

Author: Paul F. Bosch [pbosch@golden.net]

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GREENING CHRISTIAN WORSHIP PART 2

I return this month to the series begun in my last posting, that of “greening” Christian worship. How may congregations exercise a responsible stewardship of creation in their worship life? I continue numbering where we left off in [Essay 115](#).

7. It’s About *Resisting* the Temptations of Consumerism

Most North Americans have no idea of the extent to which they have become captives to consumerism. Marshall McLuhan says that whoever discovered water, you can be certain it was not a fish. North Americans are surrounded by consumerism — so-called free-market capitalism — the way a fish is surrounded by water. We live in it. So its temptations are very hard to discern, much less to resist.

Perhaps it’s not so much consumerism as the compulsion to remain up-to-date, *au courant*, contemporary, “with it.” Whatever its source, North Americans hate to be thought of as in any way behind the times.

Lusting after material abundance. Buying what’s new. Surrounding ourselves with the latest products from the marketplace, particularly the latest technologies. Keeping up with the most recent trends in this or that. These instincts have become almost a patriotic duty in North America.

But we should try to become aware of the price we are paying to keep current: the price, the costs, to our own well-being and that of the planet, the environment. Some examples as they relate to worship:



In the 1950's every new home in every new suburban subdivision had to have wall-to-wall carpeting. It was The Thing to have, in the 'Fifties, if you were building or renovating. Not surprisingly, that assumption was transferred to church building and church re-modelling. Every suburban church on every suburban street corner had to install wall-to-wall carpeting, in nave and chancel. And if your church building was not newly built but older, you surely wanted to be properly up-to-date. So you succumbed too. Your building committee bought and installed wall-to-wall carpeting in your older building.

Often forgotten in this desire to remain current — almost always forgotten! — was this: A church is a public building. An assembly's worship space is not your suburban living room. And carpeting in a church is almost always calamitous for acoustics. So hard-surfaced floors in natural materials are almost always preferable in churches, no matter what the current tastes and fads. Stone floors. Tiles. *Terrazzo*. Hardwoods. Even modern vinyl. Even humble concrete. Any of these is preferable, in a church, to wall-to-wall carpeting. And they'll last more than a lifetime.

A church building is not domestic. It is a public edifice. Your model, in constructing or in renovating a church building, is not your suburban living room, but your local town hall or court house. Or even, if you prefer, your local *McDonald's* or *Burger King*. What goes on *inside* that building may rightly tilt toward the domestic. But the edifice itself — the House of the Church — has been solidly public since the Fourth Century. I don't think we need to regret that.

The temptations of today's electronic technology are even more seductive. Most technological innovations serve only to distance the worshipper from the authentic, the real, the relational. As often as they may be necessary, they are almost always at the same time disastrous for worship.

A Public Address system where it's not needed. Slide shows. PowerPoint projections of texts and images. Even the Sunday guide-to-worship, the print-piece parish bulletin and those individual throw-away paper pamphlets and "worship supplements". You'd expect each of these to be an aid in worship, a help in bringing people together. They're not, it turns out. People are distanced from each other, and from the corporate engagement that worship invites — and requires. If you need convincing, read Lutheran pastor Mark Olson in *Notes to Eli*, pages 24-27. (Full Title: *Notes to Eli: A Pilgrim Hears the Call of God and Seeks to Be Faithful: Reflections of a Samuel Who Is Engaged in the Adventure of Pastoral Leadership*. Kirk House Publishers, 2005.)

Bottom line: Don't be seduced into buying what's new, what's "hot", what's the latest. Whatever it is. Save your money. The environment will thank you. So will worshippers.

Christian worship began in an oral culture. (An *aural* culture?) We've long ago moved into a literate culture. (It's thoroughly individualistic.) And beyond that, into an electronic culture. (It's radically private.) But worship remains steadfastly oral / aural. It's

communal. Worship is always at its best, its most engaging, when we respect that. When we celebrate and exploit that.

Worship leaders would be wise to avoid the seductions of both print technology and electronic technology, as much as possible. As if they're poison. Both of these seductions move us away from an oral / aural context; away from the corporate context Christian worship requires, and into an individualist context, into an unwholesome privatism. And they waste both energy and resources.

8. It's About the Eucharist's Call to *Justice*

I've already highlighted the ecological implications of an every-Sunday Eucharist in 4 above. Now I'll simply note that proleptic acting out of the justice in God's *shalom*, where rich and poor are fed alike. In Eucharist, everyone receives the same: a crust of bread, a sip of wine.

That's a gesture of radical justice. The rich in this assembly do not receive more than their share. The poor do not leave with less. At this "hungry feast", all are treated alike. That is a demonstration of God's *shalom*.

Now that is furthermore a powerful proleptic gesture. It demonstrates a future possibility — and a present actuality — that belongs to Christ's Commonwealth. One day — today! At this Eucharist! — we will treat all people, all creation, with the same even-handed generosity.

We live in a culture where a tiny percentage of the world's population (we Western Christians) own and control — and exploit and waste! — an unconscionable percentage of the world's wealth and resources. That imbalance in ownership and opportunity cannot long continue.

I'd even be willing to argue, against our elected North American leaders, that there's no such thing as today's so-called "war on terror". It's a war of the world's rich against the world's poor. And most of us, faithful reader, are among the rich.

For more on the Eucharist's call to justice see *Liturgy, Justice and the Reign of God* by J. Frank Henderson, Stephen Larson and Kathleen Quinn available at <http://www.jfrankhenderson.com/pdf/LJRG.pdf>.

9. It's About *Hospitality* that Extends Beyond Worship

Here's another possibility for your congregation to consider: Offering a fuller banquet of real food at Sunday's coffee hour, and inviting the community. This is the practice of the wonderful congregation my daughter joined when she lived in Manhattan, NYC. The entire building had been recently re-configured, actually lowering the floor of the original sanctuary so as to provide street-level access to the worship space. An enormous new

font now stood, street-level, at the centre of an enormous new entrance / narthex. Every Sunday, at the conclusion of the Holy Communion, the people assemble here. Awaiting them there is a sumptuous feast, prepared pot-luck style, by members with the means to share: sliced ham and beef, potato salads, green salads, baked goods, an eye-popping variety of cheeses and finger foods. Coffee and tea, of course. And flagons of juice and bottles of wine.

The congregation consists of a marvellous mix of people: the wealthy and cultured, musicians and artists, actors and dancers from Manhattan's nearby theatre district, and a generous percentage of the poor and homeless: Street people who had simply wandered in through the building's new grade-level entrance. No one is turned away.

This enlarged "coffee hour" remains to this day in my memory as an extraordinary example of Christian hospitality. It is a sign of the Kingdom of God. And it celebrates our planet's plenitude.

10. It's About *Reducing Our Dependence on Print*

I've already mentioned the debilitating effects of relying on print materials in worship. Reducing your congregation's dependence on print makes not only an ecological statement, since it saves paper, and saves trees. It's also an endorsement of the (still) basically oral / aural character of Christian worship.

As I've maintained before in these postings, every piece of print you press into a worshipper's hands sends two terrible signals: A) "This is going to be difficult, folks." And B) "You're going to have to be both sighted and literate to get by here: The blind, the aged, the young, the illiterate need not apply."

Do you really need those printed paper pamphlets you hand out so promiscuously? Those "worship supplements"? That sheet with the Day's Psalm, verses and refrain? That bulletin insert with the Day's scripture lections printed out? That page with the Day's parish announcements (to be repeated orally / aurally, word-for-word, in minutes, in any case, by a worship leader?) How much of these can you really do without?

I'm delighted, for example, that in our new worship book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, all you'll need, as worshipper, for the liturgies for Lent and the Three Days is printed in full. The ministers' roles are omitted. What the people need to say is in the pew edition. What you need to *hear* in those rites is in the ministers' editions.

I yearn for the day when, in every parish, all you'll need to worship will be a hymnbook.

Hey, why tolerate even that? Why not, at least once a year, an almost book-less Eucharist, with a book (the Bible) only for Lections? The ministers memorizing all liturgical portions? And all congregational hymns lined out by a leader, or call-and-response? It can be done! See Essays [82](#) and [83](#) above.

11. Its About Stewardship Around Worship

Here's a concluding grab-bag of ideas related to your Sunday morning assembly:

Can members be encouraged to car-pool to worship? Saves fuel...

Can you replace paper towels in your washrooms with electric dryers? Yes, I too hate those things. And with the costs of electricity rising, and today's ease and efficiency in paper recycling, it may represent an ineffective trade-off. It will take some research in your specific locality...

And you'll want to make yourself aware of "greening" resources available close to home. Where I live there's a non-profit outfit called REEP, for Residential Energy Efficiency Project, that can advise you on lowering energy costs for your parish buildings. Visit <http://www.reepwaterlooregion.ca/>. You've probably got a similar agency in your own metropolitan area nearby.

Of course, you'd want to look at the Greening Sacred Spaces initiative <http://www.faith-commongood.net/gss/spaces.asp> on the Faith and the Common Good website <http://www.faith-commongood.net/> out of Toronto.

Google "energy assessment" and you'll come up with more resources than you can use...

Ask your local metropolitan town council for information on reducing your environmental "footprint". In this regard, visit <http://www.footprintnetwork.org>, www.myfootprint.org and <http://www.earthday.net>.



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

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