

Is Our Worship Ecumenical?

By
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Much has been written, and lectured concerning our worship, which is to be user-friendly, inviting, heart-warming, Biblical, evangelical, prophetic, and affirming. What has not garnered much conversation is whether or not our worship is ecumenical, meaning worship that is open and aware of the variety of Christian theological expressions.

Rarely do we think about worship being ecumenical. Ironically, we have been told over and over again how younger generations tend not to be loyal to anyone faith community. Since that is the case, during any given worship service there may be non-United Methodists worshipping with us, especially younger people. They come from various Christian faith communities, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox. Many come with little understanding of the Christian faith. If you doubt that then listen to how many know the 23rd Psalm when shared at a funeral, or searching for the words to the Lord's Prayer, and if they pray the Lord's Prayer, do they come from a faith community that ends the prayer prior to the words "... for thine is the kingdom ..." as in the Roman Catholic faith seeing these words as an additional phrase; or use the words "... debt and debtors ..." instead of 'trespass and trespasses' as in many Reformed faith communities; or "... thine is the glory for ever and ever..." as is the case in Episcopal and Lutheran settings.

I will examine our worship and see if we can make it more ecumenical, more authentic in its presentation and execution. Can we gather as a people of God and in doing so can we also avoid exclusivity?

One might ask why we should even be concerned as to whether our worship is or is not ecumenical. It would appear that most of our focus in worship in recent times is centered about trying to make worship relevant assuming; of course that the worship we offer is irrelevant. The answer to that question concerning why worship should be ecumenical takes on differing responses. (1) Worship should be ecumenical because we live in an age that calls for greater tolerance, openness, and appreciation of various faith communities. (2) No one faith community has all the truth. (3) We need to be willing to learn from each others traditions as a means of better understanding our own faith traditions. (4) It was Jesus who noted that there are others who are doing works in his name who may not be part of his band of disciples¹ (5) We should be a people prepared to listen to the faith expressions of other communities and honor those traditions. (6) This is not a call to abandon our United Methodist heritage or discard those distinguishing characteristics we bring to the ecumenical table. To be more precise, this is an invitation to embrace who we are, while at the same time embracing others who are seeking to worship the risen Christ.

I will briefly examine eight elements in our worship life: Scripture, preaching, creeds, the liturgy, prayer, hymnody, and the sacraments, both baptism and Holy Communion. In each case, what is being offered are overviews, not in depth critique or scholarly assessments. These observations are more an evaluative tool, seeking to see whether we need to make some changes in our worship if we are seeking to be in ministry to all people.

Scripture

How can it be that scripture can be a dividing element in our worship? The most obvious weakness in our scripture is whether we are willing to use the Lectionary in our preaching, or not. The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) is used by most

¹ S Mark 9.38ff

western Christian Churches as the basis of their worship. It contains four readings: an Old Testament passage, a Psalm/Canticle, an epistle reading and a Gospel lesson. (This is altered during the Easter season, with readings from the Book of Acts supplanting the Old Testament readings) All four of these readings are to be offered during the worship service. I am amazed at how few of our churches use all of the readings, evidently forgetting, as S Paul noted, that ‘faith comes from listening, but it’s listening by means of Christ’s message’². More often than not readings are sacrificed on the altar of ‘not-enough-time’ in our worship ... because “something’s gotta give”. It is often the word of God that is discarded.

Related to this is the thinking that if we read the appointed RCL readings that this is all that is needed. The intent of the readings is that we base our preaching on at least one of these texts. It does little for the congregation to have the scripture read and then the preaching go wandering off in some other direction. If one is not going to use the RCL readings then don’t mislead the congregation. These readings are structured over the course of three years and by using all four readings the congregation will have heard portions of every book in the Bible, save Esther. The RCL also prevents the preacher from preaching her or his favorite biblical themes and ignoring other theological issues that need to be part of our spiritual growth. I recall one parishioner being surprised that her own church was reading and preaching from the same passages of scripture that the Roman Catholic priest read in his worship. The lectionary can be a wonderful tool for ecumenical conversations.

For those who choose not to use the Revised Common Lectionary in their preaching, I invite you to be very intentional in your preaching. Plan ahead, not merely a week or two, but months. This will allow the preaching time to take an overview of what she or he is sharing with the congregation. As noted above, one of the dangers of

² Romans 10.17, Common English Bible

not using the RCL is that we wind up preaching themes that become too familiar to the worshiping community, while ignoring other critical elements needed for our faith journey, and not stretching our own theological minds. Do we plan our preaching in a theological vein? An interesting task the preacher might exercise is to read through his or her sermon, scrutinizing *theologically* what they are saying. What theology are we espousing to our congregations?

Since I am on the topic of scripture, there are two other points to be made, one dealing with our understanding of importance of one portion of scripture over another, and a second point concerning inter-faith implications.

It is the practice in many Christian churches to have the congregation stand during the reading of the Gospel lesson. It would appear that what we are saying by standing during the gospel reading is that the words of Jesus are more important than the words of S Paul, or Moses, or David, or John the Seer. We start to head down an interesting road when we say that one part of scripture is more important than any other. It surely calls into question our understanding of whether all scripture is of equal value. Years ago, while attending a rather conservative worship service, the preacher, who read the scripture lesson, instructed the congregation to stand while the scripture was read, be it Hebrew Scriptures or New Testament writings. I would suggest that we either stand for all of scripture or remain seated for the reading of all scripture. Such actions might offer a rather probative 'teaching moment' for the pastor, both personally and for her congregation.

The other item that relates to the issue of standing for the Gospel, and not for the Hebrew Scriptures surely tells our Jewish sisters and brothers that their scriptures are not as important as our scriptures; and in doing so we toss a subtle bundle of twigs on the pyre of anti-Semitism. It is not merely millennial Christians that are searching for

meaning and truth, but those raised in non-Christian settings ... and non-theistic communities as well.

Preaching

“The difficulty of preaching is none other than that of trying to say who and what Jesus Christ is. Theologians must go both ways, the ways of descending and the way of ascending thought. This means, however, that they can seek to be only signposts, pointing fingers. Only brokenly and very imperfectly can they discharge their mission as proclaimers of God’s Word.”³ Several years ago I was speaking with a well known scholar and asked him if he ever did any preaching these days. His response startled me when he told me that he did not. He believed the challenge and the awe-filled responsibility of preaching were beyond him. I wonder if he had allowed the likes of Karl Barth to frighten him away from the pulpit. The task of the preacher is one that is sacred, to some nearly a ‘sacrament.’ Yet it is in our preaching that we “... attempt from our standpoint all that is possible [to] attempt to serve the Word of God ...”⁴ What, in our preaching, opens up the ecumenical world that surrounds us today?

Preaching styles have varied throughout church history. The allegorical preaching of the ancient church, the moral preaching of the Middle Ages, the metaphysical preaching of the 17th century, the exegetical preaching of the 19th & 20th centuries to the topical preaching of today illustrate how preaching is not static. Rather, it has most often reflected where society is at any given moment in time. But we need to add another element to our preaching: Is our preaching ecumenical?

Every faith community fashion icons of our founders and influential thinkers: John Calvin, for the Reformed, Martin Luther, for the Lutherans, Thomas Cranmer, for

³ Karl Barth, Homiletics , p 45.

⁴ Ibid, p 45

the Episcopalians, Thomas Aquinas for Roman Catholics, John Wesley for United Methodists. And those who find themselves in independent churches can easily turn to the likes of Billy Graham and even Charles Haddon Spurgeon as great names to be invoked in preaching. Yet it might behoove us to look beyond our own icons and spend time reading and learning from those outside our historic faith communities. I wonder how many United Methodists have spent any time reading Calvin's Institutes. (For that matter, I wonder how many United Methodists have actually read John Wesley's sermons.) A long neglected Methodist, Franz Hildebrant, spent considerable time showing Wesleyans the similarity between Wesley and Luther⁵. I recall a Lutheran scholar once commenting that some of the best thinkers on Martin Luther were Methodists⁶.

This leads to another issue in our preaching, is our preaching theological? Such a question might seem to be foolish, but I wonder what theological themes do we preach? Do we preach about the Trinity, even on Trinity Sunday? We are prone to preach about justification and grace, personal salvation and on rare occasions holiness, while ignoring incarnation, save at Christmas, or resurrection, save at Easter, worship, sacraments, missions, stewardship, both personal and financial, to name but a few areas that are overlooked in our preaching. I have heard many a United Methodist say quite proudly that they don't believe in predestination. That might seem like a good Wesleyan position, but what do we do with passages of scripture that use such a word and a concept? Where does our theology of the church come into our preaching or even our theology of worship? In order to have a more complete theological understanding we need to reach beyond our own faith communities to understand and possibly embrace theological thought that might challenge some of our preconceived

⁵ See Franz Hildebrant, [From Luther to Wesley](#)

⁶ See Philip S Watson, [Let God be God.](#)

thinking about other faith communities. How many of us have taken the time to even scan through some of the writings of Thomas Aquinas, or the Lutheran pietists? How about reading and giving serious thought to our Moravian sisters and brothers, those with whom we are engaged in conversations about full communion. For those who value John Wesley then reading some of the literature he referenced might be insightful, the ancient church writers.

Some might contend that it is incumbent upon United Methodists to make sure that our doctrine is clearly stated so that our faithful can know what it means to be a Wesleyan. But to the exclusion of all others? It might be rather important for us to broaden our appeal, to open hearts and minds to a broader theological understanding; we are, after all, a people who argue open minds, open hearts and open doors. But this surely cannot be limited by our own definitions.

This leads to another facet of much of our preaching today. Are we even taking the time to write out our sermons? An ever increasing number of preachers think that preaching is speaking what comes from their heart, and ignoring the work of writing out what one needs to share with the congregation from the text. Such preaching most often falls prey to pet themes, hazy thinking, repetitious words and phrases, and preaching that over the course of time, leads to limited spiritual growth in the lives of hungry parishioners. What is also lost is the poetry of preaching, not some rhyming scheme, but language that leads us into the mystery of the text, and the drama that is central to the Good News. Writing and rewriting our sermons, thinking and rethinking what we are saying is an important element in taking the text to the heart of every believer for whom we are responsible.

Are we actually taking the time to study and know the text? Are we making the text our own? Have we started taking 'short cuts' via the internet or some prefab sermon service? Whereas there is great value in reading the sermons of other

preachers, indeed Mr. Wesley encouraged his followers to preach his sermons, but only as a model for their own sermons. Archbishop Cranmer circulated a book of sermons to be preached in his churches due to the lack of credible preaching in those parishes, but this was a stop gap measure until a learned clergy could fill the pulpits of the English churches. There is no excuse for turning away from studying and researching the texts we preach. If we do not have enough time for the needed preparation then our priorities are askew. We need to know the text if we are ever to truly proclaim the text, the message of Good News. “The concept of preaching cannot be fixed on the basis of experience. It is a theological concept which arises in the faith that can only point to the divine reality.”⁷ And theology is worked out in the study, in the preparation required for proclamation, engaging scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.

Creeds

In the early 1970’s there was an attempt to examine some of the English texts used in our worship. From this came the International Consultation on English Texts (ICET). Worship items such as the Lord’s Prayer were reworked to bring them into greater harmony with the original text. This can be found in our UMC hymnal #894. In addition there was offered newer translation of the church’s three historic creeds – the Nicene Creed (#880), the Apostles’ Creed (#882) and the Athanasian Creed, which is not found in our hymnal. When creeds are used, and I fear that there is an ever dwindle use of creeds in our worship, we might want to include either the Nicene or Apostles’ Creeds more often that we are want to do.

Historically, the Nicene Creed is used when the Eucharist is celebrated; the Apostles’ Creed when a baptism takes place. In some cases the Apostles’ Creed takes of shape of a question and response as found in our Baptismal services. The Nicene is

⁷ Ibid, p. 46.

often neglected because it is so long, and we all know how we deal with complaints that our worship service is too long; we jettison what we deem ‘non-essential.’ Yet the theology expressed in the Nicene Creed has helped define what it means to be an orthodox believer since the 4th century. The Apostles’ Creed, which may be the oldest statement of the Christian faith, slips into our worship from time to time. Yet both of these are part of every major Christian faith tradition, thus the reason of ICET to address them.

Our UMC Hymnal does offer a variety of other creeds: the traditional Apostles’ Creed, “Statement of faith of the United Church of Canada,” “A Statement of Faith of the Korean Methodist Church,” “A Modern Affirmation,” “The World Methodist Social Affirmation,” “Affirmation From Romans 8,” “Affirmation from 1 Corinthians 15.1-5 and Colossians 1:15-20,” and “Affirmation from 1 Timothy 2.” These latter three are Christological in nature and non-Trinitarian. The “Korean” and “World Methodist” are clearly focused upon the Wesleyan tradition. The Canadian statement is a reflection of the merger that took place in 1925 when the Methodist Church, Canada, the Congregational Churches and the majority of Presbyterian churches formed an organic union, thus speaking to their commonality.

Using the two historic creeds found in our hymnal are means by which we express what the universal (catholic) church believes. If we are interested in being truly ecumenical we might want to spend some time using creeds acknowledged by all as statements of what it means to be a true believer. They are Trinitarian, theological, Christological (especially the Apostles’ Creed) and Pneumatological (emphasizing the Holy Spirit, especially the Nicene Creed). They also address the nature of the church (one holy catholic and apostolic) and the Parousia. One of the elements that the Millennial Generation is looking for is authenticity and integrity in the church’s

worship. Using the historic creeds more frequently would go a long way in addressing this issue.

In attempting to be ecumenical in our creeds there is one paramount issue that cannot be ignored. Creeds need to be Trinitarian. In writing about the need for the doctrine of the Trinity in our worship, N T Wright comments:

... the place of doctrine within Christianity is absolutely vital. Christians are not defined by skin color, by gender, by geographical locations, or even, shockingly, by their good behavior. Nor are they defined by the particular type of religious feelings they may have. They are defined in terms of *the god they worship*. That's why we say the Creed at the heart of our regular liturgies; we are defined as a people who believe in this god. All other definitions of the church are open to distortion. ... The doctrine of the Trinity ... is paradoxically the thing which forces us to keep our minds open; having grasped, or been grasped by, the fact that the true god is both three and one we are forced not into closed-mindedness but into true open-mindedness, not because we want to criticize or dispute but because we are hungry for God, hungry to know him better, hungry to love in return the one, and the three, who has loved us into life.⁸

To that end one might take a look at a modern affirmation of faith that comes from one of the most ecumenical movements in our time – The Iona Community. They offer a brief creed that should satisfy the most reluctant of us who balk at using the ancient creeds. It reads:

We believe in God beyond us, maker and sustainer of all life and all creation.
We believe in God beside us, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.
We believe in God within us, the Holy Spirit of Pentecostal fire and Life-giving Breath of the church.⁹

Order of Worship/The Liturgy

How we structure our worship services will often disclose whether we are ecumenical in our worship or merely trying to be 'relevant.' I must confess that I am rather puzzled at the variety of orders of worship. One can easily start to draw conclusions about one's theological understandings from how the worship 'flows'

⁸ N T Wright, For All God's Worth, pp. 28-29.

⁹ Iona Abbey Worship Book, p.

during any given worship service. This raises one of the underlying issues with our worship: Do we have a theology of worship?

If we examine the stated worship of the UMC, the Lutherans, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians and the Roman Catholic faith communities, one of the facts that should makes its presence known quickly is that it is Trinitarian. I keep returning to this theme of the Trinity because it is one of the truly ecumenical realities that make the church the church. There is a tendency among some of our worship leadership to simply put together an order of worship that will highlight their theme or their sermon. Even worse is the use of orders of worship that can be found on the internet or in some pre-packaged worship program. One of the primary reasons to shy away from such is because far too often these worship services are too narrowly focused and do not speak to the ecumenical nature of the church.

When we start to put together the order of worship are we asking ourselves how this order of worship is going to speak to common good, speaking a theological word about what it means to be a follower of Christ? Are we cognizant of what we are saying in our worship? Are we affirming incarnation or resurrection? Are we being Trinitarian or are we excluding the other two persons in the Godhead? What do we say about the gathered community in the way we structure our worship? Are they participants in the liturgy or simply along for the ride? Are we more interested in ‘variety being the spice or worship,’ or are we trying to make our worship Theocentric? Is worship about God or is about the congregation? Need it be one or the other? Can it not be both?

Ecumenical worship is focused on a far more vivid image of the Holy than what we often find in worship services. Ecumenical worship looks beyond the liturgy to what the liturgy is offering – an encounter with the Sacred. It has been said by some

that the Minor Prophets often protested against the Temple worship¹⁰ seeing it as being empty and ultimately dishonoring to God. Yet one needs to remember that it was under God's direction that Temple worship was first established. Who got the worship wrong? God? Israel? What went wrong was not the worship, but what Israel brought to the worship. The focus was lost amid a lack of faithful love and the knowledge of God.

Ecumenical worship always has God at the center and the focus of worship. Ecumenical worship is not the weekly 'shot in the arm' that lets us limp through one more week until we get the next booster shot a week later. It is work, the work of the church. It can neither be replaced by the church 'leaving the building' nor the church trying to make our worship a 'happy hour.'

Prayer

Prayer can often be a subtle reminder that we are not all that ecumenical in our praying, both private and public. I recently attended a worship service where prayers were requested for the Bishop, the district superintendent and the pastor of the congregation. This alone shocked me, for my experience is that often these three are rarely referenced in our prayers. As desirable as these petitions were there were no references to prayers for other clergy, either in their own faith community or the catholic church. An oversight? Surely, but one that reminds us that we are not a solo act in proclaiming and living the Gospel.

Ecumenical praying brings before the Lord all of God's people and creation.

Our prayers often fall into various categories; praise, thanksgiving, petitions, to mention but a few. Yet is our praise of God broad enough to be inclusive, or just enough to let God know that we are most concerned about our praising God? Do our words of thanksgiving bring into focus what God has done for us, or what God has

¹⁰ Hosea 6.6

done and is doing in settings other than ours? Are our petitions on behalf of our needs alone or do we bring the needs of others beyond our own faith community, the needs of the churches in our community, the needs of the churches in hostile settings, the needs of our state and local communities, or the needs of our nation and other nations of the world? Is our public prayer-life truly universal in scope?

I can recall the local church building being called the “House of God.” But when we pray it often sounds more like this is “our house,” or worse yet that this is “my house.” (This a common error made by both clergy and laity alike when they refer to their local church as *my* church.) There are few times in worship that are more intimate than in prayer, and this is often the time we glimpse into what we really believe about ourselves, about the Christian journey, and who is part of that journey ... or who apparently is not part of this pilgrimage.

We need to give serious thought to what we are saying in our public prayers and how we are saying it. Extemporaneous prayer has been an element in United Methodist worship since advocated by John Wesley. However, if we are not intentional such praying falls into repeated patterns of catch phrases that too often ignore aspects of the church needing to be lifted up in prayer. This is not an argument against extemporaneous praying, but simply calling upon us to listen, to think ahead, and to jot down items that need to be offered to the Lord. Often times written prayers give us time to think through what we are saying, litanies that involve the entire community or even prayers taken from sources assist us in opening our prayers to a much broader comprehension of the church.

It might behoove us to take the time to read the prayers offered by others throughout the history of the church. Let’s see how these people understood what prayer can be. And here is a novel idea, what about taking serious time in reading the

prayers of ancient Israel as found in the book of Psalms and see how these ancient words could be both personal and universal.

Our prayers often tell us as much about ourselves and our visions as they do about God and our need for God's guidance.

Hymnody

I think that it would be fair to say that one of the most ecumenical elements in most of our worship is in our hymnody. During any given worship service we will be singing hymns and spiritual songs that have come from any number of various faith communities. In many cases we have no real idea what faith community is represented in the writers of our hymns. Wesleyan, Congregational, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Moravian, Orthodox, Independent ... they all make their appearance in nearly all hymnals, and are found in the variety of hymnals the UMC now use. Our hymnody may be the best indicator that we can truly be ecumenical in our worship without really trying all that hard.

However, the potential weakness in our hymnody, and one that might make it less ecumenical, is getting stuck in one genre of hymnody. Hymnody often reflects the theological climate of its time. The gospel songs many of the older generation grew up singing arose out of the evangelical and personal salvation emphasis of the 19th and early 20th century. The focus of these hymns is often "I" and "personal salvation." In the process the social gospel has been set aside in lieu of "MY hope and MY righteousness." Even with many of today's praise choruses the emphasis often falls upon the individual and not the community, be that the local community or the broader community of faith. The attempt by some to counter such 'personal piety' may well be an over emphasis on social holiness neglecting personal responsibility. What is called for is a greater intentionality on our part to stop and think what we are singing.

Another factor in our singing is that there are a significant number of non United Methodists who are (1) not used to singing all that much during a worship service, or (2) don't have the slightest clue as to what it is that we are singing because they are so new to faith that such music is a foreign language. This calls us to take the time to nurture a singing congregation. Singing is one of the best ways of making worship truly congregational. (Singing only an occasional stanza of a hymn will always reduce congregational participation in worship, while greater congregational participation is what we need to be moving toward.)

Hymns are theological statements. It has been argued by some that we sing our theology; and if that is true, what theology are we singing and what theology are we offering our congregations? Is it a narrow and exclusive theology or is it a theology that embraces all people and creation itself? Is it a theology that is so abstract that we cannot relate to it, or so limiting that only a select few get the message?

The Sacraments: Baptism

Dr. Gayle Carlton Felton, writes in her book By Water and the Spirit, that

It is through the sacrament of baptism that we are given our identity as people for whom Jesus Christ lived, died, and was resurrected. In baptism we are initiated into the Christian church; we are incorporated into the community of God's people, the body of Christ. By baptism we are commissioned into ministry; we are called to continue the work of Christ for the redemption of the world. ¹¹

Note that she does not distinguish between United Methodist baptism and that of other Christian faith communities. Whether one practices believer's baptism or infant baptism, this sacrament is a public testimony that we are Jesus people. Save for the Society of Friends and The Salvation Army, baptism is the universal rite that is shared by all other Christian traditions. On more than one occasion I have had friends tell me that they were 'baptized' Lutheran, or Reformed, or Roman Catholic or into some other

¹¹ By Water and the Spirit, p. 2

denomination. I have always pointed out that such is not the case; they were baptized into the church. Even in discussion with Roman Catholic priests there has been agreement that baptism is not the sole property of one people.

What makes the church one people is our faith in Jesus Christ, and the expression of this oneness is the waters of baptism. If there is an ecumenical moment in the life of the church it is when we gather around the font. This is one of the reasons that I have often been troubled when walking into a sanctuary and being unable to see the baptismal font. The font is a visible expression of our shared faith, and it is often buried away or shunted off to the side so as to make space for more important worship elements – the piano, or the trap set, or the pulpit, if we are even still using pulpits these days. We bring the font out when we need it. Thus, the sign of our commonality and shared community is often more an instrument of inconvenience. The location of our fonts tells us more about our theology of worship than one might think.

I know that there has been an attempt made by some to eliminate from worship all traditional signs of Christian worship: crosses, kneeling rails, stain glass, communion tables, pews, organs, and the like. Along with this ‘cleansing of the temple’ is the baptismal font. And in some cases, baptisms are removed from the primary worship services, moved to a more convenient time, an after-service of some sort, or even an evening baptismal service.

One of the most visual signs of Christian unity is baptism. Water and Spirit, the gathered community and the traditional Trinitarian formula have, since the earliest years of the church, offered a public declaration that we are followers of the risen Christ. It is the constant reminder that we are one people. And to those who are not baptized, and this is an ever growing population, it becomes a public statement that they too can enter into these waters and become a testimony to the grace of God.

The Sacraments: Holy Communion

In speaking with one of our ecumenical leaders a short time ago, the question was asked of him: What elements of Methodism help define who we are? He responded with a few items, but the very first one was this – we have an open Table. I mention this because this is part of our DNA. Whereas many faith communities bar the Table, save for their own community of believers, or for the baptized, the UMC has, via the prayer of confession, invites all to come to the Table.

Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him,
Who earnestly repent of their sin
And seek to live in peace with one another.¹²

The Table becomes a means by which all of God's people can come and share a common meal, a common grace. It is clearly the most obvious point in our worship where there can be no distinction between old and young, the faithful and those seeking greater faithfulness, the well and the ill, the found and the lost, the rich and the poor, the disciple and the searcher. If we have failed, during the course of our worship, to be ecumenical, the Table is the moment of grace when any walls of separation and distinction are destroyed.

Having said that, I am amazed at how few of our congregations refuse to move to a weekly Eucharist – the one truly ecumenical moment in our worship. We take pride in a monthly Eucharist as if this is some badge of responsibility telling all how 'sacramental' we are. I am not sure the monthly Eucharist is what John Wesley had in mind when he wrote about 'Constant Communion¹³.' But then again, we often become more Wesleyan when it fits our needs and our theological positions while distancing ourselves from Mr. Wesley when he starts to challenge us to examine our lives according to his standards. We have even, in recent years, started to 'dumb down' John

¹² United Methodist Hymnal, #7

¹³ John Wesley, "The Duty of Constant Communion," The Works of John Wesley, vol. 3, p 427.

Wesley's third rule the Christian Life from "... attending upon the ordinances of God," which are "... the public worship of God, The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded, the Supper of the Lord, Family and private prayer, Searching the Scriptures and fasting,"¹⁴ to simply "stay in love with God."

Another aspect of the Eucharist is, as Mr. Wesley notes, that it is a converting moment. I take this 'conversion' on at least two levels. The first is that it speaks to the faithful, those of us who have erred and strayed and seek to return to a closer walk with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that which is celebrated in Bread and Wine. Secondly, it speaks to those who are searching, seeking a spiritual encounter. How many times have we been told that the millennial generation is a spiritual generation; searching for the Holy but not finding it in our churches? If we want to do church in a new way what is the possibility that the 'new way' is not found in imitating what we hear on the radio or over our iPods, but found in the invitation to come and dine at our Lord's Table. For most of us, a weekly Eucharist would be a 'new way' to do worship. What have we got to loose? We seem to have tried everything else!

It might well be that one of our noted hymn writers has captured the ecumenical nature of the Eucharist when he wrote:

I come with joy to meet my Lord,
Forgiven, loved and free,
In awe and wonder to recall
His life laid down for me.

I come with Christians far and near
To find, as all are fed,
The new community of love
In Christ's communion bread.

As Christ breaks bread and bids us share
Each proud division ends.
The love that made us makes us one,

¹⁴ The Book of Discipline, 2012, ¶104.

And strangers now are friends.

And thus with joy we meet our Lord.
His presence always near,
Is in such friendship better known,
We see and praise him here.

Together met, together bound,
We'll go our different ways,
And as his people in the world,
We'll live and speak his praise.¹⁵

The Lord's Table is where sacred fellowship welcomes all to taste and see that the Lord is good. And we need to be spending more time dining at this Table of love and grace.

Part of the irony over our lack of ecumenical worship is that ecumenism is in our DNA. As our Constitution notes:

As part of the church universal, the United Methodist Church believes That the Lord of the church is calling Christians everywhere to strive toward Unity; and therefore it will *seek, and work for, unity at all levels of church life*; through world relationships with other Methodist churches and united churches related to The Methodist Church or The Evangelical United Brethren Church, through councils of churches, and through plans of union and covenantal relationships with churches of Methodist or other denominational traditions.¹⁶ (Italics, mine).

The irony is found in the italicized word. I wonder if we truly do “seek, and work for, unity at all levels of church life.” Have we been so absorbed with trying to create leaders that we have failed to lead? Have we reduced our ecumenical vision to little more than an occasional gathering of local clergy around a cup of coffee and the ever diminishing ecumenical Thanksgiving Service? How does our Sunday worship reflect our seeking and working for unity at all levels of church life?

“Methodism has never claimed to be the one true church and has seldom claimed to be even the ‘truest’ of all churches, understanding itself rather as a religious

¹⁵ United Methodist Hymnal, 617.

¹⁶ The Book of Discipline, 2012, ¶6. Article VI., p. 25.

movement with a particular mission among the broader body of Christian believers.”¹⁷ This might well be what John Wesley meant when he wrote, “Whoever they are that have ‘one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all’, I can easily hear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship. Nor would I on these accounts scruple still to include them within the pale of the catholic church.”¹⁸ Yet such an openness and desire to be such an ecumenical witness has fallen on fallow ground of late.

In a conference restructuring, one Annual Conference totally eliminated the conference ecumenical committee and wrote them out of the budget. It was rescued by the bishop who must use his budget to cover their rather meager expenses. How many of us even know who chairs annual conference ecumenical and interreligious committees? What exposure do ecumenical concerns have in the life of the annual conference? I wonder how many of our congregations and annual conferences have celebrated the full communion now shared between the United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion and Christian Methodist Churches? How vigorously are we going to “seek and work” for the coming full communion with the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church and the Moravian Church?

In conclusion one might turn to the recent struggles various faith communities have had addressing the current reshaping of our theological task.

The ecumenical movement has brought new appreciation for the unity as well as the richness and diversity of the church catholic.

Currents of theology have developed out of Black people’s struggle for freedom, the movement for the full equality of women in church and society, and the quest for liberation and for indigenous forms of Christian existence in churches around the world.

¹⁷ Ted Campbell, Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials, p. 18.

¹⁸ Sermons, vol. 3, “Of the Church” p. 52

The challenge to United Methodists is to discern the various strands of these vital movements of faith that are coherent, faithful understandings of the gospel and the Christian mission for our times.¹⁹

This is not a call for abandoning our heritage, as the Book of Discipline notes, but a means of better understanding our place as part of the catholic church. And worship is one of the primary means by which this can be accomplished.

Ecumenical worship is worship that is conscious of those who are joining us in worship. It is worship that is going to make some of us ill at ease because it will take us beyond our safe environments. It is going to ask us to be intentionally theological in what we say and how we say it. It is going to force us to scrutinize what we are doing Sunday upon Sunday. It is going to be hard work; but then again, we are not about cheap grace.

Ecumenical worship happens, not by accident, but by intentionality. It calls for us to open our minds, our hearts, our vision, and our faith understanding to see and embrace the goodness that can be found in the historic and catholic faith, the church, and the body of Christ. It is the willingness to reach beyond our own borders and definitions, our own prejudices and fears. It is a willingness to examine our own theological practices and possibly find fault lines that may need correcting. It is a willingness to do the hard and daring work of engaging the Godhead, and bringing the Sacred to bear upon our worshipping congregations. It is a desire to bring the common into the presence of the Divine and offer worship that reaches into the hearts and souls of all who come seeking to be followers of the risen Lord.

¹⁹ Book of Discipline, 2012, ¶103

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Our views on Israel & the Jews. Our Resource Store. Resources. Topical Index. (Excerpt from Chris Lawson's book, Taize - A Community and Worship: Ecumenical reconciliation or an interfaith delusion? Reformed Worship, a publication of Faith Alive Christian Resources CRC (Christian Reformed Church) Publications, carries an article on their website that promotes the practice of Taize' worship. The article, "How to Plan in the Style of Taize," says that the students, faculty, and staff of Calvin Theological Seminary spend time together once a week in "contemplative services" in "the manner of the Community of Taize'." Taize is a form of contemplative worship that incorporates mystical practices and interspiritual beliefs as this article describes There is an ecumenical prayer vigil across the globe on the 24th of every month, that will continue until we all can celebrate an end to occupation and a just and lasting resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Opening responses. Gather in our hearts Lord Bring peace through our words. Gather in our hearts Lord. Bring peace through our listening. Gather in our hearts Lord. Bring peace through our actions. Gather in our hearts Lord. In the name of Christ, who is our peace, we light this light for peace in the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel. The following may be sung several times as a candle is lit: (CH4 784). Come light, light of god, give light to creation enlighten our hearts and remain with your world. See more of One Hope Ecumenical Worship, Pierre, SD on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of One Hope Ecumenical Worship, Pierre, SD on Facebook. Log In. Forgot account? Friends, as the weather is changing we are going back into our buildings. Please pray that we can navigate dealing with Covid 19, and be safe! See All. Videos. Planning Joint Worship Developing an ecumenical worship service can be one of the most spiritually uplifting experiences for any Christian. As always, we remember that we are living into Jesus' prayer in John 17:21 "That you all may be one." If you are planning an ecumenical worship service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, or some other time: here are some pointers and items to keep in mind: Identify uniqueness Start by asking what is it about worship in our home churches that we treasure most deeply? Start in your congregation Start by having this conversa