

In the Shadow #11

One can go on and on about the cultural differences between the US and Rwanda/Africa. A particular realm that the difference is most evident is Sunday worship. There is so much more energy in an African service! And more hours!

As Americans, we're pretty well accustomed to a one-hour service. We might spring for the extra hour of Sunday School, before or after worship. From the background I come from, there is typically piano or organ music playing as everyone gathers. An invocation/greeting/opening prayer is offered. Hymns are sung accapella or with the piano, organ or other instruments for accompaniment. While singing, everyone sits or stands still, holding a hymnal or reading off a screen. Prayer requests are shared and an appropriate prayer given. An offering is collected. An individual, ensemble or choir might present a special musical selection. Scripture is read. The sermon is preached. Another hymn is sung and a closing prayer is spoken. There are a number of minor variations, and contemporary worship is common for many, but this is the general scheme for many of our traditional churches.

In Africa and most "warm culture" locations, there are many worshipers that began walking before daylight to arrive. A few people will be at the church by 8 or 8:30. They will start singing, using a drum to beat out the time. Nobody sits or stands still while singing. There is always hand-clapping, foot-stomping, arm-waving and dancing. Slowly the others filter in. By 9 there might be a song leader and a keyboard or guitar player. A prayer will be offered with lots of "amens" and other words of encouragement coming along. Eventually the song leader or the pastor will suggest a hymn from the songbook or hymnal – up till now, no one has been using either. Even with this

suggestion, virtually everyone is singing from memory. Visitors and guests will be recognized and welcomed. More prayers offered. There will be choir music – likely from more than one choir. Even the offering is an opportunity to dance up to the collection basket in the front. Eventually there will be the pastor's sermon, followed by more singing and dancing. Now that it is somewhere between noon and 1 pm, there will be a closing prayer. Some will leave fairly quickly (they have a long walk home), others will hang around to visit with each other and to help put away the plastic stackable chairs, the keyboard, drums and electronics.

I'm not going to get into an argument about right or wrong on the worship style subject. I'll simply say that each is different, has its unique context, and is acceptable to God as our "sacrifice of praise." For me, admittedly, I greatly appreciate the old hymns. I suppose it's a lot like comfort food. It feels good in my soul. And when I'm back home in the States, I will love singing them again. But I doubt that I will stand still.

For the Master, Chris Elliott with the Church of the Brethren Rwanda.

