

Alternative worship  
is what happens when people  
create worship for themselves,  
in a way that fully reflects  
who they are as people and  
the culture that they live  
their everyday lives in.

Because most forms of church have become culturally disconnected from the wider world, alternative worship can seem like a radical break with conventional church practices.

It uses the technologies and media of our everyday lives – TV, video, CDs, computers – things that we take for granted in a domestic environment but seldom see in churches.

It takes much of its content from the secular world - the music, the language, often the imagery - because it sees the presence of God in these things, and knows that spirituality has to make sense in the context of our secular lives if it is to nourish us and help us be salt and light.

Alternative worship searches  
the traditions of the Church  
for resources that fit  
the needs of the present.  
Christianity has rich storehouses  
of spiritual treasures.

Many of these lie neglected or forgotten, but have renewed relevance - others have been exhausted by overused and need to be rested, or have become irrelevant to the current needs of church and world.

Alternative worship tries to interpret tradition faithfully into new contexts - but this may mean changing the form in order to preserve or revivify the meaning.

Alternative worship  
is not about trendy evangelism.  
It is not about dressing the Church  
up in contemporary clothes  
to appeal to outsiders.  
It is not about putting on a spectacle  
in order to get a message across.



It is an attempt  
by the people involved  
to make worship for themselves  
that is real, that allows them  
to bring their whole selves and lives  
before God, not just the religious parts.

That means acknowledging  
in church that we do go to clubs,  
argue about politics, watch TV  
and films, have curious and detailed  
knowledge of parts of the music world,  
get stressed about our jobs,  
shout at the children...and that  
God is right there with us.

So it seems natural to continue the conversation in God's house, without suddenly pretending to be respectable.

But strangely, this makes what goes on more accessible to outsiders - because it's recognisably part of the world they live in, touches the issues they care about, isn't just a religious experience that you have to be an insider to get. Sometimes they start to see where God is in their own lives - and that's often not where religious convention would have us expect.

Alternative worship is deeply concerned for community.

Community is a place of honesty, commitment and support, where people grow through relationship. Community is essential to living any kind of authentic Christian life in societies which work against it in fine detail.

Community is not clique, but reaches out to others, maybe locally, maybe globally. Whenever we meet as God's people we are aware of those not present who are also God's people. And we are aware of those who do not consider themselves God's people but are, more than they ever think.

Alternative worship is intensely concerned with creativity.

Partly this is because reinventing worship requires it; but more because of a belief that creativity is essential to human wholeness and should be offered back to the Creator in worship.

Since we are made in the image  
of a creator God, we are all creative  
- but life, and often sadly the Church,  
conspires to tell us that we are not,  
that we have nothing worth offering.



Alternative worship offers people the chance of creative expression in worship. Not just the team making things to be admired by the congregation, but the congregation making things as worship, to be admired by the team.

Alternative worship tries to give people 'tools' for honest encounters with God. 'Tools' might mean prayer, pens and paper, a video loop, something to eat, someone to talk to, Holy Communion, or anything else that can help us to meet God in some way.

But the tools used in alternative worship have one important characteristic - they don't lead to predetermined outcomes. That is to say, alternative worship seeks to bring God and the participant together - but not to predetermine what the outcome of the meeting might be. This is essential to protect the genuineness of the encounter.

The implication of all this is that the team who organise the event see themselves as facilitators rather than leaders. Their skills are put to helping everyone present, themselves included, to have an authentic encounter with God. They don't presume to dictate the content of that

encounter or where it should lead. They trust that God will deal with people with infinite sensitivity for their situations. The absence of pressure, or concern for specific 'results', encourages openness to God. Amazing encounters may follow.

*[Skateboard magazines] are an implicated part of the development of skateboarding, and are thus what historians call a primary source - unmediated by the distance of time and backward look of the historian.'*

*'[They are not] the products of professional journalists, but the products of skateboarders themselves who have become journalists through working on such publications. Their agenda is not then the external agenda of the intellectual academic or careerist reporter, but the internal agenda of the intellectually active proponent.'*

*'Skateboard magazines are highly illustrated with still and high-speed sequence photography.'*

*As such, this imagery as much as the written work provides "the nearest thing that we have to a historical record of what skateboarding is".'*

*'The photograph in fact has a triple value for this history of skateboarding. Most obviously, it provides a window on the past, showing what went on and where. Second, the photograph is itself an implicated part of skateboarding.'*

*Third, the photographs reproduced here perform part of the argument of the book - the images, then, are not so much just representations of what happened but have approximately equal status to the words.*

*The performative nature of skateboarding's consciousness [i.e. it ultimately means something when the skateboarder skateboards] means that the image of skateboarding acquires the status of a statement - it is not only a representation of a thing, the meaning of which is clarified through text, but is a representation of an enunciative act and hence carries meaning in a less mediated manner.*

*Iain Borden, 'Skateboarding, Space and the City'*



*"Photograph everything...  
every aspect of anything to do with  
your friends on and off skateboards.  
Time goes by quicker than you think,  
take the pictures now."*

*Filmmaker/photographer Larry Clark to apprentice  
skateboard photographer Tobin Yelland*

When I began taking pictures of alternative worship events, my motivation was simply to record some amazing but short-lived artworks, so that now and in the future people could see what this thing was all about.

Over time a more subtle inner agenda emerged, out of who I am and the kind of photography I see most of. These images represent how an 'intellectually active proponent' sees the scene he is a part of.

They were intended for emulation,  
for the dissemination of 'tricks',  
recording not just facts but possibilities.

They are a contribution to a discourse  
about Christianity and society pursued  
not only with words, but with images  
and 'enunciative acts'.

Alternative worship too has a 'global conversation', in which ideas and moves are passed between groups, adapting and extending as they go.

Photographs play an active part in that process, by documenting the adaptations and innovations and provoking new ones.

They also help create something that can be identified with, for people who thought they were alone or isolated in how they felt about church.

I used to be in that position myself, it would have helped to have found a 'Small Fire' back then.

Photographs, as in board sports, can be a beacon for those who search. There is no really satisfactory term for the cultural field around skateboarding, snowboarding and surfing, which encompasses an entire web of activities and attitudes sharing the same 'head-space'.



It's instructive to compare this culture with church. In the former, image-making, action & theory go hand-in-hand as simultaneous activities. Actions and images embody theoretical research. Theory often emerges out of instinctive action. Knowledge is constructed through images and actions as much as words.

Conversely, the prevailing culture of the Church is an academic culture dealing in conceptual research, written theory which then seeks forms. The ethos is to write and approve first, then act to reproduce the writings.

The culture-makers are primarily those whose writings have been tested, whose training has been approved before they can act.

The difference between the cultures resembles the divide explored by musicologist Simon Frith, between the Classical tradition of music as conceptual, existing as a written work before and above any performance, and the African tradition of music as a social ritual constructive of social space, a performance

constructing and responsive to its context.

In the latter tradition, the performance that is right is the one that is right for [and in dialogue with] this group of people right now rather than the one that is closest to a theoretical ideal.

It's striking how many of those involved in church experiments are connected to or participants in the culture of riding sideways. I had assumed this fact to be banal, since board-riding culture in a diluted form is so pervasive now; but the reactions I've had when the subject crops up suggest that it's not as boringly self-evident as I had supposed.

Is it because creative and free-thinking people are drawn to that culture, or because that culture produces creative and free-thinking people? Is it because they seek a kind of church where doing and thinking are one inseparable gesture - thoughtful doing, active thinking, a cultivation of 'intelligent instinct'?