

on personal needs, people will imitate that and pray the same way in their private prayer. Sitting at God's right hand, Christ intercedes for the world; we should participate in the prayer of Christ and pray for the suffering world. Having compassion for others delivers us from our own self-centeredness.

What are some of the concerns which appear regularly in your church prayers, including those concerning the larger world? What prayer concerns are missing?

Liturgy in Chinese means "the way we act in daily life." Christ-centered liturgy is not what we perform for one hour on Sunday; it is our whole life and encompasses all our actions. When Christians live a Christ-centered life in their daily lives, Sunday worship becomes the climax, the apex of their lives. When Christ-centered Christians come together as the Body of Christ in worship, in a Christ-centered space, using a Christ-centered liturgy, with the help of the Holy Spirit they can truly find satisfaction and peace to ease their empty and restless hearts.

How would you describe the Christ-centered worship? How is it expressed and realized in your own church and context?

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“Thinking it over...”

Issue #6

This is the sixth in an occasional pamphlet series of theological reflections on timely challenges facing churches of the Lutheran communion. It is produced by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies, but does not represent official positions of the Lutheran World Federation. You are encouraged to duplicate, translate and use this in local settings. To subscribe to this series, please contact Ursula Liesch at Liesch@lutheranworld.org

MAY 2004

RENEWING WORSHIP LIFE: SOME PERSPECTIVES FROM HONG KONG

Riding a bus to and from work and school can provide a few restful moments during which one can look out of the window and enjoy the calm while meditating and reflecting on one's daily life. But when commercial TV is installed on every bus and ferryboat, one's personal space of silence and tranquility is being invaded. Loud music is being played constantly, the heavy rock beat stirring up one's restful heart. Sexy singers with their cheap sentimentality fill our minds with unnecessary desire, tempting us to consume more and more. During the news broadcast, one finds oneself numb toward the starving in the Third World, wars, terrorist attacks, etc. It all seems too far away, too remote. We see these images so often that we no longer feel compassion and sympathy for the victims.

This is the reality of Hong Kong: people are bombarded with cheap music and commercialism. Every day, new commercials and new songs stimulate our senses. Anything old or traditional is considered out of fashion, not up-to-date.

In light of the strong influence of popular culture, how does the church respond to people's needs and bring them closer to God? These are questions church leaders always ask themselves and to which the answer probably is worship. Worship can help the church to bring the restless closer to God. However, when we attend church, we often find people yawning during worship. "Boring" and "outdated" are words we hear constantly, especially from young people. Worship "should" offer a space so God's people can encounter God, so that they can rest and find strength as well as satisfaction. Our liturgy does not seem to offer respite to people who are influenced by this over-stimulated world.

How is the liturgy experienced in your own church? Is it relevant and inviting? Can you relate to the experience of people in Hong Kong?

In the Lutheran community in Hong Kong, there are two different approaches to liturgical renewal. One group is trying very hard to make the historic liturgy relevant to the people and to make God the center of worship. The other group consists of people who seek other alternatives. To them “worship and praise” seem to be a good choice; people like it, it is easy to learn and therefore attracts new people. But before discarding the Lutheran tradition, we should relearn it and gain a deeper understanding. Instead of saying that Lutheran liturgy is boring, we should ask, How can we bring it more to life?

Liturgy should be an experience that reflects and connects with our life here and now; it should satisfy people’s needs and desires, so that they can truly participate in the liturgy and find goodness, and so ease their restless and empty hearts. A God-centered liturgy can really bring the fullness of God’s presence to the people who participate in it. Fact of the matter is that for a number of reasons the liturgy in our churches does not function well. One reason for this may be the poor performance of those who perform in the liturgy, e.g., liturgist, reader etc. This means that our liturgy is not able to express and reveal its true spirit which is Word-centered, God-centered, and Jesus-centered. It is hardly surprising that people think it is boring and outdated. Nowadays they turn to a “worship and praise” style of worship to find satisfaction. How can our liturgy come to reveal itself fully as what it should be in order to make modern Hong Kong people find true peace?

We need to rethink and renew our liturgy, starting with the worship space. Some of our churches are located in commercial high-rises, occupying only a small unit. The church is usually cramped; a huge pulpit and altar are pushed against the wall. The congregational space is occupied by brightly-colored folding chairs. The baptismal font is sometimes hidden from view, and when one enters this space, one never feels that this is a space of holiness, a space where one can encounter God.

To renew the worship space, the church should invite the pastor, liturgist, interior designer and artistic lay persons to work together. Their work must reflect that this space is a space of worship and prayer where God is present through Word and sacraments. It should also reflect the artistic taste and cultural elements of the body of Christians who assemble here around Jesus their Lord.

How does the worship space of your own church express God’s presence in Word and sacrament?

The pulpit is where God’s Word is proclaimed. It is where God’s Word is made flesh and lives among us. The pulpit should reflect this truth. Preaching the Word of God is not lecturing, or merely sharing. Instead, preaching invites participation and response to God’s love. The pulpit can be made with simple and flowing lines, to express God’s invitation to us; it should be approachable. It should not be a huge wooden box that separates the assembly of God from the preacher.

When Chinese people gather to eat, they like to sit around a table. The Eucharist is a thanksgiving meal where Christians come together and share the Lord’s family feast. Therefore, the table should be made like a table, not like a tomb-like altar. The table at which the family of Christ celebrates the sacramental meal together should preferably be a round one, since in Chinese culture roundness symbolizes unity and completeness.

About the baptismal font: baptism signifies death and resurrection with Christ. Some congregations in the West take this meaning seriously. They build the font in the shape of the cross, or an octagon, with water deep enough for the immersion of adults and for infant baptism. Because of limited space in Hong Kong, it is difficult to have a pool in the church; but a font with clear water should be placed at the entrance of the worship area to remind us that it is through baptism that we have died with our Lord and we are united with him in resurrection. Water in Chinese culture also signifies abundance and wealth. Touching the water every time we enter the church can also help us to be connected with our Lord, whose abundant love and grace are sufficient for us.

Where are children and adults baptized in your own church? How does this place of baptism reflect the meaning of this sacrament?

God is good, God is truth, God is beauty. Does our liturgical environment reflect this? If our church just looks like a community hall, how can people distinguish the holy from the profane? One should not ignore the worship space, for it cultivates our relationship with the divine. Untidy and ugly spaces show disrespect for the worshippers, and do not help them to participate in the liturgy. A simple, beautiful, holy space encourages and demands reverence and love for God whom we worship.

Liturgy is not only influenced by the liturgical space, but also by the people who serve in the liturgy. Liturgists should lead people to God. They should live a liturgical life, encountering God first before leading the congregation to encounter God. They should worship God in spirit and truth before they can lead people to worship God in spirit and truth. No matter how familiar they are with the liturgy they should prepare the liturgy well, each time treating it as a fresh and new experience. If a reader in the worship service only prepares the reading of the biblical passage five minutes before the service, he or she cannot really have a deep understanding of the Word of God. The reader has to live, pray and meditate on the Word in order to speak on behalf of God, or be able to let the Holy Spirit speak through him or her. Extensive training should be given to specially chosen Scripture readers to cultivate their spiritual life, instead of following the usual practice by which every member of the church has a chance to read the Scriptures in the worship service. A reader should have a profound commitment to his or her service.

The “worship and praise” groups very often emphasize individual feelings. This focus on personal feelings leads to self-centered prayer. The prayer of the church, the intercessions, are quite often centered on personal needs and those of the congregation. The beauty of liturgy is to help us focus not only on ourselves but also on God. How we pray in the church influences the way we pray in our daily lives. If the church prayer only focuses