Incarnational Worship

Liisa Tino

Abstract

How do we incarnate our Lutheran heritage in order to communicate the Gospel? When we plan and carry out worship, we need to make sure everyone can "see Jesus" (Matthew 20:32-33). This is the challenge for both the overseas missionary and the professional church worker in America: to find the best way to communicate "God with us" to the worshiping community. Just as God's Word has been translated into hundreds of heart-languages around the world, our liturgies and hymnodies also need to reach the hearts of the people with whom we work. From the Reformation and up to the present, Lutherans have been innovating so that the Word is preached and understood by the audience in their vernacular.

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel" resonates from the choir lofts during the season of Advent, followed by an exuberant "Joy to the World – the Lord Has Come" on Christmas Eve! But do the rest of our liturgical efforts reflect the same biblical truth—that God came to the earth to dwell amongst men? Do we strive to give meaning to the fact that God sent His Son from the lofty heights of a perfect heaven to take on human flesh and *become like us* through our words and music? And who is "us"? The German or European immigrant settled in America about 200 years ago? What about the Maasai in his hut in the Tanzanian bush, or the Bolivian cooking potatoes on her woodstove high in the Andes? Yes, this is the cultural challenge for the missionary, or the church musician, or even pastors today: to find the best way to communicate "God with us" to the worshiping community wherever that may be, while keeping alive our rich Lutheran heritage.

An essential component of this heritage is our liturgy. It is the framework that organizes and guides Lutheran worship services. It includes an order of spoken and sung responses that are designed to unite worshipers in confession, absolution, and the reading of scripture. At the center of Lutheran corporate worship is the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Unlike many evangelical churches where hymn singing and Bible teaching is loosely organized around a Biblical theme, most Lutheran churches follow the calendar of the Church Year which has specific pericopes, or excerpts

---

Liisa Tino is a trained Lutheran educator and musician. She has served for over 30 years - as a missionary in Venezuela, as a Lutheran School teacher and church musician in South Florida, and currently as a missionary in Chile under the auspices of Global Lutheran Outreach. She is married and has four children and five grandchildren.

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 to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

from scripture, for each Sunday or holy day. "It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel" (AC VII).[1]

As a Lutheran educator I am proud of our reputation as a "teaching church." Liturgy is one of those beautiful tools to educate believers. The opportunity to follow the life of Christ through the elements of our liturgy each Sunday is a rich experience (when properly understood!) Repetition through singing and reciting scripture creates a solid foundation for the regular worshiper. Who has not had the goose-bump experience of hearing a toddler sing at the top of his/her little lungs "Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabbaoth! Heav'n and earth are filled with Thy glory!"?

But worship is much more than education! Worship is a command from God with a higher purpose: to acknowledge the greatness of our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; to remind us that we are His chosen people; and to receive from Him the abundant gifts of grace. Yet without Christ's intervention, we are unable to offer anything to God in worship. The Lutheran Confessions say: "We cannot offer anything to God unless we have first been reconciled and reborn. The greatest possible comfort comes from this doctrine that the highest worship in the Gospel is the desire to receive forgiveness of sins, grace, and righteousness" (AP IV).[2] We, the created ones, long for our Creator. This longing for God is, in itself, worship. "Man's *desiring* to receive forgiveness, grace, and righteousness is worship. . . . It is not the mere participation in Holy Baptism or the Lord's Supper that is worship; but the reaching out to God by the believer during his participation or as he meditates on God's gift in the Sacrament, that is worship."[3] Thus, in the broad sense, worship is "the response of the creature to the Creator."[4]

Worship is the heartbeat of the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." We are to acknowledge the Lord as our one and only source of strength. "Sing to God, sing in praise of his name, extol him who rides on the clouds; rejoice before him—his name is the LORD." (Ps 68:4, NIV). In Luke 4:8 Jesus quotes the Old Testament: "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" (NIV)

The Triune God is present in worship. We, the created, beseech our Father and Creator, and we are forgiven and made holy by His Son, the Redeemer. God the Holy Spirit empowers the believer to respond in praise and thanksgiving.

The Word in Worship—in the language of the people

When one studies the origin of the individual parts of Lutheran liturgy and many of the "traditional" hymns, it is clear they are taken directly from scripture. King David is probably our greatest resource for worship material. His story begins in the book of 1 Samuel as a young shepherd, playing his harp while out in the fields. Later, his harp playing is employed to soothe the troubled spirits of King Saul. By the time we get to the end of the book of Psalms, primarily composed by David, we read that the Lord should be praised with "the trumpet sound…with tambourine and dance…with loud clashing cymbals" (Ps

150:3–5). Whether praising or repenting or crying for mercy, David makes a habit of naming the attributes of God and telling of His greatness.

In the church in the Middle Ages, there was a stumbling block to communicating the Gospel to the common people—language. For centuries the church conducted worship in a language that only the priests and monks could speak or understand. Luther therefore began translating scriptures into German so that the incarnate God could be seen and heard by his fellowmen in their language.

> But what is the point of needlessly adhering so scrupulously and stubbornly to words which one cannot understand anyway? Whoever would speak German must not use Hebrew style. Rather he must see to it—once he understands the Hebrew author—that he concentrates on the sense of the text, asking himself, 'Pray tell, what do the Germans say in such a situation?' Once he has the German words to serve the purpose, let him drop the Hebrew words and express the meaning freely in the best German he knows.[5]

Many resisted this change. Some stated it was heresy, or at least unholy.[6] Yet Luther did not stop at translating the Word of God into the language of the people, he also saw the necessity to create a German Mass. Starting with the Reformation until the present, Lutherans have been innovating so that the Word is preached and understood by the audience in their vernacular.

It is undeniable that language is an essential component of our Lutheran liturgy as we strive to provide the means for believers to follow the words of the apostle Paul: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16).

The Language of Music

Martin Luther loved the language of music and believed it had an important role in the church. "…music is an endowment and a gift of God, not a gift of men. It also drives away the devil and makes people cheerful… I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise."[7]

Music is a vehicle for thankfulness and a tool to relinquish our worries and fears. When the Israelites grew weary while traipsing through the wilderness, God told Moses to have the people recount the history of what He had done to rescue them from slavery in Egypt. The prophetess Miriam, Moses' sister, accompanied the retelling with her tambourine, and all the women followed her playing tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang for them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea!" (Ex 15: 21).

Luther believed it was important for all people, clergy and laity, men and women, youth and children, to participate in the music of the church. He emphasized the importance

of singing hymns and was a prolific hymn writer, setting his words to melodies that sounded familiar to the ears of his contemporaries. He wrote about thirty-six hymns and frequently accompanied German hymn singing on the lute.[8] To this day, Lutherans have the reputation of being a "singing church."

Luther wrote, "For the sake of such (the new Christians and those being evangelized), we must read, sing, preach, write, and compose; and if it could in any wise help or promote their interests, I would have all the bells pealing, and all the organs playing, and everything making a noise that could."[9] It seems that both Luther and King David would be supportive of using a variety of instruments or different styles of music or even amplification systems for reaching the lost!

What would Luther's advice to us be if he heard us today struggling to apply those same innovations which he made in Germany during the time of the Reformation to a tribe of Kenyans sitting under an acacia tree, or to a group of Kazakhs gathered by a river, or to a new group of believers in a Spanish-speaking, salsa-dancing Caribbean country, or to a small African American congregation in downtown Detroit? Just as God's Word has been translated into hundreds of heart-languages around the world, our liturgies and hymnodies also need to reach the hearts of the people with whom we work. When we plan and carry out worship, we need to make sure everyone can "see Jesus." Besides the verbal language used in worship, there is the language of culture— instrumentation, expressions, and styles of music that reflect the culture of the people worshiping. Lamin Sanneh summarizes it this way: "[C]onversion puts the Gospel through the crucible of its host culture." [10]

Just as God's Word has been translated into hundreds of heart-languages around the world, our liturgies and hymnodies also need to reach the hearts of the people with whom we work.

People "see Jesus" when they hear clearly what He has done for them. We must carefully consider the visual and audio tools used to communicate Jesus during worship. Will they be a distraction that cause people to focus on learning a new way to talk or to sing or to dress? Instead of understanding that God sent Jesus for *all* people, will they think He came to a different culture in a different time? Will they know that God comes to them in their own language and culture? Incarnational worship results in the congregation proclaiming, "God is with US!"

The Language of Worship

When the magnitude of Jesus' love, the depth of His sacrifice, and the eternal hope that He gives each believer are understood more intimately, then the believer should be able to respond in faith during worship in their own cultural language. This, Sanneh contends, is precisely what is happening on the global Christian scene. "Christianity helped Africans to become renewed Africans, not remade Europeans."[11]

In 1989, my husband and I arrived in Venezuela as missionaries. Everything was new and different—the weather, the style of clothing, the houses, the food, and of course, the language. Although we felt like "fish out of water" in such a different environment, we listened and observed to see how we could fit in to our new environment. Slowly, we began to use our education and training as pastor and teacher/church musician. I was excited to see how exuberant the youth were at their weekly Saturday evening meetings. They played games, studied the Bible, prayed, and sang with *gusto*! I felt inspired to compose a new melody based on Psalm 103 (in Spanish) which perhaps could be added to their repertoire. I came up with a contemporary tune based on my tastes at the time. When I finished, I tested it on a few youth that I had come to know and trust. What a flop! They smiled politely and nodded their heads. I tried to teach it to them, but they couldn't seem to pick it up. What had gone wrong?

Well, it was a few months later when I realized my mistake while listening to a young man from a different part of the country share an original song. First, he accompanied the song on the local instrument, the *cuatro*. Second, the words were organized and positioned to imitate a rhythm that was challenging for me, but natural to the Venezuelans. Although it was a struggle for me to sing, the Venezuelan youth sang wholeheartedly. I had not yet learned the musical heart language of the people.

How does one deal with this? The first thing I did was purchase a *cuatro* and I began to learn how to play. Then, I started listening to a great variety of Venezuelan music and tried to replicate some. The greatest blessing was when God sent a man to our mission who had many musical gifts. As he began to study the Bible with my husband, he was our window into the musical heart-language of the country.

Incarnating Lutheran Worship

The concept of "incarnation" begins with God. He sent His divine Son to "put on" human flesh in order to accomplish His plan of salvation. We now have the challenge to take the truth of the Gospel and to "put on the flesh" of the specific communities where we work. We must take care not to confuse our flesh—"our" customs, "our" music, "our" styles—for the message of the Gospel. This is the challenge in both foreign mission work and within the United States today. How do we incarnate our Lutheran heritage in order to communicate the Gospel?

The difficulty in this process is that we, as "trained" church workers, have a plethora of knowledge and experience and are geared to start teaching immediately. Before we can teach effectively, we need to learn. Observing and asking questions allows the missionary to learn about the culture, while sharing the Word and developing relationships.

The next important step is to equip the new Christian to use his or her talents. Sometimes it is difficult to let go of the cherished nostalgia connected to the liturgy and the songs that we grew up with. However, as the "local musicians" grow in their faith, liturgy and hymnody are reawakened. A traditional hymn has new texture when accompanied by common, local instruments. The lyric becomes alive when set to rhythms of the new culture. A psalm becomes poetry of the people when expressed through a new

melody that reflects their heritage. The goal should be that the Christians who gather to worship locally, hear clearly that Christ came to *them*, in their culture, to walk among them, to bear their sins and to give them new life through His resurrection.

I have seen the difficulty that this presents in many congregations throughout the United States. Frequently, older historic Lutheran churches are met with the challenge of reaching out to a changing neighborhood. The old strategies and styles do not seem to be effective in connecting with the community. In cases like this, it is time to start learning about the new neighbors. House to house visits or surveys can be implemented. Free events hosted by the church can provide opportunities to find out the needs of the people. Are there young families? Older retirees? Young professionals? Are there any prominent ethnic groups?

After the observation and learning stage, a plan should be made. Identifying leaders from the community who can help organize is a bonus. Once there is a "connection," the Gospel can be shared. Developing relationships first is important before worship is begun. If there is a different culture represented, every attempt should be made to use elements of this new culture when designing worship. The Lutheran liturgy should be a dynamic tool that reflects the culture and allows people to glorify God, to confess sins and receive forgiveness, to praise Jesus for new life and then to be fed by the sacraments and the preaching of the Word, all in their own "language" (words and culture). The liturgy and the hymnody should provide a means to say: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth" (Job 19:25).

The healthiest approach to conducting incarnational Lutheran worship begins with teaching. One way to do this is before each worship service, the pastor or leader highlights one element of the liturgy, explaining the scriptural reference and the meaning of this specific element. Week by week there is a progressive teaching until all parts of the liturgy are taught. This process should be repeated from time to time to maximize understanding among the worshipers. For the new Christian, this has proved to be very edifying.

Another useful tool is to provide alternative melodies for different elements of the liturgy. There is a wealth of options that can be substituted for the Gloria Patri, the Kyrie Eleison, the Sanctus, and so forth. These melodies should be rehearsed ahead of time and properly introduced so the parishioner can sing along. If a particular melody is difficult for the average churchgoer to sing, a different one should be used. There is little value to struggling with a "foreign" tune or singing badly when there are other options. Additionally, local musicians should be encouraged to compose original arrangements to be used in the context of liturgy.

If a particular melody is difficult for the average churchgoer to sing, a different one should be used. There is little value to struggling with a "foreign" tune or singing badly when there are other options.

For over twenty years as missionaries in Spanish-speaking cultures, it has been interesting to see how Lutheranism is received. Because of the traditionally Catholic history in Hispanic countries, liturgy is often familiar to the newcomer. We hear comments such as, "Yes, this is just like the Catholic church." Or "Your church reminds me of when I used to go to mass with my grandmother." Or "This is just another church that recites mumbo jumbo and the priest is up front scolding the commoner!" I guess we could say there have been a few hurdles along the way! How do we adapt our liturgy so that it communicates to and connects with the people?

Martin Luther also dealt with this same challenge of conducting services in a meaningful way. He wrote:

> [L]iberty must prevail in these matters and Christians must not be bound by laws and ordinances. That is why the Scriptures prescribe nothing in these matters, but allow for freedom for the Spirit to act according to his own understanding as the respective place, time, and persons may require it.[12]

While maintaining a great respect for tradition and valuing the structure of liturgy, he also says, "I would kindly and for God's sake request all those who see this order of service or desire to follow it: Do not make it a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone's conscience, but use it in Christian liberty as long, when, where, and how you find it to be practical and useful."[13]

Structuring the language of worship

The structure of our Lutheran liturgy should be the vehicle in which we see Christ coming to His people gathered in worship. It is a tool for organizing a worship service that focuses on the Word and sacraments, God's gifts to us. The essential part of our participation in worship is our response of thanksgiving and praise to God. Luther wrote,

> He urges us to give praise and thanks. Since of ourselves we are nothing but have everything from God, it is easy to see that we can give Him nothing; neither can we repay Him for His grace. He demands nothing from us. The only thing left, therefore, is for us to praise and thank Him. First we must recognize in our hearts and believe that we receive everything from Him and that He is our God. Then out with it, and freely and openly confess this before the world—preach, praise, glorify, and give thanks! This is the real and only worship of God.[14]

Towards the beginning of the Reformation Luther wrote two orders of worship. The first was a Latin service written in 1523, and the second was a German order of service,

written in 1526. Even these were not orders of service in the sense of detailed instructions, but general guidelines in paragraph form, often with general suggestions and options left open.

The *form* of a worship service is not worship in and of itself. Lutheran Confessions state that "the ceremonies or church usages which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God, but which have been introduced solely for the sake of good order and the general welfare, are in and for themselves no divine worship or even a part of it" (FC Ep X 3).[15] Simply participating in the liturgy is not worship. When the liturgical words, actions and songs are offered to our Divine God with thankful hearts, worship happens.

Too often, I have visited congregations where a very rigid use of "the correct liturgy" has reduced the participation of the worshipers to the pastor and a small group of the faithful. When a visitor comes, the words and music of the "Divine Service" are so foreign that he or she does not return. I have observed in some non-North American cultures, the members struggle to sing *a cappella* because no one knows how to play the organ, which they have been led to believe is only "correct" instrument for worship. Or, in other cases, the organist is brilliant and plays loudly and with expertise, yet the congregation barely sings because they cannot hear their own voices or those of the people around them. Sometimes a cantor or a trained group of vocalists is designated to lead in the singing of the liturgy and hymns. Too often an elitist mentality enters in, where only those who have learned the proper chants and responses participate. Unfortunately, criticisms have arisen towards those who do not conform to these rigid liturgical standards to the point where anything outside of the prescribed forms is labeled non-Lutheran.

Instead of being divided we should be united by our liturgical structure while also following Martin Luther's insight that the core of worship is praise rather than conformity. "Worship is praise for God. It is unconstrained—at table, in the bedroom, at the tavern, in the attic, in the house, in the field, in all places, with all persons, at all times. Whoever says otherwise lies as much as the pope and the devil himself." [16]

Let me see Jesus!

Just as Jesus put on human flesh when He came into this world, we should strive to make worship look and sound like the people to whom it is directed. The challenge to worship in the heart language of the people becomes a blessing to everyone.

During our years in Venezuela, many volunteer groups came to work on projects at the various missions. Without fail, one or two of the volunteers would make a comment after a typical worship service expressing how they had been blessed and encouraged by the "Venezuelan style" liturgy. The rhythms of the hymns had motivated and impressed them with the fact that these brothers and sisters truly came to worship and praise their Triune God in every service. One of those volunteers happened to visit us in a different Latin American country many years later. This time, the style of worship was a direct translation into Spanish of "page 5 and 15" from *The Lutheran Hymnal* in the United States. After the service, my friend approached me: "What happened? I remember how

worship in Spanish seemed so alive, as if it was part of the people. You seemed to have lost something here."

This brother in Christ led me to reflect on the fact that while we are definitely united by our Lutheran liturgy, uniformity is not the vehicle to accomplish that. Each culture, each language, each region has its unique components. Jesus enters into each of these situations in a unique way. The Word doesn't change. The sacraments do not change. The message does not change. But when the proper "skin" is applied—that is, the language, the sound, the style of the liturgy and songs—incarnational worship happens. And isn't that our goal? That each person meets Jesus and can offer praise and thanks for all He has done. When people worship in their heart-language and culture they will be "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with [their] heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:19–20).

Endnotes

[1] Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 32.
[2] Tappert, 155.
[3] "Worship," *The Christian Cyclopedia*. https://cyclopedia.lcms.org/display.asp?t1=W&word=WORSHIP. Accessed 15 May 2022.
[4] "Worship", *The Christian Cyclopedia*.
[5] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vol. 35:213–4.
[6] Numerous historical examples exist. See Andrew Gow, "Challenging the Protestant Paradigm: Bible Reading in Lay and Urban Contexts of the Later Middle Ages," in *Scripture and Pluralism: Reading the Bible in the Religiously Plural Worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan and Thomas E. Burman (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005).

[7] Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says,* 16th Edition (St. Louis, MO; Concordia, 2006), Vol 2, #3091, 980.
[8] Christopher Boyd Brown, "Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation" (2005). Cited in Wikipedia, "Martin Luther." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther. Accessed 27 March 2022.
[9] Martin Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Divine Service", cited at https://history.hanover.edu/texts/luthserv.html. Accessed 27 March 2022.
[10] Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 53.
[11] Sanneh, 43.
[12] Luther, AE 53:37.
[13] Luther, AE 53:61.
[14] Luther, AE 14:32.
[15] Tappert, 493.
[16] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), vol. 75:80.