

ORAL COMMUNICATION IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP: A THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

The question of what constitutes Christian worship has been a front burner in Christian theological discourse for many years. The general perception of many Christians on the subject of worship, gives a picture that Christian worship is about singing, clapping and dancing, however, a close observation reveals that Christian worship is much more than that. The aim of this paper is to analyze the role of oral communication in Christian worship from a philosophic-theological perspective. The methods adopted to achieve the above task are the phenomenological, historical and critical analysis methods. The findings show that Christian worship is deeply intertwined with oral communication, serving as a primary means of dialogue and reinforcing faith. Effective oral communication in a worship service occurs during sermon delivery, Scriptural interpretation by clergies, prayers, and hymns singing. It helps congregants get involved in the worship activities that promote both individual spiritual growth and communal bonding. It also enhances the clarity and impact of religious messages, promotes congregational participation, and strengthens togetherness. The paper concludes that oral communication in Christian worship promotes dialogue between God and congregants through spoken prayers and hymn singing, and dialogue between one congregant to another through the order of worship, storytelling and proverbial sayings.

Keywords: Christian, Worship, Oral, Communication, Theological.

1. Introduction

Religion and communication are tools that shape the world we live in today. While religion shapes the individual's life in the society, regulates his relationship with the creator and with people around him. Communication on the other hand deals with both how we relate with one another and a means of communicating with man and God. Interestingly, both religion and communication are tools required by man to live a better and relate well with others in society.

In Christian worship, oral communication serves as a fundamental conduit for expressing faith, fostering community, and nurturing spiritual growth. The spoken word, through prayers, hymns, and sermons, plays a pivotal role in shaping the

worship experience and reinforcing theological teachings. This article explores the significance of oral communication within Christian worship, examining how it facilitates the transmission of religious beliefs, enhances communal bonds, and contributes to the dynamic practice of faith. By analyzing various aspects of verbal interaction in worship settings especially in the use of African proverbs, this study aims to illuminate the integral role that speech and language play in the spiritual and communal dimensions of Christian practice.

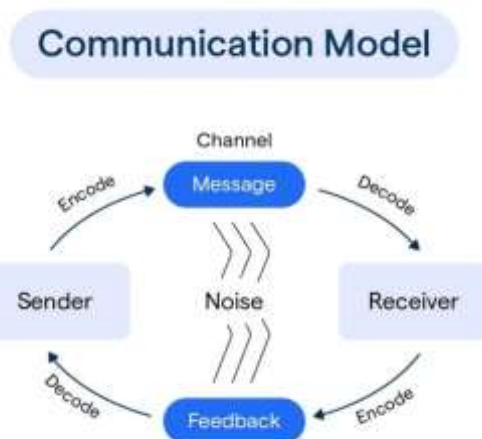
2. Conceptual Clarification

There is no consensus in the definition of religion. Religion takes different meaning for different people. According to Connelly (1996), religion presents a set of beliefs and cultural

norms that enable people of different cultural milieu seeking meaning to life incertitude. Sanusi (2013), opines that religion is primarily an effort at following a set of beliefs, feelings, and actions that comes as stimuli to direct experience of the pious and the holy. However, Kim and Kim (2016) assert that religion plays a pragmatic role by offering purpose and meaning to human lives, providing satisfaction and encouragement to society, and invigorating unity and a sense of identity among member of society that is devoid of tension. The definition of Kim and Kim puts religion in light of hope for man as it provides satisfaction for society. Omotoye (2011), describes religion practiced by Africans by saying:

It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature yet it is "written" everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the people's myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped. It is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans, young or old.

In defining communication, Hybels and Weaver (1998), say it is a process in which people share information, ideas and feelings. Sanusi (2013) expanded the view of Hybels and Weaver, by adding that in that process there is a sender who initiates the conversation (message), and a receiver of the message (recipient) and the channel through which the message gets to its destination is the medium. The presence of both the sender and the receiver of the message in the communication process literarily mean they have something to communicate (share). Onotere (2013), says the key word in communication is "sharing", Sharing brings about humans satisfaction as it meets needs and achieve pleasure.



Communication is described as the sine qua non of religion. It is used for worship, sermons, prayer, and rituals. Onekutu and Ojebode, (2007), say communication is needed in all areas of human endeavor such as in persuasion, to influence others action, to inform, to share, to discover and uncover information. In driving the point home, Hybels and Weaver (1998), note that effective communication is the key to success in workplace, at school, market place, other areas of human relationships and Church worship experience. In other words, good communication is paramount to human co-existence. Elaborating on the importance of communication, Ottuh and Jemegbe(2020) observe, without communication, social cohesion will elude members of society, this is because communication do not only brings life to society, it also helps for peaceful coexistence. They went further to say that to achieve any meaningful development in any human society; it is pertinent that communication prioritized.

Many people view worship only from the perspectives of the means of worship or what people do in the service; attending church services, singing, praying, and listening. According to Webber (1985), cited in Wardle (1992) worship is "a meeting between God and his people". Webber went further by saying;

"In this meeting, God becomes present to His people, who respond with praise and thanksgiving. Thus the worshipper is

brought into a personal contact with the one who gives meaning and purpose to life, from this encounter the worshipper receives strength and courage to live with hope in a fallen world" (p. 23)

In another definition, Harp (2007), says worship is ascribing worthiness to the object of worship, which comes through praise, prayer, and hymn singing in an environment of worship. Kendall (1989), using the interaction that occurs in worship to describe worship says, it is the response to, preparation for, the preached word. In other words, worship proceeds preaching. This definition makes preaching central in worship, though did not demean the important role of music in worship process. Music appears to be part of the preparation process of worship.

The Old Testament worship points to the story of salvation that points to relationship between God and the people of Israel. This relationship was made possible by a covenant of blood between God and the people (2 Chron. 5-7/ Neh. 8-10). This pattern of worship requires the people to meet in an agreed place to offer animal sacrifices before they can enter into the presence of God (2 Chron. 5:7-10), the process is usually to sing praises to God, read the Word of God audibly and expound same, pray for the community, and the presence fire from heaven indicates the presence of God (2 Chron. 7:1-2). The response to this presence of God in their midst is usually followed by singing of praise, peace offering or covenant meal and the benediction (Harp, 2007).

Lawrence (2016), views worship as a dialogue between God and His people. It is a process where we speak and listen to God in anticipation for God to speak back to us. In other words, Christian worship is not a monologue conversation; it is a dialogue either between God and man or between humans. One major ways by which people hear God in worship is through the spoken word of scripture.

The Problem of Religious Language

The problem of religious language is a complex and multifaceted one. The problem of religious language considers whether it is

possible to talk about God meaningfully if the traditional conceptions of God as being incorporeal, infinite, and timeless, are accepted. Because these traditional conceptions of God make it difficult to describe God, religious language has the potential to be meaningless. Theories of religious language either attempt to demonstrate that such language is meaningless, or attempt to show how religious language can still be meaningful.

Religious language, Nelson (2017) defines, is the language that is used to express religious concepts like god, soul, salvation and so on. He believes religious language to be different from ordinary language as it is, at times, evocative, metaphorical and poetic.

The problem of religious language is worrisome to practitioners of the Abrahamic religious traditions because it has the potential to undermine those traditions. All three faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam proclaim truths about God in written texts, commentary traditions, and oral teachings. In fact, speech about God is essential to both personal praxis and organized celebration in these traditions. Without adequate solution to the problem of religious language, human speech about God is called into question. Without the ability to speak about God and to understand the meaning of what is spoken, the Abrahamic faiths are vulnerable to the criticism that their sacred texts and teachings are unintelligible.

Nelson (2017) explores different approaches to comprehending the problem of religious language. The first approach, Verificationism, places emphasis on the need for objective verification or falsification of religious claims. The second approach, Metaphysical Realism, puts forward the view that religious language refers to objective realities that are beyond human experience.

He also discusses in length the Wittgensteinian and the neo-pragmatic approaches to religious discourse as per which factors like context, practical goals, and social and historical practices are of utmost importance in constructing our conception of religious language. Instead of endorsing a single theory as a complete solution to the problem of

religious language, we endorse the quest for continued exploration and discussion through a careful and critical analysis and reflection of the role of religious language in our lives. In worship there are uses of religious languages, sometimes it is meaning at other times they are not, but what is most important is that Christian perspective of worship is absolute submission or surrender to the will of God.

Christian Worship as an Act of Communication

In ancient times, before the introduction of Western education and Western civilization in Africa, Africans were involved in oral communication from one generation to another within the context of their culture. Oral communication is a means through which important traditional values and morals were transmitted and taught. Oral communication still exists today despite the prevalence of Western education in some communities in Africa. Aligning with this view, Ottuh and Jemegbe (2020) opine that in religious communication are attempts made to transmit religious values from generation to generation, and the family is the first medium through which these values are transmitted. They noted further that religion enable people to come together to communicate common myths, values, ethics, and tradition that are dare and beneficial to them. A second reason people come together in religious communication is to offer prayers, make sacrifices and to perform other form of ritual/ceremonies.

Mbiti (1975) in Fasipe (2013), opines that Africans did not invent an alphabet for the art of reading and writing, as such, they did not keep records of history. Instead, they communicated information orally from one generation to another. In Africa, oral culture spread through traditional religious settings and the Church via the medium of storytelling, dancing, music, symbols, and proverbs. Maxey (2009), observes that most Africans Christians today practice and communicates their faith orally, and they do this through storytelling, sermons, prayers and songs. Interestingly, Christian worship and traditions are being shaped by traditional African oral practices, through indigenous music and local arts

employed in communicating the gospel of Christ in Churches. As Krabill (2013), cited in Fasipe (2023), observes that, “the life and worship experiences of indigenous Churches/movements across sub-Sahara Africa are for the most part oral in character”.

How Churches Communicates the gospel in Worship today in rural Churches;

None Use of Order of Worship

Order of worship is meant to lead worship planners/leaders to see the whole picture and flow of the worship service. The process may be carried out through a bulletin, or announcement, or through an electronic screen (Discipleship Ministries).

Danyew (2016) notes that in early church history, the order of worship contains four components they are; teaching, fellowship, communion and prayer, drawn from the book of Acts 2:42 “the believers devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayer. However, Justin Marryr cited in Ashley Danyew (2016) states that the first order of worship called the Apology to the Roman authorities in (ca. 155) also had four components drawn from the Apology. They are; the word of God, prayer, communion, and offering. Below is the Apology to the Roman authorities;

“On the day called Sunday there is a gathering together in the same place of all who live in a given city or rural district. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then when the reader ceases, the president in a discourse admonishes and urges the imitation of these good things. Next we all rise together and send up prayers. When we cease from our prayer, bread is presented and wine and water. The president in the same manner sends up prayer and thanksgiving, according to his ability, and the people sing out their assents, saying the “Amen.” A distribution and participation of the elements for which thanks have been given is made to each person, and to those who are not present they are sent by the deacons. Those who have means and are willing, each according to his own choice, give what he wills, and what is collected is deposited

with the president. He provides for the orphans and widows, those who are in need on account of sickness or some other cause, those who are in bonds, strangers who are sojourning, and in a word he becomes the protector of all who are in need. We all make our assembly in common on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God changed the darkness and made and made the world, and Jesus Christ our Saviour arose from the dead on the same day. For they crucified him on the day before Saturn's day, and on the day after (which is the day of the Sun) he appeared to his disciples and taught these things, which we have offered for your consideration. (First Apology, 67)."

Apart from the early Church order of worship, there are other samples of order of worship, For example;

Episcopal pattern of Order of Worship

Service of the Word of God

Hymn,

Psalm, or Anthem

Prayer

Hymn of Praise

Collection of the Day

Lessons (Scripture Reading)

Sermon, Creed,

Prayer for the People

Confession of Sin, the Peace

Lutheran pattern of Order of Worship

Service of the Sacrament

Sanctus

Prayer of Thanksgiving

The Word of the Lord

Proclamation of Christ

The Lord's Prayer

Pax Domini

Agnus Dei

Distribution

Canticle

Nunc Dimittis

Collect

Benediction

Methodist Pattern of Order of Worship

The Entrance

Gathering, Greetings and Hymn, Opening

Prayers and Praise, Anthem

Proclamation and Response

Prayer of Illumination, Scripture, Sermon, Response to the Word, Concern and Prayer, Offering

Thanksgiving

Communion, Prayer of Thanksgiving, The Lord's Prayer

Sending Forth

Hymn or Song and Dismissal with Blessing, Going forth

Prebyterian Pattern of Order of Worship

Gathering

Call to Worship, Hymns of Praise, Confession and Pardon, and the Peace

The Word

Prayer for Illumination, Scripture Reading, Sermon, Invitation to Discipleship, Affirmation of Faith, Baptism, and Prayer of the People

The Eucharist

Offering, Invitation to the table, Great Thanksgiving, Lord's Prayer, Communion of the People

Sending

Songs or Acts of Commitment, the Charge and Blessing

In process of time, liturgical scholars agree that the focus of Christian worship should rest on the scriptural conviction that is focus on Christ crucifixion. Therefore, Christian worship should be Christ centered. Thus, the order of worship swiftly shifted to a new pattern called the principle of worship;

Modern Pattern of Order of Worship

Worship Celebrates Christ

In Praises and Thanksgiving/ Prayer of Adoration

Worship Tells and Acts out the Christ Event

As We Surrender Ourselves to the Risen Lord

In worship God Speaks and Acts

We Prepare to Receive His Word through Prayer

Worship As an Act of Communication

Through His Infallable Word

Through His Servant

In Worship We Respond To God and To Each

Other
 In Prayer of Commitment
 In Praying for One another
 Worship As An Act of The People
 We Welcome Ourselves
 Worship As God's Creative Gifts
 We Offer Our Tithes
 We Give Our Offering
 We Give to help Others
 Worship Is A Way of Life
 We Depart to Life for The Lord in Prayer
 We share the Benediction

The order of worship outlined above by Ashly Danyew reveals a communication link in the worship service between divinity and humanity on the one hand, and among humans who are participant in the worship experience. It also show a communication flow of one item of worship order to another. The transition of the order from one item to another shows a vertical and horizontal flow of the communication process that occurs in Christian worship.

Worship service in a literate community highlights or prints her order of worship, in some cases, especially in an urban setting employ the use of electronic media viewing to highlight her order of service. But in an oral worship setting order of worship do not function with its written form. The progress of event during worship experience is either dictated or the leader determines the course of the worship. In most cases, worshippers in an oral worship setting memorized the normal succession of the worship because by reason of the repeated weekly sequence congregants may anticipate what follows after every event in the worship.

Use of Storytelling

In oral worship setting, sermons are presented in various forms such as storytelling, drama, or a combination of both. Interestingly, presenting the gospel in story form is not peculiar to African churches. As a matter of fact, Jesus used this type of teaching method to communicate his message to his audience. In subscribing to Jesus' teaching method, Peterson

(1999) says "When Jesus opened His mouth and spoke, what came out more often than not was a story." In reality, Jesus never wrote a book on theology, but he taught theology everywhere he went (Steffen, 2005 in Fasipe). The use of storytelling will help preachers in oral cultural setting to connect and involve the congregants in the communication process through drama engagement.

Use of Proverbs in Worship

The use of proverbs in communication resonates well with Africans. This is because in Africa culture, conversation or discourse that not garnished with words of proverbs may be considered unintelligent and senseless. According to Moon (2009) in Fasipe, Proverbs supplies memory clips for oral learners. It also functions as symbols, especially in an oral culture where conversations are recalled in order to be use at a later time. Proverbs provides deeper meaning beyond the literal meaning of a conversation. Moon states further that the place of proverbs should not be trivialized in oral culture and conversation, instead, proverbs functions as an important symbolic element in oral conversation to facilitate the connection of inner reality to the external reality by providing mnemonic expression to aid recall. The knowledge of proverbs and their usage is very important in oral culture, even in worship. Therefore, any preacher who is skillful in the art of proverbs will attract many listeners. Kraft (2000) in Fasipe, emphasizes the need for communicators in oral community to learn the devices that the receptors are familiar with. He writes;

To relate the message to the real life of one's hearers, the communicator must learn to employ the communicational devices familiar to the receptor in ways to which the receptor is responsive. Credible messages start from where the receptor is. In many cultures, this involves the knowledge and use of variety of proverbs, aphorisms, and tales of various kinds.

According to Unseth (2013), Jesus and other authors in the Bible employed local proverbs in their conversations. In Luke 4:23 Jesus deployed the use of proverb to introduce

the topic of his sermon, when he said "Physician, heal yourself." In another instance, in 2 Pet. 2:22 Apostle Peter quoted two proverbs, first, "A dog returns to its vomit, and a sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud." Peter said this in order to illustrate a point. Tewoldemedhin (2006) cited in Unseth (2013), admits that Proverbs are used to portray a society's highest efforts to command and describe a moral life. He further cautioned that preachers should not subject the Bible teachings to the local proverbs and other aspects of culture; this is because the Bible is the highest authority in Christian faith and it is above all traditions.

Some ways proverb can be used in Christian worship;

Proverbs in Preaching and Teaching

Helm (2014), says preaching is an interaction that requires God, the preacher, and the audience. While Lovell and Neil (2011) say "Preaching is the communication of truth through a personality." Both definitions establish a connection and a dialogue between God, the preacher and the congregation. Unseth (2013) opines that preaching is used to reinforce proverb. Kudadjie,(1996) cited in Unseth asserts that proverbs can be used to great advantage in Christian preaching and teaching especially when it is used correctly, it communicates the truth about biblical themes and stories. It also speaks to the intellect, the soul and the heart.

In using proverbs for preaching and teaching Unseth (2013) advice flexibility, dynamism and acknowledgement of the culture of the people. He also gave some examples from some cultural environment. In teaching from Matthew 7:1 about not judging others, the proverb of the Tonga people group would apply. It says "A whip used on someone else should be away or tomorrow the same whip will be used to whip you." The Jabo people group of Liberia says "A tree grows up before we tie a cow to it." It means that experience and growth are necessary before other will trust a person in a position. This proverb will be appropriate for the Jabo congregation when teaching on the qualifications of elders/oversea

from (1 Timothy 3:2,6) "The oversea... must not be a recent convert Unseth, 2013." The Igbo cultures of Nigeria have a proverb that says "A child, who washes his hands thoroughly, eats with elders." It means when a person puts his head right or humble himself, he is favoured to sit with those in authority. This proverb is appropriate for the Igbo people of Southern Nigeria from (Acts 6:5). While the Urhobo people of South-south Nigeria says "A worthless man is not invited for important gathering." It means families and friends will be deserted and mock you when life is at its worst. This proverb can be used to buttress a point when preaching to an Urhobo audience with a text from John 1:46 "... Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Proverbs for the Introduction of a Sermon or Song

Proverbs are figurative expressions or saying to communicate deeper meaning to a person or group of persons. Proverbs and storytelling can be used to introduce the topic/title of a sermon, it can also be used to introduce a song during worship service. Therefore, proverbs serve as interlude or intervention period in a sermon or music to either highlight a point or a theological truth that can encourage spiritual growth or faith. It is also an interface between communication and worship to strike a spiritual and social meeting point in the atmosphere of worship. These interlude and interface is essential in worship because Jesus engaged in it in his days. For example, when he said; "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces" (Mat. 7:6). Or "Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Mat. 10:16).

Use of Music in Worship

Music has always been an integral part of worship, and Africans are intrinsically attracted to music. According to Mitchell (1975), says Singing was an integral part of temple worship of the people of Israel (1 Chron. 6:31-32, 16:42). Their deliverance from Egypt and the crossing of the red sea was celebrated with singing (Exod. 15). Jesus and his disciples

also sang hymns (Matt. 26:30). Apostle Paul admonished the Colossians to "... teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God." (Col. 3: 16-17).

Knowing the purpose of music in worship as essential for connecting congregants to God and the spirit of the service. It is also important to know that in congregational songs people need to know and learn how to dialogue with God through the songs and hymns, this is because songs in worship help us to express our thoughts, feeling, desires and faith. It is necessary that a congregation build their vocabulary of praise. Making the songs simple and repetitive helps the congregation to transit into individual prayers and personal reflection (Mitchell, 1975). Brewer (2016), outlined four purposes of music within the Christian tradition. These purposes are;

Music teaches the gospel to the congregation.

Music connects people to God in unique ways

Music allows people to communicate their love to God with their whole being

Music as worship fulfills God's command

Brewer further states that singing enables people to honour God in ways and manners that lead to worship, prayer (communication) and devotion. Mitchell (1975), observes that traditional and culturally music style has greatly influence music performance and the conduct worship. How worship is conducted invariably affects how people relate and converse with their creator. As Mbiti (1975) cited in Fasipe (2023), puts it differently by saying Africans are passionate about music that is the reason they dance and sing ecstatically at worship service, and sometimes engage in spontaneous expressions. These spontaneous expressions also come in forms of thanksgiving appreciation for what the Lord, sharing of testimony in worship context.

Challenges and Oral Communication in Christian Worship

The challenge of not having bulletin or printed order of worship may subject the worship activities to the discretion and manipulation of the worship leader.

The possibility of interpreting scriptural text out of context or using proverbs that may not align with the text or accompany the sung selected for the worship.

Oral Communication in worship poses risk of inaccuracies in the narration of scriptural truth. oral retellings by untrained individuals The possibility of alteration of oral information from one person to another or one generation to another is very high since the congregants relied on their memory as they share and listen to information passed onto them.

Benefits of Oral Communication in Christian Worship

Though challenges abound in oral communication in worship, yet there are immerse benefits that will help the church both to improve on worship activities and enhance better theological understanding among the members. Some of the benefits that worshippers and worship leaders stand to gain when they worship orally are;

Like it was in the ancient African Church, oral communication in worship can be a blessing to the church especially among rural communities because of the homogeneous nature of the people. Worship leaders can explore the homogeneous advantage to create a strong bond between him and the people, thereby acting as fertilizer for the use of effective communication.

Oral communication in worship gives clergy some advantage, as it helps the clergy to discover diverse methods and styles of presenting the message to the congregants. This is because he/she is exposing to the following ways of communicate such as music, proverbs, and storytelling.

Oral communication in worship promotes cordial relationship among congregants. As the minister shares stories and tell proverbs during the sermon, these stories and proverbs resonates with the congregants provoking excitement and feelings of identity and are able to past.

Oral communication in worship enhances strong memorization and retention of text, stories and events that occurs in the service. This is very crucial to this work, since there are no written or printed materials and setting may be an illiterate environment.

The rich legacy of morality and the tedious learning of the past remind contemporary faith communities are of their roots.

Effective use of oral communication in worship can promote a united Church and loving people.

Oral communication will also help the Church and the member to be effective and skillful in evangelism. This is because constant and continues use of oral communication in the Church has helps them to master its use in the communication with others.

Implications for Worship Leaders

Worship leaders will benefit from oral communication when they deploy the tools of storytelling and oratory skills to educate congregants especially in helping them to grow in their faith and in moral living.

In the absence of technology and media devices, worship leaders can improvise ways of presenting the order of worship to the congregation by announcing intermittently the next item on the order or by using the local chalkboard to write same in the indigenous language of the people.

Worship leaders should ensure that order of worship is arrange in a dialogical format that communicates a flow between Divinity and humanity that is where God speaks and we respond to him. This will further portray dialogical desire expected in a worship service.

Worship leaders should do thorough exegesis on scriptural texts for the sermon to discover the appropriateness of a proverbs or story he/she intend to use as a supporting tools to the message

It is expedient that worship leaders have a good understanding of their audience in other to determine what method or style of the morality that will appeal to them.

3. Conclusion

Oral communication influences and inters face with Christian worship as it relates to the tradition of people within a given society. It also looked at the role of cultural values and traditional modes of sharing information have shaped the contemporary worship style. Though challenges abound in oral communication in worship, yet there are Immerse benefits that will help the Church both to improve on worship activities and enhance better theological understanding among the members. Worship can only be said to have occurred when there is effective communication. The Congregation is recommended to express their faith in singing, clapping and dancing, prayers and responsive reading of the scripture.

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