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Collaborative Art in the Church: How to Start

“Live in harmony with each other do not be haughty...never wise in your own sight.”

Romans 12:16

“Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name goes all the glory, for your unfailing love and your faithfulness!”

Psalms 115:1

...I believe that each work of art, whether it is a work of great genius, or something very small, comes to the artist and says, "Here I am. Enflesh me. Give birth to me." And the artist either says, "My soul doth magnify the Lord," and willingly becomes the bearer of the work, or refuses; but the obedient response is not necessarily a conscious one, and not everyone has the humble, courageous obedience of Mary.

- Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*

Introduction

We are all called to emulate the creative nature of God, but we do this in many different ways. At the same time, we are all called to participate in our church community— building one another up. Healthy collaboration allows us to build community, brotherhood, and trust.

Art can be very subjective. Yet, when creating and sharing art in a local church, we can take steps to cast a wider net for excitement. We can find ways to share new ideas, as well as old, while celebrating the Spirit at work in our midst—all in one art project.

Corporate art can accomplish many goals. Infusing our works with theology, while loving our neighbor in the process, is a way to bless the entire church body, not just art lovers. In worship arts, we have the ability validate the lonely and the forgotten — so and so's nephew, Ester's husband, John's friend, the widow and the 12 year old. We can also use corporate art projects to express community grief and help healing begin, and we can memorialize victory. As worship arts ministers, we have the opportunity to validate and partner with the entire church, in powerful ways, one project at a time.

But an important question remains: *How* do we accomplish corporate art as a group— without wanting to tackle each other??

Terms:

As we delve into the topic of collaborative art, here are some key terms for everyone involved. Feel free to use your own terms in your local context, but the point here is to distinguish between the various workers/volunteers.

Worship Arts Ministry: The entire group of contributors, planners, and visionaries who will participate from start to finish.

Core Team: The visionary and oversight group, which consists of church leadership, theologian, and creatives.

Project Team: The group of workers who contribute to a specific (often, singular) project.

Creative Choir: You may have heard the term "Visual Choir" to describe the visual artists that contribute within your church. I will use the term "Creative Choir" because contributors can use a wide variety of multi-sensory creative skills.

1) Preparation

Assess your relationships

Think of the artist, pastor, worship pastor, elders and deacons, lay leaders, loud talkers, etc. Is there trust? This is an essential step. Trust must exist in these relationships before healthy/worshipful collaboration is possible. This step can take time, sometimes a frustratingly long time.

However, if God is calling you to use art as ministry, then this work is part of a greater work of art within your church body; an artwork that uses people as brushes and love as paint. Some might already have their church relationships in a healthy state. If you do not, or if you need to shore up a particular relationship, build trust, spend time, eat together, and woo equally. Above all, do not be divisive.

Under no circumstances should you invite your pastor to dinner for the first time and drop a worship arts bomb before the dessert. Or if you do, don't quote me during it!

Really invest in your collaborative partners. Trust takes time. This patient walk can be the first beautiful act of worship for your new creative arts ministry.

Difficult people

Some people are hard to work with no matter what you do. Be patient and have a clear, shared vision for how your worship arts team will function. Honor God while you wait for Him to work it out. Make sure your communication with this type of person is very clear. Any in-person communication should be reiterated in emails. In some cases, these people adjust or move to a different area.

Continue to try to build a strong bond of trust. If the person is essential to your team, think about particular projects for them to participate in and some projects for a different combination of team members to handle. Be certain to build heartfelt prayer into your meetings — such as, “Father, help us to be a team that honors you in our work, in how we treat each other, and in our results, help us to be gracious and humble as we...”

Finally, be gracious in the meantime. This too is an act of worship.

Discover possibilities

In all likelihood, your church is rich with resources that you have never considered. Begin discovering by creating a “Creative Choir” directory. (See Appendix.)

It is estimated that the average person will change careers 5-7 times during their working life, so congregants likely have multiple interests and abilities. They may be a graphic designer now, but maybe they also weld or make a mean BBQ. Try to remember that people are filled with all sorts of abilities that you might not be aware of. God will keep adding to this list as you journey on your collaboration adventure.

Art can be used to bless and heal. Trust the Spirit to guide you in this, and remember that everyone can help.

2) Building a Core Team

Your core team should be diverse and might include a pastor, worship pastor, theologian, a lay person, a creator, an elder over worship (if you have one). Ultimately, you want a group that includes church leadership, church members, a theologian, and creatives. Make sure that you have someone with a pastoral perspective involved. These people should be copied on any initial planning emails. (Note to artists: This core team doesn't need to be copied on every email, such as where your project team will buy yarn and if you will meet for lunch.)

Team communication:

- Hold ideas lightly. Never fall in love with your own idea.
- Practice *radical* humility.
- Do not get discouraged. Group brainstorming is like building a snowball— your idea might not show on the outside this time, but the snowball wouldn't be as strong or as full without your input/ideas on the inside. Without “internal ideas,” a snowball would just fall apart.
- Be a team player. The best collaborative projects includes many colors (Pastor, theologian, quilter, brick layer, artist, scrapbooker, non-art lover, teenager, child), all creating a masterpiece together.

Finding safety in teamwork

The core group also offers a layer of protection when you are approached by nay-sayers. In response to critique, say something like: “Thanks for sharing. I'll definitely share your feedback with the team. This is the direction the church leadership and the team decided to go this year. Have you ever thought about working on a project? Maybe you could help create (a more traditional/modern) Christmas next year!”

Do not take unkind criticism to heart, but do share your negative and positive feedback experiences with the core team. You might hear one complaint, while others have 10 strong positive responses to share.

Even if the comment twinges a bit, no one is perfect. If the critique is valid, don't personalize it, but thank the person and put it in the collective toolbox for next time.

Understand funding limits:

Make sure that your core team clearly understands how your church's creative projects are funded—or if they not funded. This will greatly impact the scope of your future brainstorms. (If funding isn't available, there are still several options, especially if you are collaborating and involving your church family in the project.)

Either way, from the beginning, the vision needs to be considerate and loving, respecting what is feasible for your church body. (See the section “When Funding is Low” below.) It would be amazing to create projects all the time, but based on your church's ability and need, it might be more honoring to do fewer projects per year. Consider the burden on the church budget, and remember that fewer projects can allow more time, which can lead to a greater “wow” factor.

3) Collaborative Brainstorming

When an idea is initiated by leadership:

Sometimes a pastor will give a verbal clue: "I am working on a series for a couple months from now on 'Vision' and I'm thinking of some kind of a window or..." In some cases, the worship pastor or teaching pastor will send an email proposing a seasonal need, theme, or idea. If this conversation starts in person with one person, follow the conversation up with an email to the team. Clear communication can help limit conflict between core members.

Do not play favorites. Keep written notes or a journal to track who has helped with which projects. You might even ask people afterwards how much time they invested into a past project. That way, you can even out responsibilities and avoid preferring (or overworking) some people more than others.

In doing so, spread out the work over time. It is okay to approach a single member whose skills fit the project, but then be thoughtful about other creatives on the team and have them take a leading role in the next project.

At a core team meeting, or in a team email, the pastor (or other ministry leader) should briefly explain the season or sermon series. Ask the group theologian questions about the text and its references. Have him/her explain simply at first, and then you can go deeper. Team members can then contribute and ask clarifying questions as their minds explore possibilities.

Stay in the "maybe" realm at first. No idea is a bad idea. Springboard off of each other and find delight in each other's humor and creativity. Offer 1-3 very open possibilities that meet the need. Then allow for input, feedback, and additional ideas. Make sure you leave room for others to share, invite quieter group members to speak.

Think of possible "Creative Choir" members and the skills that exist in your church. Continue to bounce ideas until a general consensus is reached. Remember this is about worshiping the Lord, not us. Do not fall in love with your own ideas. If your team has trouble coming to a consensus without arguing, revisit the trust-building section and put projects on hold. I assure you, God cares more about your hearts than your art project. Otherwise, at that point, you should have a broad vision for what the project is. Before thinking about specific project ideas, though, try to ask questions like "How can we help make sure the congregation understands_____?" In other words, determine the potential goal(s) prior to finalizing details.

Things to think about when brainstorming a project:

- Is this temporary, long-term, or permanent?
- Can you include different age groups in your project?
- Can you include someone who hasn't been involved before (or not recently)?
- Are there any loners or new people who you can include?
- Can you make this art more accessible to those with different abilities? Can you involve them in the making of it in some way? Is it an appropriate project in which to incorporate something like braille?
- Does this art piece need an accompanying descriptive panel or blurb in the bulletin?
- What other arts have you incorporated into the service lately? Video? Poetry? Dramatic readings of scripture? Can you cohesively incorporate any other art forms?

When the idea is initiated by you, not leadership:

Remember that you do not need “permission” from your church to create art. You can pursue art-making many different ways. If you are making art for a church, it doesn’t mean that every piece of art you make is for the church. Some of your ideas will be exercises or experiments. Others will create beautiful pieces that just won’t lend themselves to the church building, sermon series, or liturgical season. These pieces can still be used to bless the greater church body through art markets and individual collectors. You can also consider donating pieces to schools and hospitals, for example, since that would also be ministry. The point is that you must decide what this piece is and not be confused or discouraged if, for whatever reason, your art does not work for the church.

When you are inspired, it is important to make some distinctions up front before bringing them to church leadership:

First, what is the purpose of this idea? Is this a very specific thing that God is calling you to do for ministry? Could it be therapeutic and personal? Is it under the scope of being a creative person and having a cool idea. All these are fine.

Second, is this a liturgical art project or something like a painting for the church to display somewhere? Is it meant for others to be involved in? Why or why not? What are your motives? Are you focused on the Lord and His word? Are you willing to reexamine if the church says “no”?

Once you have thought through these aspects, if this is a piece you’d like to propose to the church, ask God to help you approach the leadership with a spiritually healthy mindset.

If they say “Yes”:

Make sure you communicate what it is (e.g., using sketches or Google images), how much it will cost, and who will pay for it. Be willing to hear from others and adapt. Know the necessary timing, and prioritize the project until it is finished. You don’t want any of these things to get off track and lose the “Yes” next time you present an idea. Ask the leadership email the core team to let them know what you are working on. Try to include and validate other people in the production and installation of the piece. Ultimately, the audience is God, and in communal art, He is looking at the intention, the process, enhanced community worship, and the piece—as your offering. In other words, is the art a “pleasing incense” from start to finish?

If they say “No” or “Wait”:

You might be surprised when you approach leadership and things don’t go as planned. Sometimes they just won’t share your vision. In other cases, they might love the idea, but not have a relevant time in mind in the foreseeable future. Sometimes we are called to wait on the Lord, and sometimes a beautiful idea is *never* called into service, but that gestation period is not a waste. These meditations help us to be more sensitive to other work that God is weaving, and they strengthen our creative mindset. After all, it is not a bad thing to hold— a beautiful illustration —of how loving, or how magnificent God is, in your heart for an extended time. Isn’t that what we are trying to give to others?

4) Project Phase

Putting together a project team:

At this point, a specific “project team” needs to be formed. You can have one or more of your core group lead this specially designated team — depending on availability, scope, and area of strength. If there is more than one leader in the project team, good communication, forgiveness, and humility are especially important. The team leader(s) need to think seriously about the Creative Choir. The project might need to be adapted or improved, based on who can join your project team and the time set aside. After any adjustments are made, present a clear plan and a specific deadline to your project team.

When you’re unsure if you can accomplish a “hypothetical” project:

If you have researched and are still not quite sure how to go about a project, ask experts. The best place to start is within your own congregation. Many people are delighted to share their knowledge when you consult them — such as, “We are working on a special project and need advice from an expert. Would you be willing to help?” This person may even volunteer to show you how to accomplish part of your idea, or he/she become a partner in the project. Next, look to your network outside the church. Maybe a social media post is necessary, such as “Does anyone know a friendly electrician?” Explain your crazy idea, your goal, and your purpose. Ask what they recommend or if they would be willing to teach you. As an extra bonus, asking people outside of your church can be a possible outreach opportunity!

Delivering with Faith and Wisdom:

Don’t commit to or promise a project unless you have confirmed that you have the team necessary and that they are willing to contribute. A project should stay indefinite until you have touched base with each contributor and have heard their input. Make sure everyone knows the expectations. Set your deadline for all work (excluding setup) to be completed a week before, or earlier if needed. This leaves a little room for you to give grace to volunteers.

Use both faith and wisdom. Avoid waiting to the last minute or hoping that a project will “all work out” because you over-promised, assumed, or had insufficient communication.

When funding is limited:

If funding is especially limited, think creatively! Consider art grants, church grants, resale...and “google” like crazy. Look for cheaper supplies on Facebook marketplace. Post on social media to see if friends have what you are looking for. Create projects that use everyday items, or common castoffs, and then beg and borrow them from your network. For a few examples:

- Think of yarn or other home items that people already own.
- Borrow “large rusty things” for an installation.
- Ask members to buy flowers for Easter from you after — using them for an Easter Sunday installation.
- Look for scrap wood in nature or ask church members (use a slide to show what you are looking for).
- Get large pieces of cardboard or pallets from a warehouse worker.
- Do paper-roll projects.

You have more resources than you likely realize. Use your creative choir with artistry. When a project can't be done without spending money on it, try to think about ways to get more value out of the project. Can a portion be reused or repurposed? Could your piece be an item in your church auction and benefit other ministry? Would someone want to buy the project outright? Could you donate the project to another church after your use is finished? **Remember: Don't fall in love with projects, but fall in love with people, God's provision, and His ability to create beauty – not only through you, but through the community around you.**

How to cut material costs:

- **Paper rolls:** These can be a very affordable option.
- **Cardboard and pallets:** Ask some warehouse workers you know.
- **Yarn and fabric:** Check a discount warehouse or ask congregation to donate. Include a picture of what you are hoping for.
- **Wood:** Ask congregants for donations. Show them a picture or ask craftsman for scraps.
- **Flowers:** Often, funeral homes have a surplus or special connections for lower prices. Ask the congregation to buy flowers that will be used in an Easter/Christmas display.
- **Lift:** If no one in your congregation has access to these through their work, go to a company like ServiceMaster and ask if they would consider lending one twice a year (Easter and Christmas).
- **Scaffolding and ladders:** Ask contractors, church members, or family members.
- **Wire and metal artifacts:** Check with electricians, contractors, or jewelry makers.
- **Furniture, recycled paint and home repair goods:** Visit resale shops, such as www.habitat.org/restores.
- **Art Supplies:** Google "Donate art supplies" in your area to find organizations that donate or resell art materials to keep them available and out of landfills.
- **Overstock fabric:** Google "Discount fabric warehouse" to find cheap fabric.
- **Boxes and packaging:** Chain grocery stores will often donate packaging things like boxes or fish trays for printmaking etc. Just ask.

Links to help increase your funding:

<https://worship.calvin.edu/grants/worshipping-communities/>

<https://www.format.com/magazine/resources/art/best-art-grants>

<https://www.cheapjoes.com/artist-resources/donations>

5) Reflection

Debrief with your team, usually within 2-4 weeks after completing a project. A "feedback loop" is helpful in order to review what you have accomplished as a team. Naming strengths and weaknesses will help you grow as a team, as well as plan better for future projects. Make this a safe place to share compliments, ideas, emotions, and needs. For example, this is an ideal time to see if anyone felt overwhelmed and needs to rest.

As general advice, try to keep this reflection time relatively brief, and focus as much as possible on the positive, since you want to celebrate and not descend into criticism. If any mistakes were made, encourage one another that next time can be better! Make sure that a leader is ready to guide the conversation and to focus the group on the future.

APPENDIX

Potential Creative Choir Members:

- Pastor
- Theologians (Involve your seniors)
- Church Janitor/building maintenance (your new best bud)
- Quilters (sew, cut, quilt, make paper banners)
- Elementary Teachers (who spend their days planning creative learning opportunities and their nights cutting out shapes!)
- Seamstresses/Tailors (i.e., people who know how to sew know how to cut!)
- Photographer (including teens who take nice pictures on social media)
- Models (use congregants not stock photography)
- Scrapbookers (e.g., for paper banners)
- Experienced artists
- Amateur artists (encourage them, give them an opportunity to grow)
- People who have nice mantel designs during the holidays (e.g., decorating the table)
- Graphic designers (e.g., banners, stencils for wood cutting, slide creation, bulletin design)
- Interior designers
- Pinterest addicts (who can help with research)
- Bakers (baking cinnamon or ginger cookies for a Christmas service)
- Teens (“Would anyone be interested in helping design/build a...?”)
- Kids (Is there any part of the project that a child can contribute to, or can it involve the children’s ministry?)
- Renovators (both professionals and DIYers)
- Roofers
- Electricians
- Contractors
- Cement workers
- Jewelry makers
- Bricklayers
- Mechanics
- Laypeople (who can “learn on the job”)
- And don’t hesitate to ask the barbecue guy! (He might surprise you and also bring food!)
- The woman or man who always shows up to service first (“Do you like this here or here better?” as a last-minute setup checker.)

