

Worship in the WELS: Changing Practices

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At first glance, it may seem as though the approach of this paper will end up contradicting much of what Prof. Braun said in his. If all the great things of our faith are timeless—the Gospel, the Sacraments, the ancient liturgy of the Western Church, the noble traditions of our own church body—why should anything have to change? In ordinary matters of ordinary life we don't care for people who relentlessly advocate "change just for the sake of change," do we? We don't like to fix what ain't broke, whether in automobiles, politics, child rearing, economics, social policy, or education.

The group worship that goes on in our congregations each week is probably the most important thing we do. It brings the most people together the most often the most intensively. Many, many things happen during that hour or two: first, our relationship with God is developed. We confess our sin to him and receive the splendid gift of forgiveness. We listen to his Word, discover more fully his identity, appreciate his mighty works, hear his invitation to follow, perceive more clearly his will, and absorb his strength. We are moved to respond with adoration, praise, thanks, gifts, prayers, and a renewed dedication to live the Christian life.

The second thing is almost as important, and that is the way in which our relationships with other Christians are developed. We make and renew Christian friendships, encourage one another, pray for one another, grow into a team of workers, evangelize the seekers among us, and re-win the struggling delinquents. The strength and unity of each of our congregations grows out of that precious time together. The many weekly activities—Bible studies, catechism teaching, evangelism, counseling, works of service—are important indeed, but they don't do as much as widely as our worship hour. And so the way in which we craft our forms (and change them) had better be done with great care.

Our main worship book, *The Lutheran Hymnal*, first appeared in 1941. The WELS now by at least three decades has the oldest hymnal of any major denomination, and it will be more years yet before the new hymnal is available. The very unchanging nature of the Sunday morning worship which it leads is extremely important to some people. All week they feel threatened and upset and stressed by a relentlessly changing world. Sunday morning is a time to escape into another world, a world where things are better, a world where there are things you can still depend on. Unchanging hymns and an unchanging liturgy come to symbolize the God who never changes. Comfortable and familiar forms provide stability, something to count on in a world where every other "earthly prop gives way."

And yet, worship forms that always remained the same would no longer be true worship. The way in which Christians respond to the Gospel (Prof. Braun's first point) will change because Christians are different. The way (point 15) in which Christians use the arts—music, architecture, painting, oratory, sculpture, poetry—will change because the arts change and grow, and people's perception of what is beautiful or appropriate or inspiring is not static. A single unaccompanied voice singing Gregorian chant in Latin is a beautiful thing, but if you had to listen to the entire service sung in it for three Sundays, you would be quite homesick for the hymns of the *Lutheran Hymnal*. People change; language changes; individual dialects of language change; the arts change; culture changes. To fight change in worship is to miss the point—God allows us and even urges us to use his gifts to craft a response to him in our own

way, and he takes delight in worship forms in which we use the best our various cultures have to offer.

It will be the main point of this paper to encourage retaining the best of our Lutheran Christian heritage while remaining open to new ways, to steer the middle course between antiquarianism and trend obsession. It is good to remember, though, that forms and techniques are not worship in and of themselves. True worship begins in a human heart grateful for grace and in a mind that is the temple of the Spirit. Prof. Bruce Backer of DMLC once told a Minnesota pastoral conference:

“Variety will not solve lethargic worship, nor will modern English, nor will old English, neither will new liturgies nor old liturgies; neither new hymns nor old hymns; faster hymn playing nor slower hymn playing.... the idea that there is any kind of lasting solution in these techniques to the problems in worship is a grand delusion that we must fight with all our strength. Techniques, programs, machinery, methods, will never enliven faith. Let the call to repentance be heard among us. Let the soothing oil of the Gospel of forgiveness be poured into the wounds of sin. And a generation will arise before us who will present their lives to God as a living sacrifice. And they will go to the house of the Lord willingly to hear the Word and to answer with prayer, thanks and praise.”

There are many voices heard in the WELS which resist change, especially change in our worship practices. You have read some of the intense excerpts from angry letters in the *Northwestern Lutheran* from people who want their Sunday morning experience of 1997 identical to the one they remember from 1947. A recent unsigned post card to the hymnal project director urged him to stake all them *Samplers* and throw them in Lake Michigan.” Another writer seemed upset as she wrote concerning the *Sampler* and the list of suggested hymns for the new hymnal, it’s unadulterated blasphemy...Honestly! Didn’t anyone who sat in on the hymn debauchery hear Satan laughing? That old devil must have had a field day watching and listening to your great group. I can’t believe the abortion performed on our beloved hymnal—that is something you all have to live with in the future.” There were more letters like that, lots more.

You are the people of our district who will guide the worship life of our congregations into the 21st century. Most of you remember the difficulties associated with introducing a new catechism and a modern language Bible translation. But the shock that will accompany the changing of hymnals will dwarf whatever problems you might have encountered with the other two. I would like to muse a little bit about worship forms and change in our synod, structured around the past, present, and future, in the hope that changes in our worship life, inevitable in my view, will be welcomed and happen gracefully, and that in all these things we will glorify God and edify his people.

I. THE PAST

People who are fearful about change in forms forget that our worship forms have been in steady change ever since the congregations that make up the synod were founded. These are just some of the ways in which our worship practices of the good old days are different from those of today:

—men used to sit on one side of the church and the women and children were expected to sit on the other; sometimes the church council would sit as a body underneath the pulpit and gaze sternly out at the people to watch for dozing and fooling around.

—some churches had the practice of pew rental, meaning that the location of your seat more or less depended on your level of church “dues” (and vice versa).

—many (most?) of our churches had flat rate “church dues”; if your contributions were not up to this level, you would be dropped from membership.

—on the basis of I Corinthians 11 all women were expected to wear hats to church.

—people must have had greater stamina, or else in the days before TV, radio, Nintendo, and movies going to church was thought of as more of a diversion. Sermons alone would regularly be 45 minutes or longer, and often a second service or Christian doctrine classes would begin after lunch.

—the Lutheran Hymnal is generally considered an oddity because of the number of hymns with 10-12 verses. But some of the German originals were far longer still, and all the verses would be sung. [Paul Gerhardt’s originals had 15, 20-30 verses.]

—it used to be that the choir always sang from the balcony. Now it is more and more common to see the choir and children’s choirs singing from the chancel. Vocal solos used to be a rarity except for weddings or funerals. They seem to be appearing more often lately in Sunday morning services.

—the Lutheran Hymnal itself was once brand new and not immediately received with joy by all congregations. There are stories that some churches held on to their 1916 Book of Worship into the 1960’s. [Nebraska and Dakotas]

—there seemed at one time to be a WELS rule that the only musical instrument suitable for public worship was the organ. Many churches now are finding joy in the enrichment that other instruments bring: handbells, brass, flute and oboe, piano, guitar, synthesizer, drums and other percussion instruments, and even pre-recorded taped backup.

—our synod has some strong roots in pietism and semi-Lutheran mission societies in Germany. Banners and clerical vestments other than a black Geneva gown were frowned on or forbidden outright; the theory, I guess, is that they were too Catholic or showy. The first Sunday that I wore an off-white alb, an elderly member sneered at me plenty loud, “Gaudy, gaudy, gaudy” Banners and non-black vestments are now much more common.

—the practice of Holy Communion has changed considerably. Personal announcement to the pastor beforehand used to be common, even mandatory. Sometimes a special confessional service of preparation was held on the Saturday evening beforehand to prepare people properly for receiving Communion the next day. Some church services dismissed all attenders who would not be communing that day, and the Communion liturgy would continue with the faithful “remnant”. Altars in older churches were set forward of the wall; the communicants would receive the host on one side of the rail, walk behind the altar (usually expected to deposit some money in a “Klingelboutel” back there), and then receive the cup from the right side of the rail.

—the granddaddy of all traumatic changes, of course, was the transition from German into English. In the year that the Lutheran Hymnal was issued, 1941, the Southeastern Wisconsin District convention’s minutes and reports were published in German. Many people were certain that Lutheran doctrinal integrity could not be retained in English and that God far preferred to be worshiped in German.

From your own memory, or from anecdotes from your parents and grandparents, you could surely add to this list of outward forms and styles in our worship life that have changed over the years. I doubt whether we would want to go back to any of the former ways, but each change away from the practices listed above encountered some initial resistance.

II. THE PRESENT

In the years since TLH was issued, American society has changed profoundly. If we think that our congregations should resist these changes stoutly, we are partly right. Some “new things” in our society are just Satan’s poison and need to be resisted, such as the legitimization of homosexuality, toleration of abortion, the increase in violence and in the toleration of violence and numbness to violence, easy divorce, acceptance of and glorification of adultery, loss of confidence in marriage, the loudest of the demands of the feminist agenda, etc.

In my view, however, there are many other changes in our society that should lead us to think about the way in which we conduct our Sunday morning hour with God and his people. In the days when the WELS was an immigrant group, with growth assured from the steady arrival of more boats from Central Europe, it was much easier to ignore the “Yankee” society around it. But now that the boats have stopped and the babies have slowed down, our synod is becoming much more outreach-oriented; we are paying more attention than ever before to people’s needs and expectations. We are becoming more Americanized, less oriented toward Europe and its forms and culture. We are organizing and planning how to penetrate neighborhoods, not just waiting to see who shows up after the bells ring.

Probably the littler your congregation, the more willing you will be to adapt yourself to others; the larger and more secure your congregation, the less pressure you will feel. Older congregations tend to be less likely to change and newer congregations have less momentum for the status quo. Mission churches tend to be more flexible than well-established churches. The most adaptive groups of all are the exploratory missions, where most of their contacts have no prior experience at all with the WELS, and where most aspects of church life and worship will have to be built up by consensus.

Adaptive thinking is not retreat; it is, in fact, quite biblical. St. Paul could discuss religious philosophy in Greek with Greek thinkers in Athens but discuss Christ’s fulfillment of the OT ceremonial law with Jews in Aramaic. He was well-read in both Greek literature and the OT. In one context he had his helper Timothy circumcised; in another he decided that his helper Titus should not. To the Corinthians he wrote about developing an adaptive attitude:

“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that I might by all possible means save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

The following is a list of some social trends in American cities which are already affecting our public worship and should figure in our thinking and planning for the 21st century. I think we should view these trends as opportunities for outreach rather than as opportunities for moaning and yearning for the 1950’s.

1. Choice. Americans have come to expect a variety of choices in life: in schools, cars, TV shows, radio channels, live music, restaurant entrees, and on and on. To stay alive supermarkets have had to increase the average number of items offered from 7,000 to over 20,000. The hours of most businesses have expanded to attract increasingly more selective shoppers. The church that is trying to penetrate its community and draw people does well to offer choices.

The ramifications? The uniformity that we have enjoyed in WELS worship will fade somewhat as congregations develop different worship “personalities.” There won’t be such a pervasive notion of “the WELS way,” “one size fits all”. No more “Come to the McWELS.”

Perhaps churches of the 21st century will offer different styles of worship in different services. Perhaps we will see some “high church” WELS worship with chanting, alb and stole, processions with processional cross, and acolytes. Perhaps we will see some “low church” WELS worship with a choir singing Gospel music backed by electronic instruments and drums, with clapping, “Amens”, and testimonies. Perhaps we will see churches near universities and with possibilities for increased campus ministry having Sunday evening worship where the principal instrument is the guitar rather than the organ, and where most of the music used will have originated within the last 20 years. Perhaps this will mean that different Sundays of the month will utilize different liturgies. Perhaps this will mean offering four Bible studies a week instead of one. Perhaps it means having four choirs instead of just “the choir”.

2. Minorities. The high schools in the MPS system currently are 55% black, 35% white, and 10% Hispanic, Indian, and Asian. What does that say about the population of Milwaukee in 2010? What about Kenosha and Racine? Chicago (and its suburbs)? Even...Waukesha?

As our congregations have opportunities to become multi-cultural, it shows respect to other cultures to draw worship materials from other cultures. The funny (and beautiful) thing is, the white members of multi-cultural churches don’t feel cheated by that but rather enriched.

3. Community. In the Immigrant days, the neighborhoods from which our churches drew members were homogeneous. Many, perhaps most members walked to church. Mostly that has changed. Most of the members of my church have to drive or take the bus to church. That means that members tend not to see each other around the community as they shop or whatever. They have much less in common. It is not as easy to get people to come to midweek activities because of distance.

4. Exploratories and small missions. We are planting churches these days with much smaller or even nonexistent nucleuses. Many of these small groups prize informality and closeness, and would perceive the p.5/15 style of liturgy as being impersonal and too formal.

5. Music revolution. Popular music has gone through several radical transformations. Composers of church music also are producing hymns and songs that sound different from chorales, anthems, and metrical psalms. Let us not be afraid of new things, but rather master and use what is good and beautiful and helpful. After all, even Johann Sebastian’s music was once considered disturbing and unchurchlike.

6. Language revolution. At the beginning of the past decade the King James Version of the Bible still reigned supreme in the WELS. Who could have guessed that over 90% of WELS churches would now use the NIV for teaching, Scripture readings, and preaching? The implications for our worship life are immense—if the language of our worship is to be in modern English, then the liturgies and (most) hymns should be in modern English. There is also a shift to language that is more direct and less flowery (no more vouchsafes, fainting, languishing, sultry globes, guerdons, ineffable sweetness, mental rays, and purple dights.)

7. Warmth. Urban life, as it packs people together, does not bring people together. Actually, urban life alienates and separates. People withdraw into themselves as protection against the city’s noise and threats. People’s craving for personal relationships is why TV preachers will never replace Christian meetings. The point—even the most formal liturgy must project personal warmth. Worship services that are perceived as being remote and impersonal will discourage the person-to-person bonding that makes churches and worship flourish.

In addition, although this is not strictly a worship issue, the time before and after the service is where a great deal of mission work goes on. New buildings almost always feature a much larger narthex than those built 100 years ago. Coffee hours and greeters abound.

8. Decline of singing. Veteran school teachers report that it gets harder every year to train children to sing—to hear and match pitches correctly. Just as the barrage of professional athletics on TV can induce passivity and couch vegetation, so the easy availability of music from MTV, stereos, boom boxes, and walkmans can induce musical passivity. In the old days, if you wanted to hear music, there was more incentive to learn how to make it yourself. Also, almost all directors of programs of pipe organ instruction in the Midwest complain loudly that they are near folding from lack of students.

9. Feminization. For various reasons, the male/female ratio in our churches is following national church averages. If your church is anything like mine it's much easier to get women to do things around church, especially sing in the choir. The typical WELS church choir: 8 sopranos, 15 altos, 1 male tenor, 2 female tenors, 3 basses, right? Churches are really struggling to be able to sing 4-part music (SATB), and it's no coincidence that much choral music is appearing now written for three parts (SAB).

10. Funerals. A major trend in the city is for funerals to be held in the evening, at the funeral home, instead of during the daytime in the church. Implications: since the funeral homes have no hymnals and usually only cheesy, muffled organs, congregational participation tends not to be very satisfying, and so the pastors end up working out a totally spoken service where they do it all. There may be a solo. Do we have to resign ourselves to congregational nonparticipation at funerals?

11. More adult confirmands. 15 years ago our district had 1,450 8th grade confirmations and 561 adult confirmations. Last year we had only 1,045 youth but 846 adult confirmations.

Implications: In our district we have fewer new members coming in via confirmation, and those that do increasingly will come to us from outside the WELS. In the outlying districts, the number of adult confirmations exceeds the number of youth confirmations. We should make a point of including worship training especially in our confirmation instruction, teaching the meaning of our forms and helping people to appreciate our traditions. For that matter, we are doing at best a mediocre job of teaching worship in our day schools and Sunday schools.

12. Sophistication. The TV generation is less tolerant of boring (even if true and orthodox) preaching, mechanically recited liturgy, and sloppy musicianship.

13. Informality. Have you noticed how informally people dress these days? I was in a very nice restaurant last week in my best suit and best silk tie, and one fellow at the next table had a bowling shirt and his friend had blue jeans. Some people don't seem to want to "dress up" for church, either.

I am not too interested in what people wear to church, but the point in all this seems to me to be that people don't like stiff, formal, remote, and impersonal services. At WELS choir concerts it is finally permitted to clap at the end. Is it really so bad to smile in church? To clap? To laugh? Is high seriousness the only emotion permitted in the WELS?

A related matter involves human emotion. Central European culture in general and conservative Lutheran traditions in particular almost forbid public display of emotion. Perhaps the thought is that there is strength in stoicism. Certainly orthodox Lutherans have found much to criticize in the emotional excesses of the sawdust trail revivals. But the Christian's response to the Gospel is not only intellectual; it is emotional, too. God's Law and Gospel hit the head plenty hard, but they hit the heart, too, and it should be no sin to show it.

When was the last time you saw a WELS preacher let go? look angry? delighted? afraid? furious? relieved? amused? How often do WELS preachers see anything in the faces of their hearers other than the usual frozen, blank mask? Wouldn't it be something if people actually looked cut to the heart as the knife of God's Law bit in, or looked relieved and delighted as the love of God radiated from the pulpit?

14. Decline of public religion. There used to be a sort of Christian religious consensus in the U.S., which shows up even today in the religious slogans on our money and pledge of allegiance. It didn't use to be, but now is, acceptable civic behavior to skip church, reject biblical morality, deny accountability to one's maker, and so forth. This means that our adult confirmands have even farther to go to catch up and feel comfortable.

15. Work. Is it my imagination, or do half the WELS members in this district have to work on Sunday mornings? Most larger congregations have already begun to offer Thursday, Saturday, or Monday evening services. (Choice again).

III. THE FUTURE

As we make our plans for what we'd like our church life to look like in the 21st century, here are a few random thoughts to wrap things up.

First, the new office of district worship coordinator has some real promise. Workshops for musicians and pastors are valuable ways to share ideas, help each other to adapt and change and find materials and resources. The worship newsletter and the synodically issued "Focus on Worship" are valuable and important forums.

Second, the need for competent keyboard musicians is acute and the shortage will get much worse. The time is now for our congregations to promote piano and organ instruction in whatever way they can.

Third, our schools and Sunday schools could use help in developing a short, graded, annually presented worship curriculum.

Fourth, your help is needed to ease the introduction of the new hymnal. It is absolutely inevitable that the new hymnal will completely replace TLH in time, but it won't be introduced without leadership. That's you. I promise you, though, that it will be an exciting and interesting book with all the treasures of the Lutheran Hymnal and yet with enough new material to keep you busy for a decade digesting and using it.

Fifth, many of you will participate in projects to renovate or build your worship space in the next decade. Please be aware of the importance of acoustics to worship. In his book on urban mission, Roger S. Greenway argues strongly that the architectural style most appropriate for Christian churches of the future is not the grand Gothic of the past, but rather the American "living room", perhaps best exemplified by the "parlors" in funeral homes. Well, heavy carpeting over all floor areas and low ceilings with lots of drapes might induce feelings of intimacy and make people feel "comfortable", but they will deaden sound. Would you rather sing in the shower or in a closet full of winter coats? Do you know why? Hard plaster or wood reflective surfaces and the highest ceilings as you can afford will make singing ring out, encourage individual singers to project instead of rumble, and greatly enhance whatever instrumental music you may use. Please don't put carpeting under the pews or around the organ.

My most impassioned plea is saved for last. The sermon is probably considered by most worshipers to be the most critical and important feature of our worship life. We depend on it for inspiration, wisdom, insights into the Word, strength, and applications for daily living. In the

past, the model for a good sermon was considered to be classical oratory: flowery language, elaborate, lots of big words, formal, somewhat impersonal, complex, and restrained, half-read from a manuscript.

May I suggest that the kind of preaching needed for the nineties and beyond is somewhat different: personal, intense, eye-to-eye, well-researched and yet down-to-earth, poured out from the heart, with the smell of spontaneity, clearly outlined, simple, logical, with real applications to real life, talking and thinking out loud with your friends rather than orating at an audience, using all the storyteller's arts, even humor, radiating the joy of being a member of the royal family of Jesus Christ.

Soli Deo gloria—Gott allein sol Ehr—to God alone the glory!