

THE ROAD WHERE FAITH IS FOUND

WE BECOME WHAT WE RECEIVE

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP • 469

IN MISSION FOR OTHERS:
THE WITNESS OF *EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP*



Bishop Raymond Schultz writes...

We know that children become reflections of the homes in which they are raised. Generous and considerate parents instil values of caring and compassion in their children, while homes filled with rancour and blaming produce children who lack confidence and find it hard to appreciate the positive gifts of others. Encouraging homes allow children to explore their imaginations and try out experiences. Mistakes become opportunities for accidental learning rather than causes for punishment.

This formation occurs in children because children are unsuspectingly open to information and emotional conditioning. They receive before they even know they're doing it. They receive before their critical faculties can assess the value of their experiences.

By the time we become adults, our brains have installed a good deal of critical apparatus, so that what comes to us is screened through a more selective and skeptical process than when we were children. In fact, most adults who take part in spiritual formation exercises must relearn the gift of uncritically receiving God's living presence. Pastors find it particularly hard to read a Biblical text without immediately moving into exegetical mode.

In that regard, the language of worship and hymnody is a major part of our formation. My now-deceased mentor, Dr. Walter Freitag, liked to remind me that the hymn-books of the church were the doctrinal source-books of the laity. What people believed was informed as much by the words of their hymns as by their Bible reading or the sermons that pastors preached. The hymns often determined how a Biblical passage was understood or a sermon received.

By your hand you feed your people,
food of angels, heaven's bread.
For these gifts we did not labor,
by your grace have we been fed...

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 469, stanza 1*

As I have recalled Dr. Freitag's words over the years, I have agreed with their general principle, but recognize, at the same time, that the community in which those hymns are sung has a lot to do with the outcome of their reception. Congregations, like families, can be palatable and nurturing or they can leave a bad taste in your mouth. Dr. Freitag was reflecting the history of a church that did not often celebrate the sacraments and, even when it did, it set the experience in a more somber mode than we would consider normal in our present church life.

You are not only the psychological product of the home that raised you; you are also what you eat. Nutrition in childhood affects future health. Poorly nourished children experience delayed brain development and organic dysfunction. So God feeds us on the gospel story; a story told in ancient texts, in the words of the preacher's mouth, in a common meal and in the celebration of common shared experience. That's my summary of congregational life.

The story of the gospel contains both joy and sorrow, both anticipation and painful endurance. Jesus' faith led him to execution, but the formation through which he led the disciples created a community of courage. He presented a freedom of relationship with God that stimulated a sinful resentment in his peers. Even they hadn't realized what was inside them. He also became a risen presence that took his people beyond fear of evil to a daring new proclamation of God's grace for all people. *In our living and our dying, we become what we receive; Christ's own body....*

This church has adopted as its vision to be *In Mission for Others*. This vision statement is a way to summarize the ministry of Jesus and the role into which Christ invites us. It is what we want to be "when we grow up." We, as the gathered people of God, are to be the humanly physical expression of Jesus' ministry in our world at this time.

As Our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same to all, that is that we may be truly Christians.

— *The Freedom of the Christian*
in *Luther's Works, American Edition, vol. 31, p. 367,*
edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann,
(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959)

Being the humanly physical expression of Jesus doesn't happen through some momentous decision on our part. We become such *Christs to one another*, as Luther so boldly put it, through a process of being filled with the Gospel and growing into the body and intentions that the gospel produces. Susan Briehl has listed some of these attributes in the text of her hymn, *By Your Hand You Feed Your People*: bread for hunger, wine of peace; going with faith and courage to accompany the hungry, lost, bereaved.

In this meal we taste your sweetness,
bread for hunger, wine for peace.
Holy word and holy wisdom
satisfy our deepest needs.

Send us now with faith and courage
to the hungry, lost, bereaved.
In our living and our dying,
we become what we receive...

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 469, stanzas 2 and 3*

It is the gospel, not the ritual of the Eucharistic meal, that produces these attributes. Nevertheless, the ritual meal is nothing less than visible words of the gospel. As we gather for this meal, our experiences in our world, the challenges to our faith, the evidences of God's faithfulness in our lives, bring to the communion table a presence which forms faith in the others; and from them, shapes us. We are shaped by the food we eat, and by the conversation and common life of the people with whom we eat it. Some of it creates the body, some of it creates the body's character and personality.

Two disciples who knew the story about Jesus' life and death were not turned into true followers until:

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (*Luke 24:30-32*)

I am a strong supporter of directed contemplative prayer. I would like it that every member of every congregation would learn to pray over the scriptures simply by opening their consciousness to whatever God wants them to receive. There would be no speaking, no critiquing; only listening. However, since such guileless openness can admit the demons of darkness as well as angels of light, it is essential that one have a spiritual companion with whom to reflect and discern what is from the Spirit.

Contemplative prayer removes the many adult barriers we erect against God's inspiring influence, but it leaves us also without a "firewall" against the darkness "trojans" that already live inside us and those "viruses" that mill around us. The Emmaus road disciples had been overwhelmed by the dark part of the gospel story and did not know of its resurrecting potential. Without the experience at the shared meal, they would have remained guarded and pessimistic.

When we encounter the darkness in our prayers, we need the community gathered around the gospel story and the sacramental meal to complete our formation support. We mentor and direct each other through what has traditionally been called "the mutual consolation of the saints." In other words, folks support and encourage each other through their common concern for the good of all.

The values and faith of the people gathered gradually become part of us and shape the way we view the world and treat others. Hospitality and attentiveness shape us as a pastoral people. Anger at injustice and impatience with corporate insensitivity awaken our drive to engage the secular community toward making the world humane and equitable. Joy and hope are metabolized into our own future visioning.

Christ's own body, blessed and broken,
cup o'erflowing, life outpoured,
given as a living token
of you world redeemed, restored.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 469, refrain.*

Words are spoken to us as individuals, "Given for *you*; Shed for *you*..." so that together we might be in mission for *others*. Certain food groups are universally necessary for healthy growth; therefore that which is given to us individually results in our growth into a corporate body. Just as a balanced diet of fibre, carbohydrates, proteins and water has been found to be necessary for all human beings; historic words of the liturgy have come to form a diet necessary for growth in the Spirit. This is not just any gathering—a pot-luck arranged on the whim of the social director. It is nothing less than the food of the Spirit discerned by the witnesses of the ages. The parts of the liturgy take us through the scripture story

of salvation in an annual cycle of Jesus' life, death and resurrection toward restoration of God's future for us. The menu is balanced. It shapes what we become.

In some households children are to be seen but not heard. Some households rarely gather for family meals. When family events are not cultivated, children and adults have little encounter with each other except in superficial or perfunctory ways. The inter-generational passing on of the family traditions and lore is interrupted, and the tradition is broken. Unexpected disasters can do the same thing, but most families would not deliberately destroy family photographs of past years because a potential fire might make them meaningless anyway! Family trees, ancestral stories, neighbourhood experiences and the day's events all make for the formation of the family.

We keep these traditions, not in order to reproduce ourselves in our children, but because we know that our children are receiving food and drink from the world around them all the time, and we want them, in the midst of that world, to receive that which will make them healthy, trustful of God and committed to sharing in God's mission to bless the entirety of humankind.

+ Raymond

Raymond Schultz is the National Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

By your Hand You Feed Your People, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 469, was composed by Susan R. Briehl (text) and Marty Haugen (music) for the ELCIC's 2002 National Worship Conference. The tune is named for the conference location, Camrose, Alberta.

In 2002, the ELCIC's Program Committee for Worship invited a number of bishops, pastors and teachers to write a series of pastoral letters under the title "Reclaiming Our Birthright: Pastoral Letters on the Every-Sunday Celebration of Holy Communion."

Introduced by Bishop Raymond Schultz, the letters had a two-fold thrust: They were designed to assist pastors and congregational leaders in their reflection and teaching on the matter of every-Sunday Holy Communion and to help the people of God to faithfully and deliberately reclaim their baptismal birthright.

The essays are available on the *ELCIC + Worship Matters* page at *Lift Up Your Hearts* www.worship.ca.