

In the past two weeks, two new books with very similar titles came across my desk and tugged at my creative soul. *Curating Worship* by Jonny Baker from Seabury Books has a rich and intriguing cover that caught my attention immediately. *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* by Mark Pierson from Spark House moved to my short list despite its less enticing cover. I took Baker's book home for a cozy read, ready to relax with a good spiritual encounter that would touch my more creative spirit. Wow! The book awakened me to a true convergence of Emerging worship and contemporary aesthetic sensibilities. It's worship settings go way beyond the tame ideas of theme-based altar decorations popular twenty years ago. Let me explain.

During my undergraduate years as an art major, I took a required painting course only to find out that the professor was in the process of abandoning traditional painting for the then-fairly-innovative trend of doing 'happenings'. Yes, this goes back more than a few years. While I never got the benefit of my professor's expertise on painting on a canvas, this special moment in his career provided me with a unique glimpse into one of the major, cutting-edge aspects of *avant garde* art of the late sixties. For the uninitiated, 'happenings' began in the late 1950's as an opportunity to push the envelope of what constitutes painting. It is kind of a melding of painting, sculpture, dance, & theater in a space-sensitive setting. The artist Christo, who is known for his huge fabric fence installations and fabric-wrapped landmark buildings is a well-known practitioner of this type of art.

When I cracked the pages of *Curating Worship* by Jonny Baker, I was stunned to realize how this type of installation artwork has been incorporated into the Emergent way of designing worship. Curating worship, according to both books, is the use of unusual settings, technology & large scale props to provide an environment for public worship or prayerful contemplation. One single example must here suffice to pique your interest. Martin Poole, an Anglican priest, describes an installation known as the Beach Hut Advent Calendar, in which the interior of 25 beach huts are designed by artists to create daily themes. One image of this installation heads this article. Each day of Advent the next hut door is opened, counting down to Christmas. The public installation draws crowds of church and unchurched alike who can ponder and chat about the spiritual dimension of each presentation and partake of light refreshment. Poole's successful idea has been recreated in several different settings by others who experience his original concept. In his book, Baker interviews a dozen artists and worship leaders who have experienced designing holistic worship environments. Their projects can further be explored on the many websites referenced in the book.

In contrast to the Baker book, *The Art of Curating Worship* by Mark Pierson offers the personal experiences of the author, a Baptist pastor in New Zealand, who has been a leading worship curator for over 15 years. One interesting aspect of his philosophy of curating is his sense that we need to develop a 'slow-worship' movement. What he means is that like 'fast-food' with its global-wide uniformity, the church can easily succumb to a brand of worship that is the same world-wide - uniform, bland and boring. By slowing down the worship process and tapping into regional talents and cultures, we offer worship that is far more meaningful for its practitioners.

The two books together provide an up-to-the-minute look at how worship can breathe new spirit into the hearts of those who frequent our churches and of those spiritual-but-not-religious folks who never enter church buildings for worship. Grab copies of these books and share these with the most creative people that you know, visit the many websites (such as Martin Poole's [Beyond Church](#)) cited in the book, and let the Spirit soar in your community. Focus on the Lord and not the aesthetic process and amazing things can happen.

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