

## Alternative Worship

an interview with British pioneer Jonny Baker



Does church service have to be the same as it was 50 years ago – even 150 years ago? Not according to a growing movement in London, England where lights, computers, screens and modern music are re-inventing Christian worship. Becky Garrison caught up with one of the pioneers of this movement, Jonny Baker.

**Jonny Baker:** Christian; dad, husband, blogger, director of an independent record label Proost, a member of Grace (an alternative worship community in West London), national youth coordinator for CMS; coordinator of the worship at Greenbelt Arts Festival, songwriter, lover of good food, Belgian beer and conversation.

**Garrison:** What was church like for you as a child?

**Baker:** I grew up with my Dad as an Anglican vicar.

**Garrison:** Oh, one of those Rowan Atkinson type dealies?

**Baker:** It was a positive experience. My parents' faith was real, and it was a time of renewal in the church.

**Garrison:** Describe your current ministry.

**Baker:** I work for Church Mission Society which is an Anglican mission agency that is over 200 years old. It was part of the Western missionary era sending missionaries to Asia and Africa. We have a mixed history – there are exciting stories of how the gospel was shared in all sorts of contexts and times, but sad stories of how western culture was invisibly part of the package! (i.e., to get God often you got Western culture.) I actually think that good mission practice especially cross-cultural mission offers us some clues as to how to do mission in our own contexts. So I am applying that to youth ministry and working with the emerging church.

**Garrison:** How do you define alternative worship?

**Baker:** I think alternative worship is simply what happens when people reinvent church in ways that connect

with their world and culture. In the UK it came to describe people doing this dance/club culture. What was important was not the style but that the church and worship and theology was being done in imaginative ways and forms that people could relate to in their lives.

**Garrison:** Explain what you mean when you define alternative worship as post-charismatic and post-evangelical.

**Baker:** It's partly meant to be provocative! Charismatic worship came on the back of an exciting renewal movement in the UK characterized by 'body ministry' which was very liberating but it then seemed to get stuck somewhere in the 70s with performance based folk/rock chorus singing and a very front led type of worship with a set of celebrities and personalities. After a season, this became predictable and dull and was in its own way very dislocated from a lot of contemporary culture. It's in this sense that we use the term post-charismatic. Groups are still open to the renewing work of the Spirit but wanting to find new cultural expressions for that. Evangelicalism on a bad day seems like the new Pharisees – a very rigid set of dogma, very focused on personal morality, and also stuck in a cultural time warp. But on a good day, evangelicalism can be life giving and transformative, so we wouldn't want to be completely negative about either but alternative worship definitely sought out a new space.

**Garrison:** How so?

**Baker:** Worship is something that the community makes or creates out of their life and culture. The word liturgy means the work of the people and this is what alt worship is reclaiming I guess. There is a high value on creativity and participation.

### Worship people can relate to

**Garrison:** Who is your target audience and what outreach strategies do you employ to entice them to come to church?

**Baker:** I think people are fed up with being target markets, so evangelism is low key based around friendships. The theory is that if we can create worship that we relate to, then our friends will think it is meaningful as well. Also, people are very open to spiritual experiences. So, the kind of things we do to invite others into are sort of art installations meet spiritual experiences.

**Garrison:** Can you explain the role technology plays in an alternative worship service?

**Baker:** Technology is part of our everyday lives, so it's natural to use it in worship. This has changed and evolved over the years. Technologies have included music decks/CD players, TVs, slide projectors, screens, computers, and projectors. But to focus on the technology is to

miss the point. Creativity and imagination are the important things. We can make worship out of whatever is to hand.

**Garrison:** What do you see as your role as the worship leader during a church service?

**Baker:** We have tended to deconstruct that notion of worship leader. Worship tends to be planned as a group and often different parts are taken on by different people – it all flows together on the night with many voices and expressions. Sometimes in our planning we will assign someone the role of worship curator (this term was coined by Mark Pierson). That person would co-ordinate and pull things together for the worship in much the same way as someone might curate an art exhibition.

**Garrison:** Elaborate for us regarding how you reinterpret scripture so that it is relevant for today but yet remains true to the biblical message.

**Baker:** We read the scriptures and simply read them through our eyes by bringing our world to the text and vice versa. This might play out in very different ways. We recently did a couple of services looking at Psalms. The first used a lot of biblical psalms with responses/rituals associated with them. Then the second week people performed/showed/read psalms that they had created. The one I wrote was called an urban psalm

that tried to connect the sense of a psalm with living in London today.

**Garrison:** How do Les Murray the poet and the theologian Walter Bruggeman influence how you approach the use of language in a worship service?

**Baker:** They both speak of the need for the poet by suggesting that modernity has had a very kind of controlled speech but that the poet opens up speech in other imaginative ways. We try and do that by crafting liturgies and songs and rituals that touch the soul with a new tone of language.

**Garrison:** Why did you set up your book Resources for Alternative Worship (Baker Books, 2004) so that it follows the liturgical year?

**Baker:** Typically groups do about one creative service a month. The church year provides a great resource/framework and connects the worship in with the Christian story and wider church.

## Reframing Tradition

**Garrison:** Explain the necessity for Christians to reframe tradition-

**Baker:** Tradition is often assumed to be doing the same thing again and again. But actually that is traditionalism – something that quickly becomes dry and dead. Language and culture are forever

changing and evolving so to be truly traditional means driving to the heart of what is in a tradition and enabling it to live by reframing it in new cultural contexts. Jesus did this all the time. Tradition in this sense is both something to connect to and be part of and something to be played with by the community. The dangerous memory of Jesus can strangely be the very thing from the tradition itself that is used over and against the tradition to subvert it and then renew it.

**Garrison:** Given that the term ritual conjures up images of a dry and dusty service in the high church, and is seen as a dirty word in the low church community, how do you explain the embrace of rituals in the alternative worship movement?

**Baker:** Ritual is a wonderful gift from the treasure chest of the church that we have found opens up windows through which the Spirit seems to blow. We have used old rituals such as anointing with oil, communion, lighting candles and new ones such as tasting foods, dropping stones in water, or walking a labyrinth. I think they are powerful because they embody a response to God and that response can function on a number of levels for different people. They are open enough to allow God to touch people where they are.

**Garrison:** How are images used in alternative worship services?

**Baker:** I guess the use of images was one of the groundbreaking things in the early days in a tradition that had pretty much thrown them out. Now it doesn't seem so radical. But the use of images is simply part of language – it's a way we communicate and express ourselves. We live in a very visual culture, so the use of image in worship is a natural thing to do for us. It might be art, photography, video projection, VJing or whatever. But the aesthetic of alt worship is generally speaking really top notch.

**Garrison:** What are some of the innovative ways music can be employed in an alternative worship service?

**Baker:** Worship is simply using the stuff of life and culture to make our worship. So we typically use music in say three ways – to create a soundscape we use a lot of instrumental chilled out stuff (generally this isn't from the Christian subculture), we play tracks with lyrics that speak to our situation whether that is a track by Radiohead, Faithless or whatever (it will be the sort of music we listen to anyway), and we write and record our own music that expresses our worship.

**Garrison:** How do alternative worship services address the issue of consumerism?

**Baker:** I think this is a really difficult issue. I think alt worship is instinctively on the protest side of things by being counter cultural but not in a way that disengages from the culture. So we use the stuff of culture to subvert and resist that culture. It is the biggest discipleship issue – what does it mean to follow Christ in a consumer culture?

**Garrison:** What is faithful improvisation?

**Baker:** It is an idea from Tom Wright. He suggests that the time we live in is one where we are called to faithful improvisation. He draws a parallel with acting. If a theatre company found a play with a scene missing they could improvise the missing bit. Not any improvisation would do though – they would need to be faithful to the author, the characters, the lot and so on. This is a powerful idea because it gets away from the notion that we should be copying models and suggests a much richer engagement with culture out of the resources of faith and tradition in creative and diverse ways.

**Garrison:** How did hook up with your co-authors Doug Gay and Jenny Brown?

**Baker:** Doug was a hero of mine – he was one of the pioneers in the Late Late Service and I think he is one of the best songwriters I have ever known. We moved to London at a similar time and met up and became

friends. Jenny Brown is also in London and was suggested to me by another friend as someone who might be interested in helping with the CD ROM. This was a great suggestion! She has since become a fantastic friend.

**Garrison:** What groups influence the alternative worship movement in England?

**Baker:** I don't know what you mean. If you mean alt worship groups? The pioneers were the Nine O Clock Service and The Late Late Service. Greenbelt Festival then became something of a gathering place for new groups starting out and to some degree still is.

**Garrison:** Why is Greenbelt a national home base for the alternative worship community?

**Baker:** It was a natural home because of its blend of spirituality, art, social justice and a much broader outlook than many of the other (evangelical) Christian festivals.

**Garrison:** How do you see this movement translating over to the United States?

**Baker:** I see very few things in the USA that look anything like it if I'm honest. Karen Ward (COTA) in Seattle is one of a few I have met who I think are doing something similar.

Note: If you're in the New York City area, check out [www.masswithabeat.org](http://www.masswithabeat.org) or

[www.isaaceverett.com](http://www.isaaceverett.com). Isaac is a way cool dude that has come up with some mass settings based on Jonny's music. Worth checking out.