

PERFORMANCE

By Shaun Groves

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I never know where I'll be on Sunday morning. I may put on jeans and a t-shirt, stroll into a mall-like structure at almost noon to be good morning-ed by knit shirt clad greeters handing out four color bulletins or I may rise with the sun, don a suit and tie and climb the steep steps of a two hundred year old steeped building. I never know.

I never know if I'll be speaking and worshipping to an "audience" or a "congregation", sitting on wooden pew or upholstered theatre seat. Will we drink Starbucks coffee served in the lobby or shop in the church bookstore? Will there be a pulpit or a stool? A video screen, printed lyrics, transparencies or a hymnal?

This is the good part of my job as a traveling singer-songwriter and teacher: diversity. It's good to participate firsthand in the diversity that is the Church. But better than this - the best thing about being me on Sunday - is seeing God move miraculously, speak powerfully and transform thoroughly through such a wide range of buildings, people, denominations and styles. I get to see the real Power behind every church's "performance".

I'm reminded every Sunday that it is God and not our methods who convicts and comforts us. I wish I'd learned this earlier in life.

I grew up under a steeple, watching the clock as the pastor read from his notes and the choir stoically - sometimes on key - sang 1800s era hymns to God accompanied by organ blasts. And I never would have believed it as a sixteen year-old but God was present and powerful in that place and those people and He didn't need my approval to be so. Later, in college, I was part of a church plant that met in a theatre and added ample doses of distortion and conversational teaching to my Sabbath experience. And though my parents couldn't comprehend it at the time, God was present and powerful in that place and those people as well - and didn't need their approval to be so.

Since then I've seen it all, and seen God in it all - in the strangest most unpredictable places. I saw a business student weep in the arms of a homeless man at Church Under the Bridge in Waco, Texas, a mostly homeless fellowship meeting under the overpass of I-35 near Baylor University. It was there that he shared a donut and bad coffee with Jesus.

I saw a prostitute run down the aisle of a First Baptist Church in the deep south as the choir sang "Just As I Am" because it was there that she found Jesus in a family that accepted her just as she was.

I saw a pornographer, working for Playboy, surrender his camera and his life to God in a Willow Creek Association church to a tune by Chris Tomlin because it was there that a men's bible study met over barbeque and spoke for Jesus, telling the photographer he was made for more and loved by God.

It wasn't the style of music that changed these hearts. Their transformation didn't come from the expression on a worship leader's face, the chords produced by guitars or organs. It wasn't the lighting, the bulletin, the carpet or the architecture that compelled them to believe the story of Jesus to be true. When I asked the prostitute what brought her to that traditional church and down it's aisle that Sunday she said it best. "It was Jesus. Jesus and my next door neighbor. She loved on me every day. So here I am."

So be excellent in what you do, of course. Honor tradition and explore new expressions, of course. Make a joyful noise and make it well. But as you sing and sermonize each week remember to be Jesus to someone too. There are plenty of words and music in the world don't you agree? What we're short on is neighbors who love on people every day. That's a captivating and powerful performance that never goes out of style.