

## **Picky Eaters In the Pew: A Strategy For Changing The Worship Diet**

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*"Taste and see that the Lord is good."* Psalm 34:8

*"I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it..."*

I Corinthians 3:2

Worship is a matter of taste ("aesthetics"), and by providing tasty foods, we can also, as the Psalmist writes, see the goodness of God. Taste and seeing go together! So do aesthetics, the visual arts, and God! The Apostle Paul also understood that church people grow and change, and that there is a natural "food progression" as we grow from spiritual infancy into spiritual adulthood. Milk serves our needs in our infancy, but as we develop and grow, we need something more solid, and, tastier!

Let's play with these metaphors and learn how to develop the "visual taste" of our congregations through the gradual introduction of media arts in worship (a pedagogy of theological aesthetics?).

When trying to get a child to eat something new or even unpleasant to the child's taste, a frustrated parent might simply say, "Just eat it, it's good for you." Most of the time, the child may not try it, unless the adult develops a positive strategy. Frustrated parents can turn to any number of child nutrition sites for guidance, including the Mayo Clinic ("...the dinner table can become a battleground...") and "Getting Past Yech", a Wall Street Journal article about the picky eater.

It occurs to me that when it comes to worship, the worship leader and/or pastor is just like that frustrated parent trying to get a child to try something new: "Just give this worship change a try, it's good for you."

We understand that, like the dinner table, worship can become a battleground, to borrow the Mayo Clinic phrase. This being true, it doesn't mean that we can't try to add something to the worship "diet" and even help parishioners grow in their appreciation for the new "food" of a worship change.

So, borrowing from the "Getting Past Yech" Wall Street Journal article about the picky eater, let's see how we might apply the same strategies to getting a child to try—and eventually enjoy-- a different food, to the similar task of encouraging a worship congregation to change its diet and try something new. Let's have some fun with this...and use your own imagination!

*“When introducing a new food, put a small amount on the plate. Do this at least 10 times before giving up.”*

**Worship Media Suggestion:** when introducing media arts into worship, do so in small portions, and do it repeatedly. Be careful not to use too much of the screen at first. Show announcements before worship one week. Use pictures to illustrate a choir anthem the next. Show a very short mission message from a denominational video tape or DVD during the offering. Display three or four “Last Supper” paintings during communion. What you are doing is giving the congregation small amounts of media arts without a “full meal” and just enough to grow everyone’s level of comfort and familiarity.

*“Let the picky eater wash, cook, handle or even play with new foods. The idea is to familiarize the person with different looks and smells and to reduce fear of the unknown.”*

**Worship Media Suggestion:** notice the family members who take photographs after a wedding or baptism of a member of your church family. Ask if they could email the church a few of those photographs for display on the church screen. Display the photos as part of the announcements within the week or month. Add text to the photo that congratulates the family and identifies the newly-weds or the newly-baptized as part of the church family. You will be connecting the family to the congregation, affirming their use of digital photography, helping them and the whole congregation grow accustomed to the use of a screen in the sanctuary. One message is that the screen isn’t used for something that is “done to them” from the outside, but is a communication medium from within the congregation. No longer is this something from “the unknown” or strange, but a part of the church family communication system.

*“Try food chaining: identify foods a fussy eater does like, then introduce other times and build from there. If the finicky eater loves chicken nuggets, try breaded nuggets of other meats, and then move on to meat that’s not breaded. If vegetables are the issue, start with crispy vegetable chips, then move on to baked sweet-potato slices.”*

**Worship Media Suggestion:** having developed a sense that what is displayed on-screen is imagery from the church families, add a little more. Show pictures of a confirmation retreat, or a recent women’s group meeting, or congregation members working at a food pantry or at another community-based activity. Use these pictures during the visual announcements before the worship, and slowly add them in to places during the worship like the offertory period, or perhaps as an illustration of mission during the sermon

presentation. You are using local imagery and pictures of the life of the congregation during the message times of the worship service.

*“Cover new foods with a familiar sauce that the reluctant eater already likes.”*

**Worship Media Suggestion:** here is an opportunity to use visual imagery while the choir sings. The anthem is a “familiar sauce” that adds to the “flavor” of worship. By selecting imagery that fits the lyrics of a choir anthem, you are enhancing the flavor of the music, amplifying (in a visual way) the choral contribution to worship by adding visual imagery, and visually offering the congregation another way to experience what they are accustomed to. Alternatively, a preacher might preach the sermon (something the worship community already “likes”) with pictures that individually and visually “anchor” each of the sermon’s points. The congregation is used to a sermon and a preacher’s typical sermon structure; the visuals, when selected well, increase attentiveness, add to understanding, and facilitate retention (remembering what was said).

*“Don’t yell or punish the picky, but don’t cave in and cook them whatever they like either. Allow a fussy eater to go hungry occasionally to learn that his or her pickiness has consequences.”*

**Worship Media Suggestion:** once you’ve started to use visuals, and once you start to hear some negative criticisms, don’t give up! While your goal is to help the congregation become more familiar with this “strange new food” of visual arts in worship, after trying “ten times” (see the first suggestion!), you might want to stop for a week or more. People will notice, and some will begin to miss the visual “diet” you have introduced. They will tell you, and begin to make comments like, “are you going to use the screen again?”, or “I miss the screen. You can use it every once in a while, you know.” This “feedback” will help you understand that you’ve begun to change the “diet” of the congregation in a good way, and that they are beginning to enjoy the new flavors while appreciating the nutrition you are offering.

Food advisers tell us that it’s far easier to train a child to try a new food and like it than it is for an adult who has been set in his or her eating habits for a number of years. Maybe this is what Jesus understood when he said, “Bring the little children to me, for to such belongs the Kingdom of Heaven.” Children, youth, and young adults will appreciate your introducing new visual “food” into worship, and, if our experience with worship change is an indicator, the older adults who have trouble with “new foods” will also grow in their taste.