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Drum Circle Worship

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SESSION A21: Drum Circle Worship, Eric Nykamp

DRUMMING TO THE HEARTBEAT OF GOD



By Eric Nykamp
REFORMED WORSHIP,
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www.ucircles.org

The sixty people gathered for worship had been drumming together for nearly forty minutes, occasionally enlivening the rhythm with songs, shouts, or movements cued by the worship facilitator. At times people offered their own prayers to God over the sound of the drumming, or spontaneously danced, or sang a song that percolated out of their hearts. As the facilitator moved to the center of the circle, signaling to bring the drumming down, the room became quieter until eventually the drumming faded to nothing. The circle of drummers basked in the silence, aware of their connection to each other and to God. It was a holy moment.

While some Christians who traditionally worship to the sound of an organ, piano, or guitar may at first find the pulsing patter of dozens of hand drums “foreign” or “exotic,” others find these same sounds culturally affirming and deeply worshipful. But Robin Harris argues that “all people should have the opportunity to worship God in their own heart languages and music” (*Worship Leader*, Nov/Dec 2009). That’s true for Christians in Western as well as non-Western contexts. We too may have an undiscovered or long-neglected “heart language” that could be rekindled through drumming as a way to creatively connect to our Creator.

Worshiping with a drum set is no longer seen as out of place in worship traditions influenced by urban gospel or contemporary Christian rock music. However, traditional hand drums such as the djembe, which carry stronger ethnic associations, are only recently appearing in Western Christian worship, though these instruments have been used in non-Western Christian contexts for a long time. I have been worshiping with traditional hand drums in my church for many years. Drum circle worship, I’ve discovered, makes sense in the context of

worship in general and of Reformed worship in particular.

Drumming is rooted in our earliest biblical worship traditions. The frame drum (Hebrew *tof*) mentioned seventeen times in Scripture is commonly mistranslated as “tambourine” or “timbrel.” The jingly instrument we know as a tambourine today did not come into existence until the Roman period, according to archaeologists and biblical scholars. The instrument referred to in the Old Testament is a large frame drum, about twelve to twenty-two inches across its face. It was most often played by women in both secular and religious contexts (see sidebar). Hebrew women, such as Miriam (see Ex. 15:20-21) appropriated this same drum in the worship of Yahweh, continuing to do so at least until the period of Babylonian captivity, and possibly beyond. The sound of drumming, in combination with the blowing of hollow rams’ horns (*shofar*), cymbals, and dancing were among the earliest ways our spiritual ancestors worshiped God. So the sound of drumming reminds us of our roots as Christians.

Drumming connects us with Christians around the world. Hearing the sounds of instruments from around the globe, playing them with our hands, and seeing the carving and craftsmanship all are ways in which we identify with, and are reminded of, being part of the worldwide body of Christ. Using these instruments in worship reminds us that we do not worship a God associated with one ethnic group or tradition but the One who loves people of every tribe and nation. Drums symbolically “stand in the place” of our brothers and sisters from other lands, reminding us that we are all united by faith in our one shared-in-common God.

Drumming is an accessible way for congregations to participate more fully in worship. In many Western worship traditions, congregational participation is limited to verbal expression, which often relies on the ability to read. That makes worshiping difficult for small children (who are pre-literate), those unfamiliar with the language of the host congregation (immigrants, non-native language speakers, or those who are illiterate), and those who have visual impairments (the elderly or those who have visual difficulties). It not only restricts participation in worship, generally speaking, to the healthy and the well-educated, but it limits the range of human expressions in worship, which is affirmed and encouraged in Scripture.

Congregational drumming also invites intergenerational participation in worship in a way that is particularly helpful for people who worship best through musical and/or kinesthetic styles. Drumming requires minimal training, and while experience allows a greater range of sounds and rhythms to be played, most people can play a drum in a way that sounds good without any previous experience, allowing both children and the elderly to worship with expression and joy.

Drumming affirms our “bodyliness.” The hallmark of the Reformation was the

idea that Christians should be able to read the Bible for themselves and pray to God on their own behalf. This democratization of faith and religious tradition resulted in a return to studying Scripture. To this day, many Christians spend a great deal of time reading to deepen their understanding of the Bible. This heavy emphasis on words may have the unfortunate effect of implying the Gnostic idea that our intellect (maybe even just our left brains!) is what God really loves.

Yet if we believe that God calls Christians to transform culture and our world as a sign of our gratitude to God for redeeming us, by necessity we must do so with our bodies and with action. The sound waves of the drum pulsating against our skin invite us to respond with our bodies by moving our feet, bobbing our heads, swaying our limbs, and spinning our bodies. The word “hallelujah” itself (Hebrew *hallel*) describes the spinning dance of praise, affirming these God-inspired bodily responses to sound. This is not a response of the intellect; rather, it is a response of the body to truth encapsulated in sound! In some cultures, if you can’t dance in response to what you believe, it is a sign that the belief has not yet penetrated the heart. Worshipers in the Reformed tradition need to relearn not only how to walk and talk with God but also how to drum and dance with God!

Drumming as a community is inherently reconciliatory. When people drum together, their individual rhythms quickly find a common pulse. This principle is called “entrainment,” and it’s one of the reasons why many people love drumming in community. For many who come into the drum circle, this natural coming-together of individual percussion patterns into one drum song seems almost magical. I often ask my circle what they each noticed when they drummed. People remark that they “listened to each other” or were surprised how “we all came together.” Drumming in community, people intuitively learn how to listen to one another and draw together. Making this kind of “new music” to God as a unified body of believers must have some overtones of what the music of heaven will be like some day when people from every tribe and every nation gather around the throne of God.

Drumming is one way to live out the summary of the Law. When Jesus asked the rich young ruler to tell him what was written in the law of God, he answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Luke 10:27). In my experience, drum circle worship breathes new meaning and understanding into passages like this that summarize Christian belief put into action.

It is difficult to participate in drum circle worship without becoming emotionally moved by the immersion in the waters of rhythm; without having a sense of being connected to God in a profound way that goes deeper than words; without passionately engaging your muscles as you play; without connecting your rhythm to the rhythms of the other drummers; without noticing that you are an equal member of a community, each contributing to the song.

Drumming is spiritually formative. Drumming in community nurtures many of the kinds of behaviors encouraged in Scripture. God calls us to come to him “like a little child” (Luke 18:17). Drumming encourages spontaneous and playful expressions of the heart and allows us to explore this kind of open-hearted, sincere play. The apostle Paul calls us to humility (Rom. 12:3); drum circle worship shapes us to play well, and, by extension, live well together.

Listening to the steady, pulsing beat of the bass drums is an auditory reminder of the presence of God in our noisy lives. I often tell my drummers, “If you ever get lost or can’t find your rhythm, just listen for the bass drums. The bass drums are like God. Whenever we are lost, if we listen to God, we know which way to go again.” This paraphrase of Psalm 119:105 helps contextualize the worship drum circle as an experiential metaphor of the Christian life. Entraining our lives to the heartbeat of God becomes easier the deeper we practice this way of living. Ultimately, the drum circle is not about drumming at all; it is about being in rhythm with God as members of the community of God’s imagebearers here on earth.

AN INVITATION

I started UBUNTU Drum Circles in 2009 as an exploration of ways to use drum circles in worship. Facilitating others to worship with drums has done more to revolutionize my thinking about worship than any other worship practice that I have participated in since beginning to lead worship in 1991. As a musician who plays vigorously on the piano and Hammond organ, I had assumed that if I was playing skillfully, then by default I was also leading the congregation in worship well. Many of us who have been trained as worship leaders hold one or more of the following values:

1. Good worship leaders are spontaneous, which is a sign that they are following the Holy Spirit in worship.
2. Good worship leaders develop a worship plan in advance to insure that there is a central focus of the service.
3. Good worship leaders can improvise and embellish the music as a way to lead skillfully.
4. Good worship leaders rehearse the music well in advance so that there is little chance of mistakes as a way to lead skillfully.
5. Good worship leaders lead with the emotional tenor they would like the congregation to emulate in worship.

These values are part of good leadership in the Western tradition. But the handicap in this tradition is that it is easy to focus on “following the leader” as opposed to focusing on worshiping God. Facilitating worship, on the other hand,

focuses the person or persons leading worship to see the congregation of worshipers as the instrument used to become aware of the presence of God.

To use a botanical metaphor, worship leading is like designing a flower arrangement, whereas worship facilitating is more akin to tending a flower garden. As I lead my congregation in worship through the format of the drum circle, I am not so much “leading the way” to worship as inviting and giving permission to the body of Christ to worship God with a broad spectrum of modalities (musical, visual-spatial, verbal, and bodily-kinesthetic styles) with authenticity, spontaneity, and heartfelt passion.

As a leader I am foremost the servant of my congregation. This means that I may need to throw out my plan for the service if I see that people are not engaged. It means that I try to find music and rhythms that are simple enough for everyone to access them, and meaningful enough that they fit the context and direction of the worship service. It means that I need to get out of the middle of the circle as much as possible once people have the beat, allowing them to “own” and worship with the drum song. It means being hospitable to someone who may have her own song or dance or Scripture selection to offer God in the presence of the congregation. It means less of a focus on me and more on helping my congregation focus on God. Through facilitating others, I sense that God is lovingly facilitating me and entraining me to follow his heartbeat.

FOR FURTHER READING

When the Drummers Were Women by Layne Redmond, Three Rivers Press, 1997.

Glocal Worship! Finding the Local Congregation's Global Voice by Michael C. Hawn, Calvin Symposium on Worship, 2011.

“A Creative Communion” by Eric Nykamp, Reformed Worship 98.

About the Presenter

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