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Memory and Imagination: Shaping Music's Past, Present, and Future

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A4: Memory and Imagination: Shaping Music's Past, Present and Future

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Memory and imagination are key ingredients in shaping the church's music and its worship. This session will explore the roles of memory and imagination in informing our daily lives, our lives as ministers in the church, and as a launching place for imaginative thinking about music in the church.

*Now faith is the assurance that what we hope for will come about and
the certainty that what we cannot see exists.*

Hebrews 11:1 (ISV)

What is memory?

- More than recall.
- More than intellectual or emotional response.
- Never want to be without it.
- Foundational – gives life meaning.

What is memory's role in our lives?

- Grounds us, contextualizes our lives and ministries.
- Creates a basis for emotions.
- Determines how we perceive new experiences.
- Establishes basic responses such as safety, trust, and love.
- Deepens current experiences by situating them within and against previous experiences.
- Allows us to develop continually – individually and corporately.
- Lets us share our stories with others and receive others' stories.
- Weaves a meta-narrative that connects to all people and places.
- Connects us to God's continual story of redemption.

How does memory shape us?

- Bad memories haunt us and hold us back.
- Positive memories launch us forward and give us energy and vision.

- Much of the therapy that we are involved with in our lives revolves around memory.
- Most church conflict is shaped by conflicting memories.
- Memory must be nurtured and guarded. It has the ability to empower or to atrophy us.
- Memory is closely tied to our ability to act and improvise – both musically and metaphorically.

How is memory cultivated?

- Memory is cultivated through experiences.
- All experiences create a memory. All that we do and experience shapes our memory. (We all have memories we'd like to erase and ones that we'd like to enhance.)
- To create memories, we must take the risks necessary to put ourselves in new places and take new adventures.

What are memory's limitations? Where does memory come up short?

- Can be a liability when depended on too heavily.
- We can get stuck in memory at any age.
- All memory is subjective. It is based on truth, but it is laced with interpretation and forgetfulness. It is never fully accurate.
- Memory is always selective – more and more over time.
- Memory needs a community to interpret.

How does memory shape the worship life of a congregation?

- All worship is in some way shaped by someone's memory.
- Our faith is built around the God stories that have been passed along through the Bible and through the living witness of those within our faith community.
- Every congregation has a collective memory that is most readily visible in its worship life.
- Conflict arises when a sizable number of experiences in worship are not shared memories by a significant number of congregants.
- As worship leaders we are continually to enlarge the worship memory of the congregations that we serve. Every new experience is a part of the memory-building process.
- In order to build congregational memory and enlarge the community's God-story, we must be continually putting ourselves in places to build our own memory.

- Leading a congregation is always about leading contextually. It is about finding the place where our story connects with others.
- The more memory we have, the better chance that we have of finding a place where our God story can connect with others. As a result, God can be worshiped effectively and imaginatively.

How can memory function as a catalyst for imagination individually and within the church?

- The greater capacity we have for memory, the greater our capacity for imagination.
- Memories can be intellectually and emotionally based; however, the memories which shape us most profoundly are the ones that affect us emotionally.
- Since our God experience is ultimately "by faith," no amount of cognitive input is ever going to take the place of experience and feeling in worship; therefore, worship leaders must continually find ways to connect worship experiences with congregational memory.
- Expanding the worship memory of one component of the congregation always moves the entire congregation, i.e., for one group (individual) to move within the worship body, all positions must in some way shift. The worship leader must negotiate the change that is occurring within a group, and he/she must find ways to assist the other congregants in negotiating their new positions within the group.

What is imagination?

- Built on memory.
- The corollary of a strong imagination is a deep well of memory.
- Always moving forward toward what is yet to be.
- The foundation upon which change and transformation are built.
- The ability to see in the mind's eye something that doesn't yet exist.
- The capacity to project into the future something that could make the world better.
- The adeptness to reshape what is into what could be.
- More than knowledge; many people are able to understand what is, but can't imagine what could be. Without imagination, knowledge will not be transformative.
- More than dreams. There is an ability to see, hear, touch, and feel. Becomes three dimensional or embodied.
- Not based on facts – facts are often the toxin that destroys imagination.

Imagination might give leaders of music and worship . . .

- The ability to imagine a congregation singing a song they have never sung before and finding a way to teach and inspire them to sing it and eventually make it a part of themselves.
- The ability to hear a musical motif and imagine it as the seed for a new song.
- The ability to hear a passing phrase and imagine it as lines of poetry that could be set to music.
- The ability to see the limits of your own musical world and imagine that world becoming much broader and deeper.
- The ability to see our world segregated into music cubicles of self-propagating, like-colored individuals and imagine a wall-less, multicolored world.

As ministers we are called to engage with the imagination of Christ. All who have altered the world have imagined.

How might our individual and corporate imagination be enhanced?

- Creating communal spaces for sharing
- Working in well-lighted environments
- Conversing locally and globally
- Working toward inclusivity
- Establishing commons
- Encouraging catalysts
- Developing ecumenism
- Re/forming continually
- Reimagining institutions
- Sticking together
- Serving a bigger God

C. Randall Bradley, *From Memory to Imagination: Reforming the Church's Music*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012).