely on the spoken word can seem emotionally flat. Some churches have responded with contemporary worship styles centered around a worship band while others prefer a classic worship style centered on word and sacrament. With either style, worship leaders can infuse art into the experience and make it more emotionally powerful.

Contemporary Worship takes its aesthetic cues from popular culture. Oasis in Los Angeles illustrates this tendency. An early innovator in the use of art, media, and technology, this multiethnic church has sought to provide an "artistic haven" for creative individuals, especially young adults (the average age is twenty-six). Due to its proximity to Hollywood, the church draws a significant portion of its membership (30%) from workers in the television and film industry. Worship leaders adopt a project orientation toward planning services in a way similar to practices in the entertainment sector, as when a sermon series serves as an artistic project using writers, actors, sound engineers, and tech workers.

Artists play a role both behind the scenes and in the service itself as actors performing short dramas, dancers offering interpretive pieces, musicians performing original music, or a video production team offering original film shorts. Painters, sculptors, potters, and live models may be seen working at various places

inside and outside the auditorium where worship takes place.⁶

Classic Worship takes its aesthetic cues from expressions found in church history. Saint Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco epitomizes this move. Founded in 1978, the church draws on newer hymns, colorful banners, and informal preaching, all focused on revitalizing ancient traditions. On any Sunday, worship music could be drawn from Gregorian chant, the Geneva Psalter, Anglican plainsong, early American shape-note signing, or global freedom songs. The sanctuary has no piano or organ, so all singing is unaccompanied except for a drum or rhythm instruments. Clapping and dancing is encouraged.

As the service begins, the congregation gathers near the door and moves in a processional to the pews. The sanctuary is arranged choir-style with people facing each other in seats across a central aisle and the presider at one end. Every week, after singing the Lord's Prayer, the congregation comes forward to join hands in a simple dance around the communion table. Images of dancing saints, nine feet high, adorn the walls. So far, ninety of these icons have been painted by church members themselves.⁷

For Reflection

Churches that make room for creative exploration can experience new vitality. Does your congregation stifle artistic expression or celebrate it? Do artists feel like an integral part of your church or do they feel like misfits?

1. Robert Wuthnow, *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 79-84.

2. *Ibid.*, 1-20.

3. Art Raney, Daniel Cox, Robert P. Jones, "Searching for Spirituality in the U.S.: A New Look at the Spiritual but Not Religious," Public Religion Research Institute, Nov. 6, 2017, <https://www.prrri.org/research/religiosity-and-spirituality-in-america/>

4. Edie Gross, "Art and Faith Converge at a Hybrid Church/Community Arts Center," *Faith and Leadership*, April 3, 2018, <https://faithandleadership.com/art-and-faith-converge-hybrid-churchcommunity-arts-center>

5. Mary Beth McCauley, "Making Homes for the Arts in Sacred Places," *Faith and Leadership*, March 10, 2015, <https://faithandleadership.com/making-homes-arts-sacred-places>

6. Gerardo Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 88-116.

7. Wuthnow, 168-172.