

Vertical Habits Summary
Sojourn Community Church
Louisville, Kentucky

Sojourn is a church in the urban heart of Louisville, Kentucky. The church was planted in 2000 and is largely made up of adults and young families in their 20's and 30's, though that range is slowly stretching. In the years since our planting, we've sought to make the experience of worship comprehensible to outsiders and subversive to insiders who assume an understanding of the Gospel because of familiarity with the language of worship.

It's a phenomenon observable in any church. Ask a churchgoer to pray and their language will be littered with the language of the worship service. Words like "adoration", "confession", "thanksgiving", "atonement", and "sanctification" will adorn the prayers in a mirror-image of the way those terms adorn the liturgy. The question that remains is whether the words are connected in any way with a heartfelt understanding of the realities that they describe.

The Vertical Habits serves as a wonderful paradigm for teaching a way of thinking about the practices of worship that connects the language of worship to simple, comprehensible, everyday language.

The Value of the Project

Our Vertical Habits project included a four-week sermon series and a creative project that involved numerous songwriters and visual artists. The creative project culminated in the publication of a devotional and the release of a CD of original music. The overarching theme of both projects sought to bring understanding to what exactly we do when we gather for worship and to draw the connections between the practices of worship and the spiritual practices that mark the daily life of believers. We asked questions like:

- How does the language and range of adoration in our service – saying "I love you" to God - demonstrate the range of opportunities for worship in everyday life?
- How does saying "I'm sorry" to God in our prayer of confession prepare us to say "I'm sorry" to others in our lives?
- How does it inform the language and concepts that we consider when we confess?

The language of the Vertical Habits surprises people. When the community is used to a certain language set, replacing that (particularly with language as earthy as the habits) surprises people. Suddenly, these terms that had a category of understanding are rocked and shaken up, connected to these earthy and simple concepts. "Illumination" becomes "listening". Confession becomes saying "I'm sorry". The range of Christian practices becomes renewed by becoming a different kind of encounter, met at a different level emotionally and cognitively.

The Results

The goal of the sermon series was to spark a dialogue in the community about what we do when we worship. A few weeks after the series, we had a learning party with our musicians and visual artists. We spent a day walking through the steps of the service, teaching and demonstrating a range of ideas about each component of the service. Our goal was to send them out and call them to work on songs and visual art that communicated each habit and each movement in the liturgy. The results blew us away.

Our songwriters created over 40 songs – several for each habit – and our visual artists collaborated on a series of a dozen images related to the habits. The songs were narrowed down to 10 (plus one contemporary arrangement of a hymn) and the images were collected in a devotional. The CD and devotional were released simultaneously, along with an article in our

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monthly magazine communicating the goals of the project and the hope to renew our language in worship and connect that language to the practices of everyday life.¹

Over the following months, we heard feedback again and again about the way that the vertical habits language served to inform and transform the way the church approached the services. We saw and heard dramatic changes in the participation of individuals during worship. The singing was louder. The reading was louder. And the church began to see these weekly practices as something meaningful to them on a personal level – not simply the routines of church.

Conclusion

If there was one concept that emerged from this project that we find ourselves coming back to again and again, it's the concept of intelligibility. Tim Keller, in an article titled "Evangelistic Worship"², discusses the tremendous value of intelligibility in building bridges for the gospel to outsiders. The Vertical Habits serve that purpose wonderfully. Instead of drawing dichotomies between insiders and outsiders, we assume that everyone needs to hear these concepts explained and demonstrated. By renewing the sense of understanding that our congregation had, we renewed their sense of opportunity and responsibility to participate in the services.

I think it is essential to mention the need for contextualization. One thing we found in a largely post-church culture was a hunger for connection with history. As we taught the habits, the church continually showed the desire to cling to the historical concepts. Because of this, we found the Vertical Habits language served us best as simple supportive language and explanatory language alongside historical and theological language. Creatively, our music took on the sound and styles of our culture, as did the visual art.

I mention contextualization because what's beautiful about the Habits is the way they can bring out such incredible variety in different contexts. As we've observed what's emerged from other churches, we've been blessed to see the way these different "tribes" and congregations give voice to these concepts. So here are a few questions I would challenge you to consider:

- What is the Visual Culture of your congregation? What kind of art and aesthetic choices do they make? Some cultures will naturally reflect fine art or modern design, others will reflect the aesthetics of NASCAR or pop television. There's no moral value here, it's simply a matter of identifying the culture of your congregation.
- What is the conversational language of your congregation? Tailor the terms of the habits to connect to that conversational dialect.
- Finally, where is the congregation at in their thinking regarding the connections between worship and life? Knowing where your starting from – what the base of knowledge regarding worship is and how it's practiced – is essential in crafting a plan for moving the church forward.

May the Lord bless you in your work!

¹ These can be downloaded from www.sojournmusic.com

² http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Evangelistic_Worship-Keller.pdf