

Toward a Common Missional Liturgy:
Participating in the Redemptive Rule of God through Christian Worship

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We were sitting around visiting after rehearsing a few numbers for an upcoming community variety show—four pastors: one United Methodist, one Free Methodist, one Baptist (North American) and myself, an ELCA Lutheran. Being deep in the study of the missional church, I suggested that the ministerial association ought to think about some sort of unified mission in the community of Wessington Springs where we serve.

Immediately the United Methodist pastor shared with us his idea for holding a Saturday-night worship in the park during the summer months. We seemed to agree that none of our churches would probably be able to pull off something like that on our own, but maybe together we might be able to make it work.

The prospect intrigued me. Ecumenical/community worship services are nothing new for this town of 1000 (there are at least four per year), but to hold a regular weekly service throughout the summer? That was a new one!

The idea also provoked a number of questions for me. Two (or rather, two sets) in particular form the basis of this paper. First, what is it about worship that would make it the first thing pastors would think about when looking for a mission opportunity? Secondly, while I had been thinking of researching missional worship, i.e., how might a “missional church” worship that would be different from one that is not, I began to wonder: what would an *ecumenical* “missional worship service” look like? What sort of

liturgy would we use? How “liturgical” might we get? And what about Holy Communion?

WORSHIP AND MISSION: THE CONNECTION

It probably ought not to have been a surprise that the first response of a group of pastors to the question about what to do in *any* particular situation was, “Let’s worship!” Worship is what faithful Christians do, after all. It’s what we’re known for. Even if our Christianity never makes it out the front doors of our church buildings, we have pretty much figured out at least one thing to do inside.

Actually, my surprise at the ready connection between worship and mission betrays a way of thinking about worship and mission that may go back as far as Constantine, and that has only recently begun to turn around. Nearly forty years ago J.G. Davies lamented the separation between the theological disciplines of worship and mission.

Those who make worship the object of their specialized study scarcely even mention mission—not even a footnote; while those who are concerned to develop the theology of mission seem in general to have little time for cultic acts.¹

Davies also noted the distortions that can occur when worship and mission are considered separately.

The most obvious distortion is that of worship in isolation which tends to introversion. “The introverted church is one which puts its own survival before its mission, its own identity above its task, its internal concerns before its apostolate, its rituals before its ministry....”² Where worship is divorced from mission, this in-turning is frequent.... This introversion can only be counteracted and overcome by an equally powerful outward drive, which is how mission provides the necessary corrective....

¹ J.G. Davies, *Worship and Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 9.

² Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches*, 1961, pp. 103f, quoted in Davies, 16-17

The distortion to which mission itself, apart from worship, is most prone is that of self-glorification and self-aggrandizement. Mission can become a subject of human pride and self-will; it may become aggressive and forget that “it is the servant of Christ and not his proprietor.”³ Worship can provide the corrective in so far as it is truly God-centered.⁴

Forty years later, those distortions are still readily evident in both congregations and mission structures; nevertheless, there is a growing consensus among theologians as to the connection between worship and the mission of God (*missio Dei*). In his book, *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, Thomas Schattauer cites a wide variety of authors who approach the relationship between worship and mission from the “inside out.” Such an approach, he says, “locates the liturgical assembly itself within the arena of the *missio Dei*. The focus of worship is on God’s mission toward the world, to which the church witnesses and into which it is drawn.”⁵ Where other approaches have seen the relationship between worship and mission instrumentally, seen from the “inside out,”

...the assembly for worship *is* mission. The liturgical assembly is the visible locus of God’s reconciling mission toward the world. The seemingly most internal of activities, the church’s worship, is ultimately directed outward to the world. The judgment and mercy of God enacted within the liturgical assembly signify God’s ultimate judgment and mercy for the world. Like a reversible jacket, the liturgy can be turned and worn inside out, and by so doing we see the relationship between worship and mission—inside out.⁶

Nor is the connection being made solely from the side of liturgists. Darrel Guder, in *Missional Church*, lifts up worship as being central to a “missional ecclesiology for North America.”

Our postmodern society has come to regard worship as the private, internal, and often arcane activity of religionists who retreat from the world to practice their mystical rites. By definition, however, the *ekklesia* is a public assembly, and its

³ R.K. Orchard, *Missions in a Time of Testing*, 1964, p. 160, quoted in Davies, 17.

⁴ Davies, 17-18.

⁵ Thomas Schattauer, ed., *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

worship is its first form of mission....The reality of God that is proclaimed in worship is to be announced to and for the entire world.⁷

Schattauer also quotes Rodney Clapp, “an Episcopalian with strong ties to American evangelicals”:

...All liturgy is related to mission... The church exists for the sake of the world.... Worship teaches and forms us to live by the Jesus story so that others—the entire world, the church prays, will learn to live according to reality and wholeness.⁸

Many other voices could be called upon to echo these thoughts. Still, if it is really true, as Rodney Clapp says, that “all liturgy is related to mission,” is it necessarily true that all liturgy is *missional*—that is, do all forms of liturgy necessarily carry forward the *missio Dei* to which the Church is called? If not, what criteria does one use to determine the “missional potential” of a particular liturgy?

Going a step further and thinking about that prospective worship in the park envisioned by several pastors from various denominations and liturgical traditions as a missional endeavor, how might one construct, from those various traditions, a liturgy “from the ground up” that would bear witness to the redemptive reign of God in a way that speaks to the variety of people who might gather for such a service, even, perhaps expanding that variety by virtue of the liturgical (and theological) diversity of its creators?

MISSIONAL WORSHIP BEGINS WITH [THE TRIUNE] GOD

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...”

⁷ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 142, quoted in Schattauer, 4.

⁸ Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1996), 114-115, in Schattauer, 4.

“Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal...”

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Somehow, it just seems to make sense to begin worship with a threesome. That is not to say every worship service *does* begin that way.

Pastor/worship leader: “Good morning!”
 Congregation responds: “Good morning!” (Or else they respond with a mumble, because it really is not a good morning.)

No matter how a particular Christian liturgy might begin—or end—there should be no doubt for anyone attending as to its subject. The subject of all faithful worship ought to be none other than God.

It is absolutely essential that the Church keep God as the subject of worship since to be a Christian means to believe that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is everything to us—Creator, Provider, and Sustainer; Deliverer, Redeemer, and Lord; Sanctifier, Inspirer, and Empowerer. Friendship, instruction, and other aspects of the gathered community are important, but we lose our reason for being if we do not constantly remember that God has called us to be his people and that our ability to respond to that call in worship and life is totally the gift of God’s grace.⁹

For Christians the God who is the subject of worship is represented as Trinity, three-in-one. It would be inappropriate, for instance, to begin our services, “The God of all is the *One* God. There is no god but He.” Or even, “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4). While we would certainly agree with the words of the Shemah spoken by Moses at Mt. Sinai, and we would probably not debate the former statement, which is the English translation of the first confession of Islam (we confess that we believe in “one God” whenever we say the Nicene Creed), it is the *threeness* of

⁹ Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 76.

God, *along with* the oneness that defines Christianity (and which often either baffles or offends people of other religions).

Likewise for Christian mission, the Trinity is all-important. It is the triune God who sends the church into the world.

Mission [is] understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It [is] thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.¹⁰

This has not always been the church’s understanding of mission, or even of the Trinity. That may be one reason why our worship has suffered, over the years, a lack of missional emphasis, even as we have continued to honor the name of the triune God in our liturgy. The importance of the Trinity for mission is perhaps one reason why the debate over how the Trinity should be named (particularly in worship) has generated such controversy. While I will not get into the debate over “Father, Son, Holy Spirit,” vs. “Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier,” it is important to note that the debate stems from a desire to name the name of God in a way that can be recognized and received by all. Whether that means speaking the triune name differently (understanding that naming the work of God is not really speaking God’s name) or taking the time to teach people the biblical and theological roots of that name, invoking the Trinity at the beginning of worship is nevertheless invoking the name of the Three-in-One who makes us a missional community.

¹⁰ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390, quoted in Guder, 5.

Calling upon the triune God at the beginning of the liturgy helps get our priorities straight. It tells us that the effectiveness of worship does not depend on our mood (as does our response to “Good morning!”), the mood of the pastor/presider or the organist/choir director. It does not depend on whether we like the hymns/songs or the particular liturgical setting being used. Invoking the Triune God places worship squarely in God’s ballpark, with God’s rules and God’s system of “scoring.” When we begin in that way, and allow ourselves to be drawn into the liturgical “game” in that way, there is no way that we cannot emerge from worship with a “win.” Likewise, when we let the God who is in mission be the subject of our worship, with worship as the “verb,” to use Robert Webber’s word, then the church at worship cannot fail to be a church in action, and thus in mission.

MISSIONAL LITURGY ENACTS THE STORY OF GOD WITH GOD’S PEOPLE

Although God is the subject of Christian worship, and thus of Christian liturgy, liturgy that is “directed outward to the world” (Schattauer) must do more than glorify God *to* God. In a world where fewer and fewer people know and believe in the triune God of the Christian faith, Christians must seek every opportunity to simply tell the story. Good liturgy does this. The very first liturgical text recorded in the Bible (whether it was actually used in public worship), which also happens to be the very first *chapter* in the Bible, is a story. With its stately order and repetitive refrains, the Priestly account of the Creation has an unmistakably liturgical ring to it. After finally winning freedom for Israel in obedience to God’s command “so that they may worship me,” the first act of

worship of Moses and Miriam was to *tell the story* in a hymn. Liturgy as story in response to saving events is not confined to the Old Testament, however.

In both the Old and New Testaments, worship is rooted in an actual event. The content of Old Testament worship is rooted in the Exodus-event, while the content of New Testament worship is rooted in the Christ-event. In either case biblical worship celebrates the event and makes it come alive.¹¹

For Old Testament Israel, telling the story tended to be for the sake of the people themselves (e.g. Exodus 12:26f: “And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’”...). Even for followers of Christ, at least in the beginning, the motivation to continue to celebrate the Lord’s Supper “in remembrance of me” seems to be to keep the story alive for Jesus’ disciples in the midst of persecution. But with the coming of the Holy Spirit, liturgy goes public, with at least preaching, confession, forgiveness and baptisms happening on Pentecost itself, with “the breaking of bread and...prayers” quickly following. That these were not entirely private celebrations seems evident by the very fact that “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Robert Webber says specifically that “worship tells and acts out the Christ-event.”¹² More than just storytelling, missional liturgy is enacted story, a dramatic representation of the triune God’s redemptive relationship with God’s people. This story is most completely acted out in the Eucharist (more on that later) but it can be dramatized in other ways as well.

Webber describes a chapel service he led during the season of Advent that incorporated the four movements of preparation, word, response and sending, using

¹¹ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 28.

¹² Webber, 43ff

ancient liturgical responses, biblical texts, liturgical dance and “spontaneous statements of faith” from the congregation that left him feeling “lifted and exhilarated.”¹³ More than that, though, it effectively allowed the people to act out the drama of preparation for the coming of the Christ child through liturgy both ancient and modern.

In acting out God’s story in the liturgy, God’s story becomes our story. Craig Nesson speaks of “pretending the kingdom.”

When a worshiper gathers in the name of God, he or she covenants to suspend ordinary roles for a time in order to claim his or her ultimate destiny. Worship affords the occasion to rehearse the role of one’s true self, a citizen of God’s kingdom.¹⁴

And if it truly becomes our story, then, through the power of the Holy Spirit, it becomes a story that we cannot contain. Having been formed by God’s story, we may find ourselves acting it out spontaneously in the most un-church-like places.

At a 2003 conference for clergy and church musicians entitled “Worship in Turbulent Times: Reaching Out,” Dawn spoke about her appreciation for the simple exchange in which the pastor says, “The Lord be with you,” and the congregation responds, “And also with you.” She told the story of an elderly woman who, while shopping for groceries, dropped some item on the floor and was unable to stoop down to pick it up. A younger woman nearby, seeing her predicament, bent down and picked it up for her. As the older woman took the item, she said, “The Lord bless you,” to which her helper responded, “And also you.”

Missional worship, or more specifically, missional *liturgy*, does more than address the felt needs of worshipers. It does more, even, than simply to tell a story, as

¹³ Ibid, 13-15.

¹⁴ Craig L. Nesson, *Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 37.

important as the story is that the church has to tell. It brings into the story those who come to worship, so that they might be shaped by the story, and so shaped, might be encouraged and inspired to *live* the story in their homes, their work places, their schools and their places of recreation—in short, wherever they might go in the whole wide world.

MISSIONAL LITURGY IS THE WORK OF THE PEOPLE

I've never quite gotten the hang of “contemporary worship,” or even really understood what that term really means. I remember with fondness playing the drums for our campus congregation's celebration of the *Chicago Folk Service* in the seventies and leading a ninety-nine-percent African American congregation in the *Detroit Folk Mass* (the only setting of the eucharistic liturgy ever to bring me to tears) while on internship. The last church I served supposedly had “contemporary worship,” but that merely meant two Sundays per month the hymns, songs, prayers and responses usually came from sources other than our Lutheran Book of Worship. For the most part, the service usually amounted to an alternative “service of the word,” with a call to worship in the beginning, confession after the sermon, and songs, hymns and prayers in appropriate places in between, with ample congregational participation. It never even approached the so-called “entertainment evangelism” made popular by Walt Kallestad of Community Church of Joy.

I have attended worship services like that. I've been in worship spaces that feel more like auditoriums than sanctuaries, where worship combos sing “gathering music” that would rival anything one hears on Christian radio, and where what “liturgy” there is (in the sense of a worship order) is controlled by the pastor. Those worshipping in such

situations may get an emotional boost from hearing—or even singing—in the course of such a service, but just as the person sitting on the sidelines at a football game does not learn how to play the game, it is hard to see how worship produced for an audience can go very far in creating faithful Christian disciples.

It has been said that every worship service has *some* liturgy, i.e., something that “the people” do. However, even as Lutheran and other mainline congregations try ways to make their worship services more attractive by making them less “liturgical,” Robert Webber observes, that many in the evangelical tradition, often known for their sparseness of or even outright disdain for liturgy, are seeking to go the other way. “I have found an increasing desire among evangelicals to return worship to the people.”¹⁵

That desire has very deep Reformation roots. Among Martin Luther’s many accomplishments was the creation of a German mass, for the sake of the people, that along with his German Bible and the Catechisms, served not only as a means of putting the liturgy in the hands of the common people, but of teaching the faith, as well.¹⁶

One of the things that liturgy teaches is that our relationship with God is one of offering and response. I have sometimes, in children’s sermons, equated the back-and-forth action of the liturgy to a game of catch. Here the words lead one to thinking about action—ours and God’s. Writing about the liturgical exchange, “The Lord be with you—and also with you,” Dawn emphasizes the importance of the use of gestures on the part of the worship leader in a way that truly includes the people.

I remember vividly the exuberance of these lines on one occasion when I led an explained-liturgy worship service for about two hundred high school students. Saying the refrains after my explanation, the pastor extended his hands

¹⁵ Webber, 129.

¹⁶ See Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 282-284.

to bless the youth, and they sang their response with all their might. He received it by putting his hands to his heart and grinning from ear to ear. What a profound picture of mutual ministry in the Body of Christ! The youth felt that they truly belonged to the Church.¹⁷

Liturgy that is indeed the “work of the people” is indeed an act of ministry on behalf of the congregation.¹⁸ James White defines liturgy as the work

...performed by the people for the benefit of others. In other words, it is the quintessence of the priesthood of all believers in which the whole priestly community of Christians shares. To call a service “liturgical” is to indicate that it was conceived so that all worshipers take an active part in offering their worship together.¹⁹

Luther, it turns out, had good instincts (even if to some they might not qualify as missional *per se*) when he sought to give the liturgy back to the people. As in the case of the ELCA Christian education folks who a few years back proclaimed “teach to reach,” liturgy done by the people can be both education and evangelical, both forming and making disciples as it engages the people in the worship of the One who sends.

Liturgy is learned in the doing of it, and so is faith. Even more than expressing the faith we have in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, liturgy shapes our faith. That is an especially important concern for evangelism. Believers come to know the object of their faith and the content of a received tradition of the apostolic tradition through worship, through the doing of liturgy.²⁰

MISSIONAL LITURGY IS FOR THE SAKE OF THE WORLD

Contrary to what many people seem to believe, the church does not worship merely for its own benefit (although we do most certainly benefit from it). While I certainly commend the congregational leader in one of my parishes who remarked to me

¹⁷ Dawn, 253.

¹⁸ Dawn (p. 242) cites C. Walton Gaddy’s reference to “liturgy” as translating the Hebrew word *sharath*, which “denotes the idea of ministering on behalf of a community.”

¹⁹ James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 32, in Dawn, 242.

²⁰ David Paul Gleason, “Liturgy: An Evangelism Advantage,” in *Encountering God: The Legacy of the Lutheran Book of Worship for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 1998), 144.

that “It just doesn’t feel like Sunday when I don’t go to church,” we do not worship simply so people will know that it’s Sunday.

We do worship so that people might know that, in the words of the Jay Beech song, “We are the church, the body of our Lord.” And if we are the body of Christ, then it is inevitable that we must give ourselves—in our worship as in other aspects of our life together—for the sake of the world. Rodney Clapp’s assertion that “The church exists for the sake of the world” is played out in liturgy that names the name of the triune God who sends the church into the world, that rehearses the story of God with God’s people, that involves the people themselves in that rehearsal, and that looks forward in hope to the day when the liturgy we enact might not simply be “pretending the kingdom” but the real thing, complete with flowing rivers, heavenly hosts and “no more tears” living.

It is also played out in that part of the liturgy in which we “pray for the whole people of God in Jesus Christ, and for all people according to their needs,” since, living “in between the times,” there are still plenty of needs in the world.

The Christian community, when it is faithful in worship, genuinely stands before God as priests for the world, crying out to God for all those throughout the world and in our near neighborhood whose wretchedness is their only prayer.²¹

In our praying for the world God’s people not only remember the world and pray for a transformation of its brokenness, but our praying for the world both forms and transforms us. In the congregation I serve we have struggled with the question of just whom we ought to include in the “prayers of the people.” One particular member, a cancer survivor, routinely submits each month a whole list of people to whom the local cancer support group has sent “care cards.” Some of them are members of our

²¹ Gordon Lathrop, “Liturgy and Mission in the North American Context,” in Schattauer, 210.

congregation; most are not. While I have told him that he needs to make sure that these various people are willing to have their names read in church (most are), I have suppressed the urge to drop them from the prayer list after a couple of weeks, since in many cases their needs are ongoing. (I do not always pray for them by name, but their names continue to be listed in the bulletin.) Likewise deaths in our community are often remembered in our worship service, whether or not their funerals have been held in our church building. Our prayers also regularly include servicemen and women (again, both within and outside our congregation).

Recently I observed how this sort of outward-focused prayer can impact the lives of our people—particularly our youth. After worship on a recent Sunday one of our confirmation students came up to me to ask for prayer for a classmate of hers who is having serious heart problems. This was, to the best of my recollection, a first. I had prayed in confirmation class and youth group meetings for family members of our youth, at times even at their request. But this was the first time anyone under the age of 20 (more likely 30) had asked me to pray publicly for one of their friends. The friend was from another congregation, of course, and, of course, we did pray and are still praying for her. Without giving the student's name, I let the congregation know what their openness to praying “for the sake of the world” had done for one of their own—and for me. It was for me (and I hope for others) a memorable example of liturgy done “for the world” coming home to transform the church at worship and make it more truly the church.

And as we are transformed through our praying we are also transformed through our giving. While in the minds of many (especially those over fifty), the idea of “missions” may be equated with *giving money* for mission, *mission* goes far beyond that.

Neither does it exclude, however, the offering of tithes and offerings for the sake of mission. From the very beginning (see Acts 2:44-45) Christian worship involved caring for those in need, not just through praying for them, but by the sharing of the resources of the gathered community. Christian mission has also from the beginning involved gathering from the churches who have been blessed by the spread of the gospel a “collection for the saints” who have carried out that blessing (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:1-4). Thus, for the sake of mission, a part of the liturgy (except, perhaps, for Good Friday) will normally be that “a collection be taken, of which a large part is given away to people in need.”²²

THE EUCHARIST AS MISSIONAL LITURGY

A few years ago Dominican theologian Aiden Nichols wrote a modest response to Roman Catholic liturgical reform entitled *Looking at the Liturgy*.²³ While to some it would come as no surprise that “the liturgy” Nichols wanted to look at was the liturgy of the Mass, to most Protestant Christians that would not be so obvious. The little notation “Holy Communion” on our newsletter calendars, either one or two Sundays per month (or on some once a quarter or less!) indicates a separation in the minds of worshipers that must be addressed. Further separation is created between congregations of the Christian faith by varying views of the Sacrament that sometimes restrict participation to those considered to be within the flock. Beyond the practical questions of congregations regarding frequency of communion, then, my focus on missional liturgy leads me to ask to what extent the term “missional worship” requires a revisiting of the “Communion

²² Gordon Lathrop in Schattauer, 208.

question.” Does “missional liturgy” necessarily mean eucharistic liturgy? And what about ecumenical worship? If the impetus toward mission among the pastors in this community results in a weekly ecumenical liturgical assembly, will the Eucharist be a part of it? Are there reasons that we might want to pursue that question further than we might normally be inclined, *for the sake of mission*? Are there reasons, *for the sake of mission*, to stick as usual to a service of the word?

I must confess that at the outset I saw the question regarding the celebration of Holy Communion as being somewhat on the periphery of the discussion about missional liturgy, but it really has a much more central place. (In fact, if I had made it the only focus of this paper, I would not have run out of material.) Particularly in the context of a regular ecumenical gathering for worship, an intentional decision needs to be made up-front regarding this question. People should not be expected to choose which week they will attend, depending on whether Holy Communion will be served. Such a service, I believe, needs to be largely the same, week after week. People should know what to expect, especially if they are coming for the first time or bringing a guest. Also, the decision for or against the Eucharist, I believe, would itself send a message about the collective view of both worship and mission. It ought not be a decision made lightly.

The missional nature of the Eucharist might be more apparent to Protestants had we retained the Roman name for the sacrament, i.e, the Mass. The name comes from the words said at the end of the Lord’s Supper in the Medieval church, *Ite Missa est* (“You are sent out.”). William Willimon explains, “In the Mass, Christians receive the

²³ The whole title is *Looking at the Liturgy: A Critical View of Its Contemporary Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996).

nourishment and sustenance they need in order to go out into the world to do the work that they are supposed to do.”²⁴

But many of the Lutheran voices that connect liturgy and mission these days also speak of the centrality of the Eucharist. Frank C. Senn, writing about the liturgies in the Lutheran Book of Worship, asserts that the Eucharist “is the unique act of worship on the Lord’s Day,” because it is “an anticipation of the Messianic banquet in the kingdom of God and therefore the appropriate rite for the eschatological eighth day.”²⁵ He cites the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann as calling

...the whole liturgy a journey into the dimension of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is symbolized, brought together (“symbol,” *sum-ballein* means “to bring together” two realities), in the gathering of the church and the celebration of the Eucharist because the kingdom is where the Father’s reign is mediated through the Son in the Spirit. The kingdom is where the world has been reconciled with God and brought into unity with God. From time immemorial reconciliation and unity have been sealed by meal hospitality. The world’s chief reconciliation with God has been achieved by Christ’s sacrifice of atonement, and this is gratefully remembered as the core content of the eucharistic memorial—not just in words but also in the acts of eating and drinking the Lord’s body and blood (I Corinthians 1:26).²⁶

This thinking, however, is not confined to members of so-called “liturgical churches.” Robert Webber, a self-described evangelical whose work was recommended to me by both a professor from the Reformed tradition and a Baptist pastor, recovers for the evangelical community a twofold focus in worship of Word and Table. Moreover, such a liturgical focus appears quite ecumenical.

[W]orship tells and acts out the life, death resurrection and coming again of Christ through the proclamation of the Word and the Table. We order our service after

²⁴ William Willimon, *Sunday Dinner: the Lord’s Supper and the Christian Life* (Nashville, Tenn.: The Upper Room, 1981), 11

²⁵ Frank C. Senn, “Worship: The Center of Parish Life,” in Ralph R. Van Loon, ed., *Encountering God: The Legacy of Lutheran Book of Worship for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 1998), 69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

God's work of love and salvation. Therefore, it is an order that can be adapted to any church—Baptist, Independent, Presbyterian, Methodist, Charismatic, etc.²⁷

Craig Nesson furthers the notion of “acting out” God's story, even calling liturgy (especially eucharistic liturgy) “pretending the kingdom.”

In the drama of the Eucharist, we pretend that we are already people of the kingdom. In standing and kneeling, singing and listening, washing and eating, praying and blessing, we immerse ourselves in the kingdom of God as envisioned by Jesus. At worship we become parables of kingdom, imagining our lives in community as Jesus would have them.²⁸

And, of course, when one talks about “pretending,” one is almost unavoidably moved to talking about children. At a time when the wisdom of having “children's sermons” is widely debated, Gretchen Wolff Prichard, an Episcopal writer and speaker on children and spirituality, tells of one congregation that deliberately set out to design a liturgy that would address “the need of young families for liturgy that their children could find nourishing.”²⁹ What evidently was not nourishing was the practice of having a (much beloved) choral service of Morning Prayer two Sundays a month, which left the children bored, restless, and actually disappointed “that Sunday worship offered them the opportunity to take part in the eucharist only some of the time.”³⁰ Families were asking for a regular, weekly eucharistic service, which wound up being accomplished by adding a second “Service of Celebration” on Morning Prayer Sundays.

What is interesting is that, although certain things were done to increase the participation of children and families in this new service, the biggest single ingredient was...

²⁷ Webber, 45.

²⁸ Nesson, 39.

²⁹ Gretchen Wolff Prichard, *Offering the Gospel to Children* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1992), 152.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

...the sacrament itself: children who regularly receive communion come to expect Sunday worship to meet them where they cannot fail to sit up and take notice: in their hands, their bodies, their mouths and stomachs. A child may sit through the entire service of Morning Prayer without once making contact with what the adults are doing, but that is impossible at the eucharist. Children know, of course, that the offering of food is a gift of love: “Take, eat, this is *for you*.”³¹

For me there is an issue lurking in the background here regarding just how old a child might have to be before he/she is allowed to experience the gift as indeed being “for me.” I won’t go into it here, but being the father of a seven-year-old who has indicated the desire to receive the elements along with the rest of the congregation, it has become more than merely a theological issue. Prichard goes on:

Then there is the movement involved in a normal parish eucharist—passing the peace, leaving one’s seat to come forward for communion, to kneel, receive, and return—which is for children not only a welcome diversion but also a source of distinct landmarks in what is otherwise a trackless wilderness of words and music. Without such landmarks, children who can neither read nor tell time...react like kids on a long highway trip: after five minutes, they begin to whine, “Daddy, are we there yet?”³²

Those of us who have done “children’s sermons” know that what is interesting and effective for children often will have at least as much of an impact on the adults in the congregation. The “Communion is special” mindset of many of our older members notwithstanding, it would seem that here is another reason for reassessing the Eucharist as a means of mission, especially as congregations, like the one Prichard mentions, look for more ways to minister to children, youth and families.

MISSIONAL LITURGY COMBINES ORDER WITH FREEDOM

The above discussion about children at worship might make one think differently about the structure of worship, as well. Children (especially young children) like order

³¹ Ibid., 152.

and predictability. Our own children like their juice first thing in the morning and their stories at the end of the day. Upset that order and you're asking for trouble. So, too, with worship, the order and "landmarks" present in the ancient liturgies (especially the liturgy of the Eucharist) can be comforting.

At the same time, children love surprises, so within any set order there can and ought to be freedom. Marva Dawn observes,

Many argue that worship gets too boring if the same liturgical forms are used week after week. This accusation is justified in churches that stiffly follow a hymnbook order of worship without any variation whatsoever. However, most denominational service books include all kinds of options for worship parts, and the seasons of the liturgical year necessitate the weekly changing of the "propers"....³³

Dawn advocates interspersing music from various traditions and cultures into the liturgy to bear witness to the global nature of Christianity. As an example, the ELCA hymnal *With One Voice* includes quite a large section of "Service Music," with liturgical pieces taken from Lutheran and Roman Catholic liturgies, as well as Classical European, Caribbean, South African and African musical traditions both ancient and contemporary. Thus there is a great deal of freedom to be had within any particular form of the liturgy.

On the other side of the "street," so to speak, Webber argues that an emphasis on "free" worship can itself become boring.

Originally, ["free" worship] was a reaction against cold, dead, and fixed liturgical forms. The intention of its proponents was to introduce congregational participation and involvement into the church and create an atmosphere that was conducive to an inner and spontaneous response to God in worship. But I feel that somehow the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. In many of our churches, what was once free has now become a fixed form with little life and spontaneity.³⁴

³² Ibid.

³³ Dawn, 246.

³⁴ Webber, 4.

Webber, too, mentions that attention to the liturgical calendar can help add variety to people's worship experience. This, in my view, is one of the things that evangelical churches can learn from the mainline "liturgical" tradition. Unfortunately, some mainline congregations, in an effort to be more appealing to the stranger, have gone the other way, downplaying the church year and thus abandoning the one thing inherent in the tradition that gives some flavor to the week-after-week practice of worship.

Perhaps it goes back to the question of what, exactly, is the subject of our worship, or more bluntly stated, who/what is it that we worship. If the form of the liturgy is such that it cannot be changed, then the liturgy has become our god. If it is freedom at all costs that we seek, then that is our god. Liturgy that puts God squarely in the center, however, will both comfort and surprise us (as does God), will be both structured and free (as is our relationship with God). Thus does the "work of the people" image, at its best, the One in whose image "the people" are made, the very One by whom we are redeemed and sent.

Dawn cites C.S. Lewis' image of liturgy as a dance one learns so well that one need not think about the steps, or a shoe so well-made that the wearer does not notice it. "The perfect church service," Lewis wrote, "would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God."³⁵

A dialectical tension is required that must be carefully maintained by worship planners—to maintain a liturgical form, whatever style that might involve, that actually frees worship participants to focus on God without being distracted by either novelty or monotony. The goal, in Lewis' image, is to be able truly to dance, without having to count steps—that is, freely to experience the self-giving presence of God, without becoming either distracted or mechanistic.³⁶

³⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1963), quoted in Dawn, 246.

³⁶ Dawn, 246.

MISSIONAL LITURGY SHAPES AND IS SHAPED BY ITS CONTEXT

Because liturgy is the work of particular people in a particular place and time it will always be subject to the context and culture in which it is done. Moreover, the gospel itself as—written and as read—is contextual. “The gospel is always conveyed through the medium of culture.”³⁷

Concerning our own context on this continent, Lathrop writes,

A Christian assembly in North America will inevitably—both subtly and not so subtly!—be marked by the cultures of these lands where we live. Indeed, trusting that God is the creator of both land and people, such an assembly will treasure much that belongs to our human life here: our languages, our ways of gathering, and making music, our widespread democratic values.³⁸

But at the same time, the gospel is not *merely* contextual. The gospel often challenges and/or transforms what human beings take for granted in their culture. So, Paul, in noticing the “extremely religious” nature of the Athenians (Acts 17:22ff), was able to point to the altar “to an unknown god” and proclaim that god to be the God he knew “who is Lord of heaven and earth.” Therefore, even in the North American context a worship assembly,

...if it is a Christian assembly...will not just be a gathering centered around our North American values. The assembly in word and sacrament, the assembly gathered in the name of the triune God, will call us to a way of living on the land that comes from standing before that God, under the mercy of that God. The assembly may even invite us to resist certain characteristics of the pervasive North American cultures. In any case, it will certainly invite us to see ourselves as people in communion with other peoples of many other cultures, many other ways of living on the lands of the earth, many other patterns of interdependence from throughout the world.³⁹

³⁷ Craig Van Gelder in Guder, 19.

³⁸ Lathrop in Schattauer, 203.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 203

What this means for liturgy is that while one cannot simply take a particular liturgical form and plop it down anywhere without thinking about it (insisting, for example, on using an English-language liturgy in a community of Hispanic (or Arab or,, immigrants—or even using an Hispanic liturgy without thinking about the many varieties of Hispanic peoples in this country], one also cannot simply abandon time-honored tradition in favor of the newest fad or the whims of one particular group of people.

Even as we “do the liturgy” the liturgy “does us” (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). When we invoke the name of the triune God we enter into a realm where Jesus, and not ourselves, is Lord, and so we are shaped by the shape of our worship together.

So, for instance, in a society plagued by widespread biblical illiteracy, a liturgy that is biblically-based, even though it may be totally unrecognized as such, can provide a base from which to begin to learn to pray in the words of the patriarchs, the matriarchs and the saints of the church. For people who have learned individualism from the culture, a liturgy that relies on everyone working together might help them to recognize the value (or at least the reality) of our living interdependently. For people who are used to the hustle and bustle of a world constantly in motion, the gift of silence, while at first perhaps uncomfortable to receive, may provide an oasis of serenity amidst a sea of busyness. For people who “believe it when we see it” (and not always even then), having to take and eat a piece of bread and a sip of wine and believe in the body of Christ requires an act of faith that truly transforms lives.

As we “pretend the kingdom,” in Nesson’s words, through the liturgy, we are drawn into God’s eschatological vision for the world. We are not merely “conformed to

the world” but “transformed by the renewing of [our] minds” (Romans 12:2), our hearts, our ways of living in the world.

Missional liturgy, then, will take seriously the culture in which it is to be practiced, while taking into account the holy work which God’s people are about in worship.

ECUMENICAL LITURGY: BEARING WITNESS TO THE UNITY OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN MISSION

Going back to the beginning of this paper, one of the reasons for writing it was the suggestion of a regular ecumenical worship service, held outdoors in the summertime here in Wessington Springs, that came as the result of a question about our ministerial association expanding its mission. Considering all that I have written so far, what sort of liturgy ought we to use if the service becomes a reality?

While the temptation might be to either have each church or pastor provide a liturgy suitable to that church, our common witness as the Church of Jesus Christ would seem to be better served by our working together on a common liturgy that would be used for each service. Such a liturgy, conceived out of a sense of mission, ought to 1) bear witness to our baptismal identity as children of the triune God, 2) tell God’s story in word and action, 3) be for the sake of the world, 4) fully involve the people, 5) combine order with freedom, 6) both help shape and be shaped by the context, 7) celebrate the Eucharist to the extent that doing so would bind together rather than separate God’s people in the particular location where such a service is held.

One example of Christians working together to construct liturgy that bears witness to their unity (and therefore to the Christ who makes us one) can be found in the

documents relating to the fifth anniversary of the Formula of Agreement, the agreement of full communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ that was signed in 1998.

In “Guidelines for the Celebration of Full Communion” the churches say, for one thing, “When the service is hosted by a particular church body or a congregation of that church body, that church's rite is used and an ordained minister from that church or one invited from another of the church bodies presides.”⁴⁰ The document goes on to say the preacher may be drawn from one of the other participating churches.

In addition to these instructions, however, the Guidelines suggest that where a whole new service is desired,

drawing materials from various sources of the participating churches...the following order of the service, rooted in our shared Christian tradition, offers a faithful and helpful structure. The elements printed in bold type are essential to the liturgical tradition of all four communions. The elements printed in italic type, also found in each liturgical tradition, while not essential, may help provide a fuller and richer experience of worship for all participants. The *Confession of Sin* may be included as a preparatory rite or may be used elsewhere in the service.

GATHERING

Entrance Hymn

Greeting

Kyrie (Lord have mercy)

Hymn of Praise

Prayer

WORD

Prayer for Illumination

First Reading

Psalm

Second Reading

Gospel

⁴⁰ “Guidelines for the Celebration of Full Communion,” reprinted from *Guidelines and Worship Resources for the Celebration of Full Communion* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, 1998)

Sermon

Hymn

Historic Creed (Apostles' or Nicene)

Intercessions

EUCCHARIST

Greeting of Peace

Presentation of the Gifts

Great Thanksgiving

Lord's Prayer

Distribution of Communion

Canticle or Hymn

Prayer

SENDING

Blessing

*Dismissal*⁴¹

It is interesting to note that this order represents nothing “new” or “contemporary.” This is the ancient liturgical order as (more or less) celebrated in churches of various denominations every Sunday for centuries. There is obviously freedom as well as structure. For instance, no particular setting of the liturgy is dictated. Moreover, where there is a tradition of “less is more,” even Lutheran liturgical historians agree that the full liturgical form found in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* is more than is often necessary. Concerning the entrance rite, the *Manual on the Liturgy* states:

What became the traditional entrance rite of the Western church (Introit, Kyrie, Gloria in Excelsis, Collect) is a reflection of the elaborate entrance the pope used to make into the churches of Rome... This elaborate entrance rite... is far more than is necessary or perhaps even desirable as a constant practice.⁴²

Even though a special Celebration of Full Communion would be a festive event, and therefore worthy of the full liturgy, the Guidelines provide for a simpler rite where that would be more welcoming. Certainly the shorter form would be appropriate for more regular worship together.

⁴¹ Ibid.

It goes without saying that this is a service of Holy Communion. A celebration of Full Communion would be absurd without the Eucharist. Nevertheless, in churches where the Eucharist is not often celebrated (in the local UCC congregation the tradition is apparently four-to-six times per year), or where ecumenical worship is desired involving congregations without such agreements or with significant differences in sacramental understanding, a service of the word might be more in order, especially if the service occurs on a day other than Sunday.

Still, what better way for the church of Jesus Christ to witness to the unity we share in him than by sharing his body and blood in the meal he instituted for his followers. Many have been hurt or offended by not being allowed to commune in a particular congregation's worship service. While others (particularly older worshipers) might be likewise offended by the offering of the Lord's Supper to whomever comes, my urge would be to at least make that a part of the discussion, and perhaps in doing so open the door to a broader understanding of our communion in Christ. The world, I'm afraid, cares little for the fine points of our eucharistic theology and is often baffled by the divisions that exist even in our celebration of the meal that ought to bind us together. Coming together in one body to share in Christ's own body and blood would most certainly be a missional event, in which we as one church could tell the story of the One who came to destroy the walls that separate. As the writer of Ephesians said,

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians. 4:4-6).

⁴² Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy: Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing House, 1979), 210-211.

Ecumenical worship can also be missional in terms of helping congregations themselves to move to a better understanding of the liturgy they practice and to a better appreciation of the liturgies of others. Breaking free of our particular tradition—even for one Sunday—can free those captive to traditionalism to at least *consider* how things might be done differently.

For instance, in the midst of our planning together for a local celebration of the anniversary of the Formula of Agreement, the local United Church of Christ pastor observed that using the published service produced jointly for the event by the participating denominations may give him the opportunity to introduce some elements of the liturgy (for instance, the Gospel response, “Thanks be to God”) that are presently absent for the liturgy as practiced in his congregation.

Likewise, the liturgy may allow our ELCA congregation to experience both a different entrance rite (entrance rite in the prepared liturgy includes the opportunity for a baptism and a “baptismal remembrance,” but no Kyrie or Hymn of Praise) and the presentation of the elements of Holy Communion during the offering, which up to this time we have not done. Other liturgical elements in the service are set to hymn tunes (with a number of different tunes being possible, depending on the context), which might give both congregations some additional options for future consideration.

“TOWARD” BUT NOT YET

As the title “Toward a Common Missional Liturgy” indicates, the above thoughts are anything but an exhaustive treatment of the issue of missional liturgy, to say nothing of *ecumenical* missional liturgy. Each one of the sections above could easily have been

expanded into a paper of its own, such is the (surprising to me) amount of literature that has been written on the subject of missional worship.

I did manage to limit myself in some ways. I have not dwelt much on the particular *settings* of the liturgy (which, in their own way, can serve to enhance or detract from the central story, and thus the missional nature of the liturgy), nor have I dealt with the other musical aspects of worship, i.e., the “hymns, songs and spiritual songs,” preludes, postludes, gathering music and the like. I also have not addressed the place of the word of God (either read or preached) in the liturgy, except inasmuch as God’s word certainly tells “God’s story with God’s people.” I would assume (but perhaps should not) that any Christian liturgy would include ample room for the word of God. Certainly the traditional liturgies of the Church are filled with it. But in this paper I specifically wanted to focus on the liturgy, that is, more of the structure of what people do in worship. Things do not always divide up so neatly, however. Authors sometimes use the terms “worship” and “liturgy” interchangeably, and I myself have tended to mix and meld them.

The issues raised in each section have come to me more or less intuitively, as a result of my study of the missional church. I could, I suppose, have based this paper on Guder’s five characteristics of the missional ecclesiology (a missional ecclesiology is biblical, historical, contextual, eschatological and able to be practiced)⁴³, in keeping with Craig Van Gelder’s notion that “the church does what it is.”⁴⁴ I could also have chosen to address what Gordon Lathrop cites as “urgent matters for the renewal of our

⁴³ Guder, 11-12. Especially the ability of the liturgy “to be practiced” might be of some concern to some worshipers who find particular *settings* of the liturgy difficult to sing.

⁴⁴ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 128.

congregations in mission.”⁴⁵ Not all of these latter seven issues relate specifically to liturgy, however. Many of these issues have, however, found their way into this discussion.

For me the major tension throughout this discussion has been between the “ought to” and the “is,” as illustrated fairly plainly within a single paragraph by Darrel Guder.

Above all, the public worship of the mission community always leads to the pivotal act of sending. The community that is called together is the community that is sent. *Every occasion of public worship is a sending event.* Our worship traditions have vast resources to be drawn on to implement this vision of missional worship. But much work needs to be done in order to equip those who lead worship to do so with such a vision. *Communities need to learn to worship missionally.* This worship cannot happen merely as the result of liturgical innovation, nor will it be accomplished by converting the meeting into an evangelistic crusade meeting. Rather, the conversion of worship to its missional centeredness will come about as communities are gripped by their vocation to be Christ’s witnesses and being to practice that calling.⁴⁶

Worship/liturgy that is missional presumes a church that is missional. Getting the horse before the cart is perhaps the most important step toward facilitating missional worship in the church. Thus the real “work of the people” involves acknowledging and participating in the work of the triune God in calling and sending the church into the world (all of life is worship⁴⁷). Just as it was a question of mission that provoked the question of a regular joint worship service for the whole Christian community of Wessington Springs, so any questions about “Which liturgy?” or “What kind of worship service?” ought, both in our individual congregations and as the church together, be preceded by the twofold question of “Whose mission, and what is it?” If we get that right the rest can hardly help but fall into place.

⁴⁵ Lathrop in Schattauer, 208.

⁴⁶ Guder, 243, emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ See Van Gelder’s diagram of the local congregation in *The Essence of the Church*, 176.

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