



The Task of the Pastor As Leader of Worship: “Too Much, Too Fast,” “A.D. 225”

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For most ordained ministers, a veritable revolution has taken place in their leadership in worship in the past few years. The introduction of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* has been the occasion for complete reinstruction according to new and different rules. The availability of funding from insurance companies has protected worship reform and has brought a new and different possibility in worship which leaders have never had before. The dams behind which we usually had to save up our findings for acceptable release at the right time have given way completely. The wall of change hits us at once.

In a survey of the state of worship in the New England Synod of the Lutheran Church in America, after two years' use of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, there were several wry New England responses. To the question, “How would you characterize the liturgical trend/direction of the *LBW*?,” there were these contrasting answers: “Too much, too fast!” and “A.D. 225!” Both would scarcely bring attention without the double take of the reader.

I.

“Too much, too fast!” For many congregations the troubled sixties, when experimentation and guitar services for the young brought variety into a minority of congregations, had little lasting effect. A conservative rigidity protected members from what was going on around them. Inter-Lutheran *Contemporary Worship* materials were used by only a few in our area. After all, a century of work toward a “common service” to be used without variation by all Lutherans was more than a hoped for ideal; from the beginning of the century it was a reality with us, and the authorities to keep one on that track were readily at hand. It is difficult to reverse that sort of training; and it is precise and explicit. There was but one way to lead in worship, and one could be trained for such leadership.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to such congregations, there was a great buildup of liturgical scholarship and practice stemming from almost a century of a movement in Europe which was known only to the students of liturgy and to occasional worshiping groups. Some of us now can look back over at least three decades in which we tried to bring this knowledge to congregations in lectures,

workshops, music institutes and conferences. The material was building up in the fifties, even before the *Service Book and Hymnal* was first launched. The Commission on Liturgy and Hymnal, on the adoption of the *SBH* in 1957-58, immediately tried to work out ways and means

of freeing its users toward flexibility. We were to consider *the actions which the people do* in worship rather than to follow slavishly a number of single items which have been accumulated in western worship.

As chair of that Commission at that time, I was asked to invite the parallel commissioners in the Synodical Conference to talk with us about where each of us was going. When they first met with us, they were almost ready to issue a hymnal—their musicians having compiled a selection of hymns and chorale tunes which were to be the core of the new effort. (I suspect that later when the Inter-Lutheran Commission did its work, this compilation formed a head start toward the *LBW*; the results certainly show this.) In the area of liturgical scholarship we found that we were together in facing the rapid changes. Only a sort of loose-leaf folder could keep up with liturgical change in those days. And this was without taking into full consideration the actions of Vatican II.

As we know, in the seventies things settled down considerably. The youth folk-movement was the first to subside with really little permanent effect on the materials used in worship. Experimental services tired worshipers with their constant demands for shuffling papers and first-time reading of endless words. Much as routines and repetitions are blamed for inattentive dreariness in worship, actually a liturgy never does the work it is supposed to *until* it is committed to heart and one can dispense with all these trappings.

The *Contemporary Worship* series of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship attempted to introduce changes in gradual fashion to congregations which would use the pamphlets. But it was “too much, too fast” for most. Consider the changes we had to make in our thinking: *from* regarding the Church as a holy place where reverence is demanded *to* regarding the holiness as belonging to the people of God meeting eye-to-eye around a table; *from* a tradition which emphasized preaching of the Word as central *to* a primary emphasis on the centrality of the Eucharist (first time many had heard the word used); *from* an emphasis on the church serving the whole civic community in openness of ministry *to* a concentration of ministry on the baptized with each gaining a new consciousness of one’s baptized state; *from* sole leadership of liturgy by the ordained minister *to* a wide open sharing of the liturgy with lay leadership; *from* an internalized, central planning of liturgy by one leader who knows what he or she is doing *to* thinking of the minister as presider and planner, enabler of others in planning sessions far ahead of the event.

The spirit of freshness and flexibility in the new liturgy is perhaps best illustrated by a case study. Today we think of *actions that the people do* as determining our worship. The first action is obviously that they *gather* as the people of God in his presence. Now this requires more attention than a mere statement of the fact. We are all individuals in our thinking until we make the effort to reach toward others; then to join in common prayer and worship is a step further. To do this as in God’s nearer presence is a step of another kind which results in awe and reverence, as well as of thankfulness. The single corporate act of *gathering the congregation* is therefore aimed at doing all that.

Over the centuries the act of gathering has grown like Topsy. In big churches it took a long time for the physical procession to get where it was going. Everyone agrees that the real starting point of the liturgy is the Prayer of the Day. But the precise moment at which everyone is

in place (and prepared to hear that prayer) depends on a lot of variants. These variants could be cut depending on exactly what was necessary at the time. Even the first phase of the Gloria in Excelsis was reserved for the priest in charge, who was to start the service with the Collect, for only he could tell whether the Gloria in Excelsis was really needed at that service or whether one could simply go ahead with the Collect. He had both possibilities at his command.

But in the Western tradition we just added one thing after another—even little churches where entrance was simply aping the big ones. So we developed a number of gathering acts: Call to Worship, Organ Prelude, Opening Hymn, Confession of Sins, Introit and Gloria, Kyrie, Gloria in Excelsis. The Inter-Lutheran Commission tried to take the big step of cutting all this to one act. *Contemporary Worship 2* started right off with a Greeting and then the Collect. It made sense if one was to cut down the time to make space for the regular celebration of the Eucharist. But congregations such as mine had grown used to many acts of gathering, and had adjusted to it by coming to church in dribbles during the first ten minutes of the service. Imagine their surprise to find me well into the sermon by then!

This case study shows that one cannot just follow the dictates of liturgical form. Whenever a sharp change is put forward, it is always met with a regnant practice; compromise between the two must always take place under pastoral guidance. The forward movement of our liturgy is often by sudden bursts, and then by adjustments. Our survey shows that the period of adjustment is here.

“Too much, too fast!” That objector was right on the button for most of us. Ordained ministers, especially, have to be midwives to this great change. It is we pastors who must change our methods of planning for worship. No longer can we wait till the week of the coming Sunday to choose our hymns, set our sermon topics, have our conference with musicians, assign the writing of prayers, listen to lay lectors read, and plan special offerings of the arts. In order just to open up to lay leadership, a whole school of education into worship must be initiated in the congregation. Lectors must be trained. After all, very few of us read out loud any more. It is a false assumption to maintain that one can just get up and read a passage of Scripture in a conversational tone. For then the last part of our sentence could only be heard by the person three feet from us; and the conversational tone is really not that interesting to excite a congregation. The Scriptures are full of excitement and deep meaning. Luther felt that they came alive when read aloud. The Jews worked out a tradition of meditation and oral reading, accompanied by a rocking motion and chanting. The text deserves such concentration. Appointed lectors must therefore be heard in practice by someone who can be helpfully critical. Are we ready for this?

It is also assumed that prayers are easily written and vocalized by the untrained—that it is really more honest and easier to pray in conversational tones. But my experience, and that of many others, is that such easy expression comes only through long and thorough discipline in the use of forms—it is, like the expressive playing of an instrument, an art. A false standard exists through the

church that prayer is truer the closer it is to the immediate needs of the gathered community. Thus one hears all sorts of news about domestic happenings among the faithful even when one yearns to be stretched in prayer to what the Father desires through the Son. I have found as a leader in worship that I have had to spend time with prayer leaders at least a week ahead of the service,

providing them with one of perhaps six or seven forms with which the congregation can be involved in attention. Where everyone is dependent upon the direction of attention toward specifics, there is an artful movement of language in time that prepares the minds for their expected response. Composition of such prayers is a new art demanded of the pastor.

The choice of hymns from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* is suddenly a most emotional task in my part of the country. For the first time, we are faced with a host of chorale tunes which, strangely, are new to us, and which are received as somewhat dull. The texts are quite rough and take us to centuries in which we are not living. As part of our heritage it is great to have them in the book; as congregational hymns they require effort. Then, unfortunately, the musical editors have extended themselves to reharmonize our familiar 18th and 19th century tunes, and these reharmonized tunes always appear before the traditional, "sure-fire favorites." Unless a minister can read music, he or she stumbles into these in innocence. Often the harmonization was intended not to supplant the standard harmonization which can be found and used in other hymnals, but as a variant for the organist who needs variety in playing through the hymn stanza after stanza. But this intention, plus the prejudice of some editors against four part singing, has thrown us a wide curve, indeed a sinker. How necessary then for meeting one's musician(s) at least a month before the use of hymns to smoke out what one will do in the use of the hymn, since the hymn tune is a high part of the service for most lay worshipers! It should continue to be a celebrative event!

If the choice of hymns needs at least a month's lead time, the musician's choice of anthems and special music needs even more. Few ministers have entered into the efforts of musicians to choose their musical offerings. These offerings have to be procured, rehearsals have to be planned, personnel selected, special music lined up and variety encouraged. Often such long-term planning can automatically involve many on the fringe of the action: the young who play instruments, those who dance, those who have voice enough to be cantors, those who can enter into varied ways of reading.

Those of us who read *The Lutheran* remember that article by Joseph Sittler in which he urges those ministers who are not vocally gifted *not to chant*. Unfortunately, the appearance of both the *SBH* and *LBW* has brought out every minister's desire to "give it a try," and there are very few parishioners who dare to turn the minister off once the attempt has begun. We should re-introduce the practice of speaking the minister's part to an answer in chant, *a la* the *Common Service Book*, just to escape this possibility *if* we do not train our own cantors. As one who *can* chant, even I confess my great relief when someone else does it and suddenly I have time to: (a) prepare myself for my next act of leadership; (b) say my prayers in the service; and (c) get my papers in order. I wonder how we ever got ourselves tied up into doing everything ourselves. Training of cantors is not too hard. One can gather them in a group; have them chant some psalms on one note or with the tunes we have, quietly, with slow enunciation of the words in speech rhythm;

then progress to accenting important words (they are actually set in a rhythm in our *LBW* psalter); and finally go through cantors' parts again and again. It sounds easy, and it is!

Besides planning worship with the laity, the ordained minister is also supposed to preside. Now that's something we haven't the foggiest notion about. Faced with various different persons

taking parts, we simply chop up the parts and have each one do the various parts successively. In all this, the continuing theme of the presiding officer disappears. But the ideal of the *LBW* is that anyone coming in late should be able to glance at the presiding officer and know what is happening. The presiding minister should preside like a host or hostess, seeing that each assistant assists, but reserving to himself or herself the chief parts of beginning, handling the central acts, and closing it all.

The heavy demands for planning and presiding evoke the response: “Too much, too fast!” If one holds on to the old idea of the minister as leader of worship, and then adds all this necessary planning to the already taxing task, the response is apt. The congregation has certain traditional expectations of the pastor; evaluation forms can hardly be constructed to allow for evaluating time and energy expended on new ways of worship! Introducing lay activity in Lutheran Church in America congregations has been most difficult. The American Lutheran Church is further ahead, having a strong tradition of lay leadership. Yet I would hope that the Lutheran propensity of having things done decently and in order would lead to the development of lay leadership in cadres of persons learning various arts, and that leadership would be limited to those who have made the effort and have attained some competence. Our worship demands at least this.

II.

As if all this that we have said about planning and presiding were not enough, there is another heavy burden on the pastor. The direction of movement for worship depends very much on the directions congregations take under the new encouragements.

Let’s consider the comment, “A.D. 225!” It appeared in lonely splendor among the many positive and almost effusive descriptions of the “contemporary” character of the *LBW* liturgy. We had expected comments about modernity because, after all, hadn’t we changed the “Thees” and the “Thous” to “Yous,” and hadn’t we tried to eliminate sexist language, and hadn’t we tried to find hymn texts which made immediate sense to 20th century worshipers?

There is more in that wry comment, “A.D. 225!,” than meets the eye. Liturgical ecumenical eyes are fastened on about the year A.D. 225 and the liturgy of Hippolytus. That was the time just before Christianity became the state religion and subsequently took unto itself so many cultural characteristics. In the liturgy of Hippolytus, it is argued, there is a purity which we must now recover, disentangling ourselves from a cultural Christianity. The paradigm of baptism must, like then, be adult baptism; the Eucharist must be central whenever the congregation meets; and in a minority situation, the Christian community must be about those disciplines which produce its minority flavor.

Actually we are in the midst of a profound revolution in the way Christians

think about their life in the world today. We now see that, historically, we got off the main track many years ago, and a sort of religion mixed with western culture developed. We lost our distinctive flavor as Christians; we deserted the chief center of worship, the Eucharist, our ordained ministers became servants of a larger civic community, instead of stewards of the mysteries of God. In reaction against this apostasy we have now chosen as our paradigm of worship the untainted worship from the time of Hippolytus, “A.D. 225!”

This implies rather radical changes in our Sunday morning worship. For years we have trained our vision on paradigms a little later than Hippolytus, and far into Western history. When I went to seminary, Gothic architecture was considered to be ideal for Lutheran worship. Everything had its perfect place according to the Cambridge Camden Society's models of Gothic architecture. The space was perfectly divided up as one entered the church in the narthex, proceeded into the nave, and then entered the chancel, finally eating and drinking at the communion rail. It was not hard to imagine this procession in vivid terms as one approached the holy place where the fullness seemed to dwell.

How different now that we imitate Hippolytus! There were no visible church buildings then. A large living room in which Christians surrounded the table was most normal, we are told. With a firm consciousness of being the people of God, the *laos* gathered to be led in worship by the presiding officer, the bishop, in acts which were simply descriptive of the actions people were to perform in the world. There is no procession to the holy place. The holy people themselves in their gathered actions constitute God's holiness in this world.

That model calls for a radical change in church architecture. Some of our church architects, enthralled with this demand for churches in the round, urge that all churches be built thus. In Gothic churches, however, altars now appear in our chancels, often brought out from the wall; or if that is impossible, subsidiary tables are located where the presiding minister can face the people over the altar. In our manuals there is strong urging to see that this is done.

In my part of the country a lot of congregations are caught with their altars against the east wall and have very little possibility of accomplishing this change. Occasionally, when the congregation is blessed with an especially cold day and the service must be held in a social hall because the main church cannot be heated, chairs may be arranged around a table, and an entirely new experience of worship can take place. The experience can then be remembered to the enlivenment of normal worship. Otherwise, our worship is really a mixed bag. The old requires what the architecture suggests; the new demands a radical change. We are caught betwixt and between.

If we look carefully at the present material which comes from "the movement," we find several things which slow our reforming enthusiasm. It is by no means evident that the Eucharist was as crucially central to the worship of the early church as is claimed. Other forms of worship are strongly advocated, among them Services of the Word. And haven't Protestants really developed this type of emphasis? Should it be ignored? Second, it is by no means certain that the original position of the presiding minister was on the other side of the altar facing the people. Eastern Orthodox Christianity has always kept an orientation toward the east wall on which there is some portrayal of our salvation coming from this direction. Third, some of the earliest churches show just as much attention to the

centrality of readings by the prominence of the *bema* as the center of attention. Fourth, it is now thought that the pure Hippolytan liturgy, so romantically described by Gregory Dix, was perhaps a figment of his imagination.

I would hate to see the bubble of romantic imagination pricked. It has brought so much into our worship that I regard as beneficial. We have moved out of a constant penitential mood into the joy of celebration; we have involved the laity in leadership. Our people are reaching

toward a self-consciousness of their baptized state, just as Luther desired. The eucharistic acts in worship, now so central to worship, are pointing some to parallel actions in the world bringing liturgy and life together.

What bothers me, however, are the very characteristics of a *movement*. There is always something promotional; certain promises are held out; certain expectations are encouraged. And usually something happens to destroy these promises and expectations, leaving us confused—easy victims for the next movement with its similar promises and expectations. I was concerned in our New England survey when we asked, “Has the change been easy to the *LBW*?” and a good number replied that it had been easy at first because of the promotional material. But as the first year progressed, the use of the liturgy and hymns became harder and harder. One hates to ask further questions, for then one would encounter the land of broken balloons and defective toys.

I have my own such land, even though I have been a leader of the reform. In my own university and student congregation I was constantly bringing the people news about the liturgical movement—even while we were deep in the Common Service and Victorian hymn tunes. In the early sixties I was embarrassed by a number of bright young persons who listened to what I was saying, studied themselves, and formed a politically astute cadre for change. As much as we could, pastorally and architecturally, we made changes so that we actually were following the early church model while using the text of *SBH*. The Eucharist became central as the main service. We couldn’t bring the marble table out from the wall, for—though it was a table—it was sunk in concrete. So we brought the actions to the chancel space, using deacons to hold the vessels and elements.

The results have been self-evident. Worship is celebrative, and everyone is caught up. Admittedly the sermon changed to something shorter like a Catholic homily—that is, forming a verbal setting for the Eucharist to follow. The attendance is full. We should have attained all our hopes.

But my worries surround me. First, the host of strangers we had before—mostly inquiring students from outside our family—disappeared. Worship was too much an in-thing for them; everyone went up like sheep to commune, putting a strain on their integrity. There was simply no large space anymore where strangers could come in and look around without fear of immediate commitment. Instead, something else happened. The people who took communion together recognized their oneness and thereafter seemed on an interminable search for more oneness in human terms. And once this circular pattern was established it started moving around on itself. After all, practically no area of study in the university in these years has developed as much as psychological and sociological studies. The search for “real community” can be endless with all sorts of human incentives on the path. The trouble is obvious. For the Christian, “real community” should be the kingdom of God, and its food should be *shalom*. That is what

we give each other in the passing of the peace. In my campus ministry circles, colleagues—male and female—hug each other in a five minute time-out from the service at this point. But those who are marginal, on the edge of the community, seem to be ignored.

Yet it is God who defines what “real community” shall be, and God starts with the marginal, precisely with those we are *not* thinking about at the time. We owe a good deal to the anthropologists today. They show in human terms that worship is a human experience. Victor

Turner uses terms like marginal and liminal (threshold) for that kind of experience into mystery which is called worship. It is a world apart from our structures in “anti-structure” where our imaginings see things human without our structured ways of thought—perhaps, we think, as God sees them.

Again, it is not by accident that Turner refuses to use the term *community* for what is experienced by the congregation, because community would leave one on the human level alone. Instead he coins the term *communitas* for this imagined, anti-structural fellowship we have under God, which is always broader and more inclusive than any congregation’s membership.

Perhaps we would say this a different way. In worship we are grasped by an eschatological hook which pulls us to new insights and new hopes, all of which we try out in life. The kingdom we taste, but it is still not yet. Our “citizenship is in heaven.” When we use the passing of the peace—the *shalom* of the kingdom—our gesture should have broader meaning than the greeting of a buddy. We are greeting another on the threshold of another world!

If I could live through the years of the late sixties and early seventies again, I would guess that I would attack the use of that holy word—*community*, even perhaps *congregation*—because it is so static and structured in our use of it; I would insist on taking up the word “association.” I begin to hear in Catholic circles today references to “the liturgical assembly.” The liturgical assembly, they say, was never confined to the faithful, nor was the service of worship planned for them alone. There were also the catechumens who stayed till the Eucharist and then had their own activity. There were the lapsed who were being nursed back to a confession again.

I find our present concentration too exclusively on the faithful. Though it is possible to open up our liturgies toward outsiders, they tend toward the in-group. Lutherans in America at this particular moment don’t need more in-group direction. Instead of changing hymns and tunes of others to fit with their own principles and preferences, they need to learn to live appreciatively of others, using our friends’ tunes and texts as they use them—an expression of a different viewpoint in the same family.

Not only should this outward moving spirit pervade our worship, but we should prepare our liturgies to treat the parish situation as it actually is, rather than as we hope it can be. Every American congregation is composed of a number of concentric circles: the faithful; occasional attendants who seek the minister for occasional acts; seekers who seem to refuse commitment to church membership but are extremely concerned about the faith; those who appear only for ministerial acts; and those who rarely appear but privately regard the congregation as theirs also. Every pastor knows that a large percentage of ministerial acts comes from outside the circle of the faithful, and in each case adjustments to the service

and in pastoral care have to be made, depending on the situation. And it is from these circles that our steady growth comes.

Why, then, should we have only rites which must be constantly interpreted or changed? The pastor is made to lean toward the faithful and discourage the attendance of marginal people, narrowing the congregational life constantly. I know that there are some who believe that only in the intensification of the quality of Christian life is there real missionary potential. I can accept that as a possibility. But why is it, in my experience, that the attainment of quality of life goes on and on—as in my congregation—without ever making contact with the area for mission? I can

see more reason for the position of my Protestant friends who insist that action with the poor and downtrodden is the living context of prayer, and who at present seek sainthood in muddy situations.

Most pastors are in congregational situations. I think it is good that we are still caught in a sort of Christendom. In fact there are many people, and their number is growing, who no longer belong to organized churches at all. They are baptized Christians with intense faith, living with Christian symbols, appearing occasionally at Easter and Christmas, who can be reached. And there are those concentric circles around every congregation where the Spirit is working in its own way.

Some of my most memorable pastoral acts have been done in these marginal communities. I have always wished that I had the time to move with them in their marginal life. In some ways I think they are closer to *communitas* than I have been. And I must always remember that the God we worship is the one who “brings the solitary into families.”

III.

“Too much, too fast!” “A.D. 225!” These understated comments have been opened up to be entirely too true. Certainly they throw the challenge at the ordained minister as leader of worship. There are some, of course, who see our worship in terms of following manuals and ceremonial. Most of us are too practical for that. We see our worship in the traditional forms, in which the congregation now worships, opened up, interpreted, and inspired by a pastor leader who has an agenda, and yet knows just what a congregation can do at a particular time. Until a liturgy is used by a congregation with acceptance again and again, it remains a “non-liturgy.” It becomes a liturgy, strictly speaking, when through familiarity it becomes the vehicle for the worship of God.

The load in time and effort on the pastor today is heavy. Not only does the congregation expect the pastor to start a new form of leadership from the past, but the church at large now expects the pastor to start a new form of long range planning which will use the whole people of God as leaders. The possible fruits of such leadership are enticing; but the garden must be dug up, the seed planted, the plants tended before the fruits can come. That will take a whole decade. Are we able to meet this challenge? Does the congregation begin to understand these demands? Can we expect that successive leaders will carry forth the same program? These are the questions that are launched upon us by the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.