

Vertical Habits at Monroe Community Church

By Pastor Amy Schenkel

Monroe Community Church is a church plant downtown Grand Rapids, located in a redeveloping neighborhood. When my husband and I began this church about 6 years ago, we gathered together a group of people who were new to the Christian faith and to attending church. Consequently, we had to teach about why we do what we do in worship gatherings.

The invitation to be part of the Vertical Habits worship grant from the Calvin Worship Institute couldn't have come at a better time. We were looking for a way to develop experiential, meaningful, and theologically-sound worship. Vertical Habits taught our congregation about what worship is, and it helped us plan our worship services more effectively. It carried with it many unseen benefits too, such as community development.

The first part of our Vertical Habits project brought our entire congregation to Camp Tall Turf for a winter retreat. At the retreat we kicked off the idea of Vertical Habits, that our corporate worship can be seen as a conversation with God during which we repeat phrases that we often use in our conversations with others. We then divided the retreat group into small groups and assigned them each a single Vertical Habit, such as "Why?," "I'm Sorry," "Help," and others. These groups had an opportunity to explore their Vertical Habit in Scripture passages and to compare it with how they use these phrases in everyday life. Each group also developed a small banner that visualized their Vertical Habit; these banners hung in church for the duration of the series.

Back at church we asked these small groups to develop their Vertical Habit even further by creating a children's museum station that allowed other people to learn about and experience their Vertical Habit through a hands-on activity. These stations were set up in church on a designated Sunday, and we gave opportunity to explore them during a worship service. Their creativity was amazing, as the experiences taught us about these Vertical Habits in a new way. For example, one group was assigned the habit "I'm Sorry." They laid a road down on the floor, complete with forks in the road where you had to make a decision about which way to turn. Sometimes in life we make good decisions, but we also make bad ones for which we have to repent. When we repent, God washes us clean. This group symbolized that forgiveness by putting a car wash over the road (PVC pipe with blue streamers), and had people remember that God washes them clean as they walked through the car wash.

The teaching time in our worship services was also focused on the Vertical Habits, taking each habit for two Sundays in a row. The first Sunday spoke to our heads, using a passage from Scripture that explained the habit more fully. The second Sunday spoke to our hearts, using a Psalm to express the emotion related to the habit.

Our congregation learned a lot about worship and why we do what we do in our corporate gatherings. But many of the blessings were unexpected. The small groups gave our new community a chance to develop new relationships. The banners and the children's museum projects encouraged people to use gifts and talents they hadn't yet used in church. More people became involved in worship than ever before.

Furthermore, our worship planning team now has a template that helps them evaluate where our services are naturally strong and weak. Our tendency is to leave out the confession, or "I'm sorry" piece, while focusing more on "thank-you." The Vertical Habits remind us that worship is a compellation of many phrases in this conversation with God. Each phrase has meaning, and without them all our relationship with God will suffer.