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## WW '72: CHAPTER 7 ~ MAKING IT HAPPEN IN THE CONGREGATION

How may parishes begin to reform their worship life, and to keep a sense of **CONTINUAL REFORM** among leaders and in the rank and file? These are the final questions we'll be considering in this revision and enlargement of *Worship Workbench '72*. "Always reforming." *Semper reformanda*. That's the constant motto of the Church since the days of the Sixteenth Century. Our job of reforming the Church is continuous, continual. In its worship, in its witness, in its teaching, in its service to its world — the healthy Church will recognize that reform in these responsibilities will never end.

Another way of putting it: **CHANGE** is normal in the Church, as in all aspects of human life. *Stasis*, stability is ab-normal, pathological, in every human endeavour. Rather, change is normal. We should expect change. Prepare for change. Anticipate change. Welcome change. Provide for change. Celebrate change.

I. Providing for Change in Worship Life: Two possibilities for parish organization

Let me cite **TWO POSSIBILITIES** for welcoming change in the worship life of your parish. There will be other ways of providing change and responsiveness in witness or service or teaching, of course. But here are two possibilities for change in worship. The first possibility is new and most likely unfamiliar to many; the second more traditional.



1) Here for example is the first possibility. There are some congregations today which provide for change in a radical **RE-STRUCTURING** of parish life. Every member — even the youngest — automatically belongs to one of several

Working Groups. You could name them Red, Yellow, Blue and Green, or you could find more clever or more Biblical designations. In any case, each Group is responsible for everything that happens on a given Sunday morning. Some members of the Group will serve as greeters, some are lectors, some present the Offerings, some are ministers of Bread or Cup at communion, some prepare the coffee hour that follows worship.



As you can suppose, in such a Group, even the youngest members will be able to accept at least some responsibilities. In any case, each Group **TAKES ITS TURN** for providing leaders and workers for a given week, or set of weeks: One Sunday a month. Or for a full month of Sundays during a year: However it seems to work best in your setting. The important principle here is the system's egalitarianism: Everyone works. Everyone has a part to play. There are no distinctions of age or rank or privilege or even specialized competence.

But **TRAINING** will always be part of any system, including this one. Lectors will be trained in public speaking. Greeters will be trained in the skills of hospitality and welcome. Cooks for the coffee hour will be trained in their preparations and serving.

Who does the training? The pastor-president, perhaps, in some instances, but experienced and seasoned lay people could just as easily do most of the work of training. Your own congregation's **PRESENT ROSTER** of ushers and greeters and lectors could easily be apportioned so as to give leadership and training within each Group in which they're now members.



2) Still a second possibility is more traditional and thus more familiar to many: An alert and functioning Worship and Arts **COMMITTEE** in the parish. According to this system, there's an appointed Committee in the parish responsible for its worship life, under the oversight of the pastor, and ultimately answerable to the church council.

It goes without saying that there's value (necessity!) in having **LAY PEOPLE** involved from the beginning to end in planning and introducing change in parish worship. You pay a price for this kind of democracy; You cannot always get what you want, unilaterally and immediately. But that is a virtue, too. It assures at least some measure of consensus. The process whereby a Committee makes recommendations to a council, which then acts with authority and assumes responsibility, can sometimes be frustratingly slow, but it is ultimately the only equitable way, especially when there are differences of opinion.

Further: Any good Committee should exhibit **TWO QUALITIES**. A) It should provide the necessary competence to be able to address itself to the problem at hand. B) And it should represent the constituency as much as possible. Therefore, a parish Worship and Arts Committee should include the professionals: a) The organist and/or choir director, as well

as other competent lay people in the fields of b) the visual arts, architects, designers, painters, potters and c) the lively arts, dance, theatre — either as professionals or amateurs.

The Committee should also be widely representative of the parish itself. For example, I'd want to see to it that the following diverse **OPINIONS** were actively represented on the Committee: 1) "high church," 2) "low church," 3) radical, 4) conservative, 5) youth and impatience, and 6) age and experience.

Some of these opinions may be found simultaneously in the **SAME PERSON** — the Committee need not consist of six separate people. A Committee of four is probably big enough, except in the most enormous parishes. But Committee members should somehow be both A) competent for the job assigned them and B) representative of a cross-section of parish opinion. That way, any recommendation from the Committee to the council will carry the weight of both professional expertise and catholic representation. "Follow the line of most resistance." This was the principle of Committee management followed by the late Franklin Clark Fry, president of the old Lutheran Church in America, and himself a genius in wresting decisive action from the most disparate group.



Such a Committee might **MEET** no more than three or four times a year. It reviews and evaluates past experience and plans for the future, usually on a seasonal basis, that is, from one Season of the church year to the next. For ongoing or specific responsibilities, assign subcommittees.

For example, the organist and the pastor might become a kind of **SUB-COMMITTEE** for choosing all hymns and music, four or six months at a time; Another subcommittee can prepare an Experimental Service for review later, ideally by both Committee and council. Although this may sound like a lot of bureaucracy, in actual practice it has proven quite simple and workable. Of course, all Committee recommendations should be reported to the council, which alone has authority to implement or act. Frequently, a good idea from the Committee may be vetoed in council. But that's life, *n'est-ce pas?* And there's always next year, when you can try again!

We turn now to some specific items to accomplish **RENEWAL** in worship. I suggest six possibilities.

## II. A Normative Sunday Service

I have written elsewhere on this website ([Essay 20](#) above) of my **MISGIVINGS** about multiple Services on a given Sunday in a given parish. I list in that Essay four good

reasons to resist multiplying so-called “worship opportunities” in any congregation.

Without repenting my position, I must acknowledge the **REALITIES**: Many congregations already provide two major opportunities each week for worship. Why not have the first opportunity be what might be called a “Normative Sunday Service” and the second a more frankly “Experimental Service”?

The Normative Sunday Service exhibits all that is best in our received **TRADITION**, adhering fairly closely to the “rite” and “ceremony” — i.e., the words and the actions — commended by our particular tradition in its worship resources, the *Lutheran Book of Worship* or *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Of course, this Normative Service is also both “high” and “low” in the senses indicated in Chapter Four. But its chief difference from the second, more Experimental Service, is its use of the same service book found in any other of our congregations across the land.



Let me suggest three good reasons for scheduling at least one more or less “**TRADITIONAL**” Service each week. 1) We must not altogether abandon our traditional focus until we are absolutely sure it is absolutely worthless 2) Even the wildest experimental congregation must stand in solidarity with other more conservative congregations. 3) Many attend our churches as strangers and visitors, and there is no reason to confuse them needlessly. Three notes before we leave the Normative Service.

First, there is a solid preference among liturgists in favor of **SEASONAL VARIATIONS** in worship forms, rather than, say, an every-other-week style of rotation. Seasonal changes in liturgy help to differentiate and distinguish our journey through the weeks and months of the Church’s calendar.

Second, and more importantly, it can conflict with a worshipper’s “**PSYCHOLOGICAL MOMENTUM**” to schedule one type of service on the first and third Sundays of the month, for example, and another on the second and fourth Sundays of the month. If you would like to provide some variety in your situation, even during the Normative Service, my best advice to you is to do it seasonally. Use one form for the four weeks of Advent, another for the several weeks from Christmas to Epiphany, and so on. You will find it’s greatly appreciated.

Third, in many parishes, a pastor or lay leader will often provide some introductory **COMMENTS** to the congregation before the Service begins. There’s a high-sounding liturgical name for this practice which legitimizes what is in any event often a good idea: an *exordium* or “introduction”. Although, for myself these days, I prefer that the first public words from my mouth be those gracious Biblical words of the Apostolic Greeting, (“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ...”) is there nevertheless need for a congregational leader — the council chair? a retired pastor-member? — to introduce the Day’s worship with

some kind of *exordium*, lasting no longer than five minutes and taking the following form:

- 1) A word of **WELCOME** to all worshippers, introducing the presider if necessary...
- 2) A brief introduction to the **DAY** or Season, explaining and interpreting terms or symbols related to the Day's worship - banner symbols, the bulletin, vestments...
- 3) A brief announcement of **EVENTS** to come in the life of the congregation - the parish announcements - with reference to the congregational calendar....
- 4) A brief introduction to the **SERVICE** itself, with rehearsal of new musical forms if necessary....
- 5) A brief period of **SILENCE** before an instrumental or choral prelude.

### III. The Experimental Service

Keeping in mind my misgivings, sociological, theological, ecclesial and liturgical ([Essay 20](#)) about multiple Services, how might we utilize a **SECOND** Service creatively as an instrument for change? Many congregations schedule two Services regularly each week. Some parishes schedule a second Service on Wednesday evenings each week, as a substitute Sunday for the weekend vacationers. But both Services should offer the Holy Communion.

At this second, more frankly **EXPERIMENTAL** Service, there is no attempt to remain loyal to one specific tradition. Our traditional service books, for instance, could be used (if at all) as one resource among others. A wide variety of experimental services is available today: The Taize and Iona liturgies, the liturgy of the Church of South India, the so-called "Lima Liturgy" of the World Council of Churches, and of course the liturgies of other Churches and denominations. Any of these could be used for specific times and seasons on recommendation to the church council from the Worship and Arts Committee. Again, in the interests of honouring both the liturgical season and the psychological momentum of worshippers, it's best to stick with one form for a period of at least four to six weeks. It takes that long to become familiar with it, to savor its nuances, to taste its flavour.

And the Experimental Service also could provide a **LABORATORY**, a proving ground, for worship changes you might want to introduce in the Normative Service. One worshipping community used a common loaf in an Experimental Service a full year before introducing it at the Normative Service as "standard operating procedure." So also with the exchange of the peace, or the practice of lay people offering their *ex tempore* prayers during the Intercessions. Congregations will usually respond readily to innovation if they themselves have first experimented with it in a situation which is by nature flexible and temporary. The Experimental Service provides just such a low-threat proving ground for innovation.



#### IV. Evening Prayer and Rehearsal

Congregations could well schedule still another opportunity for variety, experimentation, or instruction in worship — what I will call choral **EVENING PRAYER**, although it could just as easily be choral Morning Prayer or almost any other form of worship. Perhaps a parish will find a Sunday night young people's group a ready-made, responsive and "captive" congregation. And this need not be very formal. You could simply sit around the fireplace and learn new hymns, songs, chants, or prayers, frequently of the pop or folk variety, but also some of the great contributions from the Tradition.

#### V. The Advent Change

Another tactical possibility for the local congregation might be the scheduling of major liturgical changes each **ADVENT**. This was the long-time tradition of a parish I served in central Pennsylvania. The people knew that on the first Sunday of Advent of each year, they could expect some major liturgical change, analyzed and discussed in the Worship Committee, endorsed by the council and tested and proven in the Experimental Service. It's amazing how far and how fast such a system can take a congregation.



#### VI. Seasonal Variations

I have already noted the refreshment and exhilaration that can come into worship by the simple expedient of making full use of the possibilities for **SEASONAL** variety. There is absolutely no need — no excuse! — for every Sunday's worship to be identical to every other Sunday's worship. No wonder our congregations complain worship is a drag, if Easter Sunday is no different from a Sunday in Lent, or a Sunday in Advent! Part of the Worship Committee's job is planning for wholesome and invigorating variety from season to season throughout the year.

As I have already suggested, psychological and practical problems arise when **EVERY** Sunday is absolutely unique: That would be too much. But we have the times and seasons noted above as one of the valuable resources in worship renewal. Seasonal variations in worship make worshippers aware of the Word addressing us out of the future as well as out of the past.

In many congregations it has been the custom to provide some kind of variety almost across the board each Season of the **CHURCH YEAR**. Why not routinely schedule some changes, even if only minor ones, each Season, taking full advantage of this marvelous resource from our Tradition? In architectural setting; in the action of worship, in the words and texts we use; in the music; in vestments, paraments, and colour; and in symbols?

#### VII. Retreats and Conferences

Leadership at retreats and conferences is itself a topic for another book. Let me simply register here my conviction that worship in such situations almost never fails to bring out our most authentic and **WINSOME PIETY**, for some very good reasons. There is something endearingly “low-threat” about the informal and unfamiliar setting of most retreat or conference worship that encourages us to drop our old pretensions and patterns of propriety and be more truly and authentically ourselves, meeting quite naturally with one another and with God in the family of faith.

Because worship in such a setting is frequently of the most **ELEMENTARY** variety, it can be an asset for education about worship. The spontaneous courage of worshippers at most retreats and conferences — willing to do without vestments, without music, without fussy expectations of propriety in worshippers and worship leaders — can create a wonderfully wholesome and authentic experience of worship.

#### VIII. In Conclusion: Change, Context and Compromise

A return to a more Biblical, more **CONTEXTUAL** theology was one of contributions of the Reformation. According to this “contextual” or “situational” view, the doing of theology could never be divorced from its actual context in the life situation of the community of believers. During the Reformation, theology and the whole life of faith once again became concrete, rather than abstract.

These Biblical insights — that each community of faith lives, believes, and decides within a very specific set of cultural circumstances — applies as much to our **LITURGICAL** homework in the Church as to our theology. Our liturgy is always “contextual” or “situational” liturgy. This suggests two important implications for anyone engaged in liturgical reform.

First, because our liturgy is always contextual means we are, in a sense, always fighting an **APOLOGETIC** battle. We are not only initiating action, but we are also reacting. The Creeds of our theological tradition are important, not only in what they confess, but also in what they deny. Thus it is with any proposed liturgical change. Viewed in context, any change in worship forms can be seen as affirming certain cultural values and, at the same time, denying other cultural values.

For example, there’s much clamor today, especially among young people, for worship forms expressing more **JOY** in the Christian faith. The “apologetic context” lying behind this request is the feeling of many that current worship is too joyless or sober-sided. I myself can endorse that criticism. And I can acknowledge as well the judgement that our worship has become too “Appollonian” — too cognitive and intellectualized — and not “Dionysian” enough. It keeps us humble, however, to remember that the Apostle Paul, speaking out of his own particular “apologetic context”, has to warn his hearers that their worship in their situation was too freaky — too Dionysian — and needed a little more order and sobriety!



All of this is simply to admit that in worship, as in other areas of human life, we will have to strike our balances somewhere between wide swings of the pendulum. Life does not wait for us. The culture swirls on, and the changes we propose today must always take the current situation into account, without obsessing too much, or too **SERIOUSLY**, on our own particular problems. Or solutions!



This brings me to the second implication of a contextual view: **COMPROMISE**. Whatever we do will be less than perfect. That too is a Reformation insight, as I understand it! The life of faith, in liturgical reform as elsewhere, is the life of compromise. We may not be able to accomplish all the highest, noblest goals we set for ourselves. But after all, the Gospel frees us from worrying about that overmuch. It frees us from the responsibility of having to remain single-mindedly consistent, or “pure,” or righteous.

I do not have to die for the sins of the world. That burden has already been borne for me by Another! If the forgiveness of sins means anything, it means I can dare to strike a compromise in liturgical reform, as well as anywhere. I can, of course, try to see to it that my compromise will be the highest I can achieve under the circumstances. But I will not be deceived by the **PURITY** of my choices this side of the Kingdom of God!



Luther says it so **BEAUTIFULLY** in his explanation to the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Your Kingdom come.” He says, “The Kingdom of God comes indeed of itself, without our prayer....” That’s the Good News: The assurance that God in Christ has sown a seed, and that seed will bring forth fruit, thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold. Its success does not depend on us — on our meager discipleship, our

minority numbers, our imperfect vision — but on the inner authority of the Word itself, which does not return void, but accomplishes its purposes.

Luther goes on, “...But we pray in this petition that it may come **ALSO TO US**.” In us. Through us. By means of us. Where we have authority. Where we have responsibility. That is our challenge.

May the day soon come when all the children of God sit down together in justice, peace and fulness at the Banquet of the Lord. And may it be said of us that **WE**, by God’s grace, had something to do with its coming.





This ends the serialization of my revised *Worship Workbench*, first published by Lutheran Campus Ministry national office in 1972.



Next month I begin a new occasional series anticipating and honouring the publication in October 2006 of the ELCA's & ELCIC's new worship- and hymn-book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. I'll call the series "Fifty Nifty Things about *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*".

