

Rethink Church

Reflections on Worship





Rehearsing the Reign of God in Worship

On earth as it is in heaven. When I was a little girl memorizing the Lord's Prayer, I struggled with phrases like "hallowed be thy name." My brain heard "how low wet" and could not understand what that had to do with God! But, *on earth as it is in heaven*, I got that. Even as my notions of heaven have turned away from streets paved with gold and pearly gates, I am deeply inspired by the idea of a vision of earth to which our aspirations of heaven have come all the way down. I find this passage from John's Revelation to sum up my hopes and dreams:

"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."

Revelation 21:3-5

I love the vision of God living among and within human beings, comforting, healing, and making all things new. It inspires me to lean into the world as it can be, and empowers me and my congregation to actively participate in the healing of the world.

Because I serve Middle Church as Senior Minister/Minister for Vision, Worship, and the Arts, planning worship and creating public theology are in my portfolio. Worship generates public theology; it turns people on to imagine the world God desires. With that in mind, everything that happens from the top of worship until it ends helps create God-talk that is transformational.

Our worship is planned a year in advance, with space to drop in details as we move along the year. We ask ourselves, "What is God calling us to 'story' this year in worship? What themes will we use, and how will the Lectionary passages help us to support those themes?" At Advent, we focused on "We Are Light," inspired by the Gospel of John and a piece of wonderful music by singer India.Arie.

We are intentional about themes and we are intentional every Sunday. Who greets at the door? How do they welcome those who are gathering? What do worshippers see first when they arrive? What is the story being told on the bulletin? How do hymns and musical selections offer a radical welcome to a diverse group of people? Who is sitting on the pulpit? How are we responding to the children in our midst? Who reads scripture, offers prayer, and preaches the sermon? How do we ask for the offering and invite people to join us? These are some of the questions we ask when we plan worship because the entire worship celebration tells the story of who God is and how we help God to heal the world.

We are intentional about inclusive language, and about speaking theologically about God's love shown in Jesus Christ as a wide-open door, not a litmus test that God's people can fail. Even the language of invitation to join our community is something about which we take care. Recently, we decided that Middle Church is more a "movement" than a "family" and changed the language we use about membership. Thirteen people joined on one Sunday!

As the worship team and I plan worship, we imagine that our offering is lavish love poured out for God, who is the object of our affection. We also imagine that in worship we are rehearsing the world as it can be; we are performing the norms of the Reign of God. We express our yearning to be in the center of God's plan for healing our souls and healing the world in our music and in our prayers. We create artistic holy spaces for listening to what God requires of us in scripture and in the preached word. And almost always there is a call for action in worship and in the bulletin that offers ways to be more closely connected to God or to serve others.

Isaiah articulates God's dream in this wonderful text:

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:19

Worship helps us perceive God's dream, and rehearse it on earth, as it is in heaven.

Preaching a Radical Welcome

One of my secret inspirations for each sermon I preach is Marina Abramović. I first encountered her work in 2010 at the Museum of Modern Art in her exhibit “The Artist Is Present.” Since then I have followed her work, supported the Kickstarter campaign for her new institute, and continue to find my sermons influenced by her nuanced differentiation between acting and performance.

According to Abramović, acting refers to a role or character being played out. Acting requires you to be someone you are not. Performance, in contrast, requires that you remain who you are but intentionally put yourself in a specific environment. In the former you bring something false to life; in the latter you bring something true.

What does all of this have to do with preaching? Everything. Because preaching is performance but preaching is not acting.

Each word of a sermon is a performance of a radical welcome, inviting us to enter through these dialogical doors and find ourselves in a space where we are truly welcome as we truly are. When we say “all are welcome,” this is not an act—pretending to be something we truly are not—but it is a performance, opening our doors and our lives and our words to welcome each of us and all of us. The sermon must embody this welcome in both its method and its message, intentional about the stories we tell, the pronouns we choose, the postures we take, and the actions we invite people towards. All of it, from my opening “Hi everybody” to my closing “May it be

so” must be a performance (but not an act) of a radical welcome that includes and embraces.

This profundity is as simple as an intentional diversity of bodies and voices. It’s one thing for one person who looks and sounds one way to say that all are welcome, but it’s another for different people of different ages and ethnicities and sexual identities and gender expressions to simply be who they are, performing a radical welcome for all to see. Preaching is the mediation of experience, words creating worlds in which we can find God, ourselves, and one another. And this ever-evolving world must be one where all are welcome. God does not call us to act—to be someone we are not. God calls us to perform—to live as the people we are in the world around us. For not only are sermons performance rather than acting, but so are our lives.

Every Sunday night at our Art & Soul worship gathering we aim to perform a radical welcome. From the opening welcome and invitation to the selection of music to the passing of the peace to the preaching of the sermon, the experience is cast, not with actors, but with performers. The way we dance and sing or stand and talk can be an embodiment of a radical welcome, literally opening the doors and watching as people walk in to see what all the noise is about.

From the pulpit to the sidewalk to wherever our lives will take us, may we be people who perform a radical welcome in every word we say and action we embody.

Jim Kast-Keat is Associate Minister for Education at Middle Collegiate Church.





Welcoming Children in Worship

It is likely we all agree with the Whitney Houston song: “I believe the children are our future. Teach them well and let them lead the way.”

The children *are* our future and our best hope for a better tomorrow for the generations to come. Our churches can be healthy, safe, moral, and positive spaces for growth and empowerment, where children and youth are encouraged to dream, helping them to set goals in life. Our congregations are spaces where children not only have one another, but adults as mentors to share experiences with and receive guidance through life’s challenges. They may experience diversity in a community unlike any other in their lives. At churches, children can meet people of various ages, economic backgrounds, gender expressions, which leads to greater understanding of inclusivity. When children see they can make a difference in church, it helps them to see they can make a difference in the world. When children participate in worship, they learn valuable leadership skills. Having children as part of the worshipping community lets them know they are part of the church community as a whole, beyond Sunday school or youth group, which will inspire them to stay connected through college and into adulthood.

At Middle Collegiate Church, we engage children in worship in a number of ways. Each Sunday morning, we include a relevant and memorable children’s moment in worship. This may take the form of a Message for All Ages, when we call the children and “young at heart” to the pulpit for a five-minute lesson about what it means to be people of God in the here and now, and relate it to the theme of that day’s worship celebration. Other Sundays, the children’s moment may be

a family leading a prayer or reading scripture together. On most Sundays, children and youth leave the sanctuary just before the sermon to attend Sunday School, but every first Sunday of the month, all God’s children—young and old—stay in the worship celebration together. Children frequently serve Communion on these Sundays. The congregation values this inclusion, showing approval with their smiles, hugs, and kind words. Worship incorporates not only words, but visuals, music, movement, and touch, helping make it accessible for children and adults alike with various learning styles.

Mentoring is also an important part of children and youth ministry. Adults are connected with children at Middle Church, checking in with them and taking interest in their lives. Men mentor our boys from childhood through youth, building deep connections and safe spaces. Adults also mentor children through the arts and include justice issues so our children are connected to the larger community and the world. Regular training and follow-up with leaders is vital, creating a support system for their endeavors which cultivates their helpful and empowering relationships with children and youth. We also prioritize community building through mission trips and intergenerational activities, giving children concrete action items for their lives.

Engaging children as part of the church accomplishes our prime objective for them—to feel welcomed, accepted, and loved. Through caring for our children, we place value on our entire community and its future. Nourishing the children’s ministry is a direct demonstration of the church’s mission, not only to welcome them into the family of God, but into a movement for justice promising a better future for all.

Preaching and the Arts

When we integrate preaching and the arts, we celebrate the divine creativity in each of us. When worship leaders and artists play together in worship, we create an opportunity to experience the divine in new ways. We acknowledge the diversity of our community. Experiencing the arts during a sermon can be particularly meaningful for certain people, including children; those who are not proficient in the predominant language; those with mental illnesses; and others who learn best through media other than the spoken word.

Preaching—even in its most traditional form—is art. Preaching as art involves four elements: (1) the preacher as the artist; (2) the sermon as the medium; (3) the congregation as the audience; and (4) God as muse.

To integrate preaching and the arts, we simply need to expand our understanding of the first two elements: the preacher and the sermon. A preacher is not limited to the worship leader. The preacher can be a poet, a cellist, a painter, a puppeteer. A sermon is not limited to the words spoken from a pulpit. The sermon can be dance, visual art, music, film. As we expand our understanding of “the preacher” and “the sermon,” we expand our understanding of “preaching.” The diversity of ways of preaching—that is, a human interpretation of a divine message—is limitless.

As we expand our understanding of the first two elements, we need to maintain our understanding of the other two: the congregation and God. The congregation is our audience. If we expand our understanding of “preaching” with-

out explanation, they will not understand the message. They will feel isolated from the experience. They will be upset. As worship leaders, we must invite the congregation to share our new understanding of “preaching.” Before the sermon, we can introduce the artist as preacher. After the sermon—for example, during the benediction—we can explicitly state the connection between the art and the message.

We also need to maintain our understanding of God as muse. Preaching is an encounter between the human and the spiritual. As we integrate preaching and the arts, we must remain grounded in the divine message. Any aesthetic choices about the art must consider the sermon’s message. By prioritizing the theological message, the sermon will remain focused on the divine. The preaching will not be a solely human endeavor. It will be a collaborative partnership of human and divine.

Integrating preaching and the arts is risky. The worship leader must try something new. The worship leader must share the pulpit with others gracefully. The worship leader must do all of this knowing that some congregants will not like or understand the sermon. These risks require faith: faith in our relationships with artists, with our congregation, and with the divine. When we worship leaders take risks in our worship space, we model for our congregants how they can take risks in their own lives. We demonstrate that serving our world requires creativity, courage, and openness to the ways God is transforming us.

Chad Tanaka Pack is Associate Minister for Finance and Stewardship at Middle Collegiate Church.



Beyond Our Walls:

Sharing Your Congregation's Story for Love and Justice

We each have a platform to change the story about what *church* means to the mainstream culture. Standing for marriage equality, racial reconciliation, and economic justice outside our sanctuary walls requires planning, responding, collaboration, and media.

Over the past few years, some of the ways our worship connected with the world's story have been:

- Performed a triple gay wedding during our morning worship celebration after the gay marriage bill passed in New York State.
- Worn hoodies during worship before George Zimmerman was arrested and after he was acquitted for the killing of Trayvon Martin.
- Housed the activists of Occupy Wall Street after they were evicted from Zuccotti Park.
- Stood for gun violence prevention after Sandy Hook with the Groundswell Movement at Auburn Seminary by turning a gun into a farming tool—"a sword into a plowshare."

Even though our senior minister and worship team plan the outline, music, scripture, and sermon titles a year in advance, they are always bringing in the text of our culture—the news stories, the injustices, and the commitment to heal the world—into the narratives shared on Sunday. So when news breaks that intersects with our key justice issues (racial, eco-

nomic, gender/LGBTI, and anti-gun violence), our worship reflects the issue on Sunday. And, at times, members of the press are invited to worship with us.

The media is not likely to attend events we create (such as concerts, performances, or educational opportunities), but they always look for stories that relate to the current news cycle. Journalists always need personal, local stories about how individuals and communities respond organically to the most current news. So when you alert them to a worship celebration or a gathering that has a highly visible component (hoodies) and share people's stories, they will be more likely to want to share your congregation's story.

It is our responsibility to tell the story of the transforming power of our worship experience outside our walls. I joke that the first minister visitors meet is our website, because most new people find us online. Many visitors find Middle Church by searching for "gay friendly," "progressive," or "gospel music." Your website, newsletter, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube Channel, and livestream are all tools to tell the story of God's power at work in your congregation to those outside your walls.

Although 300 people witnessed the triple gay wedding at Middle Church in July 2011 during Sunday morning worship, it has been viewed more than 2,000 times on YouTube and comes up as a suggested video by YouTube to viewers around the country. Photographs and videos share your community outside your walls, so it is important to document how you respond with love and creativity to our world's wounds. Those images can be shared through blogs or with local media as well.

It is important that the faith leaders write Op-Eds. I recommend training through the The Op-Ed Project or media training through Auburn Seminary's Auburn Media so you gain the tools for your story to be heard in our sound bite culture. Whether it's a website, a blog, or a local TV story, beginning with a personal narrative opens the heart. Policy and legislation does not move people but stories shift our minds and culture.

Partnerships amplify our voice. Through Auburn Seminary and the Groundswell Movement, 60,000 people were emailed about the national Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath and our online viewing audience tripled that Sunday. So when you are planning or have completed an event, share the details with your social justice partners with language and images they can use in social media. Through all of our communication tools, we shift the conversations in media around justice.





Music and Community

Aldous Huxley writes, “After silence, that which would come nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music.” I believe music goes beyond what we might be able to express or imagine and it opens us up in ways we did not think were possible. It catches us by surprise; it calls us to awaken our very souls to that which we thought was no longer present. Music is a great gift from the Holy. If we have just a glimmer of God’s grace and wonder as we do our ministry, the music that we select embodies the rich experience God has for each and everyone of us here as human beings on planet Earth.

When I think of music in terms of my ministries—Gospel Choir and Children’s Chorus—I think of just that . . . ministry. Music provides opportunity to bring people together, to both teach and to worship. Worship can take on a very “church”-like connotation, but worship can also be “appreciation” and “realization” of all that life has to offer. I love how a choir brings people together with a common goal. That goal is “song.” No matter what the level of expertise, the song binds us together at each rehearsal. We share common experiences about what the artist has put into words, and how the composer has both melodically and harmonically structured his or her story. We

may not always agree, but we come to a place of understanding of the message of the music. Whether delivering a gospel selection such as “God Is Standing By” or the Broadway selection “Happiness Is”, each voice in the song must be connected to the music. When we connect to the music, we connect to each other. When we connect to each other, we begin to take on a new form. Our voices blend, and become stronger, and they transmit the message of God’s power and beauty. And so a new community and identity forms, one with a message of hope and transformation. In building this choir community, we are able to provide the inspiration to build communities around us.

Choirs help to build the community of our congregations inside and outside the walls of the church building. Our congregation sees themselves in the choir. They see and feel the joy and the hardships of life. They see and feel the possibility of transformation through song as melodies waft, soloists wail, and choristers emote. In our communal experience, some people are moved to stand, others weep, some shout, others clap, while still others sit silently and observe. They are all a part of the song, the song that we are leading, together.

John Del Cueto is Director of the Gospel Choir and Children’s Chorus at Middle Collegiate Church.

Music from Many Cultures

In choosing music for the Middle Church Choir, there are several considerations. First, we try to unify all parts of the worship around one theme. Generally the theme is the text for the day taken from the Lectionary. The minister who is preaching will select a text from the choices, and will post it in our worship planning schedule, along with a few sentences to explain the focus of the sermon. With this summary, one can generally isolate some general themes to consider. In some cases, there might be a musical setting of the exact text, which can be helpful.

Next, in a congregation like Middle Collegiate Church, diversity is extremely important. We choose music from all eras of traditional Western church music, from the cultures which may be particularly appropriate for this congregation, from cultures which may have interesting and evocative traditions, and according to what specific celebrations member of the congregation may be observing. We also include appropriate selections from the Broadway canon, as well as popular music which may fit a specific theme. In other words, all styles are welcome!

Perhaps the most urgent part is the diversity of music styles within each Sunday morning worship celebration. The Middle Church Choir usually offers three contributions

each Sunday—an introit, an anthem, and a second anthem at the offertory. Ideally, each selection would be chosen from a different type of music. The hope is that each person present will find something which particularly appeals to them. At Middle Church, we are fortunate to have a choir which is not only capable of singing many different types of music, but is able to sing it with little practice and is willing to do so.

We are also fortunate to have a volunteer choir, the Middle Church Jerriese Johnson Gospel Choir, named for its founder. They sing a wide variety of music as well—traditional and contemporary gospel music, spirituals, popular music, and global music among them. When the gospel choir is not singing, Jacqui and I are intentional to program music for the Middle Church Choir that offers cultural balance in worship.

As we select hymns, we also keep in mind the preacher's sermon summary to guide us thematically. We consider the total music program, selecting hymns that offer both textual support and musical diversity in worship. Our aim is for everyone to connect to some part of the music program. Because of our extraordinary diversity, this is an exciting puzzle to solve. We seek to be fluent in many musical "languages" so each listener can find the way into the worship experience.

Jonathan Dudley is Director of Music at Middle Collegiate Church.





Gospel Music in Worship

Art & Soul is Middle Church's weekly Sunday evening worship celebration featuring dynamic, edgy preaching that seeks the seeker, and equally dynamic, edgy music to reach believer and non-believer alike. While an array of musical genres can be heard, including pop, jazz, Broadway, and rock, the music most often sung by the congregation and the Middle Community Chorus is gospel.

Why gospel? Gospel—at its heart African-American sacred music—is the quintessential American musical melting pot, the text of the Good News of God's love for us set to the blues, jazz, and funk. Or even the classical anthem. It is deeply introspective, a fervent plea for God to respond to a pressing need. It is necessarily unrestrained, causing the participant, singer, or listener, to move in joy. It is emotional, it is accessible, it is risky, and it is designed for worship.

The Presbyterian *Directory of Worship* defines worship, a time to connect with God, this way: *Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to (the triune) God. In worship the people of God acknowledge God present in the world and in their lives.*

And they shared this on the role of music: *Song is a response which engages the whole self in prayer. Song unites the faithful in common prayer wherever they gather for worship whether in church, home, or other special place.*

And, from the preface to the *Songs of Zion* hymnal, published by the United Methodist Church: *Singing is as close to worship as breathing is to life.*

Based on the above definitions of worship, the role of music in worship, and what makes music—specifically singing—so important, we learn three things:

- Worship is where God's people acknowledge God's presence.
- Song in worship unites the faithful in common prayer.
- Singing is as close to worship as breathing is to life.

And if we apply the assessment of J. Alfred Smith, Sr., in his essay, "The Ecumenical Nature of African American Music": *The intentionality of African American musicians in the black church ecumenical family has always been to creatively express, with the community engaged in worship, the deepest feelings of love ... for God.*

We discover, in gospel, a versatile, viable, vibrant music form. Although Smith speaks specifically about black music in the black church, Gospel music has spread internationally, spanning multiple cultures and genres. There is country gospel, rock, gospel rap, Spanish-language, Caribbean gospel, and African gospel. There are gospel music festivals around the world. Clearly, gospel music is a global form that can be used cross-culturally and ecumenically, uniting and building communities in worship. It reaches the non-believer who is outside the church, and it reaches the regular worshipper. Gospel music, as we've done in in Art & Soul, can be effectively used to reach multicultural, multiethnic communities, and its richness and adaptability makes it easily inserted into any style of worship.



Worship Is Transformational

A few years ago, at a congregational meeting about justice at Middle Church, a young adult, Alex, said, “Just tell us what to do.” Tell us what we can do every week to make justice happen in the world. Tell us something practical, something doable, that helps us to take what we have experienced in worship out into the streets. Tell us how we can be changed and help heal others.

And so we do. Every Sunday, morning and evening. Every bulletin includes ideas to take the preached word and live it out loud. Sometimes the suggestion is internal, about healing our own souls. Like, “List three qualities for which you want to be remembered.” “Turn your face to the light and bask in the love of God’s glow.” More often the suggestions are active, such as “Sign this petition and share it with your community.” “Get on the bus with us in three weeks and go to Washington to march for gun control.”

These suggestions are written by the preacher and are a direct extension of the sermon. The ideas are supported by the songs that has been sung and the prayers that have been prayed. Worship is one of the ways we attract friends, retain members, deploy activists, grow leaders, nurture spirits, and develop partners.

Two of our members became partners in our feeding ministries. “Middle Church is so good to us. You opened the door for us to do ministry, and we walked right into it. There is a need, and so we are filling it.” This is what Renee and Kele said when asked why they decided to donate their truck to deliver hot meals to people in need. Inspired by Sunday sermons about God’s Economy, Renee and Kele decided to use their truck to help hungry neighbors have food on the table.

Our warmer weather feeding program, Butterfly Meal, was envisioned by long-term member Danita and delivers almost 200 packed lunches for people in Tompkins Square and Washington Square Parks. When Butterfly hibernated for the winter, the Soul Food truck began to serve love and food. Renee and Kele were inspired by worship to participate in Middle Church’s God’s Economy program, in which we work for everyone to have enough.

Here is a personal testimony from one of our young adults. Worship inspired her mission work in the Rockaways.

When the Storm Hits . . . BY GABRIELLE S. DEVEAUX

When Hurricane Sandy hit, I was fortunate enough to not only be home with provisions but also to be riding the storm out in Harlem, where we never lost power. Knowing others were not so fortunate and with the NYC Marathon cancelled, I turned my usual marathon party-goers into volunteers. More than 15 of my friends went to help with the recovery relief in Staten Island on Marathon Sunday. Three days later I brought 10 of my colleagues to the Rockaways. So many images I’ll never forget. A beach town turned into a sandbox. Vehicles cast and displaced like toy cars, chunks of boardwalk laying several blocks in from the now quiet ocean, clothes strewn in the middle of intersections begging for new homes, mentally ill adults waiting outside in the cold to be evacuated—their lives in the garbage bags they held under their arms.

Through the Middle Project Leadership Initiative workshop courses, we have had numerous in-depth sessions that rock my world, my perspectives, and my call to action personally, spiritually, professionally, and altruistically. Perhaps you’re familiar with “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten?” That to me is Middle Project. How to live, what to do, and how to be. The Golden Rule, with ethical action steps.

It’s been over a year now since Hurricane Sandy made landfall in our area and still our neighbors are struggling to make ends meet and rebuild. Therefore, when the time comes to act, to spark a movement of people, I channel not only my social networks but also the leadership skills I have been building through Middle Project. Equipped with these skills and inspired by worship, we continue to go back. So we go back, and we continue to go back until we are all healed. When the storm hits figuratively in your own life, what vision will you have for change?

We often say that worship is a transformational box in which we become agents for change. Worship transforms us, renews our minds and hearts, and enables soul healing, so we can heal the world.

Worship Changes Culture

As a consultant to congregations, I have worshipped in churches of every size and cultural setting across numerous denominational traditions. I have found that every faith community has its own personality, its own culture. The culture is shaped by norms and beliefs that are both articulated and unarticulated, conscious and unconscious, based on long-practiced faith traditions and based on contemporary and even secular customs and preferences. Some congregations have worship patterns with expansive liturgy, some have minimal liturgy and some have no liturgy at all. Each worship form says something about the congregations' history, core values, identity, and culture.

Once entering a Korean church for worship, I could feel the energy of the children, notice the eye contact from adults who nodded to me and smiled a greeting, and see the friendliness of the people toward each other. I experienced the culture without knowing the language. I took a seat by myself and almost immediately noticed someone taking a seat next to me. As I turned to see who it was, they spoke to me in my language and asked if I spoke Korean. When I said no, I did not, they said they would be my translator during the celebration.

This and many other experiences in worship settings raised this question for me: Do the members of the congregation determine the form, spirit, and culture of worship or does the worship experience shape the culture of the congregation?

Some years ago I served part-time on staff of a church working through a process of change. Their goal was to be-

come more inclusive and more diverse. At the time I joined them, their worship experience was so traditional as to be stiff, with a formal written liturgy, traditional choir and music, and a "culture" that I would describe as cordial but not friendly to visitors. During the passing of the peace, worshippers would greet those who were within arms length of them, but not move from their seats. Was the worship constraining the people or were the people constraining the worship? The people seemed cocooned.

We began the change process by holding focus groups open to all members. One key question we asked was, "What experiences in worship have you had in other settings that you would like to experience here?" Participants shared numerous stories of worship that included drama, secular readings, dance, an expansive repertoire of music from gospel to jazz, to bluegrass to rock. These conversations opened the door to a wide range of possibilities for new elements in worship. We communicated some of what we heard in the focus groups back to the congregation and invited them into the spiritual season of Lent through the arts in worship. We informed them of what would be happening and why; we set a specific period of time for experimentation and we set a spiritual frame for the experiences we would have. Halfway through Lent people were saying, "We hope you have plans to keep this going".

We changed the experience of worship and changed the culture of the congregation. Now there was new energy, excitement, and more diverse people wanted to be there.

John Janka is Director of Programming at The Middle Project.



There Is Only Dance

In the poem, “Burnt Norton,” T. S. Eliot embarked on a sustained exploration of time and transcendence. In a striking invocation of this theme, the speaker alludes to dance as representative of the human experience of timelessness:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point
There would be no dance, and there is only dance.
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

Eliot 1952, 119



I delight in our God who made the good creation dance. Each one of God’s creatures is a creature in motion—heart beating, blood coursing, and the *ruach* breath of Spirit warming and cooling the nostrils. We are God’s dancing dear ones every day of our living. When we gather in community to worship our God, we are dancers whether we perceive it or not—hearts beating, blood coursing, and the *ruach* breath of Spirit warming and cooling our nostrils. What does it mean to be a dancing human being in community?

Dance, in a worshipping community, provides the singular opportunity to be outside of time as we know it—“neither from nor towards,” but “at the still point,” as Eliot eloquently stated. At the still point, we encounter the Holy and time . . . Stops? Shifts? Slows? Something happens. And in a faith community it happens with those with whom we can affirm, “I felt it too! That was something! God is amazing!” Dance is the ultimate *Kairos* time in which those who dance, and those who witness the dance, can experience a time lapse, a moment of indeterminate time in which everything stands ready to be transformed. God slows our roll and we have to pay attention in wholly and holy new ways. I’ve seen it. I’ve experienced it. I’ve helped create it. We can say that something happens, but we cannot “say where.”

At Middle Church, we partner with God in the creation of *Kairos* time in the intentionality of shaping a ministry of dance inclusive of all God’s dancing bodies. Jacqui Lewis and I have been working for more than two years to shift the dance event from something that is performed to something that is experienced—dance for all dancing bodies, dance for all God’s children. There is less focus on perfect bodies and more energy around the perfection of participating bodies. The objective is a collective company of dancers with a broad invitation to the community to join the dance, join the heal-

ing, join the ministry of movement that carries us all to transformation.

One intentional shift came in the casting of bodies—children and adults, professional and aspiring, multiethnic, multi-ability, seniors, tall, short, small, large, and everything in between and beyond. Our dance ministry like our congregation has to mirror the reign of God—as many diverse people as possible are invited to move. Many times, witnesses to dance at Middle Church speak of the transformation that comes from seeing older dancers, dancers with limited physical ability, and dancers with “meat on their bones.” A handful of times, those who never thought they would move in church, find themselves offering the good gift of their dancing bodies which bless our family of faith with fresh ways of seeing and being.

My seminary worship and the arts professor, Dr. Joan Carter, said that if members of our church enter worship on the ground floor, the job of worship is to get them to the penthouse where transformation occurs. The elevator that makes this transformational feat possible is the arts, and I’m partial to dance.

I’m partial because words fail us. Repeatedly and spectacularly, words flop where gesture frees. Words wound where movement washes away the muck and grime of life and loosens up the stuck feelings, the un-cried tears, the unbounded joy, the smothering shame, the too muchness of life that is simply . . . life. Life inexpressible, except that we dance it. Life is movement and movement is life. There is only dance and the invitation to join the movement.

Join our movement.

middlechurch.org

Ways to Rethink Church

1. *Broadway and Popular culture have much to offer worship in terms of inspirational or conscious music.*

Think about programming music from the following sources. Be sure to listen to the lyrics and adjust them for your context if necessary. We love music from The Lion King, In the Heights, Jesus Christ Superstar, Godspell, West Side Story, Bob Marley, Michael Jackson, Beyoncé, Pink, Matisyahu . . .

2. *Tap dance to the sermon.*

3. *Drum to the scripture reading.*

4. *Use puppets to teach children about communion.*

5. *Use several voices to read scripture or preach*

6. *Dance on the pews. They make for great sight lines.*

7. *Preach sermons in the first person of characters from the scripture.*

8. *Have a painter improvise a work while worship is happening.*

9. *Live tweet*

10. *Invite lay people to dream their best dreams about worship.*

“We Are The Ones”

You and I are the ones we’ve been waiting for.

You and I thought this was somebody else’s war.

You and I are the ones, the ones we’ve been waiting for.

—Tituss Burgess

Planning Multicultural Worship



Worship is a joyous, artistic opportunity to rehearse the Reign of God in congregational life. Worship heals our souls so we can heal the world. It is also the space where we share the Sacred Narrative, and cast ourselves in it. What is God about in the universe? How can we discover it? What is our role in it? The Sacred Narrative *contradicts and critiques* our current story. This means that worship is both a celebration *and* a call to change! Worship is the place where the sense of urgency for the new story is created, and nurtured in “safe enough space.” Because we want everyone to get it, we need to tell that story in the many cultural languages of our people. We have to be multivocal in our worship planning so that as many as can will find their place in the purpose of the Holy.

In addition to the narrative arc the liturgical year provides, the calendar year provides “episodes” to story. Fall is homecoming and an opportunity to celebrate Hispanic Heritage. Advent through King Day is an arc in which to celebrate the way the light overcomes the darkness. The arc of King Day, Black History Month, Lunar New Year, and Women’s History month is an opportunity to story justice. May through June can celebrate the gifts of Spirit, and the pride every human being can have in their sexual identity. In summer, we often celebrate a theme like love in action, or what it means to be reformed.

Here are more tips for planning worship to increase diversity:

- **Select a theme, and then plan worship for a year in advance**, creating a frame into which you can drop details. Planning makes space for art to happen. Be prepared to shift your plan for a changing environment.
- **Invite people in your congregation and surrounding community, including children, to offer art in worship.** Their presence immediately increases your diversity and they will invite friends to come! Local high schools and colleges are a great source of affordable musicians and artists.
- **Plan to preach texts which paint a picture of God’s peaceable reign** such as Isaiah 11 and Revelation 7. Use illustrations and stories from many cultures in your sermons. Google is our friend. When writing, I might search “Latino man saves African American boy” and see what comes up.
- **Start a gospel choir, no matter the racial or ethnic mix in your congregation.** The local high school has some *Glee*-type teens who are ready to help you start an intergenerational choir.
- **Secular music like jazz, R&B, classical, rock, and rap can help to build cultural bridges.** For example, Michael Jackson’s “Man in the Mirror” is a secular song with spiritual meaning. Music draws diverse people together in the world and does the same within our congregations.
- **Hire a musician who is complementary to your style**, one who shares your vision for racial and cultural diversity. Collaborate and celebrate the product in worship.

Storying Diversity through Worship and the Arts

We complete a planner like the one on page 15 to share the details of each worship celebration with the team.

Storying Multiracial, Multicultural Congregations through Worship and the Arts

A Worksheet for Planning Worship

Theme: What is the story we are telling right now? What is the theme for this liturgical arc?

Date	<i>Date and Theme or special considerations for this day</i>
Preacher(s)	<i>Who is preaching?</i>
Scripture	<i>What text(s) are we using?</i>
Title/Focus	<i>What is the title of the sermon? Write a sentence or two describing what the sermon will say and do.</i>
Leader(s)	<i>All lay and clergy leaders in worship. Assign their roles in the spaces below.</i>
Announcements	
Thanksgiving Prayer	
Morning Prayer	
Offertory Prayer	
Hymn 1	<i>Consider ALL the music—hymns, choir selections,</i>
Hymn 2	<i>special music, and so forth—as you make your plan.</i>
Church Choir	Introit: <i>Do the selections for the week express our diverse,</i>
	Anthem: <i>multivocal community? Can we make different</i>
	Offertory: <i>choices to reach more hearts and souls?</i>
Gospel Choir	Selection 1:
	Selection 2:
Special Art/Event	<i>How can we use a variety of art to enhance and punctuate the message? Dance? Drama? Puppets? Visual? Can the sermon be a poem? Benediction a song? Can the dancers “move” to the scripture? How can we make the art happen in a liturgical spot so we can keep our time commitment to the congregation?</i>
Sound/Microphones	<i>Who is using which microphone so that sound enhances rather than distracts from worship?</i>
Staging	<i>Who is in the pulpit? Where will we position the piano? What liturgy will we use for Communion this month? We are ALWAYS painting a picture of the multiracial, multicultural vision.</i>
Resources	<i>Use The United Methodist Music and Worship Planner or Prepare! A Weekly Worship Planbook for Pastors and Musicians. Hymnals such as New Century, Presbyterian, Methodist, Rejoice in the Lord, African American, and Songs of Zion, are some resources we use from many faith traditions and cultures. We also flip through the index of music that resides in our heads. Secular songs become sacred here.</i>
Notes	

Middle Collegiate Church Vision Statement

Middle Collegiate Church is a celebrating, culturally diverse, inclusive and growing community of faith where all persons are welcomed just as they are as they come through the door. Rooted in Christian tradition as the oldest continuous Protestant Church in North America, Middle Church is called by God to boldly do a new thing on the earth.

As a teaching congregation that celebrates the arts, our ministries include rich and meaningful worship, care, and education that nurture the mind, body, and spirit, social action which embraces the global community, and participation in interfaith dialogue for the purpose of justice and reconciliation.



The Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis is Senior Minister at Middle Collegiate Church in New York City and Executive Director of The Middle Project. Lewis earned her M.Div. at Princeton Theological Seminary and her Ph.D. in Psychology and Religion at Drew University. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), Lewis is a nationally recognized author, speaker, and preacher on the topics of racial, economic, and gender/LGBTI justice. Lewis has been adjunct faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary, The Graduate Theological Union, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Wesley Theological Seminary. She has been interviewed on NPR's *Weekend Edition*, CNN, *Essence* magazine, the Associated Press, and *The New York Times*. Author of *The Power of Stories: A Guide for Leaders in Multi-Racial and Multi-Cultural Congregations*, *Ten Essential Strategies to Grow a Multicultural, Multiracial Congregation*, and a children's book that celebrates diversity, *You Are So Wonderful!*, Lewis was recently featured in the History Channel H2 series, *The Bible Rules*. She has published numerous articles and sermons, and blogs for *The Huffington Post*. Lewis is working on a book about getting a grown-up God. She is married to her best friend, Rev. John Janka, with whom she works for racial reconciliation every day. Through The Middle Project, Lewis and Janka offer consulting to congregations.



Middle Collegiate Church

welcoming • artistic • inclusive • bold

SANCTUARY 112 Second Avenue (between 6th and 7th Streets)
OFFICE 50 East 7th Street • New York, NY 10003
TELEPHONE (212) 477-0666
EMAIL middleinfo@middlechurch.org
WEBSITE middlechurch.org

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