

Freedom for artists in the church

As a worship leader for more than 20 years in a free non-denominational church in Germany I wrote songs, poetry and plays as an expression of my art. After this season I joined OM (Operation Mobilisation) to develop an arts branch in Germany with a focus on encouraging artists and churches, building a network of artists, giving seminars and reaching out to society with the Gospel in many different ways. The following thoughts reflect my personal experience and probably also the region where I serve in the Body of Christ.

The role of the arts in the church has always been of great interest for me. During my time as a worship leader I helped build up a group of artists within our church (mainly non-professionals). For years they had the freedom to express their art during Sunday services. They had, for example, the opportunity to provide a substantial part of the program of “special services” (like Easter and Christmas). But the artists also contributed their art to other aspects of church life: Once a month a little team of artists went to Sunday school and presented a theme to the kids, for example in a simple dance or with visual art. After the presentation the children were invited to join in and become part of it. Another example is our annual arts evening which is a kind of outreach-model where people from the city are invited. It used to be held in the sanctuary of our church; last year we went to the studio of a professional visual artist on our team and invited everyone to come.

I am fully aware of the fact that in many churches this is not possible because of a lack of understanding for the arts, prejudices, different priorities, misunderstandings etc.. To be honest: The relationship between artists and churches is often difficult. As artists don't automatically find open doors into a church, I believe they need some sort of an “advocate” within a church who speaks up for them and champions their cause, a person who welcomes them, someone who understands their heart. Experience shows that because of his different spiritual calling and tight schedule only in rare cases this can/should be the pastor. In many churches this person could be the worship leader, because he serves in the field of music and has a lot to do with words, lyrics and sound as well as the interaction with an audience. But as nowadays worship ministries in many churches have different priorities, most worship leaders unfortunately don't feel called or equipped to become this “open door” for artists.

The church needs the artist and the artist needs the church

As in churches so much content is communicated almost exclusively by words, all non-verbal and visual channels of communication which the arts supply are desperately needed. Why not ask one or two actors or mime artists to contribute a quick impromptu skit to a sermon, or even the worship time, visualizing a Biblical theme? Despite all our necessary striving for excellence we should not be afraid of improvisational art contributions to services or events where applicable and welcome. A wrong idea of perfectionism can easily stifle inspiration.

It is very important for a church to love the artist and not only his art. It is tempting to have nice art to boost the image of a church and yet ignore the artist as a brother/sister who is part of the family. This would create a feeling of being exploited in the artist's soul. This also applies to an a priori expectation that artists should always do their art in church for free. As with all other questions about art in church there needs to be an open and friendly conversation about this topic, too. The worst thing that can happen is that all sides have expectations, and no one dares to voice them. There are models which can help artists contribute their works to church life without renouncing remuneration. Some professionals say for example: "Two weeks a year I do my art for church for free; the rest of the time it needs to be remunerated..." - which is a just arrangement as all external contributors to church life (like guest speakers) receive an honorarium, too.

There seems to be a wide range of potential conflicts between church/church leadership and artists which has caused many pastors to shy away from the arts and artists to stay away from churches altogether. Some of these conflicts are really serious issues which need to be processed wisely and carefully. But without sounding too simplistic, let me suggest that conflicts along this line are often similar to other conflicts in a church where non-artists are involved. All conflicts need to be resolved on the basis of the same Biblical ethics: understanding, forgiveness, reconciliation, working on prejudices on all sides and an opening of hearts for each other.

One final thought: Freedom is a very important issue for artists and a prerequisite for artistic work. Nevertheless, as artists we should not demand "unlimited freedom" (a kind of "blank check") for our art in church. Freedom for art within a church is something that develops over time. Our lives and our integrity are the best advertisement for our art and where mutual trust and understanding grow, the freedom for our art will grow, too. Positive critique by non-artists should not be considered as a "voice of incompetence": What non-artists with their different viewpoints have said about my art has often helped me more in my development than the opinions of colleagues.

Freedom for the arts in a church is not only reflected by the opportunities we get to show and perform our art. This freedom is often found in many other corners, slots, modules and teams where we as artists can and should invest ourselves in church. We should be ready to seize these opportunities because churches need the unique ability of artists to see things from a different angle, to handle problems differently, to express spiritual and prophetic things etc.. Why not let an artist preach on a Sunday? And there is even more freedom: Artists are needed to grow a church in new and unusual ways. Artists are needed as mentors to develop the creative potential of a church. Why not have a "creative day" once or twice a year in church (organized and run by the artists) where everybody is invited to explore their own creative talents? Why not have open arts groups/workshops in a church (knitting, hand-lettering, woodworking, drawing...) as non-threatening places for seekers to cross the threshold into a church or find easy access to the faith?

All these examples validate the calling of an artist in a church. These are "real" tasks for artistic people and the demonstration that art is not supposed to be a little extra to church life but that it can and should undergird all aspects of the vision of a church. This

may require a certain flexibility on the side of the artists, an openness for impromptu things and collaborations with other art forms and non-artists – but isn't church all about collaboration anyway?

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OM ARTS IN DEUTSCHLAND

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