



Renewing Worship: The Beginning or the End?

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With the vote of approval from the churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on August 10, 2005, the Renewing Worship project moved from its proposal stage to its reality stage. That vote approved the publication of the new worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, and its subsequent constellation of supplemental materials. Moving into final review and preparation for publication, this resource is expected to be available in October 2006.

The driving ideas of the Renewing Worship project will now meet their greatest challenge. Will the congregations of the ELCA really take on the initiative to renew worship in their own settings, with their varied resources and unique opportunities? Will pastors and church musicians really take the publication of new resources as the impetus to begin their own worship renewal and not just as ends in themselves?

Renewing the church's worship has been at the heart of this project from its first conversation. The hope for deep congregational renewal was articulated at the initial meeting of the four consultation groups—language, preaching, music, and worship space and environment—in February 2001. *Principles for Worship*¹ was the result of those consultations and planted that hope for renewal in the hands of con-

¹*Renewing Worship 2: Principles for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).

The Renewing Worship project of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will provide worship leaders and congregations a great variety of resources. Renewal itself will depend upon the skill and commitment of leaders and congregations as they employ these resources in the service of the gospel.

gregational, synodical, and churchwide ELCA leaders. Over the past four years, discussion groups, church committees, seminary classes, and many others have discussed these principles and considered application in their own settings. Now, with the publication of a primary, common worship book, these principles have a home in a permanent resource. More resources will follow that will continue to spin out these principles and offer resources for the widening needs and expanding face of ELCA congregations. Will renewal of the church's worship follow?

The success of this project is now in the hands and hearts of those who do the daily work of planning and preparing worship in the church's congregations, camps, retreat centers, colleges, universities, and seminaries. As they sit and plan and pray, this project will take root or will simply become another good idea left on the vine.

PRINCIPLES FOR RENEWAL

What would it mean for each worshiping community in the ELCA to renew its worship? While the answers are as varied as the many settings in which the church finds itself, the Renewing Worship project offers some shared and common principles. These principles guided the work of the Renewing Worship project from its inception. In *Principles for Worship*, these foundational ideas set the stage for the work of the editorial teams that followed. And the *Principles for Worship* themselves built on the previous work of *The Use of the Means of Grace*,² the foundational document for worship practice in the ELCA. In continuing this trajectory, the Renewing Worship project attempts to en flesh the central matters of the church's worship in our twenty-first-century, North American context.

What are some of these common principles? Certainly first is a commitment to make the central things of worship, the Word and the Meal, clear and prominent in the Sunday assembly. It will mean that baptism and its thanksgiving are not only celebrated at one's baptism, but are a continual and lifelong remembrance and thanksgiving. It will mean that congregational song is primary in the assembly and that music leadership enables that song.

Over the past months, I have taken the Kantorei, Valparaiso University's chapel choir, around the Indiana-Kentucky synod to lead and teach materials from the Renewing Worship project. In these day-long gatherings, we sing many of the new congregational songs, as well as some of the old favorites this project includes. We worship, pray, and sing together, using new liturgical music for Morning and Evening Prayer. I talk about the many ways congregations have now to renew and enliven their worship and the ways new resources will aid them. Then we discuss the ways worship might be renewed in each of the communities to which we will all return after this day's event.

²*The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*, adopted for guidance and practice by the Fifth Biennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 19 August 1997 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

We have learned a lot by doing these events. I have seen many faithful pastors and musicians who want to learn how they can use the new materials. Many parishes are eager to explore these new materials, finding potential in them for their community's enlivened worship. There are other parishes with very limited resources, who wonder how they can afford to purchase new materials. Some even wonder if there is anyone who can teach new songs and hymns to their congregation. Many are beset by dwindling finances, aging parishioners, and staff vacancies. Others find the process of sorting through new options an unwelcome challenge. In all these cases, there are difficulties that accompany any potential for change. While many would hope for renewal in their places, the practical issues surrounding renewal often take precedence and limit the conversation.

So how is it that the leaders of this church can really engage in worship renewal? How can these new resources become more than a new set of books on a shelf and software on a computer? These questions lead us to imagine new ways to engage the church in conversation around the central things of worship. In the Word proclaimed and the Meal shared, we are constantly renewed for our ongoing life in Christ. The challenge is continual to find the ways we can keep engaged, focused on the community's life in worship, as we sift through new resources. As each worship gathering is unique, so, too, the resources chosen need to fit the unique setting, talents, and resources of each setting. It takes insightful leaders, committed planners, and open hearts to explore the Renewing Worship project.

RENEWAL THROUGH CONGREGATIONAL SONG

New hymns, songs, and liturgical music are some of the important new contributions of the Renewing Worship project. The explosion of hymnody we have witnessed since the publication of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) would be reason enough to demand new resources for the church's song. Little did the framers of the *LBW* know about the wealth of congregational song from African, Latino, and Asian cultures that is now at hand. Yet there are more compelling reasons than just availability that make these various musical forms of interest to those who lead congregational song.

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Congregational song requires a community to render it. That song is incomplete until the congregation adds its voice of assent and praise. Such a concept goes against the grain of the individualized consumption of recorded music available at every turn in today's everyday life. In a culture that now provides instant and personalized access to individual musical choices, singing together in community

song is no longer a commonplace activity. Thus, it requires the best resources and efforts of musicians and worship planners who teach and lead this music.

Consider for a moment an African song like “Listen, God Is Calling.”³ In its call and response pattern, it places a song leader and the congregation in interdependent relationship. Each needs the other’s part to complete the song; neither is complete without the other. The music implies a community and its response. Or turn to an Asian song, “Lord, Your Hands Formed This World.”⁴ The congregation’s voice describes God’s work rolling out the work of creation as a mat, building a home for each of God’s people. Here we hear God’s work described in fresh and new images. In the Spanish tune “¡Aleluya! Cristo resucitó,”⁵ interlocking rhythms between the congregation and accompanying instruments lend life to this communal song. Each part is needed in order for the song to be complete.

It may be easier to consider the importance of renewing the church’s song by imagining its antithesis: a church’s life and mission without congregational song. Consider for a moment a gathering for worship, the entrance of the ministers, the reverence of the moment, without the congregation’s musical response. Consider gathering around the table to receive the gifts of Christ’s body and blood without singing. Consider the blessing and sending back into our daily life at the end of worship without music.

We can’t imagine any of these things because they simply couldn’t be. Music connects us in community, binds us as Christian family, connects worship with the rest of life. “Unglued” is a word that comes to mind when I try to imagine a church’s life without the congregation’s voice. We would become unglued because we would no longer have our bindings. Music connects us to each other, places us in relation to our Creator, accompanies our actions in worship, proclaims the gospel among us. It does all of these things while carrying the words of God into our assembly, literally putting those words in our mouths.

Music is like proclamation of the word because both exist through time and presume a community to speak, or sing, and to listen. They are a pair that coexists in the Christian assembly, creating dialogues between leader and congregation, cantor and congregation, choir and congregation. No other art form does this like music. We are seldom engaged more fully as participants than in the music of a congregational hymn or sung response. Music is integral because it builds up what the community does; singing together makes the community into the community. It is integral because it forms the community through its common work, the church’s liturgy.

If congregational song were not integral to the church’s life and mission, would there not also be other musical voids outside of worship itself? What about that night we wake full of fear and can’t return to sleep? What about that visit to

³Traditional Tanzanian text and tune, in *With One Voice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995) #712.

⁴Ramon and Sario Aliano, in *ibid.*, #727.

⁵Luis Bojos, in *Renewing Worship Songbook* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003) #146.

our dying friend when there are no words left to say? What about that moment of joy we want to share with the young child who has been baptized? These moments, too, are filled from the church's music. Without it, these too would be empty spaces in our lives.

Integral means primary, not secondary. Music is not a warm-up for the main event. It is a main event. Congregational song is not a way to cover an uncomfortable silence; it is its own communication. It is not entertaining; it is engaging. Music engages us at multiple levels—at the level of our senses, for sure, but also at the level of our spirit, our emotions, our psyche. Music reaches our hard hearts, our tired minds, our weak spirits, and our wounded psyches. If the church were a self-help organization, we could claim music's purpose to improve all of these things in us. The better news is that these benefits are still by-products of music's function in the Christian assembly. Music draws us into the church's life and mission by engaging us in proclaiming and receiving God's word for us. As we sing together, we embody God's word to us in this place at this time.

How is congregational song integral to church life and mission? How does it connect to one's own deepest sense of baptismal identity in Christ? Remember these words of Paul: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:27). The role of the worship leader is to expose baptismal identity within the body of Christ. As we assent to that call, we are also witnessing to God's work among us as the body of Christ. We are witnessing to our own place in the church's mission, as leaders for others into these great gifts of God. We are staking our claim on the belief that there is something so important going on in the church's worship that we will develop and hone our own gifts for that service leadership.

One beautiful summer morning this past July, I was praying on the deck of a cottage my brother owns in northern Wisconsin. I had been struggling with my selfish desires and was feeling depressed that I was so far from desiring God. As I prayed, a song just came wandering through my head as it often does. It was just the line "You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you."⁶ I couldn't even initially recall what the hymn was, or how I knew it. Then, at the same time I remembered what the hymn was, I remembered I didn't even like it! The reason I knew it was that I attend our weekly praise service in the chapel. It is not my favorite service, but it is a part of the Morning Prayer community with whom I worship, and I attend regularly. Sure enough, we had sung that hymn there quite a bit last year, and now, here it pops up in the middle of the wilderness of the north woods at the moment I needed it. I didn't need to consciously remember it, or even like it. The song worked in me to bring God's word of healing for my life and mission, allowing me to return again to my work in the church. That's how integral the church's song is.

⁶The song is "As the Deer Pants for the Water," in *Worship & Praise Songbook* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999) #9.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, reminds us how important it is to keep focused on the central and important nature of worship. “If there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8).

The Renewing Worship project seeks to give voice to the words and songs that will carry our praises for the next generation. It is a weighty challenge, one that is always ongoing and incomplete. By design this project is an ongoing process and will always meet with limited success. Perhaps most important, though, this process of worship renewal is intended to be carried out with a continuing variation of resources. Renewing Worship challenges us to make the best use of this variety. An array of resources will give tools to worship leaders to guide their choices. Will these resources and ideas enable worship renewal?

Such a hope is captured in the final stanza of a hymn that has come to the ELCA through the Renewing Worship songbook. Written as a response to the events surrounding 9/11 as well as other experiences of international violence, the author declares:

Your city’s built to music; we are the stones you seek;
your harmony is language, we are the words you speak.
Our faith we find in service, our hope in others’ dreams,
our love in hand of neighbor; our homeland brightly gleams.
Inscribe our hearts with justice; your way—the path untried;
your truth—the heart of stranger; your life—the Crucified.⁷

Our praises are ever renewed in the church’s worship. Resources can aid us; renewal awaits us. ⊕

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⁷William Whitla, “Let Streams of Living Justice,” in *Renewing Worship Songbook*, #248:2.