

*Worship for the
Whole People of God*

SECOND EDITION

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With Contributed Appendix from David Gambrell

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Introduction

From the very beginning, Christian worship has been diverse. Over the centuries, Christians have worshiped God through their local cultural expressions, among them language, music, architecture, art, and the more subtle but important expressions that Anscar Chupungco, the groundbreaking scholar of liturgical enculturation, calls “the genius of a people.”¹ At times, Christian worship has created distance from culture (for example, by using a language the people don’t speak daily); at times, Christian worship may almost collapse into culture (for example, by emphasizing secular holidays more than Christ-centered celebrations). Still, if only through using subtly acculturated rhythms to sing the same song, worship always reflects the local culture.

Worship also reflects denominational and historical differences. Take the sacrament of the Table, for example. While some denominations celebrate Communion each Sunday, others celebrate once a month, once a quarter, or even once a year. In addition, Christian understandings of how Christ is present in the meal differ. Even the names we use are diverse: Eucharist, Holy Communion, Lord’s Supper, Divine Liturgy, the Mass. At times, where there is local freedom, there may be more diversity *within* a denomination than there are distinct differences *between* denominations.

We need not lament these differences, but rather we can appreciate how Christians have continued to worship in ways that help them to live faithfully within their cultural contexts and to communicate the gospel to others. We can, indeed, celebrate the way the gospel has been preached, sung, and prayed in as many tongues and rhythms as there are peoples around the world, calling forth a rich array of gifts to bring to God and to the world.

The goal in this volume is not to advise a single pattern of worship but to support good pastoral and congregational reflection on worship. No doubt my biases will be more evident to readers than to myself; nor would I argue that all liturgical practices are equally good. My hope is to give lay and clergy leaders enough basic historical, theological,

and pastoral material—and enough good questions—to reflect on and renew their worship practices.

EXPERIENCES THAT LED TO THIS BOOK

For almost twenty-six years, before I retired in 2016, I taught a foundational worship course once or twice a year. I have the greatest respect for worship textbooks already published. James F. White's *Introduction to Christian Worship* is comprehensive in its exploration of Christian liturgy, with strong historical research and encyclopedic knowledge of the classical Western worship traditions.² Susan White's *Foundations of Christian Worship* is particularly articulate and contemporary in its theology.³ Both address important issues in liturgical studies. *Understanding, Preparing for, and Practicing Christian Worship*, written by Franklin Segler and revised by Randall Bradley, is helpful in its practical advice about worship and its provision of primary source materials.⁴ I used one of these three textbooks each time I taught the course, together with *African American Christian Worship* by Melva Costen (a concise yet informative exploration of African American traditions with excellent theological insights applicable to all traditions) or *Diverse Worship* by Pedrito Maynard-Reid (a helpful exploration of the role of culture in worship, especially in African American, Caribbean, and Hispanic traditions).⁵ I also assigned articles from the Korean and Hispanic traditions.⁶

Despite the great value of all these resources, I undertook this project first of all because my teaching situation meant that I was always struggling to find readings adequate to the great diversity of denominational and cultural backgrounds of my students. There were two options for the required worship class: United Methodist Worship, which a colleague taught, and Christian Public Worship, which I taught. Students who were not United Methodist were a large percentage of the students in Christian Public Worship. There were members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Korean Methodist Church, and other Methodist traditions, as well as my own denomination, the United Church of Christ; others were Baptist, Pentecostal, or Presbyterian. Almost always my classes represented a wonderful array of denominational, national, and cultural backgrounds. I could not explore all these traditions in as much detail as I would have liked, and since it is a United Methodist seminary I emphasized that tradition

more than others. Still, it was important to me to teach in a way that is relevant and applicable to all the students in my class, which meant stretching my understanding of theology and practice.

Given this experience, a primary goal of this book is to honor the diversity of Christian communities and their worship. As I have reflected over the years on teaching in a diverse environment, I have come to see that liturgical studies, a relatively new area of theological study, can be limited in its perspective. The liturgical renewal movement inspired by the work of Vatican II sits at the very center of the field, and it has brought many gifts to the churches that have embraced it. What a refreshing wind was blowing in the 1960s to encourage churches of many backgrounds to promote active participation of the laity and to celebrate sacraments with more energy and care as “vivid signs of the Spirit!”⁷ How helpful the Roman Lectionary and its Protestant adaptations have been in ensuring the churches would read and reflect on a rich treasury of Scripture, centered on the journey of Jesus from birth to death to resurrection! How wise it was to bring Word and Sacrament into better balance, so that preaching and the sacraments served together as the heart of Christian worship! The liturgical renewal movement has made a significant improvement in the worshipping life of countless churches around the world. Yet the very norm of fostering the full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful in worship, which is central to this movement, presses us toward a deeper embrace of cultural diversity in worship.

Traditions of continental Europe and the British Isles sometimes function in the field of liturgical studies as the norm and measure of Christian worship. Christians worshipping within the United States, much less in Asia, Africa, or Latin America, may not recognize the best of their traditions represented adequately (if at all) in the writings of liturgical scholars. This is not as simple as talking about Lenten processions in the Philippines or vivid storytelling in African American sermons, or even paying more attention to the social contexts in which the world’s people live. It is a paradigm shift (parallel to the post-colonial movement in Christian theology) that envisions diverse Christian communities standing side by side as people who worship God, without privileging one group over the other, like the great multitude envisioned in Revelation 7:9–10 “that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands,” crying out in a loud voice and saying, “Salvation belongs

to our God!” The European and white North American measure of what is adequate liturgy must be decentered, so that Christians of many backgrounds can learn from one another and the Spirit how to worship and to honor one another more deeply and fully.⁸ While this will be fully possible only as more liturgical scholars from a broader range of backgrounds take part in liturgical studies, I hope in this book to contribute in a small way to this shift toward a global understanding of the church and its worship.

The *Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture*, growing out of an international study group of the Lutheran World Federation at their meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1996, provides a framework that can contribute to this shift in paradigm:

Christian worship relates dynamically to culture in at least four ways. First, it is *transcultural*, the same substance for everyone everywhere, beyond culture. Second, it is *contextual*, varying according to the local situation (both nature and culture). Third, it is *counter-cultural*, challenging what is contrary to the Gospel in a given culture. Fourth, it is *cross-cultural*, making possible sharing between different local cultures.⁹

Two hundred years after the missionary movement toward world evangelism began, it is easy to identify how missionaries sometimes treated their contextual practices of dress, language, music, and worship as if they were transcultural, required for everyone everywhere. It is not as easy as it might seem for members of dominant groups to discern how a white Eurocentric norm continues to operate, assuming what is only contextual is transcultural. James W. Perkinson writes in *White Theology* that white supremacy tends to operate as “the hidden ground from which ‘talk’ takes off, in modern Eurocentric evaluations of reality and divinity. . . . We can mystify ourselves and others into imagining that white supremacy is ‘present’ and potent only when explicitly identified as such.”¹⁰ The task today is to discern how, in cross-cultural solidarity, to respect contextualized worship practices of Christians throughout the world, while at the same time seeking the transcultural presence of the living God and doing the countercultural work of seeking justice and peace in our own context.

A second main concern I bring to this book is for the practices of worship. I was drawn to the study of worship by my ten years as full-time pastor in Illinois and Wisconsin. (I also served as interim and supply pastor in a number of churches while I was working on my

ThD degree.) I had wonderful training about the theology, spirit, and purpose of worship at Chicago Theological Seminary by Christian education professor Ross Snyder, preaching professor Charles Bayer, and others, but I'm not sure that any professor even mentioned the word "funeral." It fell to retired pastor Warner Siebert, who was a member of the first church I served as solo pastor, to guide me in shaping my first funeral. His advice served me well, but finding myself in this situation caused me to think about how my seminary education could have been more helpful. I have a passion for the practical, a desire to prepare students to lead worship with care, integrating theological reflection with pastoral sensitivity, energy, and liturgical creativity, in a way that is appropriate to their contexts. Indeed, given the diversity of students I taught, it would not be appropriate to prescribe just one correct practice of any aspect of worship; it is necessary to foster the ability to integrate theology and practice in planning and leading worship. Thus I have desired in my classes and in this book to give more attention to the practice of worship than is often the case.

A third central concern I bring to this book motivates virtually every liturgical scholar: the desire to contribute to local church vitality and faithful Christian practice. Worship is at the center of the church's life and a life-changing encounter with God. Of course God takes no delight in our solemn assemblies (Amos 5:21–24) unless they lead to the work of justice, compassion, and holiness to which God calls the church in the world. Yet worship shapes Christian community and identity and draws the congregation into the story of God's love and care for the world. Spirit-filled worship empowers the church to be the church. Worship, then, is a key practice worthy of all the best reflection, practice, and openness to the Spirit the church and its leaders can muster.

Worship supports local church vitality when leaders seek to make worship respectful and meaningful to all who gather, whatever their gender or sexual orientation, whatever their age or ability, whatever their ethnic or national background. Respect is shown through words that do not demean or exclude and through varied means of participation, through seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching, and through listening and speaking, moving and remaining silent, singing and clapping. The spirit of a congregation who participates actively in worship, open to the Spirit of God, attracts new members and nurtures longtime members in ways deeper than style or musical taste. Worship is the work of the *laos*, the whole people of God. The title of this book,

Worship for the Whole People of God, points to this central truth: the goal of those who plan and lead worship should be to engage the full, wholehearted participation of the whole congregation.¹¹

A final concern of mine—which may seem paradoxical given what I have already said—is to speak passionately and forthrightly, since worship is so important in the life and renewal of the churches. I hope that when I advocate certain practices strongly (for example, frequent celebration of Communion) I won't seem to be demanding a uniformity that doesn't respect difference, but engaging conversations I find very important, while respecting people with other viewpoints and practices. I hope that this volume may serve (among other things) as a textbook on Christian worship, yet I want to avoid sounding distant and encyclopedic, but to communicate the excitement and value of worship well done, to the glory of God!

MY OWN LOCATION AND STORY

Perhaps my viewpoints will seem more understandable if I share something of my own background and story. My ancestors, primarily English and Scottish, as well as Cherokee, have had roots in the United States since at least the seventeenth century. In recent generations, on my father's side were Methodist and Pentecostal, and my mother's side, mostly Baptist Christians; both from Tennessee and deeply influenced by evangelical/Frontier Christianity, as I am. As for church membership, I was Methodist for sixteen years from my birth in 1947, then Presbyterian for ten years. In early 1974 I joined the United Church of Christ, and later that year I was ordained in that denomination, where I have continued since. I also served on the Disciples of Christ committee that produced the *Chalice Hymnal*. I have also worshiped with Episcopal churches in varied settings in Tennessee, Illinois, and St. Croix, Virgin Islands. And of course, I was so located among the United Methodists at my seminary that once, when singer Jim Strathdee asked a group who was *not* United Methodist, someone had to remind me to raise my hand.

I have been educated in Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Roman Catholic, and United Methodist institutions. These were excellent schools, each in its own way, but I can count on my fingers the number of assigned readings written by a woman or a person of color. I have done much reading beyond this and worshiped in diverse

contexts, yet I realize that my worldview is subconsciously shaped by the canon of literature (and other life experiences) to regard the Euro-Anglo-white traditions of worship as the “real” tradition of worship, with others being variations of lesser import. I suspect that many of us studying and teaching liturgy today have similar experiences, though few in the North American Academy of Liturgy, our scholarly guild, are as deeply rooted in evangelical traditions as I am. I hope that rising generations of liturgical scholars will be able to imagine the vast landscape of Christian worship more fully and clearly than I do. What I see is only a glimpse.

I am thankful that I have been able to sojourn and worship with Christians from so many backgrounds. These times of conversing and worshipping together have changed me and freed me to praise the living God more deeply and fully.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The first chapters of the book lay the foundation for our consideration of Christian worship by exploring the theology of worship in chapter 1 and the understanding of worship as the participation of the whole people of God in chapter 2. Chapter 3 explores the diversity of Christian worship traditions.

The practical considerations of preparing services of Christian worship follow in the next five chapters. Chapter 4 considers the nature and tasks of planning and leading worship, as well as the order in which worship proceeds. Chapter 5 explores the arts of worship. Chapter 6 treats the shaping of vivid words for worship, followed in chapter 7 by consideration of various forms of prayer in worship, from the greeting to the benediction. Chapter 8 treats the closely related topics of Scripture and the church year in preaching and worship.

The next group of chapters considers the sacraments and rites of the church. Chapter 9 explores the understanding of sacramentality and sacramental living. Chapter 10 addresses baptism and the related rites of baptismal affirmation, ordination, and commissioning. This is followed by reflection on the theology and practice of the Eucharist in chapter 11. Chapter 12 considers the theology and practice of conducting marriages and services of death and resurrection. Chapter 13 explores healing and reconciliation in Christian worship, oft-neglected areas of study.

The final chapter in the first edition followed developments in worship in the United States and beyond, and some basic norms for Christian worship that might apply across our many traditions. The second edition expands the final chapter and offers additional resources to support the use of this book, including discussion questions and learning activities, and a new appendix addressing online worship in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Psalm 84:1, 4 describes the gift of dwelling in God's presence and singing God's praise: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! . . . Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise." I count it a blessing to spend my life in studying, teaching, and leading Christian worship, as well as writing hymns and prayers for congregational worship. To study and teach about liturgy is also an awesome thing, because this work centers on the unimaginable love, creativity, dynamism, and holiness of God at work in the church, the body of Christ. May the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit shine through on every page, to the glory of the triune God!

1

Understanding Christian Worship

Theological Foundations

Worship is central in the biblical tradition. The First Commandment begins: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2–3); it goes on to make it clear that Israel should not worship anyone or anything but the living God who has freed them and given them a new way of life. The psalms call the faithful to worship: “Worship the LORD with gladness; come into God’s presence with singing” (Ps. 100:2 alt.). By the second chapter of the New Testament, the magi fall down to worship Jesus (Matt. 2:11 King James Version). Paul expands the concept of worship to speak of presenting of our whole bodies and selves “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1b). As the Bible draws to a close, the strains of the faithful worshipping God in song are still echoing in our souls (Rev. 4:10; 7:10). Surely worship is a central part of the vocation of Christians.

But what is worship, and why do we do what we do in worship? Considering these questions is important when a congregation (or denomination) discerns that it is time for change in its common worship, for example, to grow in Christian faith and life or to start a new worship service to reach out to new populations. At such times, statements such as “we’ve always done it that way” and “we never did it that way before” are not adequate. Reflecting on what a particular liturgical practice means to the congregation and exploring its sources in Scripture and

centuries of Christian tradition may be the starting point, if a question such as frequency of Communion or the style of music is stirring discussion in the church. Other congregations may have a broader sense that fundamental change is needed in their common worship as a whole. Whether the motivation is particular or broad, it is important to reflect on the meaning and purpose of worship. As we consider what liturgical practices mean to us—and to people and traditions different from our own—it is possible to see which changes bring out the central meanings even more fully. Reflection on meanings can help us follow inherited traditions in a more life-giving way. For example, learning more about the meaning of our denomination's prayer at the Communion table can help a pastor or priest say the words with more meaning, which in turn will help it become the prayer of the people's hearts and spirits as well.

As the Christian church gained its own identity distinct from the Jewish heritage from which it arose and spread across the ancient Mediterranean world and beyond, practices grew from the church's living faith. Groups did not first sit down and agree on a theology, then start shaping rituals and liturgies. Instead the rituals grew out of familiar practices (whether from Judaism or from other religious traditions from which Christians came), infused with new meanings as the gospel of Jesus Christ brought change in lives and communities. It is no coincidence that in the fourth century debates raged around doctrine, after the Roman emperor Constantine legalized the church and it attracted vast numbers of converts from other religions. Christian groups that had met in secret to avoid persecution were now able to communicate with one another. Christians from Spain, North Africa, Rome, and Syria discovered some common beliefs and practices, but also encountered differences that led to heated controversy. Historians debate whether Constantine converted to Christianity himself (since he continued to lead pagan rites and was baptized only on his deathbed), but it is clear that he was eager to use the growing faith to his political advantage.¹ He felt that helping Christians agree with one another would help to unify his fragile empire, so in 325 he called the Council of Nicaea to find common ground in their understanding of who Jesus Christ was. The classic Trinitarian theology and Christology that were articulated and agreed upon by the council (and the Council of Constantinople in 381) grew out of reflection on worship practices: If we pray to Christ as a God, and also believe in one God, then it follows that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit share in the divinity of the one

God. Arguments pro and con and articulations of doctrine referenced prayers and worship practices. Similarly, in the fifth century Augustine argued for original sin in answering the question, why do we baptize infants? This approach to understanding worship grows out of actual words, rituals, and other practices. In the fifth century, the lay monk Prosper of Aquitaine articulated the principle that has been called *lex orandi, lex credendi*, or in English, “the law of praying is the law of believing.” Yet believing also shapes praying. As British Methodist theologian and liturgical scholar Geoffrey Wainwright says so clearly, “While liturgy is thus claimed to establish doctrine, doctrine may also have a return effect on liturgy.”²

Ultimately, the shape of prayer and the shape of theology should be in dynamic interaction, grounded in living faith in community. Kevin Irwin has argued that this interplay of believing and praying is grounded in a “doxological theology that involves the whole person in the act of theologizing” and “emphasize[s] notions of conversion and growth in the faith as well as growth in understanding.”³ Thus, he proposes adding a third term to *lex orandi, lex credendi*: that is, *lex agendi* (law of acting),⁴ the shape of what we actually *do* in liturgy and in daily life, in prayer and in ethical engagement with life. Praying, believing, and acting should influence one another in living liturgical theology, which in turn gauges how what we do correlates with what we say we believe and the way we worship.⁵

DEFINING WORSHIP

In a classic description, James F. White, who was a pioneer leader of liturgical growth through his 1980 book *Introduction to Christian Worship*, named three ways of defining Christian worship: considering the definition of words used to describe worship; observing what actually happens in worship; and considering the reflections of liturgical theologians.⁶

Using this framework for defining worship, we begin by considering words used in various languages to describe the gathering of Christians for praise and thanksgiving, reading Scripture and preaching, praying, and sharing in Communion with one another, then going out with a blessing and a charge to live in faith in daily life.

The word “worship” itself comes the Old English word “*weorthscipe*—literally *weorth* (worth) and *-scipe* (ship).”⁷ It means ascribing worth to

someone. As one of the most common words in English to describe what Christians do when they gather, “worship” focuses on praising and thanking God with reverence. *Adoración* in Spanish also brings out this meaning of worship as praise for who God is.

“Liturgy,” another English word commonly used to describe the church’s meeting, comes from “the Greek *leitourgía*, composed from words for work (*érgon*) and people (*laós*). In ancient Greece, a liturgy was a public work performed for the benefit of the city or state.”⁸ In recent decades, church leaders and theologians have stressed this derivation of “liturgy,” since it points to worship as the work of the whole people of God, and not just the clergy. As White writes: “In other words, it [liturgy] is the quintessence of the priesthood of all believers in which the whole priestly community of Christians share. . . . All worshipers take an active part in offering their worship together.”⁹ To make matters more confusing, though, “liturgy” is popularly used of a printed script for a worship service with words for clergy and laity, and so “liturgical” may seem to describe formal, scripted worship. Strictly speaking, though, “liturgy” is properly used only when worship is participatory, whether or not there is a printed script.

Dwight Vogel has noted that people sometimes use the terms “worship” and “liturgy” interchangeably, yet some distinctions should be made: “For me, the word ‘worship’ implies human response to that which is worshiped, including such elements as prayer and praise, lament and thanksgiving, confession and commitment.”¹⁰ Thus, either solitary individuals or religious communities worship. Liturgy by its very nature is a common act of worship; it is the primary source of liturgical theology, to the extent that it brings about deep change in those who participate.¹¹

Gottesdienst, the German word for worship that brings together words meaning “God” and “service,” brings out another dimension of worship, for it can refer to either the church’s service to God or God’s service and self-giving to the people. The word “office” (sometimes used of worship), like “service,” means “something done for others.”¹² The phrase Bach wrote on his musical compositions, *Soli Deo gloria* (Latin for “To God alone be glory”), demonstrates this meaning of worship as an offering of ourselves and our gifts to the glory of God, as well as our receiving God’s self-offering to us in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

El culto in Spanish (*le culte* in French and *il culto* in Italian) speaks of worship in rich words relating to cultivation of the earth and the

nurturing of relationships, which applies well to the way in which worship nurtures faith, community, and relationship with God. In English, however, “cult” has negative connotations of a small group gathered around a charismatic and perhaps abusive leader.

Some words about worship speak of the bodily action of falling down in submission and homage, including the Greek words *latreia* and *proskunein*.¹³ Koreans also use *updurida* (the verb meaning “prostrate”) and *jurhada* (the verb meaning “bow down”) together to speak of worship and respect, implying that the God of Christianity is the most high. The chorus of “O Come, All You Faithful,” “O come, let us adore him,” is translated in the *Korean Hymnal* by repeating *updurida jurhada* three times.¹⁴ These usages may reflect the contexts in ancient Greece, Rome, and Southeast Asia of bowing to imperial rulers. At the same time, for contemporary Christians, they may also express reverence and willing service to the loving, powerful, and transcendent God we know in Christ.

OBSERVATION AND DESCRIPTION OF HOW CHRISTIANS WORSHIP

Another way of understanding Christian worship is to consider the actual worship practices of Christians around the world, past and present. That is, it is to ask, What do Christians *do* when they worship?

One way of answering that question is to ask what most Christians have done over the ages when they have gathered to worship. Most churches gather on Sunday, the day of Jesus’ resurrection. This weekly gathering almost always includes prayer, the reading of Scripture, preaching, singing, and a blessing and charge to live faithfully in the world. The majority of the world’s Christians (including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Disciples of Christ churches) celebrate Eucharist every Sunday, though many churches of the Reformed and Methodist¹⁵ traditions do so monthly or less. Many gather at times such as Wednesday evening or weekday mornings for additional times of liturgy. Some, notably the Seventh-day Adventists, meet on Saturday.

The week is the basic structure of time, but to a lesser or greater extent, churches observe yearly cycles, too. Almost all Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter, though there were laws against the celebration of Christmas in Puritan New England. Today, even many spiritual descendants of the Puritans (United Church of Christ congregations in

New England) follow the ecumenical lectionary, along with Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and others.

Within and beyond the weekly structures, Christians also celebrate baptism and related rites, marriage, ordination, and anointing of the sick. They gather to remember, give thanks, and seek comfort when someone dies.

Our understanding of what Christians do when they worship is not completed, however, by naming common elements. For one thing, there are exceptions to almost everything named so far. Even singing with voices is not universal—congregations of people with hearing limitations sometimes “sing” through movement instead. More importantly, honoring Christians of all nations and cultures means exploring the great variety of ways Christians worship in the world. In other words, difference matters as much as commonality if we are to understand worship fully and truly. *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex agendi* does not apply only to the historical Western tradition; the integration of praying, believing, and doing is revealed more fully as Christians learn about one another’s practices across differences in culture and tradition.¹⁶

The number of liturgical scholars from African American, Filipino, Korean, and Chinese (and many other) backgrounds who can describe their people’s Christian practices from within is growing. They can provide leadership to churches in their own background to renew their worship and to draw deeply on the resources of their culture as means to embody the gospel of Jesus Christ in their context. Their voices and perspectives are important to understanding the meaning of Christian worship and must be taken seriously. This is not a matter just of hospitality, but also of expanding the knowledge and perspectives of all who study, teach, and practice liturgy and worship. Just as in the fourth century, churches from diverse traditions around the world have the opportunity to learn and enrich their liturgy through communication with one another.

Another way to understand Christian worship in its diversity is through congregational and ethnographic studies, by spending significant time worshipping with a particular congregation and conversing with the leaders and members. In this way, researchers learn what the worship means to the congregation members, beyond descriptions in worship books, denominational guidelines, and scholarly reflections. Of course, researchers must focus on careful listening and realize the

limits of what they can learn in a relatively brief sojourn with the congregation. Particular care is needed if the researcher is working cross-culturally, in order to avoid arriving too quickly at conclusions about what is happening and what it means. Still, this is an in-depth way of learning how Christians worship. This approach can increase our understanding of how liturgy becomes effective in the lives of worshipers. For example, my most important learning through congregational studies is that good spiritual formation and Christian education practices are essential to the renewal of worship.

Episcopal priest Gloria Hopewell researched two churches in the Chicago area that had been in serious decline that “have experienced new life and vitality, growing to the point of bursting at the seams.”¹⁷ She learned that churches can renew their worship life and grow in spirit and numbers as they practice genuine hospitality, bring new energy and thought to old worship traditions, and engage with their neighborhoods through special worship services and direct service through food pantries and weekly meals. She found that dynamic clergy leadership was important at both churches, yet this was in conjunction with active lay leadership; further, previous leaders had laid the groundwork for their present growth.¹⁸ These findings, while hardly startling, grow out of observation of lived experience in churches, not theory or speculation.

Describing what happens in worship, both practices common to many Christian groups and practices that are distinctive to particular cultural, denominational, or congregational contexts, is one important way of considering the meaning of liturgies.

FIVE THEOLOGICAL EMPHASES IN UNDERSTANDING WORSHIP

Another way to consider the meaning of worship is to explore what theologians have said about it. In doing this exploration, I have found five main emphases, which are not mutually exclusive. One or more of these themes may receive more emphasis than the others in one theologian’s work or Christian tradition, though all are present in most Christian liturgies. Here we will consider each theme and some of its strengths and limitations and demonstrate how baptism may be understood through the lens of that theme.

Worship as Ritual

In ritual, groups perform symbolic words and actions. Repeated ritual builds communal identity and the individual identity of members, through recurrent performance and common symbols, while adapted or newly created ritual may also interpret life experiences. In their book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley define ritual as “ordered, patterned, and shared behavior, but more than that, it is an imaginative and interpretive act through which we express and create meaning in our lives.”¹⁹ Ritual is an important part of human life; pastoral theologian David Hogue reports that scientists studying the brain have discovered that humans are “hard-wired” to form rituals both as individuals (the daily morning walk, the way of brushing one’s teeth) and as groups.²⁰ Margaret Mead wrote, “I know of no people for whom the fact of death is not critical, and who have no ritual with which to deal with it,” though birth or marriage may be treated lightly.²¹ Rituals help people deal with the passages, crises, challenges, and mysterious realities of their lives.

Religious rituals help to create and maintain cohesive communities, and they have a role in healing life’s sorrows and integrating life’s experiences. In considering ritual, liturgical scholars draw on the work of anthropologists who study ritual patterns common to humans around the globe, as well as patterns distinctive to particular cultures or groups. Through the lens of ritual, for example, baptism is a way people in Christian communities integrate new members, parallel to initiation rites in many cultures and groups everywhere.

Ritual is an important dimension of Christian worship. Geoffrey Wainwright has written that “worship [can be] seen as the point of concentration where the whole Christian life comes to *ritual* focus.”²² The regular patterns of Christian worship (gathering on Sunday, observing Lent and Eastertide, participating in summer revivals) form Christian identity. While people within some Christian circles regard the regular rituals of other Christian groups suspiciously as empty repetition done without feeling, in truth every congregation has its rituals, whether done by rote or enthusiastically enacted. Repeated words form an important part of a congregation’s memory, whether they are from a book of worship or an oral tradition. For example, African American Christians often pray words similar to “We thank

you, God, for waking us up this morning, and we thank you that our bedsheets did not become our winding cloths [shrouds].”²³ Barbara Holmes has referred to this tradition in a poem: “For enslaved Africans during the / Middle Passage, / joy unspeakable is the surprise / of living one more day, / and the freeing embrace of death / chosen and imposed.”²⁴ Such repeated prayers are important for the lives of worshipping communities.

Ritual may also involve repeated actions: moving around the sanctuary to greet other worshipers, coming forward for Communion, or performing motions of prayer (from making the sign of the cross in Anglican or Catholic worship to “falling out” in an ecstatic experience during a charismatic service of worship). Ritual involves what we know by heart—words, songs, actions. Many a newly arrived pastor has been surprised to discover a congregation’s most-beloved rituals, revealed by the outcry heard when they are omitted or changed. Rituals often bear more meaning than it might appear.

Understanding ritual in worship can help liturgical leaders address the transitions, losses, and new beginnings that are part of the lives of Christians and of churches; as Anderson and Foley write, ritual helps to link our human stories with the divine story.²⁵ Understanding ritual may help us discern how our worship patterns shape us in the ways of Christian living and open our hearts to God and one another. Focus on ritual also can serve well in groups less tied to traditional dogma and ancient liturgies, as they seek to formulate new traditions. (This could include traditions without official worship books, as well as some Unitarian churches and feminist spiritual gatherings.) Further, the study of ritual as human behavior is a way of thinking about religious practices that supports dialogue with people of diverse faith traditions.

To discern a group’s most important rituals, ask: What rituals express who we are and support members in life passages or crises? What do we know by heart? What do we resist changing?

But speaking of such rituals as baptism and Eucharist as ways of building community and negotiating life passages is not enough to describe truly Christian worship, for it speaks only of what humans do for one another. While the study of ritual helpfully points to the human dimensions of worship, Christian worship is also an encounter with the God of Jesus Christ. And so we turn to divine revelation—another key theological theme of Christian worship.

Worship as Revelation

Revelation, as a theological theme concerning Christian worship, emphasizes God's real presence in liturgy through means God has given. Reformed (Calvinist) Christians seek God's revelation through the reading and interpretation of Scripture. In different ways, Quakers and charismatic Christians seek God's revelation through the moving of the Spirit in their worship and their lives. Many Roman Catholics, Methodists, Episcopalians, and others seek God's revelation in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, looking to these and other means of grace as doorways to sanctification and true life in Christ. They find in Eucharist the real and transformative presence of Christ, and in baptism the gift of the Spirit. The beauty of these emphases on revelation is their confidence that God, Source, Word, and Spirit, is among us to welcome, teach, encourage, feed, and commission those who worship in the name of Jesus.

The liturgical renewal movement of the last century has used the term "the paschal mystery," inspired by the thought of Dom Odo Casel, a German Benedictine monk and scholar writing in the first half of the twentieth century, to describe the presence of God in Christ in Christian worship.²⁶ *Pascha* is the Greek term for Passover by which Christians have referred to the death and resurrection of Christ. The paschal mystery (a reality that remains inexhaustible even when revealed) is the union with Jesus in his death and resurrection that Christians experience through worship, and particularly in the Eucharist. More recently, the term has been extended to speak of the whole work of Christ—incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and eternal presence experienced in worship. Jean-Jacques von Allmen, a French Reformed theologian, says that worship sums up and renders present the whole history of salvation, past, present, and future, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.²⁷

To consider the dimension of revelation in a congregation's worship, we could ask: Where do we particularly sense God's presence in our worship? How is God acting among us?

The idea of worship as revelation (when not complemented by other dimensions) is not without its limitations. At times confidence in the particular approved means of revelation (e.g., Scripture, sacrament, or Spirit) can lead to legalism in performance of ritual or interpretation of Scripture. Sometimes it can engender lack of care for the human dimensions of worship, as when sacred rites are performed in

ways that are unintelligible to worshipers, or when worship practices are frozen in time, inaccessible to new insight. But rightfully understood and practiced, this approach to understanding worship is absolutely essential, so that others may recognize that God is truly among us (1 Cor. 14:25).

Worship as Response to God

Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), an Anglican theologian who reflected much on worship and spirituality, defines worship as the response of creature to Creator: “Worship, in all its grades and kinds, is the response of the creature to the Eternal. . . . There is a sense in which we may think of the whole life of the universe, seen and unseen, conscious and unconscious, as an act of worship glorifying its Origin, Sustainer, and End.”²⁸ In this understanding, worship expresses the response of humanity (and all creation) to what God has done, is doing, and will do; “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19 alt.). Our acts of worship are inspired by the creativity, the wisdom, the holiness, the justice, the goodness, and the love of the triune God. Any understanding of worship that did not incorporate the idea of worship as response to God would be inadequate.

Liturgical theologians from the Reformed tradition (including some Presbyterian, Reformed Church, United Church of Christ, and Baptist Christians, among others) often speak of worship as response to God. Grounded in respect for the sovereignty of God and aware of the limitations of all human efforts, such theologians tend to avoid claiming too much for what human acts of worship can do. For example, Reformed theologian Karl Barth began by accepting his church’s belief that baptism is a means of salvation and grace—an action of God—and that infants and adults alike are appropriate candidates for baptism. By the time he wrote *Church Dogmatics* IV/4,²⁹ he argued that baptism was simply a human pledge or vow to be an active disciple of Jesus Christ. To claim more, that is, to claim that God acts in baptism, is to tie the sovereign God to words and rituals of human devising. Persons who understand baptism primarily as a human pledge may witness strongly to God at work in their lives before and after they were able to confess faith for themselves. They may even say that we encounter God especially in baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Yet those who understand worship primarily as response to God are sometimes hesitant to say

that our human words, rituals, and symbols directly convey the grace and presence of God or to believe that God is more present in worship than in daily life.

Since those who emphasize worship as response tend to see words and rituals as human response and not divine revelation, they also may allow more freedom for human expression in worship. A strong emphasis on worship as revelation often places boundaries around human expression and creativity. For example, Calvin, whose theology of worship focused on revelation through Scripture, insisted that the psalms provide the best words for Christian songs of praise.³⁰ But Isaac Watts (who also was from the Reformed tradition and who paraphrased many psalms for singing in worship) thought Christians should express their response in faith through song; his “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” wonderfully brings together the Scripture story and the human response of wonder and self-offering. If worship is response to God, then our contemporary expressions of faith and praise are not only permitted but, indeed, necessary.

To discover ways in which a congregation’s worship is a response to God, ask: What is God doing in our church, our lives, and our world now, and how do we respond to this in worship?

Many Christians (including this author) are less reticent than those who understand worship mainly as response to God about claiming that God is present and active in worship and that baptism, Eucharist, Scripture reading, and preaching are sacramental means of grace. But thinking about worship as response can be an important part of developing a liturgical theology, showing reverence toward the God who is with us but also beyond us, and showing honor to our human gifts of praise and prayer. Further, emphasizing the humanness of worship makes room for both lament and alleluia and helps us to integrate worship with daily life.

Worship as Relationship

If, as Charles Wesley wrote, God is “pure, unbounded love,”³¹ then an adequate understanding of Christian worship must include some focus on growing relationship and genuine encounter with God. Worship as relationship brings together God’s revelation with our human response, both by witnessing to and embodying God’s love and by drawing us

to respond in love toward God, one another, and the whole creation. Scripture, sermon, sacrament, and song reveal God *relationally*, not mechanically through correct words and actions. In turn, we respond in our human ways—bringing the whole of our lives before God and expressing our love and our devotion through the full breadth of our human words, rituals, and arts. It is God who first loved us and called us forth, yet in worship Christians share in mutual giving and receiving with the Holy One. Here also is the mystery of a relationship of love: much is revealed, yet much remains mysterious.

Evelyn Underhill writes that Christian worship is conditioned by the “great dogmas of the Trinity and the Incarnation.”³² Understanding Christian worship as relationship is grounded in the Trinitarian life of God: In Christ through the Spirit, divine love has been poured out on our hearts and into the world. Hoyt Hickman has defined worship as “encounter with the Living God through the risen Christ, in the Holy Spirit.”³³ In worship we praise the living, eternal Source of all being, we break bread with the risen Christ, and we seek the Spirit’s inspiration to enliven all we do in the church and world as the body of Christ. Through the sacramental presence of the Divine in all things, Christians participate in the life of God in worship and daily living.

Methodists tend to gravitate toward a focus on relationship in their theology of worship, since John and Charles Wesley emphasized both divine grace in the sacraments and the need for human response, accepting infant baptism as a means of grace, yet calling for an adult response (and perhaps conversion) to a life of personal and social holiness. In a relational understanding, baptism is incomplete without a covenant of love in which God and humans participate; it is an act in which God graciously gives Godself to persons who respond in faith and commitment.³⁴

Evangelical Christians also tend toward a relational theology of worship—were not the great revivals focused on opening one’s heart and life to relationship with a living God who was calling in love to restore a straying people?

A relational theology of worship holds together the conviction that God truly is present, revealing Godself in worship, and the conviction that worship is not complete without the church’s response in faith and love. Further, just as presents, cards, and flowers become more than mere rituals or commercial exercises in the context of loving relationship, so the relationship between God and church gives meaning to our rituals.

To uncover a relational understanding, ask: How does worship build our relationship with God, one another, and the world?

Since understanding worship as relationship brings together the first four emphases, its limitations are less obvious. The main danger of emphasizing worship as relationship with God is that we might regard divine love as a private possession rather than powerful energy making us partners with God in expressing love and care and seeking justice and peace in the world. Thus we must turn to the last of our five emphases to connect worship with life in the world.

Worship as Rehearsal

John Burkhart, a Presbyterian teacher in Chicago, provides the name for this last main understanding of worship: “rehearsal,” that is, worship as a way of practicing love, justice, and peace in preparation for life in the world.³⁵ He writes:

Since God’s will gives movement and pattern to reality, shaping history to its redemptive goal, worship takes on the dimension of rehearsal. . . . discerning the plot, finding roles, developing and refining characters, and practicing arts, lines, and gestures, in the drama of a history graced by God. . . . In the dimension of rehearsal, worship is to be judged by whether and how it transforms those who worship.³⁶

Worship is rehearsal when the gathered church is changed and inspired to take its part in God’s drama of transforming life in this world. Eucharist, then, is a model of sharing food and other necessities of life and of creating the table “where you are more welcome than anywhere else on earth.”³⁷ It is a model of sharing love across human boundaries similar to Jesus’ table sharing with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners—here life eternal is revealed in the present.

Or, as professor and liturgist of blessed memory Laurence Hull Stookey has written:

In the fullest New Testament tradition . . . eating and drinking with Jesus is enactment: The Eucharist is a feast in which we, with the risen Lord, incarnate the hope we have of a righteous realm in which Christ’s sacrificial love destroys barriers among human beings and between humanity and God. To this feast all are invited by God on equal terms.³⁸

Similarly, baptism thus means joining in an egalitarian covenant community who support one another in turning toward a new life of love, justice, and equality and away from ways of sin and oppression that lead to lives of self-seeking or self-abasement.

Worship as rehearsal is an act of participation in God's kingdom, or, as Ada María Isasi-Díaz names it, God's "kin-dom." She says that the kindom is a gift of God, who calls Christians to join in solidarity to participate in "the ongoing process of liberation through which we as Christians become a significantly positive force in the unfolding of the 'kin-dom' of God."³⁹ Worship as rehearsal is a part of this process.

Of course, worship is not rehearsal in the sense of not being the real event—it is an active experience of God, community, and justice in the very moment of worship. But it is rehearsal in the sense of practice which forms patterns that endure beyond the time of gathering.

Before the end of apartheid in South Africa, a speaker at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary showed a video of worship in that country that demonstrated worship as rehearsal. The service took place outside, where a tree was planted to represent hope for a new and just South Africa in which both people and the earth would be nurtured. Everyone wore robes—calling to mind the baptismal ministry of all Christians. Although the intense suffering of most people in South Africa under apartheid continued for some time, worship rehearsed and enacted God's will and the people's hope for the future.

Understanding worship as the practice of new life in Christ leads to some particular liturgical practices. Worship would be honest about life within the congregation's context—naming its joy and suffering, its challenges and resources. It would highlight the ethical dimension of worship not only through prophetic preaching, but also through justice and hospitable practices among the congregation. This might include use of expansive language, accessibility to persons with disabilities, and genuine welcome of persons regardless of race, class, and gender. Emphasizing the ethical dimension of worship would mean that before leaving, the congregation would be commissioned and sent out to be signs of God's love, justice, and peace in the world.⁴⁰

To discover the dimension of rehearsal in a congregation's worship, ask: What are we practicing here? How does our worship support and embody justice and peace in the world? What patterns are we creating that may lead to fulfillment of God's will on earth?

The prophetic writings of the Hebrew Scriptures proclaim that worship that is pleasing to God is paired with just and holy living:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
 and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

.....
 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
 I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
 But let justice roll down like waters,
 and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
 (Amos 5:21, 23–24)

The dimension of rehearsal, the theological theme of worship most often neglected in the United States, has been rediscovered in many churches of North America in recent years. Its strength lies in the way it supports faithful Christian discipleship. The main drawback can be when the concern for ethical life overshadows other dimensions of worship, so that worship does not communicate a gracious sense of God's presence. When that happens, congregations tend to work urgently for justice and inclusion as if they were without God in the world; self-righteousness and burnout can result. Yet worship surely must rehearse God's holy hopes for life on our planet.

CONCLUSION

While it is appropriate for every person, congregation, and denomination to emphasize one element—ritual, revelation, response, relationship, or rehearsal—more than others in their understanding of worship, a wholesome theology of worship includes all these dimensions. Understanding worship as ritual helps us to be sensitive to human rhythms and patterns that influence how we experience worship. Understanding worship as revelation assures us that we are not alone, for God is with us, in worship and in daily life. Understanding worship as response encourages reverence, thanks, and praise toward the holy Source of life. Understanding worship as relationship points us toward the mutual giving and receiving between God and the church. And understanding worship as rehearsal encourages us to complement our solemn assemblies and songs of praise with hospitality and justice in worship and in life. By bringing together all these dimensions, worship glorifies God and sanctifies all that is human. By incorporating neglected dimensions, churches may enhance and renew their worship.

As congregations articulate their understanding of worship, they will have more ability to base their decisions on solid ground. Pastors,

Christian educators, and church musicians can play an important part in this process, not only as teachers, but even more as guides who can help a congregation find its theological voice.

To engage in Christian worship is to thank and praise God and to bring our human joys and dilemmas before God. To worship together is to seek God's living presence, through the witness of Scripture and preaching, through baptism and Eucharist, and through ritual words and actions. It is to respond to God's great love, and nurture our relationship with God, one another, and the world, seeking to enact God's will in worship and in daily life. All of our planning and leading worship should flow out of these understandings, like streams of water from a living spring. And our worship is an act not of a few, but of all who gather at the spring. We turn next, in chapter 2, to the purpose and aspects of the participation of the whole people of God in worship.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Consider what understandings of worship are important to you. How do they affect your life?
- When you consider your church's practices of worship—the roles that ritual, revelation, response, and relation with God and one another play—what understandings of worship are currently fruitful in your church?
- What understandings and practices do you think your church would benefit from giving more attention?
- What understandings would you want to explore that aren't mentioned in this chapter?

2

Participatory Worship

In many a Protestant church in the United States fifty years ago, worship services lasted an hour, with thirty to forty-five minutes dedicated to preaching. The people's part was to sing two or three hymns and to add their offering to the plate. They would stand to sing the hymns but otherwise remain seated in the pews for most of the service. This was not true of many African American Protestant services, which might have lasted two to four hours. Even the sermon time was participatory, carried out in a rhythm of call-and-response, and there was time to pray, to come forward and kneel, to sing, and to attend to the Spirit. Catholic and Episcopal services tended to feature weekly Eucharist and only a ten-minute sermon or homily; the congregations might join in reciting the creed, singing or speaking responses to the Great Thanksgiving, coming forward for Communion, as well as moving through postures of sitting, standing, kneeling, and making the sign of the cross. Even in these churches, restlessness for fuller participation was growing.

With the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) came an awakening in worship that radically transformed Catholic worship and influenced worship in many other Christian communions. At the heart of this awakening, sometimes called the *liturgical renewal movement*, was recovery of an active role for the laity in worship, or, to paraphrase the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, their “full, conscious, and active participation.”¹ A new ecclesiology was emerging, emphasizing a vision of the church as the body of Christ living out a vibrant faith

expressed in worship and lived out in the world. In this understanding, worship was the work of the *laos*, the whole people of God, lay and ordained, male and female, adults and children. The worshipers shared a common baptismal vocation and a corporate priestly role. Preachers, priests, presiders, musicians, and other leaders were coming to be understood as enliveners of the congregation's worship, not entertainers or the primary worshipers.

These changes grew out of the renewed theological understanding of liturgy as the work of the whole congregation, not only the clergy. Study of the New Testament and early church documents fueled new discoveries. For example, Paul's description of the whole church bringing gifts for worship (1 Cor. 14:26) inspired the theological understanding that worship is guided by the Spirit and expressed through the Spirit's gifts to all. Second-century church leader Justin Martyr understood the amen at the close of the Great Thanksgiving (Communion prayer) as the people's affirmation of the prayer. More than a polite way of saying the prayer is finished, the amen expressed the people's participation in the whole prayer: "When the prayers and eucharist are finished, all the people present give their assent with an 'Amen!' 'Amen' in Hebrew means 'So be it.'"² These emerging understandings produced changes in worship, with the laity participating in many ways.

FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

In participatory worship, through the work of the Spirit, the gathered community is involved in planning, leading, and experiencing worship, which makes it more likely that worship will relate to Christians' daily lives and ministries. Presbyterian liturgist Craig Douglas Erickson suggests that shaping worship involves six forms:

1. lay leadership
2. interiorized verbal participation
3. silent engagement
4. participation through the senses
5. spontaneous involvement
6. prophetic verbal participation³

The first form that may come to mind is *lay leadership*⁴ of the spoken parts of worship through reading Scripture and leading prayers, one of the first changes in worship inspired by the liturgical renewal

movement. When I started as pastor at Bethel-Bethany United Church of Christ in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1979, I held house meetings to learn about members' hopes for the life of the church. I learned that many in the congregation were hoping that the laypeople could read the Scriptures in our services. I was delighted to make this part of all our services. I also started a worship committee that would meet to plan services together. Developing lay leadership was an important part of the renewal of this church.

Second, the *laos* (the whole people of God) worships through what Erickson calls *interiorized verbal participation*.⁵ This includes prayers and responses a congregation knows by heart, such as the Prayer of Jesus, the Apostles' Creed (or other statement of faith), and the words and music of a favorite hymn. Such "heart language" also includes words for speaking or singing that are used regularly—for example, a collect from *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church, a Communion response from *The United Methodist Hymnal*, or a recitation of psalm verses from *The Book of Worship of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*.⁶

Third, worshipers participate in what Erickson calls *silent engagement*.⁷ A congregation may participate silently, even when it is not moving or speaking, through praying fervently, listening to a sermon or anthem, or partaking in Communion elements. Silence makes it possible for people to reflect on and respond to what is happening in worship, to join their individual prayers to the corporate confession or intercession, and to contemplate the nonverbal aspects of worship. Providing a few moments of complete silence (perhaps during a prayer or after a Scripture reading) can make room for the congregation to listen for the Spirit's voice.

Participation through the senses is a fourth way in which a congregation shares in worship,⁸ perhaps above all through movement. Worshipers kneel, sit, stand, and raise their hands in prayer. They process into the church, sway with music, and follow a liturgical dancer in moving to the words and rhythms of a song. In many cultures, freedom to move is an essential form of participation, and song and movement are intimately connected. Also, as Cynthia Winton-Henry has pointed out, the congregation who seems only to watch a liturgical dance also participates through "kinesthetic identification" with the dancers—they feel the dancers' movement in their bodies.⁹ Touch can also be important; worship leaders may lay their hands on someone's head or shoulders as they pray or anoint the person

for healing or for ministry. The visual and tactile arts also contribute to worshiping with the senses; those who create a banner or table covering participate by sharing their gifts and help the congregation participate through seeing. Art and architecture shape people's experience of worship and express understandings of God and life. In these and many other ways, congregations may share actively in worship through their senses.

Another form of participation is the congregation's *spontaneous involvement*,¹⁰ which includes words and actions not scripted in advance. This may happen in many ways. While the congregation is receiving Communion, someone may spontaneously start singing "Amazing Grace," inspiring the whole congregation to join in the song. In some congregations, preachers and musicians work together like jazz musicians, improvising words or music to respond to one another. Using a prayer form common in Korea and elsewhere, *tongsung kido* (praying together), people bring their concerns to God by praying their individual prayers aloud, all speaking at the same time.¹¹ Room in the intercessions for worshipers to speak their own prayers aloud also provides an opportunity for spontaneous participation. Other unscripted forms of worship include voicing words of prophecy, speaking in tongues, and responding aloud to sermons. Congregations may erupt with joyful laughter in a high holy moment of worship. I experienced a moment like this during a baptismal renewal service when another person and I were sprinkling the congregation with water. I was moving too quickly, and my friend, frustrated and trying to catch up, began tossing large amounts of water over wide areas. The congregation rippled with delight and laughter in response to the abundant water (even though one person complained that her silk shirt became wet). Spontaneity is an important part of worship; indeed, a worship service that is entirely scripted, with no room for the unexpected, may seem to lack life or spirit.

*Prophetic verbal participation*¹² happens through preaching, prayer, and other acts of worship that speak to a particular time and place as they reflect on Scripture and gospel. This happens when we name the real struggles and joys of our lives and the world where we live.

These kinds of participation exist in some form in the worship of almost all congregations. One way to enliven worship practices in a church is to build up a form of participation most neglected in that congregation.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How does your congregation participate in worship?
- Which of these practices are active in your church?
 - lay leadership
 - interiorized verbal participation
 - silent engagement
 - participation through the senses
 - spontaneous involvement
 - prophetic verbal participation
- What kinds of participation would benefit your church?

GOALS AND MARKS OF PARTICIPATORY WORSHIP

In participatory worship, people are engaged, whether silent, speaking, moving, or still. Such worship is relevant: it touches the real life, experience, and struggles of twenty-first-century Christians. As Anne Rowthorn has written, “The authentic life of the community—in all its pain, fullness, joy, suffering, and ambiguity—must come to the liturgy and there be transformed into a new world and sent out to transform the old.”¹³ Participatory worship is contextualized, addressing the people’s concerns and making use of art forms appropriate to local context. It is empowered and empowering, so that people experience it as *their* worship—not something someone else is performing for them. Presbyterian professor and musician Melva Costen writes in *African American Christian Worship* that worship should empower the people to “envision themselves as vital and necessary actors in God’s story”¹⁴—in liturgy and in life. Participatory worship is holistic: it involves the whole self—body, emotions, and spirit, as well as the mind. Ultimately participatory worship is transforming, and it should be rooted “in the true desire of the worshiper to be transformed.”¹⁵

Participatory worship goes beyond people gathered in the same room engaging actively in the service by singing heartily, listening intently, or praying spontaneously. Don Saliers reminds us we should also seek participation *as the church*—not only as individuals, but as a body called to minister, to weep and rejoice with the world; worship is an action of the whole church, the body of Christ who share a common baptismal vocation and priesthood.¹⁶ And Christian worship

culminates in participation in the being and glory of God.¹⁷ Thus worship is an essential part of the Christian life.

A final aspect of participation in worship to complement Saliers's analysis is participation with God in the life of the world. Worship forms our faith and our human affections; it expresses our praise and longing, our thanksgiving and lament, our rejoicing and tears, so that humanity comes "full stretch before God" in worship and in daily life.¹⁸

Many forms and styles of worship have the potential of engaging Christians in full, active, conscious participation in liturgy, the work of the people. Whether traditional or contemporary, whatever the cultural background, whether it grows out of the emerging church or the liturgical renewal movement, worship should help people participate in the outer forms, in the unity of the church, and in the life of God, in the church and in the world.

EMPOWERING PARTICIPATORY WORSHIP

Forming a worship committee is a helpful way to strengthen lay leadership and support liturgical renewal.¹⁹ It should include at least a pastor, a musical leader, and a leader in Christian education, and represent the diversity of the church (by gender, ethnicity, length of membership, age, and so on). Such a group can oversee planning for seasons of worship (often the liturgical year) and special occasions, perhaps delegating planning for particular Sundays or seasons to task groups of volunteers. The committee might also collect the joys and concerns of the community and shape them into prayers of intercession for Sunday morning. It could coordinate leadership for services (ushers and lay readers, for example) and provide for Communion vessels and elements. Theologically, planning together as clergy and laity recognizes the unity of the baptized in the life of the church and brings wider perspectives to the interpretation of Scripture in worship. Practically, it provides the pastor with allies and interpreters for changes in worship and opportunities for critique and refinement of ideas before and after they are instituted.

The worship committee could appropriately have a role in deciding such issues as how to handle donations that affect the worship space or whether nonmembers may be married in the church. It could develop long-term goals for the congregation's worship, evaluate the present services, and consider and implement new ideas. These oversight functions would, of course, be in coordination with the church's governing

body. Above all, the worship committee serves as a nexus of communication and dialogue about the congregation's worship.

One way to help people participate more fully in worship is through things they know by heart. Of course, what people know well in liturgy varies by denominational and local tradition, but the goal is to ensure that worshipers repeat some words in prayer or song enough to know them by heart. For example, worship planners in churches that are developing multicultural ministry may include songs of varied cultures but rarely repeat a song often enough to learn it. The goal should be, over time, to develop a new repertoire that honors varied traditions more fully, so that people from different backgrounds truly learn one another's songs.

Another way to help congregations worship by heart is to introduce children and new members to words of frequently used prayers, creeds, and songs, helping them understand the meaning of the words and actions and thus to participate more fully. Whether a congregation uses hymnals and books of worship, bulletins, or projected images, church school and new-member sessions should also help people learn how to use these worship aids.

Making space for silence can add another dimension of worshiping by heart. It may take some time to introduce silence where it has not been practiced. The length of silence added to a time of confession or a prayer spoken by a leader can increase gradually over several months. It may also help to suggest a topic for prayer or meditation; if worshipers don't understand what they are expected to do in a time of silence, they may become anxious. Prayer leaders should learn to gauge how people are participating in silence, neither rushing them without adequate time to pray their own prayers, nor continuing at length if coughing or shuffling of papers indicates that many in the congregation are restless. Another task of the prayer leader is to respond lovingly and calmly when the sound of a fussing child or coughing adult fills the silence for a time.

Enhancing participation through the senses also takes time. Increasing nonverbal means of participation requires leaders to coordinate nonverbal aspects of worship with other parts of the service, including the Scripture texts for the day. For example, a congregation not accustomed to liturgical dance will likely accept it more readily if it is integrated well with the flow of the liturgy. One of the most powerful interpretations of the Trinity I have ever experienced was by a liturgical dancer (who had been a well-known dancer in the Korean

folk tradition) following the sermon on Trinity Sunday. She first made gestures to suggest the majesty of God, then showed Jesus Christ's "descent" into the world, then joyfully demonstrated the Spirit's work in unifying the community. Without words, through movement and gestures, she demonstrated how God the Source of all things entered our life in Jesus and continues to inspire and unify us by the Spirit.

It may be challenging to introduce spontaneity in worship where it has not been welcome previously. There is a paradox here; spontaneity coerced or wheedled from a congregation is no longer spontaneity. So we must speak about permission: when unscripted responses are desired, permission may be granted to participate in one's own way, even if that includes not responding. For example, some members of our seminary community came from traditions where worshipers move and speak spontaneously, whereas many of us were taught long ago to sit still and be quiet in worship. For that reason, the seminary's worship committee drafted a guideline about embodied worship:

The Worship Committee encourages freedom in worship to move with music, say Amen, kneel for prayers of confession, stand for other prayers, make the sign of the cross, or hold up hands in praise or petition, as the Spirit leads. Invitations to stand or move should also be respectful of persons with disabilities: "You may stand" or "please stand as you are able."²⁰

Of course, a guideline alone will not empower those who would like to speak and move in worship, if others keep still; worship planners can help by modeling spontaneous participation when genuinely moved to do so.

Worship leaders may also create safe space for spontaneous participation. For example, an invitation to liturgical healing can give permission to take part in one's own way: "You may come forward and receive anointing or remain in your seats and pray for one another. Please extend your hand if you wish to be anointed there rather than on your forehead." In such ways leaders must take care to create a climate of love and safety, especially when introducing worshipers to something new.

Laypeople may be a part of planning for prophetic verbal participation—shaping words to address what is happening here and now in the community and world. In some congregations, small groups engage the upcoming Sunday's Scripture texts with the person who will be preaching, bringing insights from their life and work. In other

congregations, small groups help to form the prayers of the people by gathering the concerns of the congregation and the world.²¹ Further, laity may participate through preaching, witnessing, and engaging the congregation in mission in the world beyond the local church. When laity participate in planning for worship by reflecting on Scripture texts and contemporary life, liturgy more truly becomes the work of the people and preaching may be more relevant to the daily lives of worshipers.

Expanding participation in worship takes time and patience, and there is not one approach appropriate to every congregation. Still, intentional attention to each aspect of liturgical participation will empower the worship of any congregation.

Developing each means of participation addresses the varied ways in which people best experience the world—through listening or through moving, through singing or through tasting, through speaking or through silence, through seeing or through touching, through steady traditions or through new ways of doing things. One Spirit calls forth the varied gifts of worshipers: “When you come together,” Paul writes, “each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (1 Cor. 14:26b). The purpose of gifts is not to bring glory to individuals but to build up the church and bring glory to God, so gifts must be exercised with care (1 Cor. 14:26c). Church leaders are sometimes tempted to focus on the needs and preferences of worshipers, as if they are a passive audience to entertain. If we want to renew worship and watch people grow in Christ, then we should instead look at how we enable people to participate and to share their gifts for the building up of the church. Each of us has a part to play in the body of Christ, as it is said in the *Didascalia*, an early-third-century Syrian document: “When you are teaching, command and exhort the people to be faithful to the assembly of the church. Let them not fail to attend, but let them gather faithfully together. Let no one deprive the Church by staying away; if they do, they deprive the body of Christ of one of its members!”²²

WORSHIPING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Children have gifts to bring. They are part of the community of faith; many of them are baptized members. Their participation is part of the people’s work of the liturgy. They often bring gifts of spontaneity and wonder, and, like adults, they bring the joys and concerns of living. Young children may participate through movement, touch, sound,

color, and song; infants may enjoy being held (an experience of belonging) and looking at the people or at light pouring through stained-glass windows. Worshiping with the rest of the congregation helps children learn about the Christian life and faith in a way not possible if they are not welcomed to worship with adults.

Making Lifelong Disciples across Generations

Building relationships across age groups is essential in Christian worship and to the future of the church. Growing in our relationships with God and one another lays the groundwork for lively and transformative worship on Sunday and living as disciples on the days between Sundays. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3:17–18 give a wonderful image of the process of growing in our faith and life: "Where the Spirit of God is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Holy One reflected as in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Spirit" (author paraphrase).

This is the baptismal journey, growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ from one degree of glory to another—through the Spirit at work among us. As we regularly seek the presence of the living God, we are changed; through the work of the Spirit in us we are transformed. Spiritual formation ideally takes place in community; it is not just a matter of individuals' growth, for the Christian life is life in community. Jack Seymour, professor emeritus of Christian education at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, has said that Jesus' ministry was to show the reign of God already at work in communities who care for one another and for others around them. This includes the work of healing and forgiveness, and of bringing good news for the poor and freedom for prisoners: "That's the good news. Even in the midst of oppression the realm of God is possible. Spiritual formation, then, draws us into community with one another, and also draws us into wider circles of caring for the people of the world."²³ By their participation, children and youth learn not only how to worship, but also what it means to be part of the church. Christian educator Virginia Thomas writes:

The purpose of worship is not education, but in the act of worship learning does take place. . . . Observing, questioning, and reflecting may be genuine expressions of the adoration and praise we offer to God.

This is particularly true of children. They do not learn to worship by studying outside the experience, reaching a certain level of intellectual competence, and then taking part in the liturgy. They learn as they worship and worship as they learn.²⁴

Children of different ages are able to participate in different ways. While newborn infants to children two years old may participate comfortably in worship, children from ages two to four may have more difficulty, unless the congregation is comfortable with children moving about the sanctuary. The ages from six to ten are very important, as children are making sense of the world around them and learning what it means to belong. They are generally interested in stories and images, and they like to learn through doing. They tend to be concrete and literal in their understanding, though at times children have a remarkable ability to speak of God; for example, I was delighted that a five-year-old child explained the Holy Spirit with great clarity and depth. Children from age ten to twelve are able to think a bit more abstractly and may enjoy symbolism—albeit in a literal way: a heart stands for love, a dove stands for peace. Older children and youth can participate in most ways that adults can. They often do some things—for example, presenting a dramatic reading of Scripture—better than most adults can. Children may be particularly attuned to imagination and narrative. And, as many churches that had been holding church school at the same time as the worship service discover, when children don't learn about worship when they are elementary-school age, they may be less likely to attend when they are teenagers.

A movement that began in Hampshire, England, points to new ways to do church. Lucy Moore and Jane Leadbetter have described this in *Messy Church: Fresh Ideas for Building a Christ-Centered Community*. The goal is to give more opportunities for families to come together and stay in church together. The gatherings include a warm welcome, hands-on activities for people of all ages around a Bible theme, and a short, gathered celebration (worship) and meal. These churches decided that the best time to gather was not necessarily Sunday morning, and also that “the best way to stay with the faith into adult life is to bring up children where generations worship together.” They have learned that “if children are happy in church, the parents are too, and children stay.”²⁵ The focus is not on clergy credentials, but on creativity developed together.

The goal should be to recognize children of all ages as full participants in worship. They will participate more enthusiastically in some

parts than others—but is this not true of adults as well? Strategies to empower children’s participation include becoming less dependent on print and using language that includes more imagery and less abstraction. Using all the senses and providing opportunities for movement and action will also help.

Preaching that regularly explores the experiences of people from age one to a hundred will help to engage the whole congregation. Unfortunately the “children’s sermon” is often the only part of worship meant to include young children. Virginia Thomas and David Ng argue persuasively in favor of abolishing the children’s sermon and making worship and preaching accessible to everyone.²⁶

If churches do include a children’s time during worship, it should be prepared with care and considerable knowledge of child development and should be related to the Scripture texts for the day. Once I heard a children’s sermon about a hungry crow who dressed in pigeon feathers to receive food offered to pigeons. Unbelievably, the preacher did not resolve how the crow would find food without the disguise, but only moralized against pretending to be someone you are not! It’s hard to imagine what sense the literal, concrete thinkers seven years old could make of such a sermon. A time for children can be effective if the preacher is on eye level with the children, presents concrete, age-appropriate content, and listens intently and respectfully to the children’s ideas and experiences—but it would be better to concentrate on making the worship service as a whole more child friendly.

David Csinos, assistant professor of practical theology at Atlantic School of Theology, has written several books encouraging attention to the different ways children experience God and how churches can make room for these approaches. His books include *Children’s Ministry That Fits*, and the collections *Faith Forward*, volumes 1, 2, and especially 3, *Launching a Revolution through Ministry with Children, Youth, and Families* (the first two volumes edited with Melvin Bray). Other helpful books on involving children in worship and faith practices are *Forbid Them Not: Involving Children in Sunday Worship* by Carolyn Carter Brown, *Come unto Me: Rethinking the Sacraments for Children* by Elizabeth Francis Caldwell, and *Faithful Families: Creating Sacred Moments at Home* by Traci Smith.²⁷

Key elements of empowering children’s participation in worship include genuine love and welcome by the congregation, good teaching about worship in home and church school, and efforts by worship planners to make significant parts of worship more accessible to children. In

one church that welcomes children in worship, each child is invited to sit with someone other than the parent—which removes the objection that when children take part in worship, their parents cannot, and also shows that children belong to the whole community of faith. Some children need help to learn the behavior the congregation expects, because there may be few other places where adults expect them to be still and quiet. Yet children bring the gift of spontaneity to worship, along with their song, their prayer, their dramatic abilities, and their growing faith.

I close this section with memories of Church of Three Crosses in Chicago, a small federated United Church of Christ and United Methodist congregation, where I belonged for a few years. A nursery was available, but children of all ages were welcome to stay in worship, and many did. Genuine friendship existed between adults and children, and some children would rove quietly from lap to lap during worship; people eagerly awaited their turn to hold the babies. Several children enjoyed coloring pictures during the sermon, using bags of educational materials and crayons found throughout the church. When Holy Communion was celebrated, the children streamed forward with the adults; servers would offer the elements at the children's eye level with an attitude of warm welcome. Once there was a buggy in the aisle on the way to Communion and people smiled to see little toes sticking out from under a blanket. Then there was a Sunday when, during the Great Thanksgiving, four-year-old Zachary left his mother, went up to the table, and looked quietly at the elements as if contemplating what they meant. What a gift of wonder he brought to us! He returned to his seat, then went forward with his mother to receive with all the rest. Ah—a holy moment! Children do belong in worship.

WORSHIPING WITH ALL OUR DIFFERING ABILITIES

Inspired by the Spirit, Christians with disabilities, like children and all other members, bring diverse gifts to contribute to worship. Lest we be deprived of the presence and gifts of these members of the body of Christ, the church must seek to make worship accessible to all. Jan B. Robitscher speaks of the need for each person to discover a liturgical space, and says that “the body of Christ is not complete unless everyone can be present and participate fully.”²⁸ Every church should strive to provide access to the space for worship—with ramps, elevators, and areas dispersed throughout the sanctuary where people using

wheelchairs may sit. Accessible bathrooms and drinking fountains are also important. Assistive listening devices, good acoustics, and clear sight lines for reading lips give access to worship for people with limited hearing. A church can give more access to people whose sight is limited by providing braille and large-print worship materials (Bibles, hymnals, and bulletins), as well as by welcoming guide dogs. Verbal cues (naming leaders, indicating when to sit and stand, speaking first before touching someone while passing the peace) are also important, along with good diction by leaders. Often the congregation must work through anxieties or stereotypes related to disabilities, including mental illness, to offer genuine welcome and to receive the gifts of all. Greeters and ushers, in particular, may be a source of frustration to people with disabilities, as when an usher refuses to seat a visitor with a guide dog; on the other hand, their words of welcome to all and guidance to newcomers can also contribute to full accessibility.

Leadership spaces (choir, pulpit, ambo,²⁹ or lectern) should be accessible to all. Further, congregations should give attention to how their ways of serving Communion welcome people with disabilities. If people go forward and kneel to receive, are people free also to stand or remain in their seats, where someone will serve them? If the elements are passed through the pews in trays, are the trays easy for everyone to handle? However serving takes place, the church must take care not to exclude or stigmatize anyone at the Table, lest (in the words of Nancy Eiesland) the Eucharist be transformed “from a corporate to a solitary experience; from a sacralization of Christ’s broken body to a stigmatization of my disabled body.”³⁰ The point of providing full access is to make it possible for all to be vital and contributing members of the community. Each member of the body of Christ has gifts to offer, in their own way. People with disabilities should also be fairly considered and empowered for ordained ministry.

A number of strategies in planning and leading worship beyond making leadership space accessible support the participation of people with disabilities (see figure). Silent engagement is possible with good verbal and written cues to introduce the time. Interiorized verbal participation is helpful; repeated prayers and familiar songs help people with limited sight (as well as those who can’t read) to worship without depending on written materials in a hymnal, bulletin, worship book, or media projection. People with Alzheimer’s disease or similar issues are helped to worship through singing very familiar hymns.³¹ Prophetic verbal participation may include a call to justice for people

Hospitality in Worship for Persons with Disabilities

	Access to See, Hear, and Participate	Worship Practices and Materials
General	Train ushers and others to greet, welcome, and assist people with varied abilities and disabilities.	Seek unified themes for worship, drawing on all the senses. Avoid negative images of disability. Invite persons with disabilities to share their gifts in worship. Make space to express lament and anger and to advocate for justice.
Mobility Issues	Remove snow from sidewalks; provide accessible parking, as well as elevators, ramps, and chairlifts so that all can enter the building. Make room for people to sit in wheelchairs among the congregation, through flexible seating or openings scattered among pews (not only in the front or back).	Provide access for all to liturgical actions, movements, and spaces, including pulpits, lecterns, and choir seating. Consider means of distributing Communion.
Visual Issues	Seek good lighting and sight lines. Welcome guide dogs.	Leaders say their own names. Some prayers and songs don't require print. Give verbal cues for participation (e.g., don't depend only on the bulletin or visual cues to invite people to stand). Provide braille and large-print materials (e.g., Bible, hymnals, books of worship).
Hearing Issues	Provide assisted listening devices and keep them in good repair. Install sound systems that enable more people to hear.	Provide sign interpreters. Leaders speak with good diction. Consider providing printed copies of sermons.
Other Concerns		Provide gluten-free wafers or bread and options other than wine for Communion.

This chart is compiled from the following sources: Valerie Jones Stiteler, "Guidelines for Including Persons with Disabilities in Congregational Worship and Community Life" (unpublished paper, 1991); Ginny Thornburgh and Ann Rose Davie, *That All May Worship* (Washington, DC: National Organization on Disabilities, 1992); Kimberly Anne Willis, "Embodying the Body of Christ" (unpublished paper, 1999); Helen Betenbaugh and Marjorie Procter-Smith, "Disabling the Lie: Prayers of Truth and Transformation," in *Human Disability and the Service of God*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 281–303. See also Edward Foley, ed., *Developmental Disabilities and Sacramental Access* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994).

with disabilities, but it may also call for braille and large-print worship aids and printed sermon manuscripts. Worshiping through a variety of senses is helpful, especially when a simple theme unifies the service. Spontaneous participation requires some care if everyone is to be included. For example, if the prayers of the people include opportunity for the congregation to speak their concerns aloud, a regular structure, in addition to signing, can help those with limited hearing to participate. Some worship leaders minimize spoken instructions for worship (for example, announcing hymn numbers), thinking this might distract from worship. Sensitivity to people with varied learning styles and abilities suggests giving worship instructions through spoken words, visual cues, and written aids together when possible, in a brief and worshipful way. For example, the instruction to stand if able could be spoken aloud, gestured, and written in a worship aid.

To empower participatory worship (as well as to promote spiritual and emotional well-being), church leaders must not only focus on attendees' preferences and needs, but also call forth their gifts. Certainly every gift known to the church is found among people with disabilities, to be discovered, affirmed, and enhanced. Beyond giving access to worship, the church must discern all members' gifts, rather than focusing on what they cannot do.

A particular gift persons with disabilities may bring is the grace of facing and affirming life with its goodness and its limits and finding God's presence in it all, in contrast to the promise of perfect lives and perfect bodies that is the stuff of fairy tales and television commercials.³² They may also teach the wisdom of lament, as a way for worshipers to cry to God in their need and protest the injustice they experience.³³ The lives of people with disabilities are ordinary lives, full of small joys, deep sorrows, and persistent challenges, including injustice and discrimination.³⁴ How important it is to honor the gifts and wisdom of the whole people of God, with their varied strengths and weaknesses!

WORSHIP AS PARTICIPATION OF ALL GOD'S PEOPLE

Worship is the work of the whole people of God, and one of the greatest ministries of worship is finding ways to help people participate with heart, mind, soul, and strength. Often that means making worship more accessible to all worshipers in their diversity, calling forth their praise and lament, nurturing their relationship with God and ministry in the world.