

Encountering Mission

Do You Hear What I Hear?

Heather Choate Davis

My favorite holy day is Pentecost. I love that the Spirit comes into a *house* to enliven the fledgling church leaders. I love that the gift the disciples were given was not some “superpower” whereby anyone who heard them preach would instantly be converted but rather, the ability to communicate in a language that each person could understand. I love that the sharing of this gift quickly begs the question, “How is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?” (Acts 2:8) —a question that begins a dialogue between the uninitiated and their Creator.

As someone who has written professionally for over forty years now—as a copywriter, screenwriter, scriptwriter, playwright, memoirist, novelist, liturgist, blogger, speechwriter, songwriter, and specialist in theological-communications—the “communication strategy” that God puts forth for the life of the Church is clear. When speaking about His “deeds of power” to those who do not yet know Him, God is not so much concerned with our saying it a certain way as He is with people *hearing* it in a way that they can comprehend. Media-theory pioneer and devout Catholic, Marshall McLuhan, taught that this was every bit as true for all messaging, (paraphrase) “communication is not about what the speaker says, but what the hearer hears.” The LCMS’s own esteemed scholar Dr. James Voelz makes a similar point in his definitive text, *What Does This Mean?* So true! What is important is the message that is heard.

As we consider the role of worship in the mission of the Church in 2022, I’d like us to lean into the communication gifts of Pentecost by giving serious thought to these questions: What is the native language of the person in our community who doesn’t yet know Jesus? Of the young woman who holds a dim view of the church and its politics? Of the middle-aged man who has no intention of showing up on a Sunday morning no matter how many winsome verses we put out on the signboard? And how can we, the local church—already strapped for members and, perhaps, inspiration—create an *entry point* for the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives?



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This is something I have spent my entire Christian life—twenty-seven years now—working on in a hundred different ways. As it is a Lutheran distinctive to “call a thing what it is,” I will start by addressing a problematic assumption we cling to about worship. Most of our churches still believe that if we build it—the service, the sermon, the reasonably well-proofed bulletin—they will come. Eventually. And if not, well, we tried.

But did we? Did we ever say, “Gee, I wonder what our services look like to the not-yet-Christian?” Did we wonder what worship might look like if we cared less about saying it the way we like to hear it and more about them hearing it at all? How Jesus might speak to their deepest needs and maybe—just maybe—how we might find new life in this wilderness season by helping to “make His path straight”?

Relax. I’m not going to suggest you change your Sunday worship service. There’s no point—they’re not coming anyway. What I am going to recommend is that you build something just for them. Don’t call it Worship; too many ecclesiastical restraints on the use of that word. Call it a service if you like or, simply, a gathering where people might come to experience the peace that passes all human understanding.

Years ago, I created a very simple event to do just this. I called it PEACE, *a quiet time for psalmody and prayer*. We held it on Wednesday nights in the summer, beginning at 8:00 pm when the sun was still up, and ending at 9:00 in candlelight, renewed. There was no sermon. No sacraments. Just a handful of *Taizé* chant refrains, a Scripture reading or two, and deep periods of silence in between. It was intentionally informal. I led it sitting on the steps of the altar and people were invited to sit on cushions on the floor near the cross or in the front pews. There was an intimacy unlike anything that can happen in the busyness of a Sunday worship. A healing silence. In the end we always stood in a circle, held hands, and said the Lord’s Prayer, gently enfolding those who were new to it.

The beauty of a service like this is that it can be led by a lay person and requires no real preparation. No bulletins, no ushers, no music rehearsals, no coffee to make and serve and clean up after. I led the chant refrains *a cappella*. I usually started off by saying something both self-effacing and true: “I’m not a singer, so I’d appreciate it if you could rescue me by joining in.”

If you’re not familiar with the chants of *Taizé*, they are intentionally simple, almost exclusively Psalm-based, and designed to be sung in repetition allowing the gathered to pick up the words and tunes quickly and carry them home as they journey—just like those first believers—through the week. Unlike traditional hymns, which teach doctrine about Jesus, or contemporary songs, which proclaim devotion to Jesus, these chants speak first to the longings of *the hearer*, who just isn’t there yet. God is still loosening the soil of their hearts.

The following are some examples of *Taizé* chants. “By night we travel in darkness in search of living water, only our thirst leads us on.” “In God alone my soul can find rest and peace, in God my peace and joy.” “Oh, Lord hear my prayer, Oh Lord hear my prayer, when I call, answer me.”

I’ve created many variations of these contemplative liturgies over the years and found them to be a powerful tool in the wilderness epoch in which the American Church now

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finds itself. So, rather than hunker down or throw up your hands or deceive yourselves that your atrophy is a sign of being a remnant, I invite you to remember that our model is not made of brick-and-mortar but of the living Cornerstone—Jesus—who always meets people where they are. May this song lyric encourage you as you venture: “*Bring on that wilderness, we’ve been this way before.*”

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