

Unleashing the Power of Worship

RUTH A. MEYERS*

Lutheran liturgical scholar Thomas Schattauer proposes that “the liturgical assembly of God’s people in the midst of the world enacts and signifies the outward movement of God for the life of the world.” Drawing upon this understanding of liturgy as a locus of God’s mission, I propose several theses on leadership for such liturgy, considering not only liturgical celebrations but also the design and preparation of liturgy as well as the community’s reflection on their patterns and experiences of worship. Fostering missional liturgy in a congregation is an adaptive challenge that requires both attention to context and knowledge and appreciation of the riches of Christian tradition.

A new understanding of mission is percolating through churches today. Increasingly, Christians are coming to understand mission in light of *missio Dei*, the mission of God. South African missiologist David Bosch explains this perspective:

Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. . . . Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. . . . To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love. . . . The *missio Dei* is God’s activity, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church may be privileged to participate.¹

* Ruth A. Meyers is Hodges-Haynes Professor of Liturgics at Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, California. She was Professor of Liturgics at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, from 1995 to 2009, and for several years was one of the resident clergy at St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church, Wilmette, Illinois. She is currently at work on a book about missional liturgy.

¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 390–391.

Over the past decade and a half, the term “missional” has come into widespread use as an expression of this approach to mission. But there is no clear agreement about the meaning of the term. Some appear to use it as a way to reassert the priority of mission activity, without fully grasping the underlying theological reorientation to the mission of God.²

Turning to liturgical studies, questions of mission have been addressed in discussions of inculturation of the liturgy in contexts that received the gospel from European and North American missionaries. In western countries that are rapidly becoming post-Christian, practitioners and scholars have explored what forms of worship are needed in this changing context, although rarely has this been framed in terms of “mission.” Some recent literature does address the relationship between liturgy and mission, and some of this literature views mission from the perspective of the mission of God, but the phrase “missional liturgy” is not widely used.³

In this essay, I explore leadership for missional liturgy by introducing several theses, each describing some aspect of such leadership as well as pointing to the nature of missional liturgy.

Liturgy as a Locus of God’s Mission

In a 1999 essay, Lutheran liturgical scholar Thomas Schattauer proposes three approaches to the relationship between liturgy and mission: inside and out, outside in, and inside out. In the first, “inside and out,” liturgy is an activity for those inside the church community, who are nourished and sustained by the liturgy in order to go out to enact the church’s mission. Worship serves the purpose of mission while remaining distinct from it. This approach thus makes a sharp distinction between worship, which takes place inside the church for the members of the church, and mission, which occurs outside.⁴

² Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007), 16–17.

³ Thomas H. Schattauer, “Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission,” in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas H. Schattauer (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1999), 1–21, especially 2–6. A Google search for “missional liturgy” yielded 235 results, not all of them discrete references. A search for “missional worship” produced 9,220 results, many of them from an evangelical or free-church context. Accessed June 20, 2009.

⁴ Schattauer, “Liturgical Assembly,” 1–2.

Schattauer goes on to identify two contemporary efforts to bring worship and mission together. In the church growth movement, worship becomes a primary means for the church to proclaim the gospel and reach those outside the church. A different approach uses worship to serve particular political and social goals, so that worship takes up the task of mission by promoting social transformation. In both of these “outside-in” strategies, “the tasks of mission become the principal purpose of the church’s worship.”⁵

A third way to view the relationship between liturgy and mission, Schattauer suggests, is “inside out.” In this perspective, liturgy itself is a locus of God’s mission. “The visible act of assembly (in Christ by the power of the Spirit) and the forms of this assembly—what we call liturgy—enact and signify this mission. . . . The liturgical assembly of God’s people in the midst of the world enacts and signifies the outward movement of God for the life of the world.”⁶

The Catechism in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* offers support for this missional understanding of liturgy. Explaining that the church is “apostolic” because it “is sent to carry out Christ’s mission to all people,” the Catechism states, “The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” And how does the church carry out this mission? It does so “*as it prays and worships*,” proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.”⁷ In other words, worship, or liturgy,⁸ is one way in which the church participates in mission, the restoration of humankind to unity with God and one another.

Understanding liturgy as a locus of God’s mission suggests an approach to liturgy that infuses not only the celebration itself but also the crafting of and preparation for liturgies, as well as the expectations and attitudes of those leading the assembly in worship. From this perspective, liturgy is offered not only for the members of the church, the “insiders,” but for the life of the world. All are welcome in an assembly that transcends age, class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and other differences that all too often divide humankind. All are

⁵ Schattauer, “Liturgical Assembly,” 2–3.

⁶ Schattauer, “Liturgical Assembly,” 3.

⁷ “An Outline of the Faith,” *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 854–855; emphasis added.

⁸ While the terms “worship” and “liturgy” have different nuances, in this article they are used interchangeably.

invited to remember and celebrate God's work in creating the world; God's reconciling love made known in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and God's gift of the Spirit that continues to infuse the life of the Christian community. The worshiping community not only remembers the history of salvation, it also is reoriented to our hope for the coming of God's new creation.

Decisions about texts and music, the design of the worship space, and the use of symbols and ritual actions are made with the belief that in each liturgy the assembly is offered a glimpse and a foretaste of the reign of God. How can each celebration enact and signify the assembly's reconciliation to God and one another, and symbolically to all creation? How does the liturgy, particularly the intercessory prayers of the gathered community, articulate the needs and yearnings of a world marked by brokenness, failure, and sin? How does the liturgy orient the assembly to the hope we have for the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed?

Leadership for Missional Liturgy Flows from Baptismal Identity

To describe the worshiping community as the "assembly of God's people" is a phrase perhaps more familiar to Lutherans than to Episcopalians.⁹ In developing a statement of principles for worship at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America made a deliberate choice to use the term "assembly" to "denote the gathering of the church in worship":

This word expresses the nature of the church as *ekklesia*, a biblical word for the church that has at its root the meaning "called out." A common pattern for worship underscores this understanding of the church: The people of God are called by the Holy Spirit to *gather* around the *word of God* and the *sacraments*, so that the Spirit may in turn *send* them into the world to continue the mission of God.¹⁰

⁹ From the Augsburg Confession, Article VII: "It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel"; in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1959), 32.

¹⁰ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Principles for Worship*, *Renewing Worship 2* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), vi.

The political connotations of “assembly”—a legislative assembly has power to effect change—suggest that the people who gather for worship have agency, that is, they have power to think, to discern, and to act.¹¹

While Episcopalians do not often use the term “assembly” to speak of the worshipping community, it does appear in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*: “In all services, the entire Christian assembly participates.”¹² Underlying both the Lutheran principles and the 1979 Prayer Book is an emphasis on the active participation of all worshippers. Moreover, Lutherans and Episcopalians share a belief in the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9), a priesthood into which we are initiated through baptism.

The 1979 Prayer Book marks a rediscovery of the significance of baptism. Louis Weil explains, “In recent decades we have been involved in the often painful process of moving from a model of church life dominated by clergy to one based upon the significance of the whole baptized community as the common ground of Christian identity.”¹³ The Baptismal Covenant in particular is helping Episcopalians recognize that the Christian faith we profess in the Apostles’ Creed leads to a lifetime of commitment, marked by ongoing participation in worship and by “carry[ing] on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world.”¹⁴

Although in many ways the 1979 Prayer Book emphasizes the active participation of the entire assembly, the choice of the term “celebrant” to refer to the one who presides at liturgy is unfortunate. It can too readily imply that the priest or bishop is the only one who celebrates, not all the members of the assembly. Some congregations have introduced the term “presider” to identify the one who leads the assembly in worship.¹⁵ John Dally tells of his conversations with his parish about this terminology. He reports that their discussions

¹¹ John A. Dally, *Choosing the Kingdom: Missional Preaching for the Household of God* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 2008), 81–82.

¹² BCP 1979, 13.

¹³ Louis Weil, *A Theology of Worship*, The New Church’s Teaching Series, vol. 12 (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 2002), 11–12.

¹⁴ “An Outline of the Faith,” BCP 1979, 855.

¹⁵ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), the new worship book of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, uses the term “presiding minister.”

inspired the lay leaders of the parish to write an identity statement that was printed in their worship leaflets:

We are the assembly, the people called out by our baptisms to proclaim God's reign of love and justice breaking into a world of hate and injustice. Together, we make eucharist, blessing and eating bread and wine as Jesus commanded us in order to be strengthened by his living presence for our own lives of Christian witness. Everyone present today is a celebrant of the eucharist; our worship is led by lay and ordained presiders.¹⁶

This identity statement offers a vision of an assembly that understands its agency. In this assembly, baptism is the wellspring that empowers the people. Within this assembly, some of the baptized step forward to lead, enabling the entire assembly to celebrate.

Liturgical leadership shared by lay and ordained people extends beyond the assembly to include the process of planning and preparation for liturgy. Several years ago, in an ethnographic study of liturgical renewal in the Episcopal Church, one of my criteria for selecting parishes to study was significant lay leadership in liturgical planning. While strong lay leadership did seem to be an important factor in liturgical renewal for the entire congregation, I discovered as well the importance of ordained leadership. Some of this may be attributed to the inherited "model of church life dominated by clergy" that Weil identifies. But clergy also have a particular role of pastoral and spiritual leadership, conferred by ordination and by a call to a particular parish or faith community. Their leadership is important in developing vision and discerning gifts.¹⁷

A baptismal ecclesiology calls for this ordained leadership to be exercised collaboratively. Roman Catholic theologian Stephen Bevans explains, "Collaboration is not simply doing what a group has decided; it involves a deep spiritual openness to the Spirit present in the *whole* community. It involves a truly ecclesial sense . . . that ministry truly is the work not of individuals but of Christ's body, the church."¹⁸

¹⁶ Dally, *Choosing the Kingdom*, 84.

¹⁷ Ruth Meyers, "The Promise and Perils of Liturgical Change," *Anglican Theological Review* 86 (2004): 103–114, especially 108–109.

¹⁸ Stephen Bevans: "Entrusted to Us: Theses on Christian Ministry," *Emmanuel* (January/February 2000): 22.

Missional Liturgy Attends to Context

A missional perspective trusts that the Spirit is at work not only in the whole community of faith, but also in the world. Hence leadership for missional liturgy will attend to the context in order to celebrate an inculturated liturgy. While the term “inculturation” was coined relatively recently, scholars point out that Christian liturgy has always interacted with each culture in which the church is planted, just as mission has always engaged the task of inculturation.¹⁹

In inculturated worship, a community embodies and inhabits its liturgy in such a way that the ritual texts and rubrics come alive for people today, through speaking and singing and in symbols and actions. The Benedictine scholar Anscar Chupungco defines liturgical inculturation as “the process whereby the texts and rites used in worship by the local church are so inserted in the framework of culture that they absorb its thought, language, and ritual patterns.”²⁰ An inculturated liturgy thus adopts many of the forms of its surrounding culture, yet the core of the liturgy remains. In the categories introduced in the 1996 Nairobi Statement of the Lutheran World Federation, worship is not only contextual, rooting worship in diverse local cultures, it is also transcultural. That is, “the resurrected Christ whom we worship, and through whom by the power of the Holy Spirit we know the grace of the Triune God, transcends and indeed is beyond all cultures.” Core elements of worship are evident in any culture: baptism and eucharist, the reading of Scripture, intercession for the world and the church, the act of assembly in the name of the risen Christ. Moreover, worship is countercultural, challenging oppression and injustice wherever they appear in local cultures, and critiquing and transforming cultural patterns in light of the gospel. Finally, worship is cross-cultural, drawing upon elements of different cultures in order to enact and celebrate some of the diversity of the body of Christ.²¹

¹⁹ Anscar J. Chupungco, *Cultural Adaptation of the Liturgy* (New York: Paulist, 1982); Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004); see especially 385–386.

²⁰ Anscar J. Chupungco, *Liturgies of the Future: The Process and Methods of Inculturation* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 29.

²¹ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities,” in *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*, ed. S. Anita

The task of inculturation thus calls for attention to our cultural context. Clergy, whose training emphasizes study of theological disciplines, may be particularly ill equipped for this challenge. Moreover, in a recent study of pastoral leadership, Jackson Carroll found that the solo and senior pastors he surveyed spent most of their time on tasks within the church, for example, preaching, worship leadership, pastoral counseling, and administration. These pastors reported an average of just two hours each week in “involvement in community affairs,” and one to three hours “working to convert others.” Outside the job, they averaged just one hour each week “surfing the web” (including chat groups and email) and two to four hours in “recreation (other than exercise).”²² How then do clergy stay attuned to their cultural context, so that they can speak the language of the culture, and the worship they lead can be inculturated?

Active collaboration with lay leadership is critical. For example, in a congregation that regularly incorporates video clips and the culture’s music, members of the congregation, including children and teens, became attentive to theological themes in contemporary film and music, regularly suggesting selections for use in worship.²³ An urban congregation that invites ad hoc teams of parishioners to design their Holy Week liturgies decided to incorporate in their Good Friday service images and stories of children who had been murdered in their city this year.²⁴ A suburban congregation decided to begin its liturgy with the exchange of the Peace, reinterpreting this element of the liturgy as a greeting that mirrored gatherings in other contexts in their community.²⁵

An inculturated liturgy may incorporate music, video, or other art forms from the local culture, and it may draw upon patterns of assembly and ritual practice from that culture. It must also be attentive to

Stauffer (Geneva, Switzerland: Lutheran World Federation, 1996), 23–28, quotation on 24.

²² Jackson Carroll, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006), 106–108, 121–122. This survey was conducted in 2001 by the National Opinion Research Center for Pulpit and Pew.

²³ Derek Harbin, a church planter at Church of the Beloved (Episcopal), Charlotte, North Carolina, provided this example.

²⁴ Several members of All Saints’ Episcopal Church, Chicago, spoke of the power of this liturgy for them.

²⁵ I experienced this practice at St. Nicholas Episcopal Church, Elk Grove Village, Illinois, several years ago.

aspects of the culture that are contradictory to the gospel. Christian Scharen identifies two major obstacles to Christian faith in the United States today. Drawing upon the work of Max Weber, Scharen describes the “compartmentalization” that results in religion being viewed as one sphere distinct from others such as kinship, economy, politics, and aesthetics. Such fragmentation makes it difficult for Christians to comprehend the significance of their faith in their daily life. Compartmentalization is compounded by “self-maximalization,” an individualism of American culture that is a powerful force contradicting the communal teaching of the gospel.²⁶

To address these cultural forces, Scharen proposes the model of “spiritual guide.” As a spiritual guide, a pastoral leader “offers direction and guidance in enacting a practice” and “frame[s] the meaning of the practice as the community enacts it.”²⁷ Although Scharen does not address leadership for worship, his model can easily be applied in this way. As a spiritual guide, worship leaders bring the resources of the tradition so that the community’s worship can resist the forces of culture that are fragmenting, dehumanizing, and in other ways at odds with the gospel.

Missional Liturgy Draws Deeply from the Well of Tradition

Sketching out a vision for a missional church in North America, a team of Protestant theologians offered a series of foundational affirmations. A missional ecclesiology is not only contextual, situated in concrete settings. It is also biblical, explicitly based on the biblical witness to God’s mission, and it is historical, shaped by the church in all its cultural expressions over time. Moreover, a missional ecclesiology is eschatological, moving toward God’s promised consummation of all things. Finally, a missional ecclesiology can be translated into practice, equipping the church for its calling as God’s people.²⁸

Missional liturgy, then, is firmly rooted in Christian tradition. Increasingly, Christians today in many different faith communities are

²⁶ Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 11–40.

²⁷ Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life*, 122–123.

²⁸ Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 11–12.

drawing from an eclectic array of ancient practices.²⁹ Pastoral leaders play an important role in fostering coherence as congregations draw upon the plethora of resources available today. For centuries, Anglicans relied upon a single authorized liturgical form provided by the *Book of Common Prayer*. Today, it is not only the Episcopal Church that has a range of materials available in the 1979 Prayer Book, *Enriching Our Worship*, and several authorized hymnals. Many other Anglican provinces have developed new liturgical resources suited to their particular contexts, and a number of congregations in the Episcopal Church use some of these materials on occasion.³⁰

Recognizing the increasing breadth of liturgical resources in different provinces of the Anglican Communion, the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation recommended, “In the future, Anglican unity will find its liturgical expression not so much in uniform texts as in a common approach to eucharistic celebration and a structure which will ensure a balance of word, prayer, and sacrament.”³¹ The 1979 Prayer Book provides this structure, which has broad ecumenical agreement, in “An Order for Celebrating the Holy Eucharist,”³² which mirrors the outline of both Rite I and Rite II.

It is not just structure, however, that provides continuity with tradition. The Anglican principles also emphasize the importance of “vivid language, symbol, and metaphor,” and “the embodied character of Christian worship,” which “must be honoured in proclamation, music, symbol, and ritual.” Moreover:

The eucharistic action models the way in which God as redeemer comes into the world in the Word made flesh, to which the people

²⁹ The liturgical movement of the mid-twentieth century encouraged a recovery of liturgical forms and practices from the earliest centuries of the church, leading to a remarkable similarity in the reforms of Catholic worship after the Second Vatican Council and the revised worship books of mainline Protestant churches. In a study of the contemporary Emerging Church movement, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger document a resurgence of interest in ancient forms: *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 217–234.

³⁰ For a survey of contemporary Anglican prayer books, see *The Oxford Guide to The Book of Common Prayer*, ed. Charles Heffing and Cynthia Shattuck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 271–442.

³¹ “Principles and Recommendations,” The Dublin Documents, in *Our Thanks and Praise: The Eucharist in Anglicanism Today*, ed. David R. Holetton (Toronto, Ontario: Anglican Book Centre, 1998), 261–262.

³² BCP 1979, 400–401.

of God respond by offering themselves—broken individuals—to be made one body in Christ’s risen life. This continual process of transformation is enacted in each celebration.³³

Leaders of missional liturgy, serving as spiritual guides, enable their communities to hold fast to these core principles.

Leaders of Missional Liturgy Facilitate Adaptive Change

For several years, I have offered workshops and classes on the subject of “missional liturgy.” A frequent response has been the question, “How can I make my church’s liturgy missional?” As I listened to these questions and probed more deeply, I realized that many people were asking about techniques. What particular practices characterize a missional liturgy, for example, a form of intercessory prayer, or a particular preaching style, or a way of gathering and sending the congregation?

While such questions are understandable, they do not adequately address the fundamental reorientation required when we understand mission to be the mission of God in which the church participates. From this perspective, missional liturgy is not so much about particular techniques, whether liturgical texts or patterns of celebration, but about an approach to liturgy and to Christian faith and witness in the world. Missional liturgy cannot be isolated from the entirety of congregational life. Rather, missional liturgy takes place in a missional congregation, one that is “shaped by participation in God’s mission” and which “lets God’s mission permeate everything that the congregation does—from worship to witness to training members for discipleship.”³⁴

Developing missional liturgy is thus an adaptive challenge, learning how to embody and enact the inherited forms of the Christian tradition in particular cultural contexts. Ronald Heifetz describes an adaptive challenge as one that requires changes in people’s values, attitudes, or habits of behavior.³⁵ A missional approach to liturgy and to church requires Christians to reconsider the values, attitudes, and habits that have accrued over a millennium and a half of Christendom,

³³ “Principles and Recommendations,” The Dublin Documents, 262.

³⁴ Lois Y. Barrett, et al., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), x.

³⁵ Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 30–40.

and learn to be church in a new way, while still holding fast to the faith delivered to the saints. Heifetz argues that leadership for adaptive change requires not authoritative solutions but rather a process that enables the community to identify the challenge and make the necessary changes in their values and attitudes as well as in their behavior.

To develop missional liturgy, congregations must learn to live at the intersection of tradition and context. Thomas Long describes such worship as

completely attuned to the American cultural moment but also fully congruent with the great worship tradition of the Christian church; a service that attracts young people and seekers and the curious and those who are hungry for a spiritual encounter, but that does so by beckoning people to the deep and refreshing pool of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it has been understood historically in the church.³⁶

Although Long does not describe this liturgy as “missional,” his vision of worship in what he terms “vital and faithful congregations” is consistent with a missional approach that both attends to the context and remains rooted in Christian tradition. He does not offer extensive advice for developing such worship, although he recognizes the importance of both ordained and lay leadership in bringing about worship renewal. That this is an adaptive challenge is evident from his finding that “whenever worship is renewed, some congregational conflict is inevitable.”³⁷ Leadership for missional liturgy thus requires courage and skill.

Leaders of Missional Liturgy are Authentic

Long identifies several characteristics of the vital and faithful congregations he studied. All of them, he says, “have strong charismatic pastors as worship leaders,” by which he means “people of deep integrity who have the power to bless others, the willingness to act in Christlike ways as they lead, and the ability to allow a service of

³⁶ Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 2001), 12.

³⁷ Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, 108.

worship to be a place of honest hospitality and the sharing of gifts.”³⁸ While Long is writing about clergy leaders, his comments apply equally to lay leaders of worship, and he does call for the primary leader, that is, the pastor, to share leadership with others.

Worship leaders, lay and ordained, speak and act in the name of Christ. Yet they also bring their humanity, their particular bodies, their personal histories, their struggles and hopes, their experiences of God. Emphasizing the importance of being oneself, Robert Hovda writes, “Liturgy is something that persons of faith do in community. And they have to bring their real selves and their whole selves and their true selves to it. . . . So when one functions as a presider or other minister, it is the whole person, the real person, the true person, the full and complete person who functions.” This is not a presence that calls attention to oneself. Rather, by being fully present to the community and to God, a worship leader can become transparent to the presence and action of the Lord.³⁹

As one who presides at worship with some frequency, I have caught myself on occasion in the midst of rote recitation of a liturgical text. I have prayed these words so often that I speak them without awareness of the reality of the words. While still a valid liturgy from the perspective of sacramental theology, the transformative power of liturgy is diminished when I am not fully present. God’s power can certainly work through frail human flesh. But when I am not doing my part to communicate, it is more difficult for the assembly to engage the liturgy fully.

Writing about preaching, Henry Mitchell urges preachers to speak to the whole of consciousness: cognitive, intuitive, and emotive. The words of the sermon convey cognitive content. But people rarely change their behavior solely because of a well-reasoned argument. They are more likely to be moved by their intuitive and emotive consciousness. Intuitive consciousness is an experiential, “gut-level” understanding, while emotive consciousness refers to a depth of feeling that motivates behavior. Mitchell proposes that sermons that speak to the whole consciousness beget trust and change behavior.⁴⁰

³⁸ Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, 98–100.

³⁹ Robert W. Hovda, *Strong, Loving and Wise: Presiding in Liturgy* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1976), 57.

⁴⁰ Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1990), 53–56.

Mitchell's insights about preaching can be extended to the entire liturgy, even though worship leaders are not always writing the texts of the liturgy. In a workshop with lay and ordained worship leaders, I invited them to reflect on one movement or text or gesture in liturgy by meditating on it; pondering images, memories, and Scripture that came to mind; and attending to the sensory dimensions—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch—of these reflections. I encouraged them to focus on intuitive and emotive understandings rather than cognitive ones. After time for reflection, the group reconvened, and each person said or enacted their portion of the liturgy, shared a bit of their reflection, then repeated the element of liturgy. The stories were powerful, revealing profound experiences of God at work in human life. Moreover, it was evident as students repeated their chosen liturgical element that the personal connections they had made with this element enabled them to enact it in a powerfully authentic manner that invited others into the mystery of God.⁴¹

Leaders of Missional Liturgy Facilitate Theological Reflection

Reflection on particular elements can be extended to the entire liturgy. As Christian Scharen points out, pastoral leaders not only offer guidance in enacting practices, they also frame the meaning of the community's practices.

Scharen cites the example of a Baptist church in a small town in Maine that decided it was time to get on with the business of feeding the hungry in their community. In a year, their program moved from a monthly evening supper with thirty guests to a weekly dinner that attracted over eighty guests, with several churches participating in the ministry. The pastor had "framed the meaning of table fellowship in terms of the eschatological kingdom of heaven, rooted in parables of Jesus in Scripture as well as prophetic and apocalyptic visions of God's Kingdom as it will be in its fullness." In this congregation, an open welcome to the communion table and reflection on the theological significance of that table led to a missional practice.⁴²

During the fourth century, the rapidly growing Christian church developed an intensive process of formation and incorporation into

⁴¹ I am indebted to Clare Nolan, BFA, for developing this exercise and giving me permission to use it.

⁴² Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life*, 54–58, 123; quotation on p. 123.

the community of faith. This catechumenal process culminated with baptism at the Easter Vigil, followed by a period of mystagogy, when the bishop would unfold the meaning of what the newly baptized had experienced in the Easter liturgy.

In the church today, the practice has seen a resurgence in parishes that have implemented a catechumenate. *The Book of Occasional Services* does not use the term “mystagogy” but calls for the period after baptism to be “devoted to such activities, formal and informal, as will assist the newly baptized to experience the fullness of the corporate life of the Church and to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the Sacraments.”⁴³ While the focus here is on the newly baptized, the entire community can find its faith deepened by reflection on the experience of the Easter Vigil and other liturgies.

Reflection on liturgy, however, need not be tied solely to the catechumenate and the incorporation of new Christians. Sometimes such reflection happens simply and spontaneously, as a worshiper comments on the power of a particular liturgy. Pastoral leaders can be attentive to such comments and invite deeper reflection. A worship planning group can gather after a liturgy and ponder their experience. While this may include evaluation of the liturgy, a missional conversation will ask what stirred in the hearts of worshipers, what the liturgy communicated about God and the people of God, how the liturgy shapes the community as a people called and sent by God.

Conclusion

Missional liturgy is a primary aspect of a congregation’s participation in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. In missional liturgy, “the liturgical assembly of God’s people in the midst of the world enacts and signifies the outward movement of God for the life of the world.”⁴⁴

Developing missional liturgy presents a critical adaptive challenge to churches today as we leave Christendom behind and reclaim the biblical story of God’s creative and redemptive love for the world. Leadership for such liturgy is shared by lay and ordained Christians, empowered by baptism to be spiritual guides. These leaders enable their communities to celebrate liturgies that are both inculturated

⁴³ *The Book of Occasional Services* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 116.

⁴⁴ Schattauer, “Liturgical Assembly,” 3.

and rooted in tradition, and they help frame the meaning of those liturgies.

Providing leadership for missional liturgy is not for the faint of heart. Yet a missional perspective includes confidence that the Spirit will provide all that is needed to accomplish the challenges we encounter. By claiming the courage to foster missional liturgy, leaders of faith communities can unleash the transformative power of liturgy. Worship in their communities will be a locus of God's mission, a place where the assembly celebrates and enacts God's reconciling love for the world, and their communities will be transformed, living ever more fully into their call to participate in the mission of God in the world.