

Alternative worship - ancient and future, permission to quest in the 21st Century Ian Mobsby © 2006
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If you said I would be here today giving this talk fifteen years ago I would never have believed you. As a secular lefty I hated the Church and Christians, as an unfortunately left over from societies ancient past, which would with a bit of luck die out sooner rather than later.

But, that was not to be my continuing story, I encountered some Christians in York and Leeds, who in the middle of the rave and club culture, hosted mystical alternative worship, spiritual chill out spaces in the clubs and events I frequented as a Student. These deeply aesthetic and spiritual spaces connected very deeply with me, and before I knew it I was going along to alternative worship services that used ancient buildings with contemporary projected images and local dance music. It was electric, it was deeply me, and before I knew it I encountered an 'ancient:future' form of faith, and I now stand here as an Anglican priest with Moot in Westminster that use alternative worship in a mix of various spiritual activities.

So what is this alternative worship and what does the Church need to hear and take seriously. So in the next 40 mins I want to explore the title Alternative worship – ancient and future, permission to quest in the 21st Century.

To do this I will attempt to set out a definition for alternative worship, that looks at its recent history, its *raison d'être*, and what I believe is its vision. I will be unapologetically making large strokes where the detail I hope will be picked up in the workshops and panel discussions.

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So what is alternative worship?

As with all labels it is a thoroughly unhelpful term that has stuck – to define this I want to start with a sociological understanding, by looking at the many words used to describe it.

Creative worship

- saying that there is something good about forms of worship that stimulate self-expression and the imagination. That encourages transcendence and worshipping God by doing something participative and creative. That in being creative, we worship God, as all people are creative people.

Encultured worship

- says that there is something very important about worshipping God through the culture in which you live and understand, for too often the churches message has been that you need to be like us to worship here, and to leave who you are at the door.

Fluid worship

- says that there is something good about not being rigid, taking risks, not controlling, allowing for spontaneity, that communities are fluid, where people surf the edges, so it is good to sometimes be flexible.

Emerging church worship

This says that there is something dynamic happening, that explorative forms of church are developing out of emerging forms of worship, that emerge out of the interplay of the worshipping community, culture and God. The church has constantly emerged like this since Jesus sent out the disciples.

Spontaneous worship

This is About letting go, no one person leading from the front, it becomes a truly communal event that draws on the skills and passions of the very people involved in your community.

Free worship

As compared with controlled worship. No one has to be passive, people can participate if they choose.

The origin of the term does seem to be contextual. In the late 1980s early 90s as the internet and email-group-communities became popular – a whole plethora of dot.alt groups began. Alternative citizenship, alternative consumption, alternative politics, so it was inevitable that a dot.alt religion dot.alt Christianity found space for those who were finding much of the expression of the church as totally unrelating to the evolving post-secular and post modern culture modelled on consumption. These cyber dot.alt groups gave permission for people to explore and express in new ways outside of the academy or traditional churches. So these alternative Christians, soon explored new ways of expression alternative church and

alternative worship. The term was used by a gathering of these dot.alt types as alt.dot.worship at a Greenbelt Arts Festival and before you knew it the term stuck. From its beginning there is something very bottom up and very contextual about alternative worship. It never began because of one person through a power dynamic, it has grown out of people's experience of God in culture and the passion to explore new forms of worship and church out of the interplay of church and culture.

As different people and groups explored fresh approaches to worship, they realised that it would not be just a different way of doing worship and that everything else stayed the same. But through praxis, it transformed the way they did church starting off with worship, then affecting community and finally mission, where Church is seen as the sum of worship, mission and community. So that alternative worship communities are part of what some call the emerging church movement.

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Steve Collins, involved in Grace in Ealing came up with quite a wide understanding about how alternative worship communities see themselves.

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To be clear, there are a few notes.

- * not about making Christianity appear cool or fashionable
- * not a restyling of existing forms and structures

They are attempting to take an ancient faith and recontextualise it in our postmodern world.

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As well as Steve's definition, I want to add in a few more of my own observations.

A response to cultural change in the 1980s

Much of alternative worship as encultured worship is seeking to worship in a post-secular and postmodern consumerist culture. I will talk more about this later, but it therefore relates to the type of world that has been emerging and accelerated in the late 80s and has continued to this day.

As A reaction to the gap between church and culture alternative worship is a reaction against some churches that have increasingly become more withdrawn from the world, with the real danger of becoming a museum towards how the church used to be. So alt worship seeks to engage with our current culture, and all its sensibilities and expressions. There has been a large gap particularly between the 16-40 age group between church and the world in which they live.

A focus on participation

People today learn and express themselves by doing. For too long doing worship has required people to be passive with one person or a few leading from the front. People now desire to worship God through some form of ritual action, where the focus is on the experiential.

A focus on experience

If worship is about transformation or connection with the divine through some form of encounter of God, then there is something about transformation through experience. Too much emphasis is given in some churches about knowing facts and about God, rather than knowing God through experience. A lot of alt worship is centred on experiential encounter of God through stations or some form of ritual action.

A return of the use of art, symbol & ritual but reframed

Now this is where we really hit the ancient:future aspect of alt worship. In many ways, alt worship is re-appropriating and re-establishing the resources out of 2000 years of Christian worship. Many of which draw particularly on the more catholic side of liturgies, prayers etc. Some of these are pre-modern such as labyrinths, prayer walks, chanting, tennabrae, as well as recontextualising the eucharist. Suddenly in our visual culture, words are less important – and that images, drama, ritual and music as installation enable worship and transcendence. So that art, symbol and ritual in a reframed way are being reappropriated for worship. But playfully which sometimes challenge the taboos.

Multi-sensory worship

In our multimedia multimodal world for communications, contextual worship seeks to emanate the best of culture through multi-sensory worship. Just in ancient times where taste, smell, touch and vision were all used to enable encounter with God, so it is again.

World & meaning making

Through the use of symbol, ritual, image, and multi-sensory worship, services on a general liturgical theme enable people to encounter God through symbols and symbolic action that feels quite natural. In so doing people engage with the faith at different levels and therefore engage with world and make meaning out of worship as they interact with God in different ways, and trusting that the Holy Spirit is taking people into encounter with the divine. This is key in a form of worship where the words are less important.

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So that is the what – and now the why? Well as I have already said cultural is changing from modernity to postmodernity and has led to a time in the present where the premodern, Modern and postmodern co-exist. So that alternative worship is responding to the enculturation needs of contextual forms of worship, particularly of the postmodern orientation. In other words it is responding to changes in culture and associated values connected with the postsecular and postmodern elements of culture.

- the effect of clubbing & dance culture on young people

This was huge in the 90s and remains a significant influence but less so now. Just as charismatic worship sought to enculturate forms of English and American folk music of the 60s and 70s, and some would argue rock music of the same period, so alternative worship seeks to engage with the many variant forms of dance, chill and pop music in its vision to seek the sacred in all things secular. Although research is mixed, I still believe that some forms of dance music encourage a form of transcendence that began in the late 1980s. Clubs have changed but do not underestimate the power of music to bring spiritual meaning and transformation when appropriated into worship. Alt worship's desire to seek the spiritual in the secular, and therefore to break down the sacred secular divide is rightly a Holy Quest.

- increased interest in spirituality & spiritual searching

The second massive factor of why alt worship is important is to understand the hugely reinvigorated interest in spirituality. Many people are spiritually searching, and seeking spiritual experience by trying lots of things out – although generally not traditional parish churches. So that alternative worship seeks to engage with this group of spiritual nomads. In a world defined by consumption, people are desperate to find meaning that is deeper than the car they buy or the clothes and labels they wear. Alt worship and emerging church communities, through relationship and worship seek to assist such people to shift from being spiritual tourists to

being spiritual pilgrims through encountering God through people and worship.

- engaging with spiritual tourism

So many alt worship groups put on worship events – where worship and mission blur to assist people in their experiential journey to God.

So alternative worship seeks to provide opportunities for people to explore existential questions such as why am I here, what does life mean, where is God and so on. These worship events are linked to websites, blog sites, internet chat spaces and so on, so there is a - hunger for exploration for identity which is a religious quest. So people tour alt worship groups, and the various communities seek to serve God as people quest for the divine..

- movement from words to images

As I have already said, words are less important than images, but also, stories or narratives are vital for people to engage in narrative forms of truth, and meaning. Story and story telling has a key place in our postmodern culture. So for example, people will use things like Godly Play in an alt worship way, or use bible stories to convey meaning. For example the story of the Prodigal son in its narrative form conveys more meaning to a postmodern culture than telling people the 10 commandments about what you should or should not do. The narrative is far more powerful than the propositional. And this is used in alt worship.

- dissonance of Christian symbols for God

In our current culture a lot of the traditional symbols and language we use can be dissonant – bringing harmful rather than helpful connections and meaning. Church language tends to be overly male, authoritarian and hierarchical. Often our language can collude with forms of exclusion, guilt, shaming people and negativity. Alt worship seeks to make connections with symbols with reframed language and meaning. So for example Father Son and Holy Spirit becomes Creator Redeemer and Companion.

Sometimes the symbols we use are not always that helpful, God as warrior, God as King, can translate very badly in culture. So some alt worship groups for example have experimented with God being like water – present in the world, bringing life and so on ... so alt worship seeks the **reappropriation of cultural symbols to point to the sacred**

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So alternative worship, seeks to reframe worship by participation, by creativity and experience to engage with experiencing God in the present, and the relevance of God in the now as a culture has shifted.

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So to quickly summarise the key aspects for me about what and why alternative worship aims to be and do...

It seeks to engage with increased interest in spirituality & spiritual searching

That the hunger for exploration for identity = religious quest

So the Aim of alt worship = transcendent experience & encounter with the divine drawing on the ancient reframed for the future which seeks to shift people from being spiritual tourists to spiritual pilgrims

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So what drives alternative worship in its practice. Well it appears to me from experience and from what I have read of others involved in alternative worship, that there are a number of key principles.

Faith in alt worship

- a concept of faith as journey

that faith is not a once for all conversion experience – but a whole of life journey of human becoming.

- an embrace of uncertainty

we live in a complex world, with a complex faith and believe in a complex God. Uncertainty is about the whole of life and our connections with the divine. Simplistic solutions to this complexity are not helpful.

- a focus on contemplation and meditation

that alt worship draws on worship as a discipline, something that needs to be developed as a spiritual skill. Doing alt worship is like curating a gallery as the community shape the worship a bit like an orchestra except that everyone is playing in it rather than watching others play. So skills such as

contemplation and meditation are drawn on in the liturgies of what is done as a community hermeneutic.

- use of symbolism that connects with people at different levels

Faith as a journey is therefore multilayered, and we are all at different points on that journey – so that our worship therefore needs to be multilayered.

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So alt worship is about developing a Contextual Church drawing on alt worship in what is called the emerging church and I would say that it draws on these key values.

- a renewed exploration of creativity
- a holistic understanding of worship - our lives as worship
- an emphasis on relationships and community
- risks taken, unusual things tried
- congregational involvement - interaction encouraged
- an emphasis on small locally based groups not big events
- cultural relevance not technology for its own sake
- a commitment to change instead of self-preservation

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Spirituality in Alt Worship – Alt worship inspired communities are attempting to engage with the many forms of mysticism that are currently held within our culture. It is key for contextual forms of worship to engage with renewed forms of mysticism arising out of information technology and complexity. People who do not go to church.

- affirmation of personal identity
- a care for the environment and an exploration of our place within creation
- a search for the transcendent and a sense of mystery and wonder
- a combination of ancient and contemporary
- use of elements that both sides of the brain respond to - experiential and intellectual

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So now we have looked at what, why, and how alternative worship does what it does. Next I want to look at some of the distinct theology that I

think under pins all of this, which I think is significant, and again something that the church needs to hear.

- strong contextual theology & focus on praxis (right action)

In a world that mistrusts those who say they know the truth. The Christian life needs to be expressed through integrity and right action of not only individuals but also spiritual communities. In alt worship there is a big emphasis on this and justice – financial, social, environmental, and cultural.

- engaged with choice & consumption as our theological context

Consumption is the key organising principle of our society now. So alt worship seeks to operate within but not of consumption. So that in worship, mission and community, it seeks to challenge oppression such as the growing trade in people trafficking and affirming culture where it is good. A key focus is seeking the divine and the spiritual in the ordinary of a culture. A good example of this is how Parallel Universe in New Zealand took a beer company advert entitled to the bitter end, and used to organise a mission-worship event to bring spiritual meaning to this poster subverting its meaning to the spiritual. Here they playfully engaged with consumption and in this case advertising, subverting it, and drawing the sacred out of the secular.

- Incarnational AND ecstatic theologies of worship

For too long the church has been divided in its starting place – of either starting with redemptive theology as the bedrock of belief that God seeks to restore us from our brokenness or Incarnational theology, that we start with God's original blessing of us and creation to be made in the image of God. The truth is that we need both AND and not either or. To have a high regard towards God and scripture and a high regard towards humanity and culture. I think alt worship and the emerging church are unique in this both and – and living with the inconsistencies of attempting to hold this position.

- a theology of holistic sacramentalism, transcending the secular/sacred divide

For me this is a key one, and slightly controversial to some. Sacramentalism is about the gift of grace God gives of being made present through the sacraments – usually communion or eucharist, or baptism etc etc. Alt worship takes this further. It draws inspiration from scripture about when it says where two or three are gathered I am there also, to see that God is made present sacramentally in many different ways and not just through priests but through the activities of Christians interacting with each other,

other people, and the world. For example having a profound conversation with a few people in a pub when someone gains some form of eureka spiritual insight. Or looking at an ikon in an art gallery, and having a spiritual moment or encounter with God through the art. Or playing gospel garage music in a night club with themed images that enables people to worship God in a night club. In these holistic sacramental moments God makes God present in very secular places and makes them sacred moments or fragments. Much of alternative worship is about serving God and God using such worship in ways that those who are facilitating it did not expect or imagine. For me this is the essence of the power of alt worship. That challenges the church not to think it controls God or how God chooses to interact in and with the world in prescribed ways. God is not controlled through our rules, and alt worship playfully seeks to follow a God that is always slightly ahead of us and out of reach. It is a corrective to putting God in a box or believing that God can only work out of a book of authorised worship expression.

- the use of contemporary culture as an iconic approach to worship
A couple of weeks ago Moot led an unusual service in that it did a high church service called a benediction. However in it, Moot created an image installation and used dance music that reframed the whole service. It drew those who participated out from a premodern world right into the heart of today's real world of injustice and pain through its imagery and content – that people encountered God through the ordinary stuff of life.

- encultured worship
I have said enough on this already

- reframing tradition for current context, well alt worship is drawing on the best of the old with the best of the new. Alt worship refuses to be pigeon holed into the either-or dynamic of the church but seeks to be both and, on the best of the catholic and evangelical traditions where worship is incarnational mission. No grouping has the right answers and Christianity in the 21st century needs to draw on the best of what we have in context.

- church as spiritual community based on the Trinitarian community. Now these are my views and findings out of the research I completed from my MA, but much of what alt worship holds dear theologically makes many connections with Trinitarian theology. As God seeks to live out the perfect expression of participation, turn taking, mutual love, inclusion, justice and

acceptance in dynamic relationship. What the Orthodox called the perichoesis, the dance of God. A God that seeks to reconcile all back into right relationship with the divine.

So alt worship and the emerging church seeks to model this in how it is a spiritual community, based on inclusion, belonging without necessarily believing, turn taking, participation, mutual love, justice and acceptance in how it does worship mission and community. It seeks to build such a body of Christ through refreshing and may I say old and vibrant forms of the Ekklesia.

So what has alternative worship and the emerging church got to say to the wider church, and what should they be listening to?

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Many emerging churches ... were not intended to become churches but developed into churches as those involved found their ecclesiology transformed by engagement with the community they were serving ... They grew into churches as those involved found the culture gap between new Christians and church too wide... (S Murray, 2004)

The Church in every age needs to rediscover Christ for the culture it finds itself in ... things that are not being renewed. re-freshed will die, to change is to love, to not change is to die. SO fresh expressions are not 'an option' just as eating fresh food is not an option to stay healthy and active for the purpose of God's mission ... The church has an 'ancient message' that needs to be fresh in how it is communicated and lived out in any given living culture.

(K Ward in I Mobsby, 2006)

Recent statistics need to give a wake up call to the church, and I am not going to quote them other than to say that the church is in decline except for some pentecostal and conservative evangelical forms, other than two.

The majority of our culture either has left church because it is no longer relevant or sustaining, or have never thought it was relevant – around 80% of the population are either not Christian or dechurched.

78% of people have a sense of spirituality but have never been to a form of faith service.

I believe the church needs new forms of worship and church to engage with this context.

I want to finish with a summary of vision for emerging Church written by Larson and Osbourne as long ago as 1972 which for me rings true particularly in an Anglican context.

The Emerging Church is called to:

1. Rediscover contextual & experimental mission in the western church.
2. Forms of church that are not restrained by institutional expectations.
3. Use of the key word ..."And". Whereas the heady polarities of our day seek to divide us in to an either-or camp, the mark of the emerging church will be its emphasis on both-and. For generations we have divided ourselves into camps: Protestants and Catholics, high and low church, clergy and laity, social activists and personal piety, liberals and conservatives, sacred and secular, institutional and underground.
4. It will bring together the most helpful of the old and best of the new, blending the dynamic of a personal Gospel with the compassion of social concern.
5. It will find its ministry being expressed by a whole people, wherein the distinction between clergy and laity will be that of function, not of status or hierarchical division.
6. In the emerging church, due emphasis will be placed on both theological rootage and contemporary experience, on celebration in worship and involvement in social concerns, on faith and feeling, reason and prayer, conversion and continuity, the personal and the conceptual.

So to conclude alt worship and the emerging church has a key role to play with engaging with fresh and encultured approaches to worship, mission and community.

Questions if time...

Resources slide

