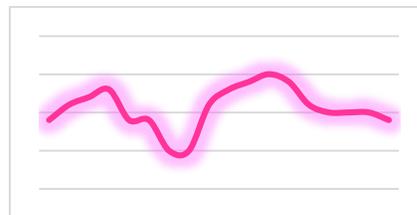# Four Functions:
A Model for Assessing an Order of Service

By Erin McGaughan, Seattle Unity Music Director, July 2013
with thanks to the ministry, staff and community at Seattle Unity

This year my minister has allowed me to experiment with our Sunday order of service.

We had made adjustments before based on specific complaints from staff and congregants, or what I call 'you squeak, I tweak.'   Announcements too dull? We'll edit them. Meditation not deep enough? We'll lengthen it. But that always felt a bit random, like playing with the dials out of anxiety or boredom, not really knowing how they work.

This year, I looked to a deeper level to ask: what is the purpose of the service as a whole? What is the function of each piece within our order of service? Is anything missing, or can anything be cut or changed to serve the root purpose better?

Below is a tool that grew out of this investigation, a kind of lens that may be useful if adapted for use in your own church.   Ideally, it encourages service planners to make bold, well-directed choices in programming.

The Four Functions

I identified four main areas of function for our Sunday service: social, spiritual, institutional, and educational.   To investigate these areas, I drew from research in contemporary theories of religious and spiritual experience, social identity, musicology, and popular neurophysiology. Then I examined each element in the service, describing how it served each function.

Here's a beginning visualization.

	Social	Spiritual	Institutional	Educational
Element				

I found that not every element served all functions, as I described them. Below are my working descriptions of these categories, followed by a grid analysis of our full service (which the reader may skim as example). Lastly I show the resulting visual tool for assessing and adjusting the order of service.

Social

My church has a growing community watching our services on Youtube, but our Sundays are mostly about live, in-person interaction in a group -- they are fundamentally social experiences. They provide tangible social benefits to our community, keeping them connected, and promoting sharing and acceptance. So the success of those services depends partly on our understanding of social mechanics, and our social communication skills.

For background I reviewed literature on emotional and social status cues, sociology of musical taste, psychology of religion, and cognitive neurophysiology. From this last field, the concept of "the social brain" was most interesting, as well as the mirror neuron systems, which help us learn quickly through imitation, and may also increase empathy. Humans are wired for the social/spiritual connection, and we use those connections continually throughout the service.

Spiritual

'Spiritual' can mean almost anything, from charismatic to contemplative. I used polling and discussion to clarify what our congregants and staff feel are the major spiritual moments in services, moments that keep them coming back over and over. I found that they love the music and the message, but my group centers their idea of "spiritual experience" around the brief (~ 3 min) *silence* during mid-service meditation. This is the least mediated moment in our service, where speech and even musical underscoring disappears. The only voice left is the divine voice from within, for a direct, individual experience of God. In this silence, we may lose track of time, thought and narrative.

In this model, when I examine a song or other service element for spiritual function, I am looking at the dramatic arc and *flow* specifically. It is the momentum or even the 'foreplay' – the dinner-and-dancing on the date with God. Therefore, a service element functions spiritually insofar as it contributes to the quality of a spiritual climax within that service. In addition to readings on spiritual experience and religious service structure, I found some of the work on brainwave frequency states to be helpful in answering this basic question: how does a specific service element put people 'in the mood' for an intimate encounter with God, right there in the service, even while sitting next to a stranger on a pew? Or, does it instead interrupt that flow, taking them 'out of the mood'?

Institutional

Our Sunday service is crucial to our church's sustainability, so unsurprisingly, a fair amount of that service needs to directly support our institution. Do we inspire the support, participation, and commitment of the congregation? Do we present the institution as healthy? Do we cultivate concepts of wise, sustainable management?   Readings on social identity theory, industrial eminence building, and organizational management helped me to see where we are contributing to our church's stability, appeal, and business health.

Educational

This function could be considered simply a technique used by the other functions. For example, in our Sunday services, we teach Principle using the language of our denominational identity -- that is, our *social* identity. We teach a variety of methods for *spiritual* connection and development, which our congregants can use at church, but also take with them to use at home and in the greater world. We promote classes in hundreds of topics, and those classes are an important way that we sustain the church as a business *institution*. Because education underlies all our efforts, with the minister's Sunday message as the nexus, I felt it merited its own look.

Relevant research material included concepts of cognitive priming (aka seeding the topic, or foreshadowing to focus mental energy on the topic), multi-modal teaching methods, memory and cognition systems, and status/authority issues in performance.

Assessing Each Element

Having identified my four main areas of function, I used this filter to assess my church's regular order of service. I asked: How does each element support each function, if it serves it at all? Readers may skim down below this example grid.

Slot	Areas of function
1. Prelude	
	Social – draws people into the space, eases social awkwardness, people feel free to chat, or just listen
	Spiritual – beginning of service energy arc
	Institutional – jazz/pop genre identifies our demographic target range; also serves as band bonding time
	Educational – can seed topic (e.g. "What's Goin' On" if the topic is Social Justice)
2. Opening Feature	
	Spiritual – initiates 'structured time' of the service
	Institutional – a high quality piece can strengthen the congregation's self-image ('we have great music'); also supports musical guest and reputation ('they have great music, they support artists') - aka "eminence building"
	Educational – lyric can seed topic or teach principle
3. Call to worship singalong	
	Social – initial welcome eases social awkwardness; group singing bonds group

	Spiritual – opportunity to worship actively; beginnings of entrainment (unified group physiology); continuing energetic arc
	Institutional – genre range defines demographic range; quality can strengthen group self-image
	Educational – lyric can seed topic or teach principle
4. Statement of Being	(*note this is actually within the call to worship*)
	Social – bonding via group recitation technique
	Institutional – affirms denominational identity
	Educational – teaches first Unity Principle
5. Mission/Vision	
	Social – bonding via group recitation technique
	Institutional – affirms shared institutional purpose
	Educational – teaches Mission/Vision
6. Intro of band	
	Social – eases social awkwardness; recognizes congregant musicians especially.
	Institutional – speaker displays poise and other status cues that affect enlistment and group self-image; rewards music staff
	Educational – may mention topic
7. Announcements	
	Social – rewards congregant in-group status by recognizing individual volunteers; familiarizes names/faces
	Institutional – supports subgroups (e.g. classes, events), sustains income and business structures; speaker poise and visual presentation quality convey status cues that affect enlistment and group self-image
	Educational – supports classes (indirect function)
8. Meet and Greet	
	Social – bonds group; supports further contact outside of the service.
	Spiritual – physically activates individuals; heightens energy
	Institutional – establishes pattern of friendly interaction
9. Fast singalong	
	Social – bonds group, promotes tolerance for wide range of expression
	Spiritual – continues energy arc; activates body/breath/blood flow; supports enthusiastic, potentially risky or ecstatic worship expression
	Institutional – leader quality can signal program strength, genre shows demographic range
	Educational – lyric can seed topic or teach principle

10. Slow singalong	
	Social – bonding deepens into rhythmic entrainment
	Spiritual – arc ramps down to slow brainwave states (alpha, theta)
	Institutional – genre reflects demographic range
	Educational – lyric can seed topic or teach principle
11. Meditation	
	Social – practices divine personal connection even in group setting, openness to shared spiritual moments
	Spiritual – slowest brainwave moment; silence allows deep, unmediated divine personal connection in service
	Institutional – shows church is reliable in providing opportunity for direct divine personal connection.
	Educational – teaches meditation methods for use at home, or in the greater world
12. Bridge slot feature song	
	Spiritual – ramps up brainwave energy (high alpha, beta ranges) to prep for ministry message (aka, the tee-up); may inspire 'beauty-awe' moment
	Institutional – quality reflects on program strength; may also support musical guest and reputation in community of sacred artists
	Educational – lyric can seed topic or teach principle
13. Message/talk	
	Explicitly **Educational**, creates a nexus for **Social**, **Spiritual**, and **Institutional** through-lines.
14. Offertory feature song	
	Spiritual – releasing energy, rewards congregation
	Institutional – consistent quality entices congregation not to leave before giving; may also support musical guest
15. Kid's Entrance 2nd svc only	
	Social – bonding, smiles, feelings of safety and comfort
	Spiritual – lightens perspective; releasing control
	Institutional – integrates generations, creates awareness of strength and continuity, rewards children and teachers
	Educational – child speakers model outreach and develop poise
16. Closing singalong	
	Social – hand-holding and eye contact bond group
	Spiritual – afterglow, ends 'structured time' of service.
	Educational – can teach principle and inspire action in the world (aka. the sending, mission)

17. postlude	
	Social – eases social awkwardness
	Spiritual – lengthens arc ending, can energize for action
	Institutional – encourages lingering and lobby activity
	Educational – reprise of song may affirm topic

Fig.1   Analysis grid of Seattle Unity Sunday service on four functions

Once I finished with the analysis, then I assigned a strength value of 1-10 to each, as we typically fulfill them.

Element#	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
social	5	0	8	4	4	3	7	8	7	4	4	0	4	0	5	5	3
spiritual	4	5	8	2	0	0	0	6	8	9	10	9	6	5	5	5	4
institutional	4	4	5	2	2	5	10	3	6	4	6	6	6	7	5	1	3
educational	2	4	6	5	5	1	2	0	6	6	4	4	10	2	4	5	2

Fig 2. SU Sunday service element strength values, range 1-10

(Note that I could also use this tool in assessing specific Sundays to determine how well we executed our potential.)
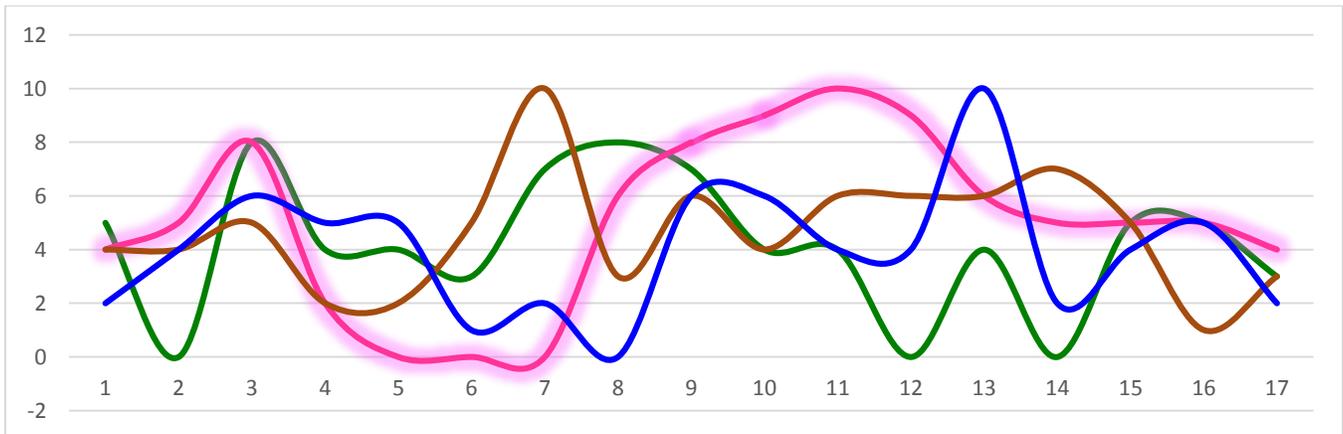
Then I used Excel to visualize the functions like this:

Fig 3. **Social, Spiritual, Institutional,** and **Educational** functions

It's fairly easy to see that a major drop in spiritual flow (highlighted pink line) occurs around elements 4-7.   I can now suggest adjustments, such as moving the announcements to a space after the offertory.   Or I can re-think our services around the notion of two distinct spiritual arcs, and choose to fulfill each separately.

In August, we will be trying exactly that, as well as methods for increasing the Sunday strength in all four areas of function. For August only, we are combining our 9 and 11 a.m. services to one 10 a.m. service, for an enriched social experience of community.   Our theme is Meditation, and we're introducing a 25 minute pre-service meditation in our smaller chapel space, led by our chaplains.   The main services will run slightly longer, with longer meditations as we explore various meditation methods. To balance this deeper slow energy, I'm trying out a technique popular among Pentecostal megachurches: a longer, more fluid praise-and-worship music set to start the service. The service contour may become something like this.
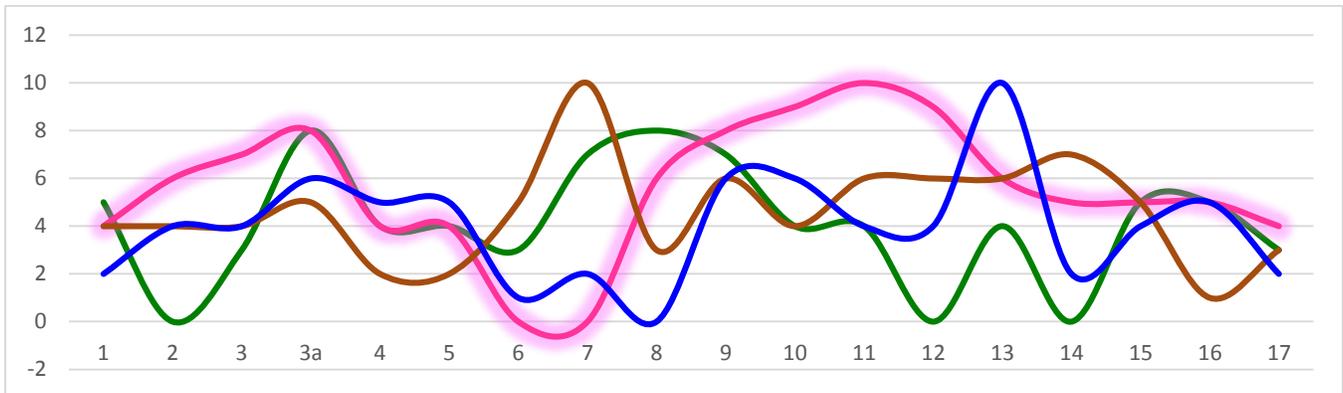

Fig 4. Projected changes in **Social, Spiritual, Institutional,** and **Educational** functions

Maybe it's not a huge difference, but I'll support it as well as I can. I'm aware that transitions themselves cause fractures in spiritual flow, so I plan to use more segues and fewer hard stops, with more charismatic, praise-filled repertoire in that first set. I hope to create a spiritually denser appetizer that merits the break in flow for elements 6 & 7.

We won't know until we try all of this, but the visual tool helps focus our efforts beyond random dial-tweaking. As always, I'll observe the results, and when our usual structure returns in September, we may keep some of these changes. What's certain is that I'll know more about my congregation, and about balancing the four areas of social, spiritual, institutional and educational function.

In summary, the Four Functions analysis invites us to:

1) Describe each service element's support of each function type
2) Quantify the strength of each
3) Use Excel charting to visualize each function's journey in the service
4) Propose changes to affect these
5) Observe results

I encourage service planners and music directors to adapt this model for their own use in assessing and improving orders of service. For more resources, check out http://erinmcgaughan.com/links.aspx under "**My resource files for ministers and MD's**".

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