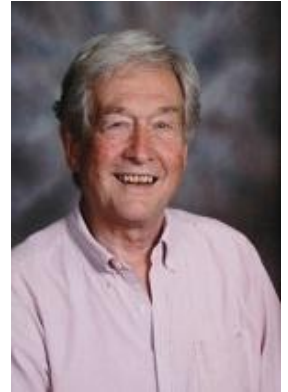


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HOUSEKEEPING

1 You have probably discerned by now, faithful reader, that I am something of a Neatness Freak. An Obsessive Compulsive. Hey, maybe even an Anal Retentive!

2 (“TMI!” I hear you muttering: “Too Much Information!”)

3 I’m the kind of person who always makes up his bed every morning. Whose desk is always immaculately tidy. Whose coloured tee shirts are always neatly folded, and arranged in the dresser drawer by rainbow colour. Whose motto since childhood has been “A place for everything, and everything in its place!”

4 With these very personal idiosyncrasies in mind, I offer this month a kind of laundry list for worship leaders. I’ll call it “Housekeeping.” Changing the figure: Herewith, a grab bag of items that bug me when I see them in a worship space. In no particular order of priority.

5 DUST COVERS draped over Table, Ambo, and even Font, when the worship space is not in use. Those dust covers are a sure sign that nobody expects this space to be visited by anyone at any time except Sunday morning. Pity.

6 I have always admired the kind of piety that expects a constant stream of visitors to any parish church building throughout the week: to pray, to meditate, to relax. Hey, simply to sit under a roof for a moment out of the cold. European churches, particularly cathedrals, are accustomed to this type of daily employment. They’re often thronged with visitors during the week, many of them simply tourists, there only to gawk.

7 And sure, European churches, particularly cathedrals, also provide a staff of volunteer docents, who can keep an eye on things. I suppose that’s a necessity many humble parish churches in North America cannot provide.

8 I remember with great fondness my first visit to Paris’ *Notre Dame* Cathedral, where I casually joined a group led by a volunteer docent who was positively evangelistic in his enthusiasm for his building. He spent a full half hour with us, extolling the majesties of the magnificent building he was devoted to. A volunteer, I am certain.

9 I suppose I should not expect to find a crew of volunteer docents at your humble parish church down by the gas station.

10 Nevertheless, those dreadful dust covers! They're a sure sign that nobody expects this place to be visited – to be used for prayer – during the week. "You want to pray? Well, Keep out!"

11 And are they really effective? Do they do any good? I say, throw 'em out!

12 THOSE PLASTIC DISINFECTANT ALCOHOL PUMPS. Here's a second item sure to get my blood boiling.

13 You see them everywhere these days. At every church entrance and exit! At the end of every pew! Beside the Chair of every Presiding Minister (PM) and Assisting Minister (AM)! Cluttering Altar / Table, Ambo, or Credence!

14 North American Christians these days have become paranoid germaphobes. Maybe with some good reasons. I can't deny it's a dangerous world out there. "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you," as a friend maintains.

15 But enough is too much, as still another friend says. Let's try to be as discrete as possible with those dreadful plastic pumps. Hide one, perhaps, on a Credence behind the altarware. PM and AM use it as discretely as possible at the Ablutions. And be certain to follow its use with a hand washing in good ol' water – H₂O – and drying with a clean towel. To get rid of that terrible fragrance. See Essay 210 above.

16 As for those plastic pumps themselves: How do you dispose of them? You have heard perhaps of the Bishops of the Church of England encouraging their parishioners to fast this past Lenten season – from plastic! And you've heard of that giant floating island of garbage – mostly plastic bottles – in the North Pacific ocean? As big in area as the state of Texas! Dreadful!

17 There must be a better way to keep clean!

18 THE ALTAR BOOK ON THE TABLE. The Altar Book, or Missal, is one of the important tools in your tool kit for any PM. But I'd place it on the Table only at the Offertory and after, and keep it elsewhere at other times. It does not belong on the Table until the Offertory. And when the Service is over, it belongs on the Credence. Not on the Table. All week.

19 Hey, wouldn't it be great if you could actually see that Book in use during the Service itself? The PM reading the Prayer of the Day from its pages, as it is held by an AM or acolyte? The AM reading from its pages during the Intercessions, as it is held by PM or acolyte?

20 At other times? Store it reverently on the Credence. On its brass or wooden missal stand, or pillow. Keep the Altar / Table free of anything when it's not in use. An empty Table at the beginning of worship. An empty Table at worship's end – and throughout the succeeding week.

21 The Principle at stake: Symbols should function. If they don't have a function, don't use them or display them. Same for Bread and Cup. Never leave them on the Table throughout the week. Bad ritual practice. And don't kid yourself, folks: These symbols teach. They teach what's happening at a given moment in worship. Or not.

22 COMMUNION BREAD THAT CRUMBLES. It's great these days to see a revival, in all the Christian churches, of the use of real bread at the Communion. Real, substantial, unambiguous, culturally appropriate bread. Not wafers. (The single virtue of wafers: They're storable. For long periods of time. Without spoiling. Like fish food. Guppy food.)

23 But real bread is a much more potent symbol than wafers. Take pains, however, please, to be certain your common loaf does not crumble.

24 I've been to Services where the Chancel floor, at the end of worship, is a sea of bread crumbs. The Cup a miniature lake of floating debris from Intinction. (Still another reason to ween your people away from the practice of Intinction!)

25 Bread that crumbles, at the Communion, is a terrible offense to a certain type of piety, the kind of piety that takes the words of the Prayer of Thanksgiving, and its Verba, in a more literal sense than I would. "That's Jesus in those bread crumbs you're treading under foot!"

26 Perhaps my own piety is more Zwinglian than traditional Lutheran at this point. Yes, I will strongly insist on the Real Presence in the Sacrament. But I do not have to share what I think of as a cannibalistic interpretation of that Bread and Cup. God uses the stuff, the matter, the molecules of this world to invade our lives, our very own molecules. The Holy comes among us "in, with and under" the Common. That's my Eucharistic piety.

27 I'm aware, though, that other Christians have a more literal understanding of things. And those bread crumbs on the floor or floating in the cup are a real source of existential anguish, for some.

28 So find a recipe for your common loaf that doesn't crumble. The recipe that *Luther Seminary* uses is a good one. *Google* Luther Seminary for a splendid recipe.

29 THOSE TRAYS OF SHOT GLASSES for individual use at Communion. First, I'd try to avoid using them at all in your parish. Teach your people how to use the Common Cup. If you're paranoid about sanitation, those little shot glasses are not much of an improvement over a Common Cup, by the time they've been handled by human fingers in the Sacristy before Communion.

30 Teach your people about the Doctrine of Concomitance. If you're absolutely paranoid about using a Common Cup, take the Bread only and return to your seat. Forget the Wine altogether. The Doctrine of Concomitance maintains that to receive one element – the Bread, say – is the same as receiving both. Christians for hundreds of years were denied the Cup and still received a valid communion.

31 Of course, I'd argue that the Cup should normally be offered to all at every Communion. I'm not arguing for a return to that Medieval heterodoxy that refused the Cup to worshippers. But paranoid pieties – and alcoholics! – can take comfort from the example of earlier generations of Christians who did not feel cheated when they received only the Bread at Communion.

32 If, in spite of all I'm arguing here, your parish is determined to keep those dreadful trays with their shot glasses, make certain they do not obscure, at the Table, the primary symbols of the Meal: a single Common Loaf and a single Common Cup. The Credence is the place for any extras that may be needed.

33 Finally, AN EMPTY FONT with perhaps a dead fly in the bottom. There should be water in the font at all times. Yes, this will burden an Altar Guild. But it's so great to enter even an empty church during a weekday, and find the Font a) accessible, b) near an entrance door, c) its cover removed, and d) filled with fresh water.

34 Try to locate your Font near an entrance door. It stands there, at the entrance of the church, as the Rite of Baptism stands at the entrance to Christian life and discipleship. And it's filled with fresh water, so you can "sign yourself with the Holy Cross", as Luther would say.

35 Perhaps I will extend these remarks – add to them – in a future posting. You'll be waiting perhaps with baited breath? Hah!

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