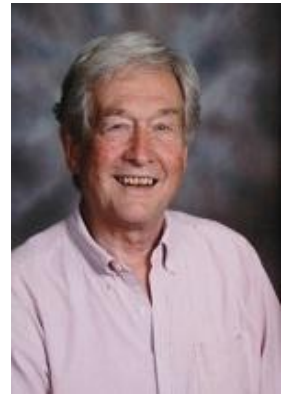


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ENLARGING THE SIGN

1 More than twenty years ago – in about 1994 – I was invited to contribute to a new worship planning resource that was being put together by our national church office, the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC)*. Lutheran pastor Andre Lavergne was the spark plug for the entire project, as I recall. There were almost a dozen contributors, myself included.

2 It was to be entitled *Gathered for Worship*, and was published in due course in 1995 by the national office of our Canadian church. A copy was made available to every pastor on its roster. And it included a veritable treasure trove of resources:

3 A) Hymn suggestions for every Sunday and Festival in the Church Year Calendar. Our worship resources in those days included *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978), along with a *Supplement* (in 1991), and an *Augsburg-Fortress* product, *With One Voice* (in 1995)...

B) Optional prayers of the day (the so-called Collect for the Day)...

C) Verse and Offertory for every Sunday and Festival...

D) An optional Offertory Prayer and Post-Communion Prayer for every Sunday and festival...

E) A brief essay on matters pertaining to Christian worship entitled “Crafting Worship”...

F) Further aids to worship, including ideas for Crafting the Intercessions...

G) Notification of Calendar commemorations that were to come in the days following this particular Sunday...

H) Sometimes pertinent bibliographic references...

4 I was charged with providing E) above: “Crafting Worship”. Separate essays on worship planning for every Sunday and Festival in the Church’s Calendar! I accepted the assignment with the broadest possible understanding of my mandate, and took opportunity in my writing to cover the widest possible selection of topics and issues.

5 I’ve had occasion in recent days to re-visit that entire volume, and to marvel once again at its abundant riches. Including – You will not be surprised to learn! – my own contributions. There’s much there that ought to be preserved and shared.

6 Accordingly, I post this month – almost without change – a selection of my own “Crafting Worship” essays. This is from Proper 25, the Sunday between September 18 and September 24. In *Gathered for Worship*, I entitle this piece “Enlarging the Sign”.

Quoting myself from 1994:

7 Christian churches of all denominations are emerging, in the second half of the Twentieth Century (and in the first decades of the Twenty-First!), from a period obsessed by what might be called sacramental and liturgical minimalism. “What is the least we can do – the least we can get away with – for this to be a valid sacrament?”

8 Our worship has been the prisoner of this crippling debilitation for generations.

9 Its impulses have given rise to such unfortunate aberrations as the individual communion wafer, and the individual communion cup. (We might well ask: Are these locutions themselves not oxymorons? Don't they suggest an intolerable contradiction in terms? There's nothing I can think of that can be both individual and common.)

10 In an age when the people's Communion was offered in one kind only – the Bread – it was the instinct to “enlarge the sign” that led Martin Luther, for example, to insist on restoring the Cup as well to the laity.

11 And “enlarging the sign” has become in our day an imperative high on the agenda in the reform of Christian worship. Across the board in all Christian denominations and parishes.

12 So, once again, as in a more primitive age, Christian congregations are experiencing the soul-and-sense-satisfying richness at the Holy Communion of real Bread, in a real common loaf, and real alcoholic wine, in a common Cup.

13 Scriptures are once again being read from a handsome, heavy book, with hubbed binding, ribbon page markers, and gold page edges – rather than from a flimsy, throw-away paper pamphlet.

14 And the “sign” at Baptism no longer consists of three dabs of moisture on a baby's brow. Following Luther, the contemporary ecumenical consensus is recovering Baptism by immersion as by far the fuller “sign”. Failing the possibility of providing the full richness of image that Baptism by immersion suggests, congregations might at least use copious amounts of water. As a friend maintains, “After a Baptism, the janitor should know that something's happened!”

15 We trivialize the sacraments – We trivialize our faith! – when concerns for practicality, or efficiency, or even sanitation become our first considerations. Such considerations may legitimately occupy our attention, in due course.

16 But first, and before any other consideration, we will want to allow the “sign” itself to speak to us – the “primary experience” itself – with fullest power. Only after we have lived with the witness of the naked sign – listened to what the sign itself is “saying” – only then will we want to consider how to implement it, how to allow its fullest voice to be apprehended. With due respect for our human hunger for “primary experience.”

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