

Marty is the youngest member of the local preacher class. He has come to faith relatively recently and was not raised as a church goer. His local Methodist church has been very supportive. Many people have told him that he has the makings of a fine preacher. More than anything else Marty wants to be up for all that God has in mind for him. He is enjoying the local preacher classes and loves learning more about scripture and theology. The problem comes when his youthful energy and enthusiasm are let loose on the slightly more sedate and traditional congregation to which he belongs.

He asks.... Why do older Christians find it so hard to get excited and show their feelings in worship?

How does that line from Van Morrison go?..... *"Wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time!"* I guess every committed young Methodist can echo that sentiment. You come back from an event like Autumn Soul, Castlewellan or Summer Madness. You're totally fired up with the vibrancy and reality of the worship. You've been lifted to the heavenlies and brought into a new and fresh encounter with God. A few days later you find yourself back at a normal Sunday morning service in your local church. The contrast is so sharp and pronounced that it almost physically hurts. You feel that no-one else there knows how you feel and a large part of you wants to take yourself off to a larger livelier church which is more cutting edge when it comes to contemporary worship.

If it was only about pleasing yourself and having a good time then you would indeed go somewhere else in much the same way as house hunters would go from property to property "shopping" for a place that suits their taste. But that's not you, Marty. You're not that consumer type of Christian. There are far too many of those around these days! You believe that God has put you in your local church for a reason – to give, every bit as much as to receive. And from what I can see you have a great deal to give.

Your question is, in itself, a challenge and even a rebuke to traditional church members. Somehow, God forgive us, we have developed the ability to sing fabulous truths about God and listen to the most stirring messages without a flicker of visible emotion. We have come to regard as weird anyone who as much as smiles while they sing – never mind raises a hand as an expression of praise. We are capable of reducing the mood at the end of a service from the profound and sacred to the banal in the space of a minute by comments on the weather or the flowers. The impression we create is that either we don't really take faith seriously or that our experience of God is something that we prefer to keep private and personal. You're quite right in seeing that there is something dysfunctional and wrong in this.

On the other hand look at those folk in your church who have encouraged and supported you. They may not be the most lively and demonstrative when it comes to worship but they have probably prayed for you far more than you know. They are clearly thrilled at the prospect of your becoming a local preacher. If you try to see it from their point of view you'll realise that for a seventy year old, to listen to a sermon from a brand new Christian in their twenties often requires grace and patience. You have the zeal and energy but they have a wealth of life experience. Maybe that's why the Church was always meant to be an all-age family. The enthusiasm of youth needs the wisdom of seniority and vice versa.

I totally get the frustration you are feeling with what you call traditional worship. Let's face it, the hymn -prayer -hymn sandwich model, led by one person, can seem very dull and predictable. Familiarity however is not always a bad thing – and your classes will have explained the pattern of Approach, Ministry of the Word and Response which underlies what we do. It can be argued that people experience greater freedom to worship when they are comfortable with an established routine. A service that sets out to be different for the sake of it rarely satisfies anyone. No amount of drama, movie clips, or latest worship songs can guarantee effective worship.

It really comes back to what Jesus said about worship *“God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth”*. At the end of the day God is the focus and the object of worship. It's about Him, not us. It's about what pleases Him and not what entertains us. God is probably not even slightly concerned about the details that bother us. Organ or praise band, Wesley or Redman, sermon or meditation – He sees past it all. He looks on the heart. He looks for those moments in a service when hearts are lifted to Him, corporately or individually, in adoration, repentance, thanksgiving, commitment or just simple need.

When you really grasp this you realise what a privilege it is to lead a service of worship. Your task in choosing music, offering prayers, reading and preaching from God's word is to help create moments when God's voice may be heard and when people can make their response. People respond in different ways – with the exuberance of youth, with the steely determination of those finding the journey difficult and with upward gaze of those nearing heaven and home.

And just so that you don't think that you're on your own in New Testament times Paul's young friend Timothy was probably faced with similar problems. Paul wrote *“Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.”* That should go a long way to winning over some of those unresponsive oldies!