

THE ROAD WHERE FAITH IS FOUND

LET US BUILD A HOUSE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP • 641

WELCOMING OUR OWN; WELCOMING THE STRANGER.



Bishop Cynthia Halmarson writes...

All are welcome!

That's the refrain in the Marty Haugen song with the same title in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

All are welcome in this place!

That's the kind of reputation that every congregation wants to have. That's the kind of invitation that every person seeking meaning, love, grace, forgiveness and community wants to hear. Marty Haugen's song itself is an invitation to build our church into a welcoming place with Christ himself as the example and the means of grace.

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
A place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions.

—*Evangelical Lutheran Worship 641, stanza 1*

As a parish pastor, I marveled at the courage of people who overcame doubts and fears to darken the door of the church for the first time, or the first time in a long, long time. Those who have been members of a congregation for many years—or for a lifetime—find it hard to imagine what goes through the mind of a person who takes that huge step to attend worship on a Sunday morning, whether as a stranger or as an invited guest.

First, there must be the recognition of need or desire. "I want to go to church." The desire usually grows out of some new-found need. Someone is new in a community and is looking for a place to belong. A family has been shaken by divorce, death or illness and is seeking the comfort of a pastor. A baby's been born and the parents (or grandparents) want a rite of blessing through baptism. Or a person has had a life-changing experience and wants help to make sense of it. We Lutherans believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of people in all kinds of circumstances, showing us our need for grace, calling forth faith, and gathering us

into community for mutual support, worship, and service (see Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Creed, in his *Small Catechism, Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 1162). But the stranger doesn't know what kind of community a congregation might be.

In recent decades the number of people who are virtual strangers to church and congregation has grown. Chat with the guests at a wedding and you'll discover that many have never been in a church building before except for a wedding or a funeral. What they know about regular worship they have gleaned from TV evangelists, movies, recollections of older relatives, and impressions from friends. And much of that can scare them off! People fear being trapped in a cult, twisted by emotions, chastised and berated, or bored to tears. So, when a person is a stranger to organized religion, deciding to go to church is a courageous act in and of itself

Then, the person has to negotiate the entry into the building and into the experience of worship. A multitude of questions can arise. What is the proper dress for Sunday worship? Where should I park the car? What door do I enter? Will I be able to follow what's going on? What if my child misbehaves? If I don't like it, can I leave? What if someone talks to me? What if no one talks to me?

Hospitality to the stranger is a recurrent theme throughout the biblical narrative. Abraham and Sarah "entertained angels unawares" because they opened their tent to strangers (Genesis 18). The widow of Zarephath invited the stranger Elijah to stay for supper and had food to last through a drought (I Kings 17). Jesus welcomed the woman at the well into his confidence by revealing his messiahship to her, a stranger and a foreigner (John 4). The early church grew congregations because of the hospitality of Lydia and others who opened their homes to traveling apostles and to believers. Believers were then, and are still today, received through holy baptism and thus welcomed into the community of faith.

How a person experiences the congregation at that first worship service can open the way to a life-giving relationship in faith to God and to the worshipping community. That's why we seek to *build a house where love is found* (stanza 3), where *the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face* (stanza 4). Inviting all to find a welcome in God's love and mercy is the mission that God gives the church. Whether the stranger is a person who is attending worship for the first time, or a neighbor new to the community, or a member of a family in need, or a person living a marginal existence in our community, God's welcome knows no bounds. All are welcome in God's grace.

Welcome to Baptism (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 232)

Holy Baptism is God's multiple gift of deliverance from sin, new birth, and welcome into the community of faith. The Christian community celebrates God's gift of baptism with adult newcomers who respond in faith to God's call to grace as well as with children of members who are reborn children of God through water and the Word. Baptism includes instruction and nurture in the faith for a life of discipleship, and so, for the newcomer and for the parents of young children, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* provides a brief rite adapted from the ancient catechumenate to welcome people into the congregation in preparation for baptism.

Welcome to Baptism is a rite designed to introduce inquirers to the congregation, offer the congregation's support, and pray a blessing over those who are preparing for baptism. The rite invites the whole congregation to practice the hospitality of welcome and prayer for newcomers or for children of members soon to be baptized. In our mobile society in which sporadic church attendance can make strangers of us all, this welcoming rite reminds us that we are a community *where all are named, their songs and visions heard and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word* (stanza 5).

In this rite those preparing for baptism may be traced with the cross as a sign of God's endless love and mercy and to outline the path of discipleship. A Bible may be presented to assist the parents of small children and adult candidates alike to encounter the Word of life. Prayers are suggested for use at the Welcome to Baptism rite and at other times during the period of instruction and preparation for the candidates. One such prayer is provided on page 75. This prayer is adapted from the ancient catechumenate practiced in the early centuries of the Christian church to welcome and incorporate the newly baptized.

Merciful and most high God, creator and giver of life, you have called all people from darkness into light, from error into truth, from death into life. Grant grace to _____ and bless them. Raise them by your Spirit. Revive them by your word. Form them by your hand. Bring them to the water of life and to the bread and cup of blessing, that with all your people they may bear witness to your grace and praise you forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The rite ends with a blessing. *God bring you in peace and joy to fullness of life in Christ and call you to the waters of baptism.* The congregation may add their blessing in spoken or sung form: *May the God of all grace, who has called you to glory, support you and make you strong.*

Congregations with an active outreach to new Christians may find the modern adaptation of the ancient catechumenate an excellent way to prepare adults for baptism and for growing into a full relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The ELCIC materials entitled *Living Witnesses: The Adult Catechumenate* outline a supportive ministry by the congregation to welcome and integrate new members.

Affirmation of Baptism (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 234)

In the *Small Catechism* Martin Luther writes about baptism with water. It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 1165).

The Lutheran tradition has a deep appreciation for our need for daily repentance and affirmation of God's promises received in baptism. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* continues in this tradition by providing a rite of *Affirmation of Baptism* to be used at the time of confirmation of young persons or at any time in the life of a baptized Christian. Occasions to use this rite with individuals might include the reception of new members, marking a significant life transition for an individual, or recognizing a person taking on new responsibilities in church or society.

The rite calls to mind the prayers and promises spoken at baptism. It invites individuals or the whole assembly to affirm the presence of Christ Jesus in the world and their lives through the renunciation of evil and profession of Christian faith using the words of the Apostles Creed. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* provides a three-fold renunciation in keeping with the earliest traditions of the church. The rite continues by inviting the individual(s) to renew their commitment to follow in the way of discipleship. That way is described in five clauses, each one pointing to a different aspect of discipleship, from life in the Christian community to witness in the world. The assembly promises its support and prayer for those affirming their baptism. When individuals are affirming their baptism, they may receive a blessing through the laying on of hands and prayer for the gifts of the Holy Spirit echoing the blessing received first at baptism. In the *Service Music* section of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (209 - 217), a wonderful collection of antiphons is provided for singing by a choir or by the whole assembly. The *Hymns* section offers familiar and new songs in a variety of styles for congregational singing.

All Are Welcome

Marty Haugen's song is an affirmation of our baptismal faith that declares God's all-encompassing love and mercy. In the body of Christ we find a welcome and we extend God's gracious love to the stranger, the outcast, the fearful and the lonely. And so, we pray that our local communities of faith will be houses with open doors where all might find peace and justice, love and freedom, and the open arms of grace.

With our prayers we also seek ways that we can put our good intentions into action so that our desire to be a welcoming place can take concrete form. What are some of the ways to become that place of welcome for neighbors and strangers?

- Place directional signs to your church building at key intersections in your community. Don't assume that everyone knows your building is there!
- Reserve a couple of parking spaces near the main entrance for newcomers and guests.
- Use signs at the entrance door and inside the building to assist newcomers to find their way to worship, the washrooms and the place of refreshments.
- Plant friendly folks in the gathering place as "undercover" greeters who recognize and assist newcomers to be comfortable in worship.
- Train members to notice people fumbling with worship books and folders and encourage them to offer assistance.
- Open up the coffee huddles. Often the congregation that defines itself as "the friendly church" is mostly friendly to the people they already know!
- Ask yourself where the greatest community needs are and encourage your members to find ways to intersect with those outside the congregation.
- Think of your church building as a community centre and invite the community to use it.

God's mission is one of welcome. We are faithful to God's mission when we offer hospitality and welcome to others.

+ Cynthia

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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.