

IMMERSE

A JOURNAL OF FAITH, LIFE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

Hitting the Mark (while missing the target)

By: Kevin Alton

Kevin Alton is a UMC youth worker, worship leader, writer, husband, father and friend. In his free time, Kevin enjoys songwriting & recording with his band Purrington, found online at www.purringtonmusic.com. He also enjoys finding community and conversation with other youth workers through Facebook, Twitter (@elvisfreakshow) and as a part of leadership for Youthworker Movement, a national organization of Wesleyan youth workers. Kevin lives in the Chattanooga area with his wife, Britta, and their two boys, Grey and Penner.

Truth be told, I shy away from most Christian music. Despite all the time and effort that's been spent in recent years researching quality and means of worship, I have no idea what kind of worship environment I'd consider "ideal." I just don't know how we can avoid, on a week-to-week basis, wandering across the line from pleasing God to pleasing ourselves. And really, I'd probably be fine with all of that except for one nagging detail.

I am a contemporary worship leader.

I'm probably partially to blame for my own problems. In a setting of contemporary worship, I'm a traditional worshiper at heart. I love the way a traditional sanctuary or chapel instantly quiets my soul and awakens reverence. I was raised in the United Methodist Church, where ministerial robes whispered solemnity. Congregational liturgical readings echoed the past; we were partaking of something old, something bigger than us, something important.

To this day, the introduction of the presence of God through lighting candles draws me deeper, preparing me for worship. It pleases me. And that is where I begin to cross the line.

I don't mean that it's wrong for us to enjoy worship, to find pleasure in it. There is certainly pleasure to be found in giving pleasure; our worship, however, should be wholly and selflessly aimed to please our God.

I get quickly pegged as a contemporary guy. Long hair, tied back. Youth worker. Guitar player. Must be, right? I've played guitar for about 20

years. From the beginning, for me, it was about one thing: when I played guitar, it was an act of worship. Granted, for a few years it was an act of worship that was difficult to listen to, but when I played, I was playing to God. It was a genuine connection. The more I played, the more I became aware of the possibility of individual worship. The great irony is that in the last five years, as I began using my ability in worship settings for the first time, worship became a struggle. Gone was the freedom of creation; we were to learn only songs that had already been written—and only the popular ones. Until I began playing in the church, I'd always played in bands that wrote their own material. I'd never wanted to be in a cover band, and suddenly that's exactly where I was. And it wasn't exactly like we were getting to cover The Beatles.

I think my greatest grief about the current climate of contemporary Christian worship is how much of popular culture got dragged into our worship settings with the popular Christian music. Our worship planning has become saturated with PR and marketing mechanisms. "Popular" anything derives from a discerned lowest common denominator. As churches struggle to retain and grow membership, the natural desire is to create popular worship practices. Striving for a certain level of local popularity results in certain expectations placed on the local congregation's "worship product."

Worship planners know that it should be this loud, in this style, using these songs with a speaker that employs this set of media while delivering a compelling message on these topics. They know these things because they were trained at a *national* event, where they heard from nationally recognized Speaker A and celebrated with nationally beloved Worship Leader B, with an evening concert from Up-and-Coming Band C, next year's nationally beloved worship leader. They were probably even challenged in a side session by edgy, regionally known Speaker D.

I don't mean that we should throw out all standards of quality and stop listening to what everybody else is doing. We should always be able to learn from each other. But we have literally built an industry—a huge, multi-million-dollar-a-year industry—out of what is meant to be a simple, relational act before God in the presence of likeminded individuals. If God is the intended audience of worship, then all we as leaders should do is prompt, encourage and enable those present to individually worship. Somewhere along the way, I think we forgot that we're supposed to be teaching people *how* to worship.

If we can get back to that, I think we'll use that newly realized gift to discover our own individual acts of worship. That's what happened to me when I picked up my dad's Silvertone electric guitar. At the age of 17, finding that led me to discover my own way of praising God, apart from packaging and programming and consumerism; a gift that forever changed my life.

My fervent prayer is that the mark of my ministry is not how topical, timely or professionally executed it was. My hope is that I am able to lead people to turn inward, enabling them to find their own ways of pleasing God.