

### Exploring Diversity In Worship Traditions

Worship traditions vary based upon a number of characteristics, including denomination, cultural context, and other factors. As such, usage of different objects, symbols, rituals, liturgy, atmosphere, and gestures are evident within these variations. This can be seen between the different traditions of a charismatic non-denominational church called *His Tabernacle*, and *The First Presbyterian Church of Dryden*, which is a part of the Presbyterian Church USA denomination. *His Tabernacle* is a multi-site Church that presented as a modern Church that catered to a variety of different age levels, but mostly consisted of young families and younger individuals. The overall service was high energy and attractional, utilizing up-to-date technology, current worship music, and visual effects and lighting to engage members in the congregation. Whereas, *The First Presbyterian Church of Dryden* is a church that consists mostly of older individuals with one younger family, traditional hymnal worship, and a clear liturgical flow. Both of these Churches have the same goal in mind, yet have very different worship traditions and flow of service. Yet, there are also churches, like *City Alliance Church*, that seek to bridge that gap between these two churches to mix a fresh modern expression of worship, while also placing an emphasis on traditional liturgical elements to be open individuals of all ages and walks of life.

*His Tabernacle* is a multi-site non-denominational church network located in the Horseheads, New York area, with locations in Ithaca, New York and Mansfield, Pennsylvania. According to their website, the Church began by a call of the Holy Spirit on Pastor Michael Spencer who was originally in Oneida, TN, telling him to move to Horseheads, NY to start a church.<sup>1</sup> What followed were many examples of God moving to provide buildings, finances, and people to allow their church to grow, have places to worship, and ultimately get them to where

---

<sup>1</sup> "Our Story." n.d. His Tabernacle. Accessed April 15, 2023. <https://www.histabernacle.com/ourstory>.

they are now.<sup>2</sup> An interesting snippet from their website also addresses where they are going, as a “Destiny Statement”, which is to continue to grow as a multi-site church, develop hundreds of connection groups, and grow into a sanctuary that can seat 2,500 people.<sup>3</sup> As a non-denominational church, they have the means to operate independently from denominational standards and expectations, which is clear in their core beliefs and values section. Overall, their core beliefs and values are broad, while also having Scripture citations to support their perspective. They have statements on Scripture, God, the Fall of Man, Baptism and Evidence of Baptism in the Holy Spirit, the Church and its mission, and more. They have a section that displays their values, which reflect God’s values of His heart, focus, attitude, generosity, and character.<sup>4</sup> As a result of the experience, it seems as though Chapell explained this specific experience well by saying that some “leaders have tried to discern how the traditions of the church can become an integrating grid for helping believers understand and transform their world.”<sup>5</sup> It was apparent that *His Tabernacle* was attempting to do so.

The next experience was at *First Presbyterian Church of Dryden*, which is a small Presbyterian Church (USA) located in Dryden, New York. The Presbyterian USA denomination traces its lineage back to the Protestant Reformation, with much of their beliefs systems under the influence of John Calvin.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the Presbyterian Church traces its lineage back to Scotland and England, as reformed communities spread throughout Europe as a result of people like John Knox, who was influenced by John Calvin.<sup>7</sup> As the Presbyterian movement would

---

<sup>2</sup> “Our Story.” His Tabernacle. <https://www.histabernacle.com/ourstory>

<sup>3</sup> “Our Story.” His Tabernacle. <https://www.histabernacle.com/ourstory>

<sup>4</sup> “Core Values.” n.d. His Tabernacle. Accessed April 15, 2023. <https://www.histabernacle.com/values>.

<sup>5</sup> Chapell, Bryan. 2017. *Christ-Centered Worship : Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic. 71.

<sup>6</sup> “What We Believe.” n.d. Presbyterian Mission Agency. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/>.

<sup>7</sup> “Church History.” n.d. Presbyterian Mission Agency. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/church-history/>.

grow in the US, so would Presbyterian expansion into becoming “more of a town church... as small towns began to grow in the previously rural areas.”<sup>8</sup> This Church being a prime example.

*City Alliance Church* is a Christian & Missionary Alliance Church plant that has existed for just over 10 years.<sup>9</sup> It started when six families began meeting together to pray and study the Word together.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, it bought a Baptist Church building in the heart of Williamsport, PA.<sup>11</sup> As a part of the C&MA tradition, it places emphasis on what is called the “Fourfold Gospel”, which is how Jesus reveals “Himself as our Savior, Sanctifier, Healer, and Coming King”<sup>12</sup>, with the goal of making Jesus’ love known to all people.<sup>13</sup> City Alliance works by “joining with Christ to transform Williamsport with the Gospel for the glory of God and the good of our city.”<sup>14</sup> City Alliance places an emphasis on connection, worship, Scripture, prayer, and the sermon. There are elements of worship such as a call to worship, communion, Scripture reading, and a benediction. Services are typically an hour and fifteen minutes, with heavy focus on worship and the sermon. Congregant members typically show up right on time at 10am and get seated by 10:05 to engage in worship. Afterward, people typically connect for up to thirty minutes after the service. During the worship portion, congregant members are engaged with worship but are reserved in movements, with the occasional hand raised and clapping during worship. As such, during the service when there is communion, members are seated when being processed through communion. Additional movement came during the worship time when prayer

---

<sup>8</sup> “Church History.” n.d. Presbyterian Mission Agency. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/church-history/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Vision & Values.” n.d. City Alliance Church. Accessed April 15, 2023. <https://www.cityalliance.org/vision-and-values>.

<sup>10</sup> Vision & Values.” n.d. City Alliance Church. <https://www.cityalliance.org/vision-and-values>

<sup>11</sup> Vision & Values.” n.d. City Alliance Church. <https://www.cityalliance.org/vision-and-values>

<sup>12</sup> “Our Faith and Mission.” n.d. Cmalliance.org. Accessed April 15, 2023. <https://cmalliance.org/who-we-are/our-faith-and-mission/>.

<sup>13</sup> Vision & Values.” n.d. City Alliance Church. <https://www.cityalliance.org/vision-and-values>

<sup>14</sup> Vision & Values.” n.d. City Alliance Church. <https://www.cityalliance.org/vision-and-values>

was available with members of the prayer team stepping forward. Creative arts are certainly valued by the church in its presentation of lyrics and slide usage during the sermon.

Overall, the experience at *His Tabernacle* was average. Upon entry, there were greeters present who were welcoming both new and regular attendees. New guests were seemingly immediately directed to the connection table to gather guest information. While it was a great set up area, it felt like it lacked genuine connection, more so geared to gather information. Within the service itself, there was a welcome time, where a church leader welcomed everyone, including new guests to the Church, made a few announcements, and went right into worship. There were only two main aspects to the service, the music worship aspect, and the sermon. They set up the service where the sermon was certainly the focal point of the service, with worship setting up and closing the Sunday service. Overall, the congregants were very engaged in both of these aspects, in their singing but also their response and clapping during the sermon. The music was certainly catered to the younger crowd, with their usage of modern worship, which included a drum set, bass guitar, keys, acoustic guitar, and vocalists. The mixing of the music was heavy with the bass and certainly louder to mimic what one would experience at a concert. As such, this form of worship as contemporary certainly allowed for younger individuals and largely unchurched people to connect. According to Bryan Chapel, “The worship music echoes secular trends, making the church seem less odd for the unchurched and less remote from everyday life for those who have found their churches’ music tradition stale.”<sup>15</sup> As such, there are people who feel that traditional church worship practices do “not resonate with their lives.”<sup>16</sup> *His Tabernacle* definitely tried to mimic a Bethel Church style service with how worship was done and how the crowd responded, which certainly showed it to be charismatic in nature.

---

<sup>15</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship : Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* , 70.

<sup>16</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship : Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* , 70.

In terms of the sermon, the Pastor was an engaging and high energy preacher. This matched the overall energy of the service itself, and all eyes were on the pastor. During the service, it was apparent that the congregation was paying attention and engaged, even responding with “Amen” or “Yes Pastor” throughout the service in agreement with what the pastor was saying. Unfortunately, there were some examples of poor theology, utilizing the power of the tongue from James 3 and attributing that with the power to create, and mischaracterizing that as a power people have, instead of the Holy Spirit.

With liturgical flow, the service was approximately one hour and twenty minutes. Overall, the congregants seemed to respect the time by arriving on time. It seemed as if a good number of people arrived a few minutes early in order to have a few minutes to connect with friends within the congregation. Upon walking through the doors, there is an open space with offices, restrooms, and a welcome desk in order to greet newcomers, including greeters to greet all individuals walking through the door, and to direct new guests to the welcome area.

In terms of gestures and movements, the worship leaders utilize their hands and have a stage presence that sought to lead and engage the congregation. Hands were raised during worship. There were times when the pastor would extend his hands to the congregation while he was speaking and was using hand motions as well. The congregation at *His Tabernacle* were a bit more charismatic in their expression with worship. Especially within the worship time, the majority of congregants were standing, raising their hands, vocally chanting during the music, and swaying while they sang. There also seemed to be people who stepped out from within the rows into the aisles to dance, or at least to provide more space to extend their arms and sway. Other than these movements, there was no particular spatial movement occurring, except passing the plates for offering. It was apparent that the worship arts were highly valued, in terms of how

the band presented and in how the congregation responded. Visually, the lyrics were presented with creative backgrounds that were visually appealing and drew ones attention to them as the band was leading worship.

Overall, the experience at *First Presbyterian* was great. The church members were welcoming, the service was theologically sound, and certainly more of a traditional service comparatively to *His Tabernacle*. Overall, there was a focus on singing, and the sermon, but heavier focus on the liturgy and response from the congregation. Within the service, there were liturgical elements consisting of a Call to Worship, Hymn of Praise, Song of Adoration, Prayers of the People, the Lord's Prayer, Choral Anthem, Scripture from the Old and New Testament, Sermon, Tithing, Gloria Patri, Prayer of Thanksgiving and Dedication, Hymn to Send out the Light, Blessing, a Choral Benediction, and a final benediction with the Aaronic Blessing. The usage of the *Gloria Patri*, according to Bryan Chapel, is utilized to affirm "the unity of the testaments' witness to our Trinitarian God", which makes sense why it would happen after the readings from the Old and New Testament.<sup>17</sup> The service lasted an hour and thirty minutes. Upon further research, the main passages of Scripture that were utilized from the Old Testament and New Testament, Matthew 21:1-11 and Isaiah 50:4-9a, came from the Revised Common Lectionary Readings as dictated by the PC USA, being adapted from *Feasting on the Word: Worship Companion*, Year C, Palm/Passion Sunday as credited in the bulletin.<sup>18</sup> The Prayer for Illumination came from *The Book of Common Worship*. Additionally, *First Presbyterian* seemed to utilize many aspects from Rayburn's example of the *Liturgy of the Word* in the Modern Story chapter of *Christ Centered Worship*.<sup>19</sup> According to the PC USA constitution, worship is to "be

---

<sup>17</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship : Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> "Presbyterian Mission Agency Daily Readings for April 2nd, 2023." n.d. Presbyterian Mission Agency. Accessed April 15, 2023. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2023/4/2/>.

<sup>19</sup> Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship : Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*, 74.

ordered in terms of four major action... Gathering, Word, Sacrament, and Sending.”<sup>20</sup> Evident within the Church experience was the emphasis on prayer, music, Scripture, and preaching according to Presbyterian doctrine.<sup>21</sup>

People were mostly early for the service and were immediately greeted by Church members. It was easy to see that in the greeting, members were checking in on each other, asking about how their weeks were, and so on. For the most part, this seemed like a tight knit community who knew each other and were not many newcomers, but they welcomed new individuals well. Upon passing the greeting team, there were people connecting in the foyer, but walked into the sanctuary to take their seats minutes before the service was to begin. It was apparent everyone was ready for the service. What seemed to be a very exciting aspect to the service was the sharing time of praises and prayer requests. People seemed genuinely excited to call things out to celebrate and to share in with the congregation, and to share how they saw God working in their lives and the lives of the people around them. The sermon and choral aspects seemed to be important also, but not to the level of *His Tabernacle*. Overall, in terms of important parts of the service, it felt like all aspects were important, which is why they were included, but the congregation was ready to engage.

In terms of movement and congregational interaction with the service, the leaders were modest in terms of their movements, much like the congregation. There was not much physical expression, except for a few extending a hand. There was nothing out of the ordinary with any movements. This was especially prevalent during the Benediction with the Aaronic Blessing, as the Pastor extended their arms toward the congregation. Additionally, the congregants were not as expressive in how they used their bodies in worship, comparatively to *His Tabernacle*. While

<sup>20</sup> “What Makes Us Unique | Presbyterian Mission Agency.” 2016. Presbyterian Mission Agency. 2016. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/what-makes-us-unique/>.

<sup>21</sup> “What Makes Us Unique | Presbyterian Mission Agency.” Presbyterian Mission Agency. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/what-makes-us-unique/>

they stood for worship, it was mostly kept to that, with no members of the congregation raising their hands, clapping, or any other movements. For the most part, congregant members were utilizing a hymnal and singing from the words within the book, yet standing in reverence with various parts of the service.

There was not much value placed in the creative arts, as there was no dancing, art, etc. There was an emphasis on music, especially hymnals, while also mixing in special music, consisting of a contemporary Christian song. It was less about attracting attention visually and musically, and more engaging in the elements on behalf of the congregation. They were certainly creative in their elements and did well with what they had.

In terms of movements from the leaders, there was a process. The liturgy determined movement, which entailed a process to be followed. There was movement from various areas of the sanctuary for those involved in the liturgy. As there were many elements, movement was directed to the podium in front of the congregation for the spoken aspects of these service. Additionally, when these elements were split with music, the congregation was directed toward the choir and lyrics. Overall, with the service, they did a great job at directing congregants with what was next in the service. For the most part, members of the congregation were stationary, with potential to stand at various parts of the service.

Each of these congregations had very different practices of worship, with *His Tabernacle* being more modern with its usage of instruments of guitars, keys and drums, voices, visual, technical, and lighting designs. On the other hand, *First Presbyterian* was traditional, utilizing a piano, choir, and hymnals for the congregation. The only similarity between the two experiences, were that lyrics were made available visually through slides from a projector or television screen. However, it was obvious that for each of the members in the church, the praxis of worship was

done well and engaged the congregation. Citing the context of these congregations, the elements of worship certainly matched its context. *City Alliance* bridges the gaps between the two extremes by utilizing instruments such as guitar, keys, bass, drums, and vocals to songs that are more contemporary in nature, but that is sensitive to people from all traditions and preferences. Additionally, it is a traditional feel in a formerly Baptist church which mixing in contemporary elements of worship and visual arts.

Liturgies were also different. At *His Tabernacle*, there was seemingly no form of liturgy, as it was purely musical worship and the sermon. At *First Presbyterian*, the service was mostly liturgical in nature. While they both had music, Scripture reading, and sermon, there was not much common ground as well. Similar to the practices of worship, each of these elements were mostly done well, and matched their cultural context. The reasons for the liturgy, or lack thereof, is certainly connect to denomination and tradition. *First Presbyterian* is tied to the PC USA Church which is highly liturgical in nature, and has hundreds of years of tradition. *His Tabernacle* is not connected to a denomination. *City Alliance* in terms of liturgy also bridges the gaps with the extremes with these two traditions, including a mix of liturgy, without being totally structured as *First Presbyterian*. Having elements of a call to worship, corporate confession, communion, reading of the Scripture, and a Benediction provides a solid form to the service, while allowing flexibility to include or exclude elements as determined by leadership. So, while it could certainly incorporate liturgical elements, there were no denominational expectations with liturgy.

In conclusion, while each church differed with worship praxis, and liturgical elements, each has their own way of catering to the spiritual needs of the individual Christian on a Sunday morning service. In doing so, each tradition stays faithful to Scripture and historical tradition

when applicable. This results in being effective to reach and impact their congregations faithfully to experience Jesus. While *First Presbyterian* followed a traditional liturgy that was affective in reaching individuals within its traditional context, *His Tabernacle* catered its service to a context that was largely unchurched, younger individuals, families, etc. With *First Presbyterian* there was a high regard for Scripture and tradition, holding each with deep veneration. *His Tabernacle* held a high regard for Scripture, yet at points felt questionable with interpretation, and very little emphasis on liturgy comparatively to *First Presbyterian*. *City Alliance* provides a nice balance between each of the experiences with worship liturgy, and a mix of traditional and contemporary values with how the service is oriented to meet the preferences of people with various church experiences and non-church experiences.

## Bibliography

Chapell, Bryan. 2017. *Christ-Centered Worship : Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic.

“What We Believe.” n.d. Presbyterian Mission Agency.

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/>.

“Church History.” n.d. Presbyterian Mission Agency. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/church-history/>.

“What Makes Us Unique | Presbyterian Mission Agency.” 2016. Presbyterian Mission Agency. 2016. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/what-makes-us-unique/>.

“Presbyterian Mission Agency Daily Readings for April 2nd, 2023.” n.d. Presbyterian Mission Agency. Accessed April 15, 2023. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2023/4/2/>.

“Our Story.” n.d. His Tabernacle. Accessed April 15, 2023.

<https://www.histabernacle.com/ourstory>.

“Core Values.” n.d. His Tabernacle. Accessed April 15, 2023.

<https://www.histabernacle.com/values>.

“Vision & Values.” n.d. City Alliance Church. Accessed April 15, 2023.

<https://www.cityalliance.org/vision-and-values>.

“Our Faith and Mission.” n.d. Cmalliance.org. Accessed April 15, 2023.

<https://cmalliance.org/who-we-are/our-faith-and-mission/>.