

Background

Confluence of the Arts and Theology

What if artists collaborated with church leaders? What if they could gain from each other's expertise... the creative's ear for the world and the theologian's exploration of God's word? What if the open-endedness of art, with its process of creating and listening to God, did not seem so threatening to the average church leader? Wouldn't this be a richer and fuller expression of the kingdom of God in our day?

Confluence refers to the point where multiple rivers flow together. We are gathering artists of all media to listen to God together by creating, composing, and collaborating over three days where God may be heard collectively.

The Issue

The World has tuned its ear to the language of media. In the past few decades the world has become a media culture that thinks and communicates through the arts. Keeping pace with these changes has been difficult in the church where change can be threatening. But unless the church speaks the language of media and the arts, it has little to say. And when it does speak, it tends to use the arts in a preachy or doctrinally prescriptive way.

The track record for artists flourishing within church circles has been poor. The artist sees what is coming before others or is impassioned by injustice and with prophetic voice may try to express it. They often have been marginalized and misunderstood. The church's leaders, on the other hand, may have been burned from ever 'handing the mic' over to one of the free-spirited creative types. Theologians and leaders are reticent about art that is open-ended and does not connect to truth as understood within the church. The theologian wonders, "Who among the artists and creatives are willing to uphold the truth that Jesus taught us?" The artist wonders, "Can I actually do any art that will be useful to the church and also connect with a postmodern world?"

'Confluence' refers to the point where multiple rivers flow together. The purpose of the Confluence is to gather artists of all media together with church leaders to listen to God and express creatively what they feel He is saying. I view it as a prophetic exploration by all participants. The Confluence sits well with today's culture and is also at home with the Vineyard's ministry of the body of believers where 'everyone gets to play'.



My hope is to ignite people with an unforgettable experience of God meeting them in their co-creating, and also model a way in the Vineyard for more people to participate in a worship/prophetic event where we listen to God.

Purpose of our event

To engage God as we think in the language of today

Goals of this event

1. To do theological reflection by thinking in the language of today.
2. To gather artists and theologians to listen to God and express creatively what we hear God saying.
3. To allow artists to step out in the creative process with permission to not have to be 'churchy' or safe.
4. To strengthen our awareness of what cultural tendencies still have weight and which ones are not helpful. [See article "Touchstones For The Confluence Of The Arts And Theology - Article"]
5. To model a way of doing this that we can take home.

Overall Aim

The confluence is an attempt to bring together both worlds, recognizing that many of us are both artists and leaders in the church. To ignite those longing for change in the church with an unforgettable experience of God meeting participants in the creative, collaborative process. We hope it will influence the culture of church - how we worship God together, how we live in community, and how we appropriate and practise relevant theological ideas in today's world. Thinking in the language of today is our challenge.

Theological Adjustments

Church has generally lagged behind the world's development. We all use the idiom of this day outside the church. We tend to switch gears and think with the modern approach when we are in church circles. O... We may include the arts, but we don't always let the artists say tough things.

To speak the language of this world does not simply mean having art, poetry, drama, dance or music in our worship services or for decoration. Intuitively you already know that we will have to go deeper than this in today's idiom. When we are actually thinking in the language of a particular culture, it changes what priorities we may value. The question is... what does the world long for? What does it value? What does it despise? And then... how will such thinking in the idiom of today change how we do theology, how we even appropriate it, or locate it?

Some of the trouble the church has relates to a mode of thinking that we might call "Modern". This modern mode has also been called "Foundationalism", universal truth that can be explained, tested by logical argument, and be applied universally in all cultural contexts. Contrasting with this mode is "Postmodern Thinking", which is a more wholism approach that holds conflicting ideas in tension, sees truth as relative to the contexts of each persons' world, and tests truth through experience.

A modern system of theology tends to begin with some foundational ideas and then builds upon them. Not wrong! But since the turn of the last century, a more wholistic approach weighs ideas experientially. If we think in today's idiom, how might wholistic system affect the way we do theology?

Today, it may not be unusual to hold two seemingly opposing theological ideas in tension... like pre-destination and free-will. No one today would burn someone at the stake for the other's ideas. We can see the inherent value of opposing positions and, in some cases, we can live with both together.

Also, there probably is no new theology emerging as much as simply a shifting of priorities. Caring for our world as stewards of our environment is not new, but its priority is much higher today. There are many areas of justice that God is bringing to our attention, if we are to love one another truly. Justice in theology is not new, but many issues it raises are finding a very high priority today.

So where does the confluence fit in to this picture? The confluence will help us do what we already do naturally most days when we are not in the church. It will give us a chance to let our own intuitive listening to God source us with His priorities for our context today. From my research, I have settled on 6 'touchstones' that represent priorities in today's world. These priorities will help us with the way we locate and appropriate theological truth. Everyone will recognize them. Even Jesus used each of them. Artists will know them intuitively. These touchstones will show what truth is pure gold to people today. Hopefully they will help our churches think in the idiom of today.

Preparation

What is a Confluence Event like? In these worship/creation times, participants create together where one person's inspiration feeds another. Drama or poetry might begin, a musician would pick up the theme, a visual artist would give color, the dancer might flow into this... We create together and God speaks through the art. This creative flow may last a few hours interspersed with group debrief to check in with the sense of what everyone may think God is saying or doing. With this in mind, I encourage theologians and artists [some are both] to prepare for an event like this by bringing with them scraps of ideas and the tools needed to create art in their area of focus.

Imagination is within the domain of both the intuitive and the analytical sides of our brain. The intuitive area is the part that gets in touch with mystery. It is where we first feel a nudging or a leaning towards a new thought. Ideas begin here in the intuitive side of the brain and, before we make sense out of them, we begin to explore them further in a spontaneous kind of way. We could say that this is where the Holy Spirit first plants a seed.

I will give a very short overview of the Touchstones at the first gathering and then will highlight one more before each creative time. I will put up their symbols around the room to remind us as we create and debrief together. I will also provide everyone with notes and PowerPoint files of this material.

Practical Tips:

This Event is NOT just for visual artists! I stress this because, for any confluence to happen, we need to have artists of ALL media gathering as well as theological leaders. Often pastors are very creative. In the Vineyard many pastors are or began as worship leaders. They understand poetry and some excel in story telling or even drama. For something new to take hold within our churches, the presence and participation of the theological leaders is vital. Their role, as it may be emerging today, is indispensable, but it is also different. They will always be theological meaning makers, but meaning for postmoderns emerges through the experience of truth. The theologian will have to learn the ebb and flow of how this happens.

My role in these events is to help identify what is emerging, to loose people from insecurity, and stir up creativity. To that end it really helps to have a few point people who have a hunch about what is going on too, especially in their area of art. Anyone can give the same kind of encouragement that you will see me offering. Following some of the whole group debrief times over the days we are together, it would be good to have these 'point people' also gather with people just in their area of art for a few moments to share more specifically the process in their media or to get their bearings, so to speak, for where people might head creatively.

The main thing not to forget in this event is mutual inspiration. The event should let God among us emerge. Few of us create live on the spot with others around us, so as vulnerable as we all might find ourselves in this situation, but the event is not about individual's ability. The event is a step towards setting in motion more of the body participating under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So, I encourage people to take breaks and look over the shoulder of someone else to get ideas. We take what inspires us, often across disciplines, and we explore further with it. In the end it will become obvious that God will have done the overall choreography and will have deposited among us transformative icons in music, movement, word, and image.

At the beginning of the confluence event, I will give an introduction at that time and then have people connect in clusters centered in the different areas of the arts along with their point person. We want to give everyone in the groups a chance to share with others something of who they are along with a few hopes they might have. I will have some framework for this on PowerPoint.

Also, you may wish to read a short paper I have written giving a brief summary of the postmodern touchstones that we all know and use intuitively as artists. This paper comes from my doctoral thesis, 'The Confluence of the Arts and Theology'.

Setup

Video camera

During creative events, it would be good to have video feed running to the main screen projector. Someone will be moving that camera around to focus on particular things of interest to the group.

Projection Computer

A video projector will be needed and run from Rik's MacBook Pro. Sound from it can be captured through HDMI [preferable] or from Rik's eighth inch jack out to RCA or 1/4 " jack. Main computer will be used for projection and some sound that is built into show.

Sound system and mics

A sound system with mics around the room and jacks for musicians to plug in will be needed. A sound person may or may not be needed. You decide.

Itunes playlist Mac

All meditation times we will be using a playlist from Rik's iPhone set on the 'Meditation Music' playlist. It can be paused and then started again on the next song where we leave off. It doesn't matter the order here. Just needs to be nice quiet and unobtrusive music.

Lighting

Lighting is huge. We need to have adequate lighting around the periphery of the room for creative times, the ability to dim these when we move to the centre for debrief, and a follow spot or something to illuminate the centre and particular things we wish to highlight.

Sample Event Plan

Thursday

Arrive in afternoon

6:00 pm Registration

7:00 pm Introductions [People get to describe who they are and their hope for this confluence event. This should be no more than 3 min.]

7:30 pm What is the Confluence? - Introduction to event and touchstones.

Friday

9:00 am Lectio Divina [Reflective exercise]

9:30 am Debrief

10:00 am Confluence [exploration]

12:00 pm Lunch break

1:30 pm Confluence followed by debrief

7:00 pm evening meal followed by fun time together somewhere

Saturday

9:00 am Visio Divina [Reflective exercise]

9:30 am Debrief

10:00 am Confluence [working in secondary medium]

12:00 pm Lunch break

1:30 pm Confluence [with final debrief]

3:30 pm Where do we go from here? Networking? Resources? What do I take with me? Pictures, audio, and video from event? Facebook group? Do event in my area.

5:00 pm Goodbyes