

# Evangelism in Public Worship

By, James P. Tiefel

It is a question that continues to be asked wherever and whenever pastors gather together: “How can we do evangelism in public worship?”

The question is preeminently practical. Pastors know that people make decisions about churches and about religion on the basis of what they see and hear at the church’s public worship. There are, to be sure, other areas of contact between searchers and the church. Searchers judge the church on the basis of its pastor who makes a call, on its members who live next door, on its publicity which arrives in the mail or over the radio. Some searchers are even drawn to the church by its message. But most searchers, before they are drawn into the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word, make decisions about a church by reacting to its worship. This is a fact of life in contemporary America and pastors know it. Hence the question.

To a certain extent, the question is also born in frustration. Pastors sense that Lutheran worship does not serve well the cause of evangelism. This is not a sense they gain from some deep-seated inferiority complex. There is some evidence that such a conclusion has validity. Last Sunday I visited the interdenominational Elmbrook Church in Waukesha. I was there for a concert, and the church is quite a concert hall. An immense edifice seating over 2000, the building is filled for two Sunday morning services and a Saturday evening service. Parking lots cover acres of land and offer shuttle service from the lots to the nave. In stark contrast is little St. John’s Lutheran Church across the street, a member of the ELCA. What is the situation here? Both churches are in the same neighborhood, work with the same demographics, own the same central location, serve the same constituency. St. John’s looks as though it has been in the neighborhood longer. Yet Elmbrook Church is very large, and St. John’s is quite small. The former packs in 6000 a weekend; the latter less than 500, I suppose. Can ELCA doctrine be the difference? I tend to think St. John’s would look about the same were it a member of the WELS. Similar observations can be made in hundreds of cities across our country, probably in every city one of you serves as pastor. Is worship the difference?

Lutheran pastors come at the question from different perspectives. Some are of a mind to value the traditional focus and elements of Lutheran liturgical worship. They possess an historical and artistic mindset and are loathe to let go of what has served the Church for 20 centuries. They see the necessity to evangelize as a threat to public worship. On the other hand, some could care less about history and art. They have used the liturgy with no inner conviction but simply because the liturgy is what Lutherans have done. They are pragmatists before they are purists and have come to conclude that the Lutheran liturgy as a distinct barrier to outreach.

These two mindsets in the area of worship and evangelism are setting some churches on fire. In the ELCA and in the LCMS the invective flies on the pages of professional journals and in lengthy debates at conferences. Some have estimated that over 1000 Lutheran churches have adopted the mega-church approach to worship. Lacking definitive information or a sense of what is causing the battle, the Commission on Worship asked Dr. Wayne Schmidt of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, to present a report on the ELCA and LCMS situation which will be presented at the Commission’s annual summer meeting. We felt Schmidt’s report would be very helpful as we assess the situation in the WELS and work to avoid the polarization which has plagued both the ELCA and Missouri.

To be sure, the debates over this issue have been quieter and more reasonable in our Synod. There are many reasons for this blessing. Part of the reason can be attributed, I think, to the fact that the Seminary’s evangelism chair and its worship chair not only share a common ancestry (The Mahnke/Valleskey clan) but also a common perspective on worship. In fact, the essay read at this conference is the draft which Prof. David Valleskey asked his second cousin to prepare for a book on evangelism, *We Believe-Therefore We Speak*, which is scheduled for release this week. While the chapter on worship will not appear exactly as it does here, it does represent what is taught in both the worship classes and the evangelism classes at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In fact, the finished chapter on worship and evangelism is close enough to this author’s original that it gets him a free copy of the book!

## Public Worship with Evangelism in Mind

Of all the activities which involve Christians with other Christians, public worship takes the preeminent position. This is true, first of all, from a theological point of view. When the Bible desires to show us the Church, i.e., the assembly of believers, it most often takes us to public worship. We see Old Testament believers gathered for instruction and for battle, but we see them gathered more often for public worship in the tabernacle and the temple. Not many of the instances of assembly in the New Testament can be thought of as something other than public worship. Author Peter Brunner maintains that public worship “is virtually the dominant mode of the manifestation of the church on earth. In such an assembly the epiphany of the church takes place.”<sup>1</sup>

That public worship is the preeminent activity in the life of a congregation is also true from a practical perspective. Statistics (to say nothing of casual observation) indicate that Christians assemble with other Christians more often at public worship than at any other event or occasion. Except where Christians live together as a family, it must be recognized that Christians worship together more than they do any other spiritual thing.

It is natural, therefore, that Christians would consider their public worship to have great value in carrying out the Savior’s commission to “preach the gospel to every creature.”

Despite what seems obvious to us, the Church in history seems to have had a divided opinion concerning the value of public worship as an evangelism tool. Even in what was likely the greatest mission era of church history, the first two centuries after Christ, we find the Savior’s witnesses looking for opportunities to proclaim the good news apart from their public worship. Only after instruction had begun were the non-baptized invited to the Word section of the service; the part of the service from introit to sermon was even called the “Mass of the Catechumens.” The pre-baptized were not even allowed to observe the mysteries in the communion section (referred to as the “Mass of the Faithful”) until after instruction and baptism were completed. Referring to corporate worship, Werner Elert wrote:

Admission was not just, for anybody....The gathering for worship in the early church was not a public but a closed assembly, while the celebration of the Eucharist was reserved for the saints with the utmost strictness.

Despite his deep commitment to the common man and his determined effort to make public worship something in which the common man could easily participate, Martin Luther did not consider the Sunday service to be the primary entrance level for many in Germany who literally were non-believers.

The German service needs a plain and simple, fair and square catechism. Catechism means the instruction in which the heathen who want to be Christians are taught and guided in what they should believe, know, and do, and leave undone, according to the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup>

Neither the practice of the New Testament Church nor that of Luther seems to have been essentially different from that of the Old Testament. Instruction by house fathers and, later in history, by the rabbis in the synagogue, preceded participation in the rites of the tabernacle and temple. It can be maintained by even a cursory study of church history that not until the dawn of American Revivalism did the Church consider its public worship to be the primary opportunity for evangelization. Rather, it understood that initiation into the Christian faith was accomplished more easily through some form of personal contact and education.

On the other hand, it can be maintained that Christians through the centuries ordered and organized the rites and ceremonies of public worship with recent converts in mind. The huge influx of members into the church of the fourth century (soon after Constantine’s Edict of Toleration) surely encouraged the formation of the Christian calendar. Since detailed individual instruction became impossible, the Church found in the calendar a method to teach the life of Christ to large numbers. Luther did create his German service (*Deutsche*

<sup>1</sup> Brunner, Peter, *Worship In the Name of Jesus*, Martin Bertram, translator (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968) p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, p. 64.

*Messe*) “for the sake of the unlearned lay folk” so that the gospel might be “publicly preached to such people to move them to believe and become Christians.”<sup>3</sup>

Martin Luther understood what the Church has always recognized, that public worship holds what people need to become Christians. The gospel is the Spirit’s exclusive tool for creating--and sustaining--faith, and the liturgy of Christian worship is full of the gospel. From opening greeting to parting blessing the liturgy proclaims the Christ who was born, lived, died, rose, and ascended for “us and our salvation.” The full reality of full forgiveness is announced in the absolution, the sermon, and the Words of Institution. The cause of forgiveness, the work of Jesus, is reviewed by the calendar and its proper. The person of Christ is taught in the liturgy’s canticles. The continuing presence of Jesus is proclaimed in the liturgical psalms. It is obvious that public worship sets a full table of the gospel, and this is what the Holy Spirit will use to convince and convert the lost.

At worship the Holy Spirit also employs people to proclaim the gospel. Because of the participatory nature of Lutheran worship, visitors have an opportunity to hear the gospel not only from the pastor, organist, and choir, but also from the worshipers. The pastor proclaims the forgiveness of sins, but so do hundreds of witnesses as they sing “O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Have mercy on us.” What an impression the unchurched receive when the entire congregation proclaims,

But God beheld my wretched state  
 Before the earth’s foundation,  
 And, mindful of his mercies great,  
 He planned my soul’s salvation.  
 A Father’s heart he turned to me,  
 Sought my redemption fervently;  
 He gave his dearest treasure.  
 (Christian Worship 377:4)

Besides actually proclaiming the gospel, worshipers also attest to the worth and value they attach to Christ by the enthusiasm and attention they show as they worship. Determined participation in the hymns and liturgy and careful concentration during the lessons and sermon serve as well as many other actions to carry out the Savior’s urging to let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

Indeed, the Holy Spirit has much with which to work in Christian worship! Although the Church through the centuries has wondered occasionally how well public worship serves for the sake of evangelism, the Church never ceases to understand that evangelization can and will take place at public worship.

In fact, the final accounting of the history of the Church may show that the liturgy, carefully prepared and pastorally led, has contributed as much to the growth of disciples inside and outside the Church as anything the Church has ever done. This is true because the liturgy showcases that which the Holy Spirit uses to make disciples: Word and Sacrament.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Additional Characteristics of Lutheran Worship Which Benefit Evangelism**

Besides possessing what is essential for evangelism, Lutheran worship has several additional characteristics which wonderfully aid the cause of reaching the lost.

*Lutheran worship contains law as well as gospel*, it convicts as well as comforts. Therefore, worship contains what is necessary to prepare the heart so that it might rejoice in the message of forgiveness.

<sup>3</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Baumler, Gary, and Moldenhauer, Kermit, editors, *Christian Worship Manual*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993), p. 112.

Because it is built on the church calendar and its set of propers, *Lutheran worship emphasizes a single theme* each Sunday and festival. Visitors may not be able to understand everything that occurs at worship, but most will be able to leave the service with the primary focus of the day in mind.

*Lutheran worship is artistic*, that is, it places high value on the proclamation of the gospel through the media of Christian art and music. This determined commitment to artistic communication guarantees that the gospel will be proclaimed to the whole man, to his emotions as well as his intellect.

Much could be added to define and defend the Lutheran understanding of art and music; perhaps books and manuals written specifically on the subject of worship are better suited for such detail.<sup>5</sup> Let no one underestimate this characteristic of Lutheran worship, however. The pages of Scripture are full of examples in which the Divine Communicator employed the arts to proclaim his message. Only heaven knows how many have been brought into the kingdom through the witness of the gospel in beautiful music or splendid art.

*Lutheran worship holds a proper balance of justification and sanctification.* In this balance Lutheran worship imitates the balance St. Paul provides so beautifully in his epistles. Note, for example, Paul's emphases and order of importance in the Letter to the Romans: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, *in view of God's mercy* (justification), to *offer your bodies as living sacrifices* (sanctification), holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:1-2). Note the emphasis, but also note the order: first justification, then sanctification.

Many visitors to public worship come not so much because they are concerned about life with God but because they are concerned about life in their homes. Because of the justification/sanctification balance, visitors will find Lutheran worship to be practical for their perceived needs. More important, however, they will also hear that a contented and fulfilled life is possible only through the pardon and power of Christ.

*Lutheran worship balances continuity and variety.* The liturgy is an order of service the Lutheran Church has inherited from the church of western Christendom. Parts are as old as Christianity itself; in fact, the progression of lessons and psalms in the Word section of the liturgy is as old as the rite of the synagogue. While the liturgy contains some relatively recent additions (for example, the confession/absolution and the offering), most of the forms Lutherans employ in their worship are more than a thousand years old.

Many visitors--especially those from Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopalian backgrounds--will find in Lutheran worship much which is familiar. Newcomers from other Protestant churches may notice that many of the hymns Lutherans sing are the same as those sung in their former congregations. Most guests will be able to see that the congregations of the Wisconsin Synod do not stand apart from the rest of Christianity as far as worship is concerned.

On the other hand, Lutheran worship is not mindlessly and numbingly the same, nor does it rely only on thousand year old forms. The Christian liturgy anticipates, encourages, and actually insists on variety. The proper of the service, that is, the set of lessons, psalms, prayers, and hymns that changes from Sunday to Sunday, allows an infusion of a variety of texts and many musical styles and arrangements. Not much more than the inability (or an unwillingness) to learn and to plan on the part of a congregation's worship leaders stands in the way of variety in Lutheran worship.

This balance of continuity and variety is a positive feature of Lutheran liturgical worship. Guests at our services will notice that Lutherans do not worship in a formalistic way, nor do they insist that worship be little more than nostalgic meandering. At the same time, they will notice that Lutheran worship does not skittishly jump from one order of service to another. This joyful stability which Lutheran worship offers is something which the leaders of Lutheran worship dare not downplay; they need to work at maintaining it.

*The liturgy of Lutheran worship allows for a balance of traditional and contemporary forms.* It is true that the liturgy consists of a set of ancient texts, but these texts are used in fresh and understandable translations. Musical settings may be as ancient as plainchant (for example, the psalm tones in *Christian Worship*) or as contemporary as the hymnal's psalm refrains and the canticles in the Service of Word and Sacrament. There can

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<sup>5</sup> Cf., for example, *Christian Worship Manual*, op. cit.

be something in Lutheran worship for a variety of musical tastes, and this is right and proper. Visitors--to say nothing of members--some from a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds, and their, tastes and comfort levels in artistic expression will obviously differ. The key issue in the selection of music for worship is almost never whether the music is traditional or contemporary. The fact is that there is bad and good traditional music just as there is bad and good contemporary music. The issue is rather: Does the music--its text, style, and method of performance--point to Christ or detract from Christ? (This issue will be broached again in the section entitled "The Seeker Service.")

*Lutheran worship balances solemnity and warmth.* Lutheran congregations which make much of the power of the Means of Grace to convert the lost are rightly the first to emphasize solemnity at worship. In the Word of God and in his sacraments human beings come into contact with the living Christ. Like Peter who fell to his knees praying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man," Lutherans come to worship with a deep sense of awe. They assent to the command, "The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him." Dr. John Brug of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary noted the value of solemnity in Lutheran worship when he wrote:

The character of good liturgy is that it deemphasizes individuals and unites worshipers in corporate praise of a majestic God. It directs less attention to human feeling and to individual desires and more attention to the majesty and goodness of God. Liturgical worship recognizes that although God is our truest Friend, he is not our "buddy." He is a holy God, who is to be feared.<sup>6</sup>

Solemnity need not be achieved at the expense of warmth, however. The Lutheran liturgy contains the good news about Jesus Christ, and the people who conduct and participate in the liturgy ought to reflect the joy and excitement that is born in the gospel. Much of the joyful content of Lutheran worship is hidden by leaders who are stiff, wooden, and unnatural as they conduct the liturgy. But when the person leading worship communicates a warm, comfortable, and personable style, then the liturgy will become what it means to be: a glorious proclamation of the fullness of Christ's blessings.

It ought to be noted here that church-goers from various denominational backgrounds tend to have differing opinions about the proper balance of solemnity and warmth. For some, even a balanced approach will seem too solemn; just as many may be put off by what they consider to be disrespect to the divine. For exactly this reason, Lutherans work for balance, avoiding both cold dignity and trendy casualness. Congregations which strive for that "warm, fuzzy feeling" at worship are not serving visitors any better than those who attempt to "rebuild Gothic cathedrals."

*Lutheran worship includes both the objective proclamation of the gospel and the subjective response of faith.* Of the two, the proclamation of the gospel, true for ever and for all, is by far more important. It is, in fact, the centerpiece of the Christian liturgy. But there is time in public worship for individual Christians to speak from the heart to God as they do in confession: "Holy and merciful Father, I confess that I am by nature sinful..." (*Christian Worship*, p. 15). There is also a place for one Christian to testify to another, for example in CW 562: "I Love to Tell the Story" (*Christian Worship* 562).

A discussion about the value of subjective elements in worship leads to the question: Is there room in Lutheran worship for personal testimonies? The worship of evangelicals regularly includes testimonials, that is, personal "sermonettes" by those who have inspiring spiritual stories to tell. Evangelicals will maintain that testimonials have obvious evangelistic potential as Christians report "what Jesus means to me."

Although Lutherans have shied away from testimonials in worship, it must be said that some of the most famous sermons in history have included the personal experiences of the preacher (Cf., for example, Paul's sermon in Jerusalem, Acts 21:37ff or his sermon before Agrippa, Acts 26). One of the ways Christians can broach the subject of religion with their neighbors is to relate a personal experience or insight.

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<sup>6</sup> Brug, John F. "Approaching A Majestic God," *Parish Leadership*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Fall 1992, p. 25.

It remains a legitimate question, however, whether testimonials in public worship complement the proclamation of the gospel. No matter how touching they may be, stories which contain no gospel or which confuse law and gospel never edify the body of Christ. It would seem that any Christian who stands before the assembly at worship has a divine call not unlike that of an assistant at communion. As part of the representative ministry such an individual ought to have an established ability to “rightly divide the word of truth” or else he ought to submit his testimonial for pastoral review. Finally, the Lutheran liturgy has not made provision for the inclusion of testimonials. No matter how beneficial they might seem to be, they will intrude into the service.

Perhaps the best question to ask when considering the use of personal testimonials in public worship is the question “Why are we doing this?” If there is any feeling that testimonials are somehow more effective in gaining the lost for Christ than the proclamation of the gospel, testimonials must be rejected. If, on the other hand, there are strong cultural or social reasons for including them, let them be used within the guidelines mentioned above.

### Summary

Lutherans take a balanced approach to worship. They balance law and gospel, simple communication and high artistry, justification and sanctification, continuity and variety, what is traditional and contemporary, solemnity and warmth, objective truth and subjective response. All of these are hallmarks of Lutheran liturgical worship. Such a gospel-centered service, focusing on the use of the Means of Grace while still allowing for congregational participation, will benefit both Christian and non-Christian, member and non-member, veteran and newcomer. It is entirely proper to conclude that Lutheran liturgical worship can serve as a key part of a congregation’s program of outreach and as a tool to attract and interest inquirers.

### Planning for Lutheran Worship With Evangelism in Mind

Those involved in preparing and conducting Lutheran worship are going to have to work and plan if they are to achieve the balances which are the hallmarks of Lutheran worship. We have already maintained that public worship is the preeminent activity of the Christian congregation.<sup>7</sup> Since this is true, it deserves the best of our time and efforts in planning and presiding.

It must be said that this very obvious truth has not always been practiced. Pastor Larry Peters, in an essay entitled “Lutheran Worship and Church Growth” wrote about this problem in his own Missouri Synod:

Lutherans have generally not done a great job utilizing the resources for worship their liturgical forms provide. It is a sad truth that much Lutheran worship is dull, boring, and seemingly irrelevant. This is an abuse of the liturgical form and not a proper use of it.<sup>8</sup>

One of the recurring complaints voiced by some today is that visitors are “turned off” by Lutheran liturgical worship. If this observation has validity in one place or another, the question must be asked if it is the liturgy that offends or the way the liturgy is done. If the charge is justified, and we have in fact failed to put our best efforts into worship, we have come to a serious matter.

It would be wise for Lutherans to pay more attention to the gifts God has given to his Church which serve as vessels for proclamation and praise. It is true that only the gospel converts, but one wonders how many sensitive searchers have left a WELS church service disgusted by cheap, mundane and trivial language, music and art. There is no justification for shoddiness. Francis Rossow wrote:

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<sup>7</sup> It is probably true that public worship is not the most important part of ministry in a mission-exploring situation.

<sup>8</sup> Paten, Larry, *Lutheran Worship and Church Growth*, an essay prepared for and distributed by the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod’s Commission on Worship.

The foolishness of preaching consists in its content, not its style. What is foolish is our message, not the manner of communicating the message. The foolishness of preaching does not necessitate foolish preaching.<sup>9</sup>

As pastors and church musicians begin to plan for worship they need to keep in mind that the Lutheran liturgy neither demands nor expects that every Lutheran congregation will use the liturgy in lockstep fashion. The goal of liturgical worship is to provide an outline of what the Church believes and to give the local community of believers the freedom to use that form as elaborately or simply as they choose and their context allows.<sup>10</sup>

The responsibility for planning and presiding at liturgy is not an easy one. It requires a deep familiarity with the form, its options and opportunities, and a close familiarity with the local context, the people of a given congregation, their culture, and their roots. It is not enough for Lutherans to hide behind a book or a liturgical form expecting the unchurched to drop into the pews informed about and appreciative of the liturgy. We must work to present the form in a way which neither confuses nor confounds the visitor or new Christian. Examine some worship bulletins and you will find an array of directions, references, and technical jargon decipherable only to the active member of long standing Lutherans must learn to use common sense and carefully present the liturgy so that its use is a joy instead of a burden.

No congregation can do all things well. Choose carefully what can be done well and build upon it. A simple, spoken liturgy is a much more eloquent spokesman for the faith than an elaborately sung liturgy which is done poorly. If the liturgy requires too many explanations, page turns, or verbal directions, it will distract and frustrate even the informed worshiper. Especially in the new mission, printing out the liturgy and hymns each week may be an important key to the success of the service.

Presiding at the liturgy is a gift which must be developed. Those leading worship need to remember that their responsibility is pivotal to the success of the liturgy. Plan carefully. Choose the themes to be emphasized and use all the resources of the liturgy toward that purpose. Be deliberate and construct each service intentionally. Effective liturgy and worship is never an accident. Plan for the flow of what is happening and help the service move logically from one part to another.

No tradition depends more upon the music of the service than does the Lutheran. Use competent musicians and be prepared to compensate them adequately and include them in the worship planning. Rehearse the liturgy with those who will lead it before the service and iron out any problems prior to the service time. It has been generally assumed by some that “good Lutheran hymnody” is unsingable while “gospel hymns” are known and loved by all. There are both good and bad hymns to be found in Lutheran and Gospel hymnody. Hymns and choral music should be chosen for the content of the words, for the way the melody supports the text, and with an eye toward the musical ability of the parish musicians and the congregational singers. Good musical leadership can help a hesitant congregation through a difficult hymn while even the most singable hymn can be rendered impossible by weak musical leadership.

Preachers must be sure to preach specific law and specific gospel. They need to continue to study to understand the difference between preaching the law and the gospel and preaching about the law and about the gospel. They also need to review their sermons before they are preached in order to determine if difference has been put into practice.

Lutherans need to watch their vocabulary. Technical jargon exists in every group. Lutherans must become “bilingual.” Learn to use the language of today and especially of the growing evangelical churches as well as the traditional Lutheran liturgical and theological vocabulary. Sermons should express the faith less in terms of logical truth propositions and more through picture language. A good sermon not only appeals to the intellect but paints memorable pictures upon the canvass of the heart as well. Sermons should not be directed only to the emotions but Lutheran preachers need to preach more to the heart as well as the head. Preachers also

<sup>9</sup> Rossow, Francis, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983) p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> The author of the section on worship is indebted for many of the thoughts in the following paragraphs to Pastor Larry Peters, whose essay was cited previously.

need to be more attentive to the people and become more aware of how the listener is following the sermon. While some may be suspicious of preachers in general, most listen carefully to see if the preacher is genuine (believing what he says) and personal (identifying with his people and the message he proclaims). Good preaching, like good liturgy, is seldom an accident. Both require hard work.

### **Striving for A Warm and Caring Atmosphere**

In and of itself, Christian love does not win souls for Christ. Only the gospel can accomplish that miracle. On the other hand, Christian love is the vessel in which the gospel is proclaimed. A warm and caring atmosphere which accompanies worship is vital in any evangelism effort.

Perhaps it is beneficial to view the worship experience as a visitor might experience it.

When we drove up to the church, I was impressed immediately by the appearance of the property. The lawn was mowed, the shrubbery was trimmed, the paint job was new. I figured that the members of the congregation must take pride in their building because the place obviously had received a lot of tender loving care.

I knew we was going to get to the church without a whole lot of time to spare and I was hoping I wouldn't have to park so far away that I'd be late. When I drove into the parking lot to drop off Cara and Ben (my wife and three year-old), I was delighted to see some empty parking spaces marked "Visitors." They were located by the main entrance, right next to several handicapped spaces. I was impressed again when I saw a ramp leading to a side entrance. My thought was, "This church thinks of everyone."

The three of us entered the main lobby and several people greeted us with handshakes and smiles. Since Cara wanted to listen to what the preacher had to say, I asked about a nursery. One of the people who greeted us volunteered to show us the room where the nursery was already in session. It was really a nice, clean room staffed by an adult and a couple of teenage girls. They were nice to us and very nice to Ben. He was actually happy to stay when we left.

An usher stood at the door of the main part of the church. He offered us a program (the pastor kept calling it a service folder) and escorted us to our seats. I was relieved the usher hadn't dragged us way up to the front and I was impressed that the people sitting at the end of the pew didn't make us crawl over them. They moved and gave Cara and me plenty of room to sit. I noticed immediately an in-bench speaker system for the hearing impaired.

The program (service folded) was neat, sharp, and friendly--not like some of the folders I had seen in other churches we visited. I grabbed a hymnal out of the book rack in front of me; it looked pretty intimidating. When I took a closer look at the folder, I noticed that it gave an outline of the service and directions for using the book.

It was just 10:30 when the organ stopped playing and the pastor walked into the altar area. He was neatly dressed in a simple white robe with green panels--stoles I guess they're called. He welcomed everyone and announced the theme for the day's service. What he said was short and sweet and just enough to make it clear what was going to be happening.

I found some things in Lutheran worship to be pretty different from what I had experienced in my own church. Three of the hymns were brand new to me (Cara knew one of them), but the congregation did pretty well and appeared to enjoy singing. In fact, I must say that the singing really reverberated throughout the church building.

I definitely was not used to all the standing and sitting these Lutherans did. The hymnal was helpful, however, and pretty easy to follow. There were a couple of tunes when I wasn't at all sure where we were, but the people sitting next to us noticed that we were a little confused and quietly pointed out the right page in the book.

The thing about the service that impressed me the most was the sermon. I knew Cara was impressed, too, because she never opened her purse for a piece of gum! What I really liked was that the pastor based everything he said on the Bible; he didn't give all sorts of personal opinions. He was easy to follow and spoke in a down-to-earth way. I didn't understand everything he said, but he said a lot that made me think. In fact, I'm still thinking about it. After the service the pastor welcomed everybody again, especially the visitors, and invited everyone to stay for a cup of coffee and some "schnecks" (I couldn't figure out what "schnecks" were until I got to know these Germans a little better!). He was very friendly when we saw him at the door. He introduced us to a young couple about our age who talked with us a little and asked us to sign a guest register. When we told them we had to pick up Ben at the nursery they offered to walk along. They invited us for a cup of coffee and introduced us to some people who were friends of theirs. They also invited us for coffee (Lutherans are really into food!). A few days later we received a hand-written note from the pastor and a little card from the couple we met. Neither was anything big, just a couple sentences saying they were glad we could come and inviting us to come again. The pastor volunteered to stop over and answer any questions we might have had. On Wednesday another couple from the congregation stopped at our house. They didn't insist on coming in (we invited them in anyway) and just wanted us to know how pleased they were that we had worshiped in their church.

A warm and caring atmosphere is not the most important part of a congregation's outreach strategy. It remains true, however, that concern and love for visitors is shown not only in the message we offer but in the way we offer the message. First impressions count. Negative impressions discourage visitors from returning. Positive impressions do not guarantee that a visitor will be won for Christ of course, but they may lead a person to another opportunity for hearing the gospel. Who can know on which visit the Holy Spirit will work his great work of conversion?

A congregation is wise, therefore, to concern itself about such things as

- + Appearance of the church property
- + Adequate parking
- + Directional signs
- + Concern for the handicapped
- + Church acoustics, including assistance for the hearing impaired
- + The worship folder or bulletin
- + The work of the ushers and greeters
- + A staffed nursery
- + A system for recording the visits of newcomers
- + A good system for timely follow-up
- + A general congregational atmosphere which says to the visitor, "We're glad you're here and look forward to seeing you again."

The pastor and members of the Evangelism Committee will want to remind the members of the congregation about the importance of maintaining an evangelism mindset. It's natural, for example, that members look forward to visiting with each other after the service. They may be so happy to see friends that visitors are inadvertently ignored. These problems can be addressed casually and easily at church council meetings, meetings of the various groups in the congregations, and Bible classes. Members who love the lost will appreciate the gentle reminder to keep hearts open and eyes out for visitors who come to worship.

### **Summary**

The love and warmth which members show visitors is also beneficial for fellow members. It would be a strange occurrence if members would show more concern for their guests than for one another. The love and warmth which visitors need is also needed by those who are part of the Body of Christ.

We believe that this point has an even more general application in public worship. We are convinced the public worship which serves the congregation's members also serves the visitors. When Lutheran liturgical worship is put to use as it means to be used, when its strengths are emphasized and its balances maintained, when it is well-planned and carefully conducted by the congregation's leaders and enthusiastically entered by the congregation's members, both visitors and members are served.

In the experience of many congregations, liturgical worship, designed first of all with members in mind, has been a wonderful and successful tool for evangelism when it was accompanied by a congregational mindset which was delighted to give God the best at worship and which was determined to reach out to the lost.

### **Alternate Worship Forms for Evangelism**

In certain situations and in certain areas congregations may come to the conclusion that a Friendship Sunday can be an valuable addition to an evangelism program.

A Friendship Sunday begins with an encouragement to members to bring friends to church on that particular Sunday. The Friendship Sunday may occur after a week of Vacation Bible School. Special after-service and follow-up events may also be planned, for example a coffee hour or Sunday School enrollment.

The format for public worship also changes on Friendship Sunday. The pastor will depart from the Christian calendar and preach a simple evangelism sermon, perhaps putting "The Great Exchange" into sermon form. The hymns will be very familiar, for example "Rock of Ages" or "Beautiful Savior." The entire order of service will be printed in the service folder, including perhaps even the hymns. The liturgy will be abandoned for that Sunday and replaced by a basic progression of lessons and hymn stanzas. Since it won't be involved in adding pace to the liturgy with the psalm and verse, the choir may decide to sing its anthem from the chancel rather than from the balcony. A sample order of service follows:

- Greeting by the pastor
- Opening hymn (Choose a "rouser" here and have the congregation stand for the last stanza)
- Invocation (e.g., We worship God the Father who created us; we worship God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who saved us from our sins; we worship God the Holy Spirit who causes us to believe and to live our lives for Christ.)
- Responsive Psalm (spoken)
- Hymn stanza (The hymn stanzas which follow need not come from the same hymn, but ought to be accompanied the same well-known tune. Have the congregation be seated after this stanza.)
- Lesson
- Hymn stanza
- Lesson
- Hymn stanza
- Gospel (Announce the reason for standing at this point. "We stand to hear the words of Jesus Christ.")
- Apostles Creed (The congregation is seated after the Creed)
- Choir anthem
- Hymn (A well-known hymn)
- Sermon (Prepare the members in advance not to stand for the reading of the text.)
- Offering (An announcement may be made that visitors should not feel obligated to participate in the offering which supports the mission of the congregation.)
- Responsive Prayer of the Church (Most Protestants remain seated for prayer.)

- Lord's Prayer (the traditional version seems the best choice here)
- Hymn (Another well-known hymn)
- Prayer (Have the congregation stand for the prayer, blessing, and hymn.)
- Blessing (Perhaps an alternate to the Aaronic Blessing is in place.)
- Closing hymn stanzas (Another "rouser")
- Announcements (Don't overdo it and don't "gush.")

The Friendship Sunday concept has some obvious advantages especially for visitors. They hear a simple and clear proclamation of law and gospel. The service excludes what might be difficult for one or another guest, for example, closed communion, difficult hymns, arid Confession/Absolution. The concept also has advantages for the members of the congregation. Especially in congregations with little past evangelism experience, the Friendship Sunday raises awareness and encourages action.

There are, however, some disadvantages to the Friendship Sunday. It must be recognized that not all barriers can be eliminated for every visitor. One guest may enjoy simple hymns, another will find the simple hymns demeaning and trite. One guest may enjoy the simple sermon, another will find it intellectually unchallenging. Baptist visitors may be attracted by the simple order of service; ELCA guests may find it empty. The fact remains that for some visitors, law and gospel will be barriers.

The more serious disadvantages may accrue to the congregation, however. A once-year or twice-a-year Friendship Sunday may tend to compartmentalize evangelism efforts, as though witnessing for Christ is something a Christian does only at specific times. It may give members the idea that they ought not bring friends to a regular Sunday service and may discourage them from "striking while the iron is hot." Finally, it may deter the development of an every Sunday evangelism mindset, since members may conclude that they need to work at evangelism only on certain Sundays of the year.

None of these disadvantages is implicit in the Friendship Sunday concept. However, they need to be considered as the concept is discussed by the pastors and evangelism committees.

Another worship format which has evangelism in mind is the so-called Seeker Service. Popularized and propagated by Willow Creek Community Church, a growing congregation in suburban Chicago, the seeker service is the regular worship format of most of America's mega-churches. Some have estimated that as many as 1000 Lutheran congregations have adopted the concept as well.

Its detractors call the Seeker Service "entertainment evangelism," although its defenders are not usually hesitant to admit that entertainment is exactly what the service intends to offer. Everything is eliminated which is liable to make one or another guest feel uncomfortable or threatened. The objective in the minds of many is to make Christianity appealing, attractive, and relevant to anyone disassociated from or dissatisfied with traditional Christianity. The Seeker Service seems to be especially aimed at young and middle-aged Americans from the middle and upper classes.

The Seeker Service is different from Friendship Sunday in several ways.

- The Friendship Service abandons the liturgy but not traditional elements of Christian worship. Sermons, hymns, prayers are retained. The Seeker Service employs non-traditional forms of communication such as drama, puppet shows, testimonials, and staged musical ensembles. The service usually consists of a series of "acts" which are "performed" for the "audience." The preacher delivers a religious talk rather than a text-based sermon.
- The order of service used on a Friendship Sunday remains participatory in character. Though simplified, the service involves a presiding minister as well as worshipers. The Seeker Service tends to be very one-sided. The worshipers are passive for the most part; they may become involved in one hymn or prayer.
- The Friendship Service keeps worship within a traditional worship setting. There are pews and organ, altar and pulpit. The Seeker Service works best in an auditorium or theater setting. The ideal worship space is wide rather than long, seats are individual and comfortable, there is a stage

rather than an altar, and the pastor speaks from a small podium (often made of plexiglass to avoid the “pulpit” look) in a business suit rather than a liturgical vestment. Many congregations design their churches specifically for the Seeker Service concept. Some contemporary church designs are able to be adapted for either a traditional service or the Seeker Service.

- Although the Friendship Service may include religious music in a contemporary style, the Seeker Service places strong emphasis (in many cases exclusive emphasis) on Christian contemporary music. Christian contemporary texts generally speak about the love and majesty of God, rarely about sin, blood atonement, or any other subject which might be a turn off to the seekers. Very purposefully the music imitates the popular music preferred by young, white, middle-class Americans and is invariably performed by soloists or small ensembles accompanied by piano, guitar, flute, and drums.

The Seeker Service has its roots in Arminianism. James Arminius was the 17th century Dutchman who took issue with the double predestination doctrine of classic Calvinism. In Arminian theology God predestines men and women neither to heaven nor hell. Rather, man himself of his own free will chooses the way of life or the way of death. To Arminians, conversion is not a divine activity in which God miraculously reaches into the heart of depraved man and works a change of heart, but rather a human activity in which man consciously reaches out for the heart of God because he has changed his own heart. The key to conversion is not using the Means of Grace to effect a change of heart (the classic Lutheran understanding) but convincing and compelling the free will to make the change itself.

Revivalism became the American manifestation of Arminianism, and Charles Finney (1792-1875), the preeminent revivalist, set down revivalistic theology on the subject of conversion: “A revival is not a miracle or dependant on a miracle in any sense. It is a purely philosophic result of the right use of means.”<sup>11</sup> Finney’s most famous means for conversion was the classic tent meeting. The tent meeting concept with its fiery sermon, emotional hymns, and altar calls, originally took place in an actual tent, but eventually moved into main line church buildings. Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham are all the descendants of Charles Finney, and all share the same theological point of view: If the mind and emotions of human beings can be touched in the right way, they will choose to add themselves to the Christian community. The classic revival meeting with its mourner’s bench and sawdust trail obviously are not what contemporary Americans are made of. However, the Seeker Service in today’s neo-evangelical churches duplicates exactly the theology, objectives, and principles which first Arminius and then Finney promoted. The gospel is proclaimed at the Seeker Service, but not as a means by which the Spirit miraculously draws people into the Church. The gospel is proclaimed rather as a reasonable and reassuring thing one might be wise to believe. The accompanying ambiance, style, and enthusiasm serve primarily to make the gospel more appealing and attractive, and whatever negates the reasonable and reassuring nature of this gospel is eliminated.

Lutherans who are attracted to the Seeker Service idea must be honest enough to admit that the concept’s basic principle is not consistent with Lutheran theology. In the minds of modern evangelicals it is-not the gospel which converts the heart but logic, relevance, and friendliness. In fact, the gospel of neo-evangelicalism is more often the story of a moral God than a saving God. What is appealing to many who attend the Seeker Service is not that God gives life through Christ’s blood atonement, but that God makes life better as one follows Christ’s example. As any Lutheran knows, such a gospel is no gospel at all.

“To the pure all things are pure” (Titus 1:15). Is it possible for Lutherans to adapt the Seeker Service concept within the parameters of Lutheran theology? The answer must be yes, but it is a qualified yes. The congregation which desires to put the concept to use must be willing to ask and answer the following questions:

- Are there people in the community who might be put off by Lutheran worship but would be attracted to the Seeker Service? There may be fewer of these people than some might suppose.

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Scott Norton, *Made In America: The Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) p. 60.

Many evangelicals are moving away from their non-liturgical moorings. Could it be that they have discovered something some Lutherans have missed?

- What barriers will have to be removed in a Lutheran Seeker Service? Is it only the liturgical trappings which cause problems for visitors (e.g., vestments, organ music, pews, etc.) or is it doctrinal content which repels? If doctrine is the problem (e.g., sin, condemnation, blood atonement, etc.) how much doctrine will have to be sacrificed in order to remove barriers? This is a critical question.  
Some assume that it is the format of the Seeker Service that draws visitors to the mega-churches in such amazing numbers. In fact, it may be theological emphases (and, in some cases, the lack of them) which so many find attractive. Wouldn't it be ironic if a Lutheran congregation sacrificed exactly what it believes converts the lost as it made an effort to attract the lost in a Seeker Service!
- Can the Seeker Service avoid trivializing the gospel? Puppet shows, gospel rap, and chancel skits do not seem to be appropriate vehicles for the greatest story ever told. Dressing the great mysteries of faith in silly moralisms does not seem to be a way to compel the lost to repent and believe the gospel
- The ambiance of the Seeker Service depends a great deal on contemporary Christian music. Congregations need to ask how much of this Christian music is usable. Much of what is available from evangelical music publishers simply does not tell the story of Christ. It speaks of wrongs but not guilt, majesty but not mercy, goodness but not grace.  
Proponents of this music insist that there are some good contemporary Christian texts, and they are right. Unfortunately, many Lutherans who enjoy this music do not always seem to be able to distinguish the good from the bad. *The Other Song Book*,<sup>12</sup> widely used in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, includes hymns which no Lutheran ought to sing. A Seeker Service conducted in a Lutheran congregation contained these lyrics:

There's a crown and you can win it,  
There's a crown and you can win it,  
There's a crown and you can win it,  
If you trust in Jesus' name.

There's a crown and you can win it,  
There's a crown and you can win it,  
There's a crown and you can win it,  
If you look in Jesus' name.

There's a crown and you can win it,  
There's a crown and you can win it,  
There's a crown and you can win it,  
If you act in Jesus' name.

The music of contemporary Christian music is just as problematic.

Musicologists and psychologists agree that music has the power to affect emotion and activity without the inclusion of a text. Studies conducted by Muzak and music therapists give ample evidence of this.<sup>13</sup> It is an untenable position that music remains a neutral force until it is attached to words.

<sup>12</sup> Dave and Barb Anderson, "The Other Song Book"

<sup>13</sup> Anne H. Rosenfield, "Music, the Beautiful Disturber," *Psychology Today*, December, 1985.

The gospel also has power to affect emotion and activity. The critical factor in church music, therefore, is to make the text predominant and the music subservient. Through the centuries Christian musicians have labored to allow the scriptural message to exert its power through the medium of music. Christians have understood that the function of music is to carry the gospel to the heart so that the gospel might affect the emotions.

The religious movements and denominations which have sprung from Arminianism have never understood the Biblical principles of music because they do not rightly understand the place and power of the Means of Grace. They put music to use, therefore, to mold and affect the emotions so that an individual might be moved to turn to God. Among contemporary evangelicals, music has the same objective in worship as ambiance, style, and friendliness: it means to make Christianity attractive and appealing so that people might see the logical value of giving themselves to Jesus. In evangelicalism the music purposefully predominates and the message of the music is relatively unimportant.

Contemporary Christian music is the music of today's neo-evangelical movement and it is the music of the Seeker Service. This music has permeated not only churches with actual Arminian roots but many more denominations which have been attracted to evangelical thought and its apparent success. The Lutheran Church is struggling with this issue, too, and one of the reasons for this struggle is that not all Lutherans understand the principles and the theology which is at issue here.

Those Lutherans who are thinking about a Seeker Service are obligated to consider carefully the issues and principles which attend the music of worship.

- Does the congregation have the ability to present contemporary Christian music and dramatic presentations well? Often these means of communication take a high degree of talent and skill. It may be impossible to imitate the successes of the mega-churches because it is impossible to duplicate the excellence of their productions.
- How will visitors be moved from the Seeker Service into the mainstream of Lutheran Worship? If guests are attracted by the non-participatory and entertainment-oriented Seeker Service, will they really be eager to attend to the "work" of Lutheran liturgical worship?
- Perhaps the biggest question in this area follows: Is the desire for a Seeker Service prompted by honest evangelistic interests or by anti-liturgical interests within the congregation itself? More than a few Lutherans have been affected by evangelical thought. We have mentioned, for instance, the confusion about the use of music in worship. If a Seeker Service is begun because members are searching for the spiritual accents of evangelicalism, the service may become a real offense in a congregation.

It becomes obvious that there are many questions which need to be asked and honestly answered by those Lutherans who are considering a Seeker Service for their evangelism efforts. Although it must be said that congregations may in Christian freedom adopt this outreach method, we are not convinced that the service has more advantages than liabilities.

### **Summary**

Some Lutherans have used a Friendship Sunday or a Seeker Service as part of their evangelism program. While these concepts may have validity in certain special situations, it remains the opinion of this author and his co-worker at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Lutheran liturgical worship, designed first of all with members in mind, has been a wonderful and successful tool for evangelism *when it was accompanied by a congregational mindset which was delighted to give God the best at worship and which was determined to reach out to the lost.*

### **Additional topics for Discussion and Review**

- The copyright laws and Lutheran congregations
- The National WELS Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts
- *Christian Worship: What It's All About*