

When worship works

By [Teri McDowell Ott](#)

May 25, 2015

Worship doesn't always work. It doesn't work when your student pianist can't get through a whole hymn verse without stopping and starting three times. Or when the toddler who accidentally bumps his head drowns out your sermon's climactic crescendo with his screams. Or when your congregation, who faithfully shows up Sunday morning after a long weekend of mission projects, only has enough energy left to go through the motions. Worship experiences are certainly not all under our control.

I work hard at worship, though, because I believe it deserves my hard work. Nothing, in my mind, better inspires or better pulls a community together than good worship. Every year I tell my students that worship done well can transform a person's faith. Worship done poorly can kill it.

In my position as chaplain at Monmouth College my students and I lead weekly chapel services all year long. In addition to these, we design and lead special services annually: Christmas convocation, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, and bacculaureate. Seeing as the bacculaureate service is our church-related college's premier worship moment, it gets planned a year in advance.

The planning process for this year's bacculaureate service was particularly frustrating. We had lined up an amazing preacher—[Margaret Aymer Oget](#)—so we wanted an amazing worship service to surround her sermon. The bacculaureate planning committee and I came up with all sorts of wild ideas at first. Special lighting effects. Flash mobs. Marching bands and drum lines. (The beginning brainstorming phase of worship planning, when no idea is a bad idea, is always fun.) When we narrowed our focus, though, and started hammering out the possibilities, we kept running into setback after setback. We can't do this because so-and-so isn't available. We can't do this because there isn't enough time to rehearse. We can't do this because so-and-so has fallen into the abyss of final exams and end-of-the-year stress and is no longer responding to e-mail. When the day of bacculaureate arrived, I felt confident that what we had eventually planned would work. But I also knew

that a whole host of things could go wrong.

In the end, it was beautiful—more beautiful than I could have ever imagined. Things came together for this service that we didn't plan. It evoked emotions that we didn't expect. Worship leaders rose to the occasion in ways that can only happen when they are inspired and feeding off the energy present in the room. I was honestly blown away.

And humbled. Clearly, what made this worship service work was a divine guiding hand. Yes, good worship requires a lot of hard work, planning, and preparation. But it's work that's never about us. So when it comes time, after you as a leader have put in all that *you* have, the best thing to do is get out of the way.

God makes worship work.

*Originally posted at [Something to Say](#)*