

# ARTISTS AND THE IMAGINATION

FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER AND MARION E. WADE CENTER EVANGELISM  
ROUNDTABLE V “IMAGINATION AND THE GOSPEL: HARNESSING THE IMAGINATION TO  
ENGAGE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND COMMUNICATE THE LIFE-CHANGING GOSPEL”

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Albert Einstein once wrote that “imagination is more important than knowledge.”

Imagination—the ability to form images and ideas in the mind, especially of things never seen or experienced directly.

Music has played an essential role in developing the bond between the things of God and the imagination for centuries. On the whole, we can only imagine the glory, majesty, and splendor of the God of the universe—things we are told in Scripture but have yet to experience for ourselves. The heart of the songwriter is to express the unseen in language that stirs the imagination, that triggers an emotional response to a longing our hearts feel but often our mouths cannot express. Through the years these expressions have varied significantly, from David’s Psalms to the simplistic melody lines of the chants of the monks, from the lyrical poetry of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century hymns to the easy phrases of what is often called modern worship. And though the stylistic debates surrounding music are ongoing, the reasons for music remain the same. Music captures the imagination. It can capture one songwriter’s perspective of God, another songwriter’s connection with God through His creation, and still another’s desperate cry for hope.

I like to think of worship music as the soundtrack to my relationship with God. In the same way that a film wouldn't be as complete or emotionally charged without the right music backing it up, my understanding of God and my emotions wouldn't be expressed as completely or with as much definition without music occasionally tugging at the part of my brain that goes beyond the logical nature of faith and reaches into my imagination. The right music can bring the majesty of creation into focus, teaching my heart to praise the God of creation the way the psalmist did. The right music can allow release when all I want is to cry out in anguish, pain, or suffering. The right music brings me back to everything I hold most precious in my life when circumstances seem beyond my control. The right melody makes everything within me long to sing a passionate and unbridled song to the One who placed that longing inside me.

I think the heart of it all is that we all long to be a part of something greater than ourselves. Music provides an escape when we need it most, the ability to believe in the poetry and the artistry and the melody.

I believe that music has the capacity to bring people closer to God, allowing them to explore their emotions, their relationship to Him, express their deepest needs and the contents of their hearts. And I believe that churches everywhere are indebted to their artists for being a part of this, which is the reason for this discourse on the connection between music and the imagination of faith.

The introduction to this topic included a discussion of music and its pertinence to the imagination of faith, but art in the church pertains to more than just music. Visual arts play a major role in stimulating the imagination, as well as every word spoken by a pastor, teacher, or other leader that communicates something about God. In too many

churches the term artist refers only to musicians, but an artist can be anyone who captures a picture of God for others to see. Artists are, for this reason, an indispensable aspect of worship. Worship by its very nature inspires the imagination to think on things that are beyond our natural comprehension, those things that we could not envision without the help of an artist's interpretation.

Even for those of us who may not be musically inclined, the core of appreciating music and artists is understanding that every word and every melody are an artistic expression unto God. Anyone who has felt the perfection of anything take his breath away can understand this concept. The church, above all, should be able to take art and reclaim it for the glory of God. Whether we fall into the category of traditional or contemporary in our worship styles, the church has for centuries used art as a mode of expression, reflection, and reverence. Whatever our opinions may be regarding the use of art in today's worship, art still upholds those same values in today's spiritual world.

Artists are an essential part of the church for this reason: they use their love of art to show an attribute of God that non-artists may otherwise not have seen. I believe God is the ultimate artist, that He delights in those who share His artistic nature, who appreciate the beauty that always surrounds us yet somehow goes unnoticed in the overwhelming spectrum of life. Some artists will revel in art for the sake of art. The artist who follows Christ and is firmly grounded in his faith will revel in art for the sake of the Creator of art.

In an era when the definition of church has significantly changed and been adapted, new traditions have arisen in the arts and in churches who value the arts. The idea of the *reproducing church* has started to gain traction in many non-denominational

circles. A reproducing church is one that grows through developing new sites and new congregations in more than one geographic area. Rather than becoming a mega-church, attracting thousands of people to a centralized location, a reproducing church (also known as a multi-site church) begins with a central location or building, but from there goes into other communities, providing the same church experience at multiple locations, all happening simultaneously. Although multi-site church has been accused of being a franchise, similar to Starbucks or McDonald's (opening new locations so that their customers don't have to drive as far), the idea—though put in negative terms—is not far from accurate. A multi-site church can provide a big-church feeling in a smaller congregation. In the multi-site approach, resources are shared among all branches of the church, keeping every location connected to each other and keeping the name of the church synonymous no matter how many locations exist. The goal is to provide attenders with the same experience no matter which location they attend, helping them walk away feeling like they have experienced a connection with God—a goal no different than any other church.

In the multi-site church, artists are crucial to creating the worship experience. And because a multi-site church continually reproduces itself, starting new locations, it must also continually reproduce artists to support any new location that may arise. This is often a daunting prospect. Artists do not seem to grow on trees. Artistry takes time to develop, grow, and become fruitful, and often in church scenarios it can be difficult to find quality artists who want to further the message of faith. Any growing church will experience a similar problem; growing churches usually find themselves faced with the challenge of creating artistically sound and imaginative services that point to God. Many churches do

this well—Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, IL has an incredible arts staff that manages to put together artistic programming on a consistent basis; Mosaic Church in Los Angeles takes another approach to artistry, drawing from the local culture to express a relevant and artistic message to their community; Community Christian Church in Naperville, IL (where I currently work and attend) is a growing multi-site church with nine locations throughout the suburbs of Chicago, dedicated to excellence in artistry but also to helping people find their way back to God. When a church experiences exponential growth, an exponential growth in artists is necessary to support any artistic programming.

When trying to develop new artists, the first step is recruiting. In order to recruit new artists, keep in mind some crucial tips. First, it is essential to show a need for new artists. Church staff members should be adept at recruiting. Church staff members, though, are professionals when it comes to covering for volunteers. Many times a service will happen without anyone knowing that something should have happened that didn't, and artists often sit in the audience at a church service without knowing that their skills and talents could have benefited that service. If a need for new artists is never shown or expressed, many artists simply will not volunteer themselves. If they feel they are not needed, they will observe rather than contribute. For these reasons it is important to show a need for new artists continually, and also to communicate it aloud around the church.

The second principle to recruiting is to have multiple pipelines from which to draw new artists. By this I mean simply looking outside the traditional sources from which churches typically draw artists. Artists have a tendency to congregate, and while having an artistically impressive service may attract some scattered members of a

congregation to express an interest to a staff member, expanding the recruiting horizons can be hugely beneficial. Checking local music venues—coffeehouses or bars with open mic nights, for example—can provide a wealth of new blood. Bringing artists from a non-churched environment into a church environment may seem like a bad idea, but time again at Community we have seen positive results from this kind of recruiting. If the programming is compelling, even an artist who expresses no faith will be drawn to be a part of great art. Religious and nonreligious art both stir the faculties, and art in the church should be no less compelling than an exhibit at the Met, for our source of inspiration is in the Creator of art.

Thinking outside the box when searching for new artists can be as vast and limitless as any recruiter imagines. At Community we have what we call School for the Arts, a school run by the church which employs private lesson teachers, providing another pipeline into the church's artistic pool, and proving again that art touches the spirit of even those far from belief in Christianity. School for the Arts not only runs private lessons for a variety of instruments, but also offers various visual art classes, children's choirs, acting classes and lessons, and many other instructional courses. Of course, most churches don't have such an established school to provide a new stream of artists. But many artists involved at churches probably can or do teach lessons, and when looking for new artists it never hurts to ask your artists whom they are training to follow in their footsteps.

At Community we also highly value small groups. Because we offer none of the traditional "Sunday school" programming for adults on weekends, we rely on small groups to help our attenders further develop their own spiritual journey. We find that in

small groups people become more open than they would by simply attending services. This provides a perfect environment for discovering people's gifts, passions, and talents, and odds are that hidden amongst many small groups are artists waiting to reveal their skill. Artists are a unique category—although possessors of a highly valuable and envied trait, the ability to create art, they are often reticent to reveal this to a large group. I believe this is because art is so subjective—what is powerful and moving to me may not be to someone else, and it becomes humbling to open your art up to others, willing to accept not only the praise but the criticism as well. Artists have fragile egos, and we would do well to encourage art in all its forms, even in the beginning stages.

Recruiting new artists can come from within the church as well. Never underestimate the abilities living inside those artists who may not even attend adult services—students and kids. At Community we value the artistic elements of our kids' programming and our student programming as highly as our adult programming, and strive to involve artists of each age group in their own programming. I can honestly say that I have met some junior high and high school artists who have more natural ability and enthusiasm than many adult artists, and that enthusiasm is contagious. Mixing younger artists in with more seasoned artists creates an environment of inclusion, bringing together the different age groups for a common purpose.

At Community we feel strongly, though, that recruiting artists is not the most powerful tool we have. We endeavor to develop artists as well, giving them somewhere to go not only on their artistic journey but also on their spiritual journey. Using a process called apprenticeship, we pair new artists with our more "veteran" artists—those who have been around the church for a while, contributing to the mission artistically—in order

to establish relationships between artists. It is crucial to develop these relationships between artists; it provides a much more cohesive feeling to any artistic production when artists feel comfortable enough with each other to express themselves without reservation. The essential part of this process, though, is having strong leaders in place. Ultimately, the staff member overseeing the arts (Worship Pastor, Arts Director, etc.) should be not only artistically gifted but also passionate about teaching other artists how to encourage and develop new artists as well as give their artists a sense of vision and purpose behind the art. It is easy to fall into the “art for art’s sake” mentality, even in churches, when gifted artists are present and ready to contribute. A strong leader will be a visionary for the higher goal of art in the church. A strong leader will communicate why it is important to not only recruit but also develop new artists, not just how to do so.

Why is it important to develop artists? In my mind, the why is more important than the how. I love the apprenticeship process that we have, because it gives our artists a chance to get involved without feeling overwhelmed. It also gives them a connection to at least one other artist, and having veteran artists apprentice new artists helps keep the staff member from feeling overwhelmed by having to develop each new contributor in his or her ministry. Because the arts encompass so many facets, this is important for the staff member—an Arts Director who is more of a musician than a visual artist will find it difficult to develop new visual artists for a service. In the same vein, a Worship Pastor who is gifted in visual arts but can also lead the band will be able to train other leaders to direct the band and then have the ability to develop a new visual artist himself. Having volunteer leaders in place in an arts ministry is crucial for its survival, and also creates a sense of ownership in the ministry itself, as well as helping leaders buy in to the vision

and mission behind artistic elements in any given service. Though artistry is largely about talent, in a church environment it is also about relationships. By having leaders develop new artists, the leaders have a greater sense of ownership in the arts ministry as whole, yearning to see artistic excellence but also hoping to continually introduce new artists to the larger vision of the arts—that of bringing the mystery of God into the church in an almost tangible way. Because art is so emotionally charged it has to be relationally based, otherwise its grounding begins to destabilize. Leaving artists to create art in a vacuum, devoid of relational contact, has the potential to produce sterile and emotionless art. This type of art points not to God but to the artist. By developing artists, we bring them into an artistic community. No matter where they may be on their spiritual journey, development seeks to improve their artistry, and we have found that the relational nature of a faith-based artistic community benefits artists at every stage of their journey.

We owe it to the artists of the church to develop them and their skills further. If art in its various forms has the capacity to bring God and the imagination together in a sensory and corporeal way, the artistic community in churches should be valued highly. Artistic communities, just like art itself, must never be static, and because some measure of constant turnover—new artists joining the community, veteran artists moving on—is always present in church settings, development of artists is critical to the establishment of a healthy and functioning artistic community. A healthy and functioning artistic community will by its nature communicate the correlation between our imaginations and the nature of God. Through music, dance, visual arts, theater, and any other art form invented by artists we catch a glimpse of what our imaginations tell us the kingdom of God is like. It is a melody that soars into our souls, it is a rhythm that pounds in our

veins, it is a motion of grace and energy, it is an action that reflects what we dare not put into words ourselves, it is a snapshot of the color and wonder surrounding the throne of heaven. The church needs artists, for artists bring the Gospel to life. Art stimulates the imagination, and imagination stimulates art, and all around us we can see the beauty of the master Artist at work, the work which the artists of this world can never fully capture.