

# Worship and Outreach

Paul Muench

While working as a missionary in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, my friend John was asked to be the guest preacher for a special worship service at a coastal congregation. Since there were no roads from the highlands to the coastal town of Wewak, flying was the only realistic way to travel.

Upon checking the flight schedule, John was confident the trip would be possible in the time constraints he had. It was very important to him to be back at his work at Mt. Hagen, a city in the highlands, on Monday. There were no problems with getting to Wewak on the Saturday; however, John was somewhat concerned about the Sunday schedule. There would be only one flight out of Wewak on Sunday. In a country in which the national airline was less than two years old and schedules and bookings were a relatively new phenomena, realism added a new dimension to travel arrangements. After some assurances that he was properly booked for that one Sunday afternoon flight, John accepted the invitation to serve as guest preacher.

John enjoyed his time in the beautiful city of Wewak, and it was a blessing to worship with the people there. His scheduling also went well, and he was arriving at the airport a half hour ahead of the scheduled departure time.

The sight of a plane climbing away from the airport temporarily upset John's sense of well-being. But he recognized that the plane taking off was a DC-3, the plane usually used as a transport plane in Papua New Guinea. A Fokker Friendship plane was the normal passenger plane. The DC-3 had obviously been an unscheduled transport flight.

Upon arrival at the airport, John relaxed. Other people were also arriving and preparing to meet the one flight of the day. However, a radical change in atmosphere occurred when the arriving passengers observed that the terminal manager was locking the terminal building. A near riot broke out. Order returned quickly only because the terminal manager joyfully volunteered to explain his actions to the potential passengers.

His explanation was simple and logical.

“Normally on this Sunday afternoon flight we use a Fokker Friendship plane. But, today, due to unscheduled maintenance, a Fokker Friendship plane was not available. We had to use a DC-3. As you all know, the



---

*Rev. Paul Muench has served as a missionary in Papua New Guinea and Russia. He also served as the Executive Director of Lutheran Bible Translators. In addition to his Master of Divinity from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis he has a Masters in Missiology and a Ph.D. in Cultural Studies.*

Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

DC-3 is a much slower plane. Therefore, I sent the plane to Mt. Hagen a half hour early to be sure that it would get there on time.”

Obviously, the terminal manager misunderstood the proper relationship between the scheduled flight and the passengers.

The relationship between worship and mission is also often misunderstood. The resulting confusion is detrimental to present as well as potential members. This essay will 1) show the relationship between worship and mission, 2) point to the implications of this relationship for worship, and 3) picture the benefit to both worship and outreach when the proper relationship is maintained.

### **Worship and Mission**

Normally worship is the time when Christians are the most visible to the community around them. It is difficult to imagine that this time of community visibility would not have some effect on the communications between Christians and non-Christians.

It is also very logical to assume that God would use the worship context as a time of spiritual preparation for the people of God. Via Word and sacrament God’s people are equipped to do what God asks them to do out in the world. “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8).

For the Lutheran worshiper the only mandatory parts of worship are Word and sacrament; however, even in these basics of worship there is an obvious dimension of outreach. “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor 11:26).

The linking of worship to mission is not limited to the New Testament. In fact, the New Testament only continues the relationship found in the Old Testament. “Israel was not missionary in the sense we normally use that name. Israel was not to leave its homeland, instead, the knowledge of God was to be conveyed by the witness of Israel’s life of worship and devotion.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the Old Testament, as God calls the people to worship, He calls them to mission, and as He reminds them of their mission, He calls them to worship. They are to be a witness to the nations (Zech 8:23), a kingdom of priests, a holy people (Ex 19:6).

The Apostle Paul provides us with a specific case study in which he defends the relationship between worship and outreach as he advises the Corinthians concerning the problems caused when some Christians used speaking in tongues in a public worship service. Paul relegated speaking in tongues to private worship because in public worship there should be a concern for the person who might walk in off the street (1 Cor 14:23). Witness to the potential Christian should take precedence over any worship form, even a form that is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Even though the length of this article does not allow further explanation of the relationship between worship and outreach, the above establishes that relationship and can serve as a stimulating base from which to study the implications of this relationship for outreach.

Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

## **Implications for Worship**

Establishing the relationship between worship and mission adds another dimension to worship. The criteria for evaluating worship forms must also include an evaluation of the outreach contributions of those forms.

Just as the missionary going into a foreign country takes time to learn the language and culture of the people so that they will be able to understand the message of Scripture, our congregations must also consider the language and cultural needs of the people in our community.

If the missionary were to demand that people learn another language before they could hear the Gospel, we would accuse the missionary of presenting the people with a stumbling block that is not the Gospel. Therefore, missionaries are taught to learn the language and customs of the people so that the Word of God, both law and Gospel, comes to the people in a way they can understand.

Just imagine the amount of mental exertion necessary to learn to participate in a worship context that requires knowledge of King James English, medieval court etiquette, Roman clothing fashions, Gothic architecture, Greek oratory skills and classical German music. Four decades after being introduced to such worship, with the aid of eight years of Lutheran grade school, confirmation instruction, college courses, seminary courses and graduate study, I feel comfortable responding to God in that worship context. In fact, I personally prefer “page 5 and 15” of the old hymnal. However, confronting a potential Christian or a new convert with such demands is a stumbling block that is not the Gospel.

Does this imply that we must be less Lutheran in our worship? Are we to deny the wisdom of our Christian forefathers for current fads? Certainly not! A brief glance at what the Lutheran Confessions say about worship will be helpful at this point.

The confessions establish firmly that the requirements for worship are Word and sacrament. They refuse to go further than this because Scripture requires no more for public worship. The Reformers had obvious and ample evidence of the harm done to the church when human forms were passed on as God’s requirements. They understood the Gospel of Matthew quite well when it says, “This people honors me with their lips, [says God] but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt 15:8-9).

The Lutheran Confessions, however, do recognize the need for human forms in worship. Language, music, ritual, and many other beautiful things God has given are appropriate and needed for worship. Rather than trying to assume some kind of understanding of all possible situations by devising “rules for Lutheran Worship,” the Lutheran Confessions recognize that decisions about worship forms are best made by the local congregation. “We believe,

Rather than trying to assume some kind of understanding of all possible situations by devising “rules for Lutheran Worship,” the Lutheran Confessions recognize that decisions about worship forms are best made by the local congregation.

Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

teach, and confess that the community of God in every place and at any time at their convenience has the authority to alter such ceremonies according to its own situation, as may be most useful and edifying for the community of God”<sup>2</sup> (FC, Ep X, 4).

This approach is very consistent with the position of the Lutheran Reformers. The people of God have access to the Word of God and are capable of being guided by God without the hierarchy of the church. Through the Word of God and the strength given in the sacraments, the people of God are guided by the Holy Spirit to make proper decisions about the forms of worship.

The Confessions, however, do point out two criteria for worship forms. The forms should be “useful and edifying.” The forms should help the people to worship God and to learn about what God has done for them in Jesus Christ.

What does “useful and edifying” mean for the outreach dimension of worship? St. Paul felt that a language not readily understood by the newcomer to worship was not useful. That language should be banned from public worship (1 Cor 14).

The science of communication tells us that a form of communication is most effective (edifying) when it calls least attention to itself. When communication forms help us to focus on the intended message, they are most helpful. When communication forms attract attention to themselves, they will often distort the message. In worship we certainly wish to use forms that will not distort our intended message.

The forms that will attract least attention to themselves are the forms most common to the people. New forms need to be learned. Forms from the culture do not suffer from this problem. Forms from outside the culture are most often changed (distorted) as they enter a new culture.

The Duna people of Papua New Guinea were known to the peoples around them as a singing people. This reputation confused me when I first came to work among them, because they had a difficult time singing in worship services. My encouraging, special practice sessions, and better translation did not solve the problem.

The long walk necessary to visit congregations gave me time to ponder the problem. On one of these walks, I became concerned for a teenage boy who was helping me to carry supplies that I needed for the long walk. The boy, who had been happy to come with me, suddenly began singing what I interpreted to be a mournful song. The tempo was very slow. My language abilities were not yet such that I could comprehend the poetic words of the song, but the tune was certainly slow and, to me, mournful.

However, when I inquired, I found that the boy was not depressed. He did not even have a stomachache. I was told he was singing a beautiful love song.

A few days later as I was listening to the funeral song a mother was singing for her child who had died the previous evening, I realized what us missionaries had allowed to happen by importing outside music. The funeral song had a very rapid tempo. In the Duna culture, a rapid tempo meant sadness, a slow tempo communicated happiness.

By putting Duna words to Western music, we were combining happy words with what the Duna considered sad music and sad words with happy music. The music forms we used for worship attracted so much confusing attention to themselves the Duna people found it almost impossible to sing.

As students of Luther, we have a precedent that would encourage us to avoid this kind of mistake. In 1525 a friend of Luther, Nicholas Hausmann, sent Luther a few samples of German liturgies. Luther returned them. “I hate to see Latin notes set over the German words. I told the publisher what the German manner of singing is. That is what I will introduce here.”<sup>3</sup>

Luther’s great concern that the people hear the Word of God extended also to his choice of music. Foreign music forms confused his people. His people understood German music best. (I wonder how Luther might react to our Lutheran hymnals. Nearly all of these hymns were written in another culture.)

There are also some profound theological implications. Our message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ will be distorted if we insist that the new Christian or the potential Christian must learn a new communication system in order to participate in Christian worship. Instead of the Good News of Jesus Christ we may be communicating bad news about the kind of music a people understand and like. We may be asking people to stumble on something that is not the Word of God.

The Biblical and Confessional requirements for Lutheran worship are Word and sacrament. Word and sacrament must, of course, be “incarnated.” They come to us in human forms. The outreach dimension of worship tells us that the human forms surrounding Word and sacrament should be forms that are understood by the people of that place. And, finally, the people of the place, the local congregation, is the group that has the responsibility for making decisions about what are appropriate worship forms.

However, the choice of appropriate worship forms is more complex. More appropriate for whom? Most congregations will have a variety of people with a variety of backgrounds.

Some people will have had a long history of using a form of worship. I find special memories in “page 5 and 15.” Many of the special worship events in my life have been framed within these forms of worship. Some people have a special attachment to classical music. Any other style of music would seem to them less than worshipful. How does the local congregation deal with these needs as well as the needs of the potential Christian and the new Christian?

There is no simple answer to this problem. The Christian congregation must consider the needs of all its people as well as the needs of outreach. However, I feel there are some criteria very helpful to the congregation. Luther does a good job of using these criteria, and I am convinced that he gets them from the Apostle Paul.

But such orders are needed for those who are still becoming Christians.  
... They [orders of worship] are essential especially for the immature and

Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

the young who must be trained and educated in Scripture and God's Word daily so that they may become familiar with the Bible, grounded, well versed, and skilled in it, ready to defend their faith and in due time to teach others and to increase the kingdom of Christ. For such, one must read, sing, preach, write and compose. And if it would help matters along, I would have all the bells pealing, and all the organs playing, and have everything ring that can make a sound.<sup>4</sup>

Luther knew enough about communication to know that in addressing a congregation, it is impossible to make the message specific to every group in the congregation. However, as a good communicator, he also knew that to compromise and make the message so general it would be geared to everyone would mean that it would be so bland no one would be impacted by the message. So, the good communicator chooses one group in the audience, aims his message to that group and the other groups are invited to "listen in."

Luther suggests this for public worship. He suggests that public worship be written for one or two specific groups in the audience. I believe we can learn much from his choice of a group to be the "primary target" for worship communication. Luther says public worship should be geared to the young Christians and to potential Christians.

Luther, I believe is following the example St. Paul set when discussing the problem of meat offered to idols (Rom 14). There is no prescribed worship form for Christian worship. A great variety of things are possible and appropriate in worship. However, we will have to make a choice. And our choice will have an effect on the congregation.

St. Paul and Luther made choices that considered the needs of outreach. St. Paul advocated restricting the choices to those that could be understood best by the weaker Christian. Luther suggests we choose forms for worship that will meet the needs of young Christians and potential Christians.

### **Benefits to Worship and Outreach**

When the proper relationship between worship and outreach is maintained, both will benefit. Worship will more clearly communicate the Word, and the sacraments will be better understood. Outreach will be better able to focus on the task of bringing the potential Christian into contact with the Word of God.

I often advise congregations making decisions about worship to give 51% of their voting power to people who are not yet Christian. The criteria for making worship decisions needs to be more theological than "I like," "This is how we have always done it," or "This is what the pastor wants." If outreach is to be a priority in a congregation, then the decision-making criteria for worship will include the needs of potential and new Christians.

When the proper relationship between worship and outreach is maintained, both will benefit.

Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

Of course, to be helpful, decision-making criteria need to be used. An excellent way for leaders to build a healthy use of proper criteria is to provide many opportunities for making choices. When worship is being planned, leaders should present several options. This will help avoid the assumption that the form presented is the “right” form. Presented with a choice, the worship committee will have the opportunity to ask, “What is the most useful and edifying in this situation? And, of course, you will regularly want to encourage the committee to tell why it chose one option rather than the other. If outreach is a part of their philosophy of ministry, you will soon see it in the decision they make.

When the outreach dimension of worship is considered, it is less likely that the worship will become outdated. If St. Paul’s concern about the person coming in off the street is considered when making worship decisions, the language and forms of worship will be adjusted to communicate well to the people in our situation today.

Updating religious forms does not mean that we abandon correct doctrine. In fact, not updating worship forms is more likely to result in false doctrine than a proper concern with being relevant will. C.H. Kraft puts it this way, “Holding to religious forms that have lost their intended meanings, as the Pharisees did is superstition.”<sup>5</sup> The proper updating of the language and ritual forms that we use for worship will strengthen the communication of correct doctrine.

Understanding the relationship between worship and outreach will, I believe, also give us a greater appreciation for the best traditions of Christian worship. My study of Christian worship leads me to believe that when the church was most active in outreach, worship was at its best. When mission lagged, worship stagnated. When you find a great proliferation of worship forms, you also find a time of much mission activity.

Outreach also benefits from the relationship. When worship forms are relevant, it is much simpler to bring potential Christians to hear the Word. Rather than a frustrated “You’re all crazy,” the potential Christian is more likely to say, “God is really among you” when brought into a worship context that can be readily understood.

With worship forms appropriate to the community of the congregation, there is more time for sharing and feeding on the Word, rather than hours of translating for the potential or new Christian. Rather than being forced to take the time to explain the cultural history of a form and its supposed meaning in this context, relevant forms will communicate intended meanings without the need for additional study.

Appropriate worship forms will also make the movement from worship to witness easier. When worship happens in a special or outdated language, the witness will need to take the extra effort to translate the Word he has heard before sharing. When the proper relationship between worship and outreach is kept, the transition from church to street is made easier.

As I mentioned earlier in the article, in a mission situation we make learning the language and culture of a people a priority. With all of the upheaval in the world, as well as in the United States, we are in a mission situation. With the refugees fleeing Ukraine,

Copyright 2022 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 30, no. 1 (2022) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail [lsfmissiology@gmail.com](mailto:lsfmissiology@gmail.com) to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

and more than a million migrants streaming across the border of the United States, we are in or near a cross-cultural situation. And, in many of these situations, we will not even have the usual structures of an established building, a usual routine of worship, and a history of music choices. Recognizing the relationship between worship and mission should be easier in these situations and obviously is very necessary.

Witness is enhanced when worship communicates that God is a God of today. God is capable of understanding and using forms of our cultural world. Incarnation is still happening today. God is alive and functioning in the world of today. Just as Jesus was not ashamed to come into the world as a human being to save us (Phil 2:5-11), God still comes to us in ways that are understood by us. We are not required to learn a sacred language or perform a secret ritual. God, in His great love for us, become human.

At the heart of Lutheran theology is our understanding that we are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus. This theology is best expressed in both our worship and our witness when we come to people in their world, when we communicate in ways that are readily understood by the people around us.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> J.G. Davies, *Worship and Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 515.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, in *Luther's Works, Vol. 53: Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 54.

<sup>4</sup> Luther, 53:62.

<sup>5</sup> C. H. Craft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 331.