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"'Dressed for Worship': Reflections on Worship in an International, Multi-cultural Church"

Edward L. Smither, PhD, Liberty Theological Seminary

Somlandela, somladela Yesu
Je vais suivre, je vais suivre Jésus
I will follow, I will follow Jesus

A Sunday morning shopper on Avenue Charles de Gaulle near the central market in downtown Tunis, Tunisia might be surprised to hear these lyrics, sung in Lingala, French, and English, coming from a church. Indeed, the presence of the Église Réformée de Tunis (Reformed Church of Tunis or ERT) is a contrast in this capital city of two million inhabitants in a predominantly Arab-Muslim country.

Indeed, the ERT is characterized by many contrasts. First, as reflected in the appearance and architecture of the building, it is an older church founded in 1884 by a French military chaplain who came to minister to French soldiers and their families in Tunisia. Yet, upon walking through the doors, one finds a state of the art sound system, modern worship instruments, and contemporary praise songs projected onto a screen by PowerPoint.

Secondly, the church has historical ties to the Reformed Church of France— a denomination that presently would not ascribe to Scriptural inerrancy and is considering ordaining homosexuals as clergy. Yet the ERT is thoroughly evangelical in its doctrine and essentially functions as an international Protestant church with members from Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Pentecostal backgrounds among others.

Third, for most of the church's existence, attendance has ranged from twenty to forty worshippers peaking at seventy members in 2002. Yet, with the increased number of African students studying in Tunis and the recent relocation of the African Development Bank headquarters from Abdijan, Cote d'Ivoire to Tunis, attendance has exploded to over four hundred forcing the church to move to two Sunday morning services.

Fourth, while the ERT began as an outreach to French families, today the church is comprised of people from thirty nationalities and over fifty ethnic groups. From a country like Cameroun alone, there are several different ethnic groups represented. Though most church members are from Francophone, sub-Saharan Africa, others come from Europe, North and South America, and Asia. While French is the official language of the church, it is quite common to hear prayers offered in English, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, and various African dialects. Perhaps this diversity is most immediately observed in the variety of dress present in the congregation as colorful robes and African headdresses contrast with western styles of clothing.

Along with the ethnic diversity, there is range of socio-economic and educational levels in the church. Hence, it is not unusual for economists from the African Development Bank who hold PhDs to attend church with their domestic help who are either illiterate or read poorly. For this reason, the church leadership has adopted a more accessible translation of the French Bible (*Parole de Vie*) for Scripture readings in the worship service.

Finally, the founding pastor of the ERT came from France and served in that role for forty years. Presently, the church has three full-time pastors—an American, a Congolese, and a Rwandan—who have come to the church in the past five years.
Despite the contrasts and diversity in the ERT, it is the only French speaking Protestant church that meets on a weekly basis in the country of Tunisia.[1] With really no place to go if one gets disgruntled, the body of the ERT has the great challenge of being focused in worship amidst such diversity. Pastor William Brown likened his congregation to the heavenly gathering observed by John:

> After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. (Rev. 7:9 NIV)

Though everyone is dressed in white in John's vision, it is still clear that the congregation is ethnically diverse. Yet, their focus like their dress is the same: worshipping the Lamb who was slain.

In light of the diversity already described in the church, the goal of this article is to explore lessons learned about worship in an international and multi-cultural context. While some authors have articulated the challenges and tensions in embracing an array of worship forms within one

[1] At the time of this writing, the ERT had begun to hold services twice monthly for expatriate Christians in the southern city of Sfax. As will be noted, there is a small Pentecostal fellowship, which left the ERT, and has met in a couple of different hotels in Tunis. Among Protestants there are two English speaking congregations: St. George's Anglican Church in Tunis and a small evangelical meeting for tourists in Sousse. The broader expatriate Christian community in Tunisia includes several Roman Catholic communities and a Russian Orthodox Church.

cultural context,[2] the experience of the ERT provides quite a case study for analyzing the richness and complexity in culture as it relates to worship.

Though I was personally involved in the ERT's worship ministry for nearly five years, my approach has been to interview the pastoral team as well as those who have given direction to worship. Aside from William Brown, the American senior pastor, I received input from Freddy Nzambe (Congolese associate pastor), Adriamaro "John" Rajaonarifetra (layman from Madagascar and worship team coordinator),[3] and Giscard Peme (student from Gabon and associate worship coordinator). To focus this study, the following critical questions were posed: 1) How would worship at the ERT presently be characterized? 2) How has the diverse and intercultural makeup of the church affected worship both negatively and positively? 3) What difficult decisions have been made regarding worship? 4) How has the church developed and grown in its worship life in the past five years?

Worship at the ERT Today

A Singing Church

Everyone interviewed agreed that the ERT is a singing church. Indeed, a ninety minute worship service will include at least thirty minutes of singing. "John," who comes from a Presbyterian background, noted that a set of praise songs and hymns, planned in collaboration with the sermon, effectively serves as a liturgical form. While there is a place in the worship order for intercessory prayer and the worship leader may at times invite the congregation to offer verbal praises and thanksgiving, worship in the ERT is generally understood as singing. Pastor Brown addressed this tendency in a sermon in 2004:

[2] In the American context, see Elmer Towns, *Putting an End to Worship Wars* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997) and Paul E. Engle and Paul A. Basden, eds., *Exploring the Worship Spectrum* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

[3] While "John" is the worship coordinator, different individuals serve in a rotation of vocally leading the worship service.

> One of our problems is that we have the tendency to understand worship as simply songs or times in prayer. We use the word "worship" to describe a certain style of songs. The songs that move, we call them worship songs, and songs that are more slow, we consider them songs of adoration. It's true that worship implies physical gestures. The word in Hebrew means to prostrate one's self. To worship means to bow down, pray, sing, read the Scriptures, preach, raise hands, etc.[4]

Brown's concerns for a more complete understanding of worship are reflected in the first article of the *Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture* (1996) : "To consider worship is to consider music, art, and architecture, as well as liturgy and preaching."[5] In light of this, the pastoral team has expressed a desire to incorporate more variety to the existing worship forms by including liturgical readings, reciting the Lord's Prayer and Apostles' Creed, and by praying silently at times and simultaneously ("Korean style") at other times.

African Style

A second observable form is that the worship, particularly singing, has a very African flavor. "John" remarked that for Africans, worship means celebration, which includes jubilant clapping, raising hands, marching, and dancing. As an American leading worship in such a context, I often felt that after the first stroke of my guitar, the congregation began leading the worship. At times, when I invited "open prayer" between songs, someone would begin worshipping with another song and effectively take over as worship leader! In such a wonderful atmosphere of freedom and spontaneity, it was admittedly tricky to know how to lead worship.

Aside from being celebrative, the words to African style songs are rather simple and repetitive. As much of the congregation grew up in oral contexts where technology is limited, the use of hymn books or PowerPoint projected songs is still rather foreign. The following, from the Baoulé dialect of Cote d`Ivoire with translation into French and English, is an example of such a worship song and is often sung at baptisms:

> Pkadjalê, pkadjalê wô lê,
> Pkadjalê, pkadjalê wô lê
> Salafi gnamien so pkadjalê wô lê,
> Salafia gnamien so pkadjalê noumalê.
>
> La lumière, la lumière est là,
> La lumière, la lumière est là
> Où il y Jésus Christ la lumière est là,
> Où il n`y a pas Jésus Christ la lumière n`est pas là.

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[4] William Brown, "Prémière Objectif: Adoration," sermon given at the ERT October 17, 2004. All translations of Brown's sermons are my own.

[5] Lutheran World Federation, *Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture*, 1.1, *Lift Up Your Hearts* (web site) accessed at http://www.worship.ca/ (last accessed October 11, 2006).

The light, the light is here,
The light, the light is here.
Where there is Jesus Christ, there is the light
Where Jesus Christ is not there, the light is not.

Diverse and Integrative

Giscard Peme asserts that because of the diverse nature of the ERT, there cannot be an exact form of worship. As the worship team uses lots of instruments, electronic enhancement, and a quality sound system, the musical style is eclectic and reflects what one would find in the market. As well, the song selection reveals an array of style from more celebrative choruses to meditative ones. Often, the tone or style of worship will be set by the particular worship leader. As the ERT has Americans, Europeans and Africans in a regular rotation, the church is exposed to different worship styles from week to week. Freddy Nzambe adds that it is a strength to integrate the various styles in worship so that every member of the church feels a part of the church's worship life. In this sense, the ERT reflects the *Nairobi Statement* which states that worship is both "contextual varying according to the local situation" and "cross-cultural, making possible sharing between different and local cultures."[6]

Diversity Affecting Worship

Given the ERT's cultural diversity, how does this reality affect the church's worship life? I specifically asked members of the worship team and church leaders how this influence was felt in both a positive and negative sense.

Appreciating Diversity

The overwhelming response was that the multi-cultural context of the ERT promoted a greater appreciation for the richness of cultural diversity and worship forms. Pastor Brown shared that he and his family, including three younger children, now prefer to sing African style songs. This broadens their vision for global worship and helps them to appreciate a form of expression to which they are not accustomed. A French believer shared that aside from being touched by worship in another language, worship at the ERT reinforces the idea of a global body of Christ as well as a vision of the heavenly gathering described in Revelation 7:9. "John" related that worship forms that bless his home church in Madagascar can also bless a group of international believers in Tunisia. His statement essentially summarizes the *Nairobi Statement* which attests: "The sharing of hymns and art and other elements of worship across cultural barriers helps enrich the whole church and strengthen the sense of the communion of the church."[7]

A second positive outcome of the cultural diversity in the ERT is that the body has a forced opportunity to learn and embrace other cultures. In a sermon in 2004, Pastor Brown said, "in Tunis, we have the French church and the English [Anglican] church, so we have no choice but to embrace our diversity."[8]

A student from Congo, shortly after his arrival in Tunis, described the ERT's worship as "nul" (nothing) because he preferred a purely celebrative, African style. Yet, upon returning to Congo

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[6] *Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture*, 1.3.
[7] *Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture*, 5.1.
[8] William Brown, "Les 40 Jours," October 9, 2004.

after a few years in Tunis, he described the worship in his Congolese home church as "nul" because it lacked the reflective element that he had come to appreciate in the ERT. Similarly, another student from Cote d'Ivoire who had spent more than five years in the ERT, experienced a stressful re-entry into his home culture partly because he missed the integrative style of worship learned at the ERT.

Indeed, worship can be counter-cultural in that it forces one to abandon ethnocentricities, even ones that are not initially apparent. Hence, the *Nairobi Statement* summarizes that worship "also involves the transformation of cultural patterns which idolize the self or the local group at the expense of a wider humanity."[9]

Diversity and Conflict

While the ERT's cultural diversity in worship has largely been valued by the congregation, there have also been conflicts. What challenges has the ERT faced and must continue to address regarding worship?

Not surprisingly, the key conflict experienced is the feeling that one culture or set of similar cultures is dominant in worship. Until the last couple of years, the ERT's worship style has tended to be more European. This is most immediately reflected in the vast majority of songs chosen from *J'aime l'Eternel Vol. 1* or *2*— a Swiss published, two volume set of hymns and choruses put together by Youth With a Mission.[10] Another source of songs is *A Toi La Gloire*, which was developed and published in France.[11] Despite being French speaking, European publications, a large percentage of these songs are translations from English. Though African style songs have been increasingly added to the repertoire of songs, the tension still exists over how many European or African songs should be sung.
Very related to that tension is that quite a few Africans, especially those who are new arrivals in Tunisia, have felt restricted in expressing themselves in a celebrative manner because of the more European presence and influence in the ERT— even if this element is a minority. Nzambe and Peme also attribute this initial inhibition to the overall cultural stress felt by sub-Saharan Africans settling in Tunisia.

Another way that the African membership feels restricted is by time. Typically, services at the ERT have lasted up to two hours, yet after a second service was added on Sunday morning to accommodate the growth, services became limited to ninety minutes. Peme noted that in his native Gabon, worship services last at least three hours and that the people need some unrushed time to enter into the Lord's presence. While the African members of the ERT have felt restricted by only ninety minutes for worship, some Americans and Europeans consider the same service to be a bit long.

While many of the cultural tensions in the ERT seem to be between African and European preferences in worship, there is at least one area where there is conflict between the various African cultures within the church— dancing. According to Nzambe, West Africans prefer to

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[9] *Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture*, 3.1.
[10] *J'aime L'Eternel* (Editions Jeunesse en Mission: Burtigny, Suisse); *J'aime L'Eternel Vol. 2* (Editions Jeunesse en Mission: Yverdon les Bains, Suisse, 6ème ed., 2003).
[11] *A Toi La Gloire* (Editions L'Institut Biblique de Nogent: Nogent sur Marne, France, 1988).

dance by emphasizing shoulder movement. In East Africa, they dance by making hand motions while jumping a little. In Southern Africa, they dance more with the feet and moving in a marching type motion. Finally, Central Africans like to dance by rotating back and forth with the hips. As a result, the other African groups tend to disapprove and even judge the way that the Central Africans dance deeming it sensual and dishonoring to God. Yet, the Central Africans insist that this form of dance is a sincere and heartfelt means of worship reflective of the culture of their region. Hence, within the worship life of the ERT, it has been necessary to address preferences and opinions among the African membership over acceptable forms of dance. While the African groups work toward a mature understanding of worship and dance, they are doing so amidst other Europeans and westerners who are just getting used to the idea of dancing in church!

The ERT also experiences some tension due to generational preferences in worship. As most of the worship team is younger, they tend to choose newer songs that are more upbeat. Even younger Africans do not seem to appreciate the hymns preferred by their parents and such songs tend not to be included in the worship selection. Finally, some of the church's older members simply struggle with the ERT's worship being so loud.

Aside from cultural and generational differences, the ERT has experienced some tensions for theological reasons. While some members from Pentecostal or Assemblies of God backgrounds have adapted to an international church that is not deliberately charismatic, one group of worshippers did choose to leave the ERT and begin their own meeting in a local hotel in which the worship was distinctively charismatic and characterized by public speaking in tongues and prophecy. On the other hand some Europeans with leanings toward traditional Reformed worship— liturgical and meditative — have left the ERT and joined the Roman Catholic Church in Tunis.

In a church as culturally, generationally, and theologically diverse as the ERT, conflicts and tensions like the ones noted are to be expected. In a sermon on worship, Pastor Brown acknowledged the ERT's worship challenges: "I admit that in a church of so many cultures and nationalities, it's not easy to find a worship style that makes everyone happy. So, let's be patient one with another."[12]

Tough Decisions

In light of Pastor Brown's admonition, what difficult decisions has the ERT leadership had to make about worship? First, they have made the theological choice to not openly embrace charismatic worship despite an element within the church with those leanings. While the issue has never been directly addressed via teaching or directives from the church leadership, it has nevertheless been dealt with in that the worship and pastoral team have not promoted certain distinctive aspects of charismatic worship. Though one group did choose to leave the church, others have remained because of their commitment to the church's overall vision, teaching, and worship.

[12] William Brown, "Objectif de L'Eglise— l'adoration," no date.

A second decision has been to limit the church service to ninety minutes. Though some cultures would prefer the freedom to worship for much longer, it has been important to maintain this time limit in order to accommodate two Sunday morning services and to take into consideration the cultures within the church that are accustomed to worshipping for less than ninety minutes.

Nzambe noted that a third important decision was providing some training for the worship team. Apparently, the pastoral team needed to convince the church council and other leaders that such a seminar was necessary and worth the time and expense. In the end, a recognized French speaking worship leader from Quebec was brought in for a week of training.[13]

In light of the ERT's diversity, Nzambe and Brown related that choosing the right person to serve as worship coordinator was difficult. It further remains a challenge to develop and encourage the coordinator in such a context. "John," the present coordinator, communicated the practical challenge of selecting songs on a weekly basis as he wants to include European, African, and even Arabic songs. He added that when the worship team is learning a new song, at times there is conflict over how the song should be interpreted (i.e. celebrative vs. reflective) based on the different members backgrounds.

Growing in Worship

How has the ERT grown as an international, multi-cultural worshipping church with its growth in numbers and diversity over the past five years? First, the church leadership has become more diverse and reflects the population and cultures of the church. While past ERT pastors have been European or western, William Brown, an American who grew up in West Africa, has been deliberate about bringing on two African associate pastors. The church council has also become more diverse and now includes members from Switzerland, Korea, Burkina-Faso, Britain and Gabon.[14] As noted, the rotation of worship leaders is diverse and regularly exposes the church to different styles and forms of worship. Yet, these leaders have also been embracing other worship styles as it is not unusual for an African leader to include distinctively European songs or an American to incorporate an African song into the worship selections.

While a diverse style is presently characteristic of worship at the ERT, this has certainly been a process over the past five years. Nzambe noted that five years ago, song selections were largely taken from *A Toi La Gloire* and worship was often led by a Swiss brother. Singing was further accompanied by a loud, out of tune piano with an acoustic guitar, flute, violin and a saxophone. While Nzambe relates that it was healthy for the Africans in the ERT to become exposed to a more European and meditative style of worship where songs were rich in lyrics, it was also beneficial for some changes to take place. Instrumentally, the piano was replaced by a synthesizer and includes guitars (both acoustic and electric), a flute or saxophone, a violin, and electric drums. As noted, the selection of songs contains a mix of African style, celebrative songs as well as upbeat and meditative songs from a western, European context. Also, song selection is facilitated by a worship coordinator and worship leaders who are sensitive to the various cultures present in the church.

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[13] Though the church seemed very positive about the experience, it is worth noting that the specialist brought in was a westerner and led worship in a manner that appealed to only some of the cultures in the ERT.

[14] The leadership structure of the ERT includes a pastoral team of three full-time pastors along with a *conseil*—a council that works with the pastoral leadership to make decisions for the church.

Worship has also developed at the ERT is through the use of technology. Within the past five years, a new sound system has been installed along with a projector for displaying songs on PowerPoint. Each week, the appointed worship leader is asked to bring the song selections on a "flash drive" and load them into the catalogue of songs already present on the church computer. While technology has positively enhanced worship, the church leadership is aware that it might be something of a shock for a worship leader, coming from an African village with no PowerPoint, sound system, or "flash drive" to integrate into the worship ministry at the ERT.

Another way that the ERT is growing is through training new musicians. At present, members of the worship team are giving music lessons to prospective members in guitar, piano, and drums.

Finally, Brown and Peme added that the ERT worship ministry has grown through some basic organization. Five years ago there was no worship team rehearsal and members simply showed up a few minutes early before church and did their best. Since "John" became the worship coordinator, he has initiated a mandatory Saturday night rehearsal that lasts a couple of hours. While this commitment has eliminated the involvement of some talented musicians and singers, Pastor Brown affirmed this development in a sermon that he preached on 1 and 2 Chronicles: "I thank God for the people in our church who are competent both in worship and organization. My desire is that these musicians would continue to take seriously the responsibility to lead us into the presence of God."[15]

Conclusions

Worship at the ERT has been rich and truly unique in my experience as a Christian and worship leader in a local church. Yet, as this article has shown, the cultural diversity, while diverse and wonderful, has also presented some challenges that must continually be addressed.

The ERT leadership is striving to promote worship that is balanced and not overly characterized by singing. Yet, as a singing church, the leadership is also deliberate about incorporating a mix of styles of worship that represents the makeup of the congregation.

While the diversity of worship styles ought to be celebrated, the pastoral leadership does encourage the church body to exercise self denying, neighbor preferring love. That is, if one's style of dance or desired sound system volume is a stumbling block to someone else, then preference should be given to that brother or sister. At the same time, those who dance a particular way or not at all, ought to remain open to new forms of worshipping the Lord.

Ultimately, the church leadership insists that worship is for the Lord and that this should be the focus over and above preferences for worship forms. Pastor Brown shared, "All of our forms of worship may be in vain, completely useless and without any true meaning. Worship is above all a matter of the heart."[16] In another sermon he added, "The church must make an effort to look beyond worship forms. God does not say, 'worship me if you only if you know the song' or 'praise me if the melody suits you.'"[17] Finally, "John" shares that "no matter the worship style, if worship is anointed, then it will bless and edify a diverse cultural context." In this sense, the

[15] William Brown, "L'objective de l'Eglise—Adoration," no date given.
[16] William Brown, "Prémière Objectif: Adoration," October 17, 2004.
[17] William Brown, "L'objective de l'Eglise—Adoration," no date given.

leadership of the ERT prays that its congregation, like that viewed by John in Revelation 7:9, would come dressed for worship in its diversity and unified focus.

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