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Quiz: Informal, experiential worship styles growing in U.S. churches

There is a movement toward more informal worship in the United States. But does that mean churches should change their worship styles? Take our quiz to test your knowledge of worship trends.

by [David Briggs](#)

March 15, 2011

Editor's note: Scroll down for quiz.

Large overhead screens, percussion instruments and spontaneous outbursts of “Amen” are increasingly finding their way into worship services in the United States.

Hymnals, choral singing, and suits and ties are diminishing.

Several national studies affirm a growing trend toward more informal, experiential worship. The [2006-07 National Congregations Study](#) found that since 1998 the percentage of congregations using visual equipment in worship jumped from 12 percent to 27 percent, and the number of congregations in which people raise their hands in praise rose from 45 percent to 57 percent.

In addition, more than four in five respondents to the [2008 U.S. Congregational Life Survey](#) said they regularly experience the presence of God in worship; just 6 percent said they were always or usually bored.

In a time of membership declines for many churches, the worship changes are part of what is “stemming the tide,” said Cynthia Woolever, research manager of the congregational life survey. “We would have seen much more dramatic drops if congregations hadn’t been making these changes.”

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Yet it can be hard to change: the satisfaction felt by the people who are coming to worship makes it harder for them to step outside their own needs and consider how change would be more inviting to others, Woolever said. “That’s part of our handicap.”

But there are resources that can help. Church leaders who want to consider changes to their worship have several research-based options:

- Diversifying worship. The [Faith Communities Today 2008 Study](#) found that congregations offering contemporary worship were especially likely to report both high levels of spiritual vitality and growing attendance at services. “In order to reach people of every generation, you have to offer the music and experiences they can relate to,” Woolever said.
- More choice. Eleven a.m. on Sunday morning is no longer the best time for worship for many people. Adding service times and sites are two ways churches are attracting more worshippers. “People are used to having more options,” Woolever said.
- An inclusive environment. Pay attention to nonverbal cues, such as whether the choir or greeters are all similar ages, to determine whether visitors will feel welcome. Even if a congregation has only one young person, Woolever said, churches should offer the youth a visible role such as being a reader or singing in the choir.

There is no one-size-fits-all formula for vital worship, researchers agree. Different kinds of cultural and worship styles are attractive to different kinds of people, they note.

Duke University sociologist Mark Chaves, director of the National Congregations Study, urges church leaders to engage in critical reflection before attempting to follow the latest worship trends.

His personal advice to church leaders: “Go for quality in every dimension. ... Whatever your genre of music is, do it well. Whatever your style of preaching is, do it well.”

In other words, if you build great worship services, they might very well come.

