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Series: **Worship Workbench**
Issue: **Essay 115 + May, 2007**

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GREENING CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Delegates to the biennial National Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada in June of this year will find themselves facing action on a package of proposals to “green” the church at every level.

The use of that noun as a verb has gained currency in recent months, as more and more people and institutions of our common life have become aware of the need to be sensitive to environmental concerns. It’s a matter of urgent response to the crisis of global climate change, but it’s also more than that. It pertains to simple Christian stewardship. How may Christians make a difference in supporting the ongoing health of our planet?



Because worship is so central to the life of every Christian community, I have been asked to address the matter from the perspective of liturgy. How may congregations begin to “green” their own gatherings for worship every week?

So I begin, with this posting, a series on the “greening” of Christian worship.

1. It’s About *Modelling* the “Kingdom of God”!

The first and most basic proposal I’d make about the relationship between worship and environmental responsibility would be this: Be aware that *in worship, we’re modelling the breaking in of the “Kingdom of God.”*

What Christian congregations do when they gather for worship, according to a beloved teacher of mine, is “play-act” at the Reign of Christ. That assertion is not meant to be flippant or childish. It’s meant to be deadly serious. In perhaps more decorous terms: In worship we are engaged in nothing less than enacting, modelling, re-presenting, a

vision of the fulness of God's *shalom*. It's a fulness yet-to-come. But it's also a fulness we can claim today. This conviction will have implications for everything we say and do in worship. And it's the foundation for everything that follows.

2. It's About Weekly Prayers for our Environment

Note, for instance, the fuller rubric at the Prayers of Intercession in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 105. Notice that—for the first time, to our shame—“*the well-being of creation*” is listed among our prayer concerns, as second on that list of priorities. That prayer suggestion should be heeded every Sunday among us.

Nothing is more dispiriting than to attend Sunday worship in a congregation whose Prayers of Intercession are devoted exclusively to members' personal and individualistic needs and desires, innocent of, or heedless of, those grand and generous petitions suggested in the rubrics here. Every Sunday our prayers ought to focus, not simply on personal concerns, but also on those wider realities beyond our parish. Including now, especially, our wounded world. We're in mission *for others*, right?

That said, it is often all too easy to recall the universal but forget the local. So for example, I'd question the environmental seriousness of any Christian congregation that did not have some plan or program for serving its own neighbourhood. Parishes simply must develop an awareness of the needs and challenges on their own turf, of the community that surrounds their own church property.

An example: Is the groundwater in your neighbourhood being compromised by toxic waste from a nearby industry? By salt from your county's program of winter road maintenance? Is it time then to mobilize with others to fight city hall? To educate — or to oppose — local corporate or business interests?

The important principle: Sensitivity to the local environment, as well as to universal realities, should show itself in your assembly's worship. Concerns in congregational prayer and piety for the welfare of the Church overseas or in foreign mission fields can sound pretty hollow if that same assembly neglects its own backyard.

Is concern for the global environment, *and* its local issues and challenges, a regular part of your congregation's Intercessions each week? It will take skilful and sensitive discernment to incorporate such concern in a congregation's weekly public prayer. But it can be done. Only you can elaborate this principle in your own setting and situation.

3. It's About Welcoming Everyone!

Is your congregation's worship *welcoming to all*? That's the next principle I'd advance in “greening” your church's worship. We are stewards of all of God's creation, our neighbours included! The intention of the Christian congregation's embrace in worship is universal, inclusive, “catholic.” Ultimately — if not yet actually in every parish — that

world-wide welcome is an ecological conviction. Nobody, nowhere, no thing is outside, beyond our welcome. Or God's!

3. A. Is your worship space wheel-chair accessible? That's more and more a non-negotiable in the design or re-modelling of church buildings. Congregations planning to build or to re-configure their worship spaces simply must pay attention to the signals we send when our buildings feature access only by climbing steps.

If your space is simply not accessible to the handicapped, can some creative action be taken to assure them nevertheless that they're welcome? Even if it's only a matter of providing some sturdy backs and arms for lifting, it's at least a signal that you care.

3. B. Or language. I'm delighted that our new worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, has tried mightily to make the language of liturgies and hymns as inclusive as possible. It's not simply any longer the sensitivities of feminists we're trying to appease. It's also the formation of our own children. Do we really want to re-enforce in our kids a theologically-indefensible patriarchalism? Sensitivity to the formative power of language ought to be a given among Churches that revere the Word.

3. C. Do gays feel welcome in your weekly parish worship? Persons of colour? Children? Young people? The poor? The blind? The illiterate? These are sometimes contentious issues among and within Christian congregations today. Yet our prayers display our public piety as Christians. Is every individual truly welcomed into our prayers? Sincerely welcomed, as participant?

3. D. Does the assembly send out Eucharistic Bread and Cup to its own sick and shut-in members at the conclusion of worship, so as to include them also in its celebrations every week? (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* anticipates this possibility: "Communion ministers may be sent to take the sacrament to those who are absent.") Among other benefits to such a program, it might relieve the peoples' ordained leaders from the burdens of single-handedly, and exhaustingly, peddling the Communion to the sick and shut-in once or twice a year, at Christmas and Easter.

Our public prayers model the Day of God's *Shalom*. Or not. I yearn for the time when our assemblies each week are altogether inclusive, lacking no portion of the entire human population. "Almighty God," we pray on Ash Wednesday, "you hate nothing you have made..." That's a conviction with ecological consequence.

4. It's About Word and Sacrament

Next: The Holy Communion itself should be reclaimed among us as our standard weekly worship. Only think of the ecological implications of holding Bread and Cup central in our celebrations. We're testifying, to ourselves and to all who witness, that God's concern for our world extends to its molecules.

Christian worship is not just a head trip. It's not simply verbalizings, not even when those verbalizings are inspired or inspiring. Our worship — our God! — engages all the senses, even taste. You chew. You swallow. You eat. You drink. You digest. You metabolize. Sacramental worship holds together the worlds of the Spirit and of the flesh, the Infinite and the finite, the Holy and the common. In sacramental worship, the Creator engages and honours the atoms, the molecules, the stuff of our created world.

Sacraments are impossible without stuff: bread, wine, water. In sacraments, God receives these atoms into a holy embrace, and returns them, to feed and cleanse and make whole all that these atoms signify: nothing less than a re-made world. A service of worship with word alone will never tell us the fullest truth about God.

In the epigram of a respected teacher, the fullest truth about God is not one word but two: Word *and* Sacraments. In "Luther-speak", the Means of Grace.

It's heartening, then, to see a revival in almost all our churches of the centrality of Word-and-Sacrament on Sunday. In the parish of my own youth, Holy Communion was celebrated four times a year. In the parish I now attend, it's every Sunday. And Holy Communion, through it all, has become more precious, more important, more significant. Not less.

I think most people in my parish would say the same.

5. It's About *Real Bread and Wine*

For the reasons already implied, therefore, it's also time to reclaim *real baker's bread and real alcohol-bearing wine in our Eucharist*, and forsake forever those fish-food wafers, and that lifeless (because pasturized) grape juice. (Would *you* serve either to guests at a party in your home?) A real loaf — pita, for example — and real wine belong on your Table in church, as on the table in your dining room.

Those so-called sacramental wafers are simply not recognizable as real bread. The single advantage of wafers has been their ease of storage and handling. But because they are so unlike the bread anyone would actually eat —so *un-real*— they pose a significant problem in Christian worship. Wafers deny what they are meant to signify: a real world caught up into the service —into the delight!— of the Ultimate.

A similar argument could be made about the suitability of grape juice in lieu of wine at Communion. Can you imagine, as host at a party, inviting guests to come and sample this bottle of grape juice you've been specially saving for the occasion? And the ugly fact of wine's potency is precisely part of its necessity in worship.

Could members be encouraged to bake real homemade bread each week for sacramental use? To provide real homemade wine? Surely your congregation includes people who could be brought to see these as opportunities for personal gestures of

eucharistia —thanksgiving.

6. It's About *Blessing* our World and All That's in it...

There's an old tradition in our Western Christian story that's sought to find a way to give thanks yearly for our splendid Creation: Blessing Fields, blessing seas, blessing seeds, blessing soils, blessing the season for planting, blessing the harvest, blessing animals. Congregations could dust off these old rites and use them, at least once a year. Hence, three suggestions from my own experience :

6. A. The Second Sunday of Easter (*Quasi Modo Geniti* in the old calendars) was anciently associated with a marvelous gesture of welcome for the newly-baptized, by offering them, at the Communion, a cup of milk laced with honey, along with the Bread and Wine. Those baptized the previous Sunday (Easter) were understood as being referenced in *1 Peter 2:2*: "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word..." (In Latin: *Quasi Modo Geniti...*)

How about resurrecting that tradition where you live? And expanding it into a kind of buffet *agape* meal, offering, to all who commune, first the Loaf, then the chalice with Wine, then a cup with milk and honey, then trays of "finger foods": Cubes of various cheeses, roasted and salted nuts, pieces of dried apricots and peaches and pears and raisins, perhaps even broccoli florets, sliced carrots and celery with dip. Marvelous! A verse from a psalm could serve as spoken formula at the distribution of these last: "Taste and see that God is good..." (See [Essay 90](#) in this series.)

Such a rite would require careful preparation, employing a team of Servers to offer these extra foods at the Table, along with the usual Ministers of Bread and Cup. But it would surely become a memorable occasion, and perhaps a yearly tradition. And it would give honour to our world, and celebrate its plenitude.

6. B. The Fifth Sunday of Easter, *Rogate*, has evolved in the Western Church as a traditional date for an annual Blessing of the Fields (*Rogate*: Latin for "pray..."). Recall that blessings among Christians are not to be understood as magic incantations, but simply as public prayers of thanks to God for whatever is God-pleasing. And because they are public prayers offered aloud, Blessings also have the character of proclamation.

A brief rite of Blessing of the Fields might follow at the conclusion of the weekly Eucharist, and might rightly include a festive procession with cross and banners to a nearby community garden, park, field, or lakeside. Lacking easy access to these, you might process to a nearby abandoned vacant lot, or to the site of a local industry notorious for its polluting. Recall that any liturgical procession is at the same time a kind of protest march. Christians owe loyalties to the *Shalom* of God alone, and not to family, race, or nation.



Your parish's Rite of Blessings should extend to seeds, seas, and soils. Three children from the assembly might be enlisted to carry seeds, water, and soil in bowls, and stand before the leader at the appropriate time. Prayers and readings and a sung congregational psalm comprise the entire brief Rite: Five or ten minutes, max.

6. C. And Saint Francis' Day, October 4, has traditionally been set aside in some Christian congregations as a day for the Blessing of Animals. Such a Rite carries its own constraints, as I'm sure you can appreciate. I won't address them here. My sister, then a parish pastor in a horsey community in Pennsylvania where the local Hunt Club actually chased a fox on horseback with hounds, was asked one year to officiate at their annual Blessing of the Hounds. She said, yes, she'd be willing, but only if she could also bless the fox! They acquiesced! Hah!

There's more to come:

- 7. It's About *Resisting* the Temptations of Consumerism**
- 8. It's About the Eucharist's Call to *Justice***
- 9. It's About *Hospitality* that Extends Beyond Worship**
- 10. It's About *Reducing* Our Dependence on Print**
- 11. Its About Stewardship *Around* Worship**

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Worship Workbench offers practical teaching about Christian worship and the preparation of liturgy from retired ELCIC pastor and liturgy professor, Paul F. Bosch, CWA. The entire series of Worship Workbench essays is available on the ELCIC + Worship Workbench page at **Lift Up Your Hearts** www.worship.ca.

See also Fred Ludolph's essay "Grain of Life and Grape of Love: Worship Which Inspires Thanksgiving and Attention to Stewardship" in **The Road Where Faith Is Found**, a series of pastoral essays designed to support the reception and exploration of Evangelical Lutheran Worship in the context of a church In Mission for Others. The entire series of Road Where Faith Is Found essays is available on the ELCIC + Worship Matters page at **Lift Up Your Hearts**.