



Setting the Stage

By Bishop Greg Mohr
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Whenever I attend a stage play or concert, one of the first things I do after finding my assigned seat is to quickly turn to the program notes. I want to read what the artistic director or the playwright has to say about the upcoming performance.

I am not looking for any spoilers as to how the play will turn out. What I find valuable is the insight that the artistic director provides. Those program notes help me see and hear things that I otherwise might miss. They also help me understand what message or insight the artistic director is trying to convey through the play or performance. The program notes help me to prepare, so that I may be more fully immersed in the experience.

I believe something similar to program notes is a valuable asset for our worship services. However, instead of written program notes, I suggest that it be spoken at the very beginning of the service. As a worship leader, what can I say in one or two minutes at the very beginning of the worship service that will help those in attendance to hear, learn, be inspired, and enter more fully into the worship experience? We as worship leaders have a wonderful opportunity to help “set the stage” for people attending worship.

Too often, I observe pastors walk to the front of the church and simply give some instructions about page numbers and then announce the opening hymn. Sometimes pastors do not even say “Welcome!” to those in attendance. I think this needs to change. We need to recognize how important the first two minutes of a worship service really are.

Consider this alternative: As pastors and worship leaders, we have “curated” the worship service. The word “curate” means “to pull together, sift through, and select for presentation, as music or website content” (Dictionary.com). While much of the liturgical setting has already been “curated” for us, there is so much more in preparing the worship service than simply following the order of service in our hymnal. All week long, we as worship leaders have been thinking about the texts for the week and about the upcoming sermon. We have been praying, reflecting and writing. We have selected hymns that complement the readings and the sermon, as well as the liturgical season. In other words, it is our task to curate the entire worship service.

With that in mind, let us use those first couple of minutes at the beginning of the worship service to invite the worshiper into the creativity, artistry, knowledge, theology, and insight that we as worship leaders have brought to bear to this holy and sacred moment. Invite the listener into the worship service, perhaps by mentioning the over-arching theme for the day, or the one thing that inspired us that week, or providing a hint of what to listen for in the readings and the sermon.

This must be more than just saying, “Today is the 34th Sunday after Pentecost.” What does that mean? Why should a listener even care? Help people to understand. Provide them with a context. Invite them into the journey we have been on as we have prepared for this worship service.

What we say at the very beginning of the worship service need not be long. But it will provide people with a framework from which to listen and in which to participate in this holy and special time.