



Worship and Outreach

In a Large Midwestern Parish¹

By John Bortulin

Introductory Matters

Every article has a context. A brother's words still ring in my ear from a past Call deliberation: "You recognize, don't you, that the public worship life of the church has been in disarray throughout the course of history?" The topic at hand has been surrounded by conversations, some of which have caused harm and division in church bodies past and present—of this I am fully aware.

So I need to say clearly: I am no expert. My musical gifts are laughable, and I have no advanced degrees in either worship or outreach.² Nor is this a persuasive essay. I write as a pastor, recognizing the gospel is the lifeblood of the church.³ I am a pastor, daily and increasingly aware of my own shortcomings, and growing, I pray, ever more charitable and enjoying the dialogue with those who think differently about why I do what I do, especially in the areas of worship and outreach, and where they intersect. I don't claim to have this all figured out, nor do I serve 1,250 parishioners and a number of weekly visitors to the Sunday Service who are completely united on this matter, either.⁴

My prayerful aim in these few short pages is to give a brief glimpse into how one larger, midwestern parish has sought to serve the lifelong WELSer and the newcomer with the same unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ, to his unending glory.⁵ If any of this is compelling, God bless it. And, if not, God bless you, dear brother, Called to serve real sinner-saints in your own context. I am thankful that this article and the ongoing conversations have given me a new opportunity to think through these items and to pray for you and your ministry, as well.

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In No Particular Order

- Hermann Sasse: "The humble preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the simple Sacraments are the greatest things that can happen in the world. For in these things the hidden reign of Christ is consummated. He himself is present in these means of grace, and the bearer of the ministry of the church actually stands in the stead of Christ. That certainly puts an end to any clerical conceit. We are nothing. He is everything. And that means that the terrible sin of pessimism, which is the pastor's greatest temptation, is finished with as well. It is nothing but doubt and unbelief, for Christ the Lord is just as present in His means of grace

Since 2014 Pastor Bortulin has served as one of the pastors at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Mukwonago, Wisconsin. In the past eight years, St. John's has seen over 250 adults join the church family through her Adult Instruction Class. This has created the dynamic of a large, established, congregation with many in the pews who were not previously familiar with liturgical worship. Additionally, John is the Worship Coordinator for the SEW District, serves on our synod's Board for Ministerial Education and Joint Mission Council, and was a member of the Rites Committee for Christian Worship.

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today as He was in the sixteenth or the first century. And 'all authority in heaven and on earth' [Matt. 28:18] is just as much His today as it was when He first spoke that promise to the apostles. And it remains so into all eternity. Do we still believe this?"⁶ **This has something to say to our time together on Sunday morning, I do believe.** For our members. And for those that you have prayed for or worked with, who saw a Facebook ad, who are down on life, or who simply took a friend up on an invitation to join them in worship.

- Paul ambled up to me after my first Sunday in Mukwonago. "Thanks for the Service, but the problem is this: you had us stand way too much." If I remember correctly, it was pretty standard fare, a Service from the hymnal; singing "How Great Thou Art" and probably "On Eagles' Wings" as well⁷, I was no glutton for punishment! The next week Paul nodded as he passed by: "That was much better." Same service. Same rubrics. Lesson learned: "How we've always done things" is a flexible conversation. **Lesson learned: let's spend a lot of time talking about why we do what we do.**⁸
- Sainted pastor and former district president Herbert Prah was quoted in *Preach the Word* 26.1 (May/June 2022). "Love your hearers as Jesus loved them." He also gave the reminder that the sermon must answer a big question: "So What?" I maintain the same goes for presiding. Members and visitors know what is important to you, dear pastor. Are they aware that you want to be there? Do you display care and concern for the entirety of the Service or just the sermon? Have you thought through your movements and your words? Practiced your pace? Does the joy show of standing in the stead of Christ and absolving the sinner in front of you? Would they know this is one of the high points of your week? "Dignified without being stuffy" is a compliment I once received. We're handling other-worldly things



Prof. James Tiefel preaches at the 2020 national leadership conference.

St. John's intentional teaching of Why We Do What We Do

1. Every AIC lesson is connected to a part of the Service. The same goes for youth catechism. The catechism student's sermon study form also asks them to list their favorite hymn and anything in the service that drew their attention. Where do I see this truth when I come to worship? Where does this truth and this worship intersect with daily life?
2. Lesson four in the AIC starts out: "Any questions about that Service you just sat through?" It's a good temperature check. Sometimes that lasts an hour. Sometimes it leads to the next lesson, a step-by-step walkthrough of the Divine Service.
3. Sunday morning Bible study often starts with "Any questions about worship today?"
4. Utilization of explanatory notes in the Service Folder.
5. Sermon connections to various parts of the Service, when appropriate.

in this place, in this hour. Let them see you reduced to tears as you explain to them the meaning of the salutation; as you marvel at God's grace to you to serve in the place where he would have you serve; as those sitting there love you in return; to the glory and praise of God. Let them see you tremble as you baptize that child. Let them see you smile as you commune that couple you were quite sure weren't going to make it; or as you commune that dear widow; or that dear young woman on Mother's Day who has suffered miscarriage after miscarriage. (A dear brother in associate ministry for the first time: "Today was the first Easter in my ministry where I have not preached. But I did absolve; I read; I prayed; I distributed holy body and holy blood; I spoke the blessing. That isn't nothing!") **Let them see this as the greatest hour of the week, and that you would not want to be anywhere else!**

- "Sharp elbows cause problems in pick-up basketball games and in church narthexes and in meetings." What does this have to do with worship and outreach? The visitor can sense when things are on edge. Members, too. Forgiveness and mercy are the rule of the day. The Eighth Commandment looks good on you. If I remembered where I heard it for the first time, I'd surely give credit: "You have found the right church when you can have a little laughter; when you don't take yourself so seriously." The gospel is serious business,

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yes. The work of the church is serious business, yes. But to have a little fun this side of heaven, in bounds, and in service of the gospel, this too is a gift of God. **“Oh, how good it is ... where the bonds of peace, of acceptance and love, are the fruits of his presence here among us.”** (CW 731:1)

- The children matter. We’ve learned to embrace their chatter. We tell young parents: “Don’t worry, we don’t hear your kids.” We provide a cry room and seats in the entryway if that’s where they find their comfort. But we do all we can to encourage them to have their children with the rest of the church family in the Service. If they learn it for hymnology, I try to remember to have it sung on Sunday. We don’t frown at parents if they sit towards the front and let their kids ask questions. The little ones receive a blessing as their parents commune. We teach the sign of the cross, that is free to be used, or not, at appropriate times in the Service. An ill-timed “Amen” and a “Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!” from the lips of these little ones are welcomed in the ears of Jesus and in our midst, as well.
- Every one, bring one. Pastor David Rosenau’s “One by One”⁹ presentation at the 2020 Leadership Conference resonated with how we’ve approached outreach. Everyone Outreach¹⁰ from Congregational Services strikes the same chord. When people come through our doors, if they do not have a pastor, we consider that our role until they tell us not to be their pastor. If a parishioner tells us about a family member or friend is in the hospital, we ask if they have a pastor serving them. We have invited some folks to the Adult Instruction Class a dozen times before they have said yes, and many more still keep saying “no.” We recognize that some of our greatest outreach happens before, during, and after the Sunday services.

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- March 2020 brought two specific blessings to our worship life. Online Morning Prayer and an online “Prayer and Conversation” meeting emerged. Two-plus years later: a ten-minute Morning Prayer is made available Monday through Friday on our YouTube page. I cannot tell you how many parishioners and non-members have commented how this has changed their daily routine. “I thank you my heavenly Father” and “Lord, have mercy” are on the lips and hearts of dozens every morning. We have now added to this a “live” Morning Prayer on Wednesday mornings during the Advent, Lent, and Easter seasons. It works for some retirees, and for some on their way to work, and for a few school families. The faculty stops in. As the online “Prayer and Conversation” meetings waned, we decided to add a monthly Prayer at the Close of Day



Pastor David Rosenau presents “One by One.”

Service.¹¹ We’ve used this Service to introduce some of the newer hymns and psalmody. God’s children (and their friend, if they’ve brought one, as they’ve been encouraged) often go home with “I will wait for you through the storm and night” from Psalm 130 in their ears. Blessed be those old words made new again! Some months ago, we brought in a speaker for an evening lecture beforehand.¹² I recognize this is not in everyone’s wheelhouse, but if the midweek “Bible study” has become an accepted norm (for which I’m thankful!), **I maintain that a regular gathering for Morning Prayer and Prayer at the Close of Day could be an accepted norm, as well.**

A few more lessons I have learned

Some people have strong opinions about what they want in worship. Over the past eight years, out of the hundreds who have come from outside of our fellowship to join us, I can count on one hand those who had strong opinions already formed regarding worship. It’s worth a conversation. To the lady with a nominal background in Methodism, I asked her: “Tell me your favorite hymns,” and lo and behold, some of them fit, and I gave attention to those in my next round of worship planning. The new confirmand from Roman Catholicism says: “I’m thankful that I don’t have to give up the sign of the cross—and to now know what it means!” Each denomination, and congregation within a denomination, is going to land somewhere on these questions. “We’ve always and we’ve never.” You could write a book! Our congregation has landed in a place where we are not going to try to “out Baptist the Baptists” or “out Catholic the Catholics.”

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This article isn't a sales pitch for the new hymnal—no royalties for this guy! But what Pastor Michael Schultz says in his Introduction to *Christian Worship* has been true and, we pray, will continue on in our congregation: "There is something for everyone to appreciate and to use: seasoned worshipers, newcomers, and a generation yet unborn."¹³ Our experience has been that liturgical worship and a frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper is not a deterrent to our outreach efforts, but rather, combined with intentional education and "every one reach one" outreach efforts, has been a tremendous blessing, to member and non-member alike!

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Dr. Wade Johnston, writing about preaching, says something that can be applied to our worship and outreach as well: "The church has time, but sinners do not. So we should stop wasting their time. There's only so long to hear, and so what gets put in their and our ears is crucial. Christ knew that and gave the paralytic what he needed first, whether or not the paralytic or anyone else realized it. There's a freedom in that realization for the preacher, that everyone's need is the same: forgiveness."¹⁴

God bless your worship and outreach to that end!

¹ Some of this article flows from previous presentations at the National Worship Conference and at the Mission and Ministry Seminar held at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Drop me a line and I'd be happy to share those presentations in outline form.

² I am, however, indebted to the brothers who have done advanced study and have expertise in both areas. I am the richer for the ongoing conversation.

³ Augsburg Confession V.

⁴ I write this article smiling about two recent conversations. The first, from a soon-to-be adult confirmand: "You guys sing some weird stuff." The second, from a midweek Bible study, when a series of comments about the recent selection of hymnody left me feeling pretty good about myself: "Pastor, we just love the new hymns we've been singing," and then quickly brought back down to reality from the back of the room: "You could pick some of the old familiars, you know!"

⁵ The context matters. St. John's is a parish founded in 1890. In the past eight years, one-fourth of our membership has come from outside of WELS, many from Roman Catholic, Evangelical, un-churched, and de-churched backgrounds. "How we've always done it" and "What I'm used to in worship" could fill volumes.

⁶ Hermann Sasse, *The Lonely Way*, Vol. 2, p. 139.

⁷ I work to find hymns that fit the theme of the day. I also recognize that the parishioner and the visitor will likely appreciate the familiar rather than the hymn that makes a great connection with the second reading in the third stanza. My philosophy here: Do the one without leaving the other undone. I'm guessing a couple dozen favorite hymns get sung 4-6 times/year. The ones that are their favorite and not mine happen to get sung while I'm on vacation ☺.

Recent Resources

Are you aware that the **Musician's Resource** (MR) is now live at nph.net? See the upper right-hand corner. Next to "Login" find "Musician's Resource," a link to a search tool and simplified site view to streamline the search experience solely to MR resources.

Christian Worship: Service Builder: Another of Caleb Bassett's tightly scripted videos was posted in mid-June, *A Powerful New Paradigm*, available at: christianworship.com/resources (under Articles) and at welscongregational-services.net/hymnal-introduction-resources. These videos are useful both for those already using *Service Builder* and for those just exploring—and to help congregational leaders to see the value and potential of *Service Builder*.

Another new resource: **Rethinking the Role of Digital Displays in Worship**. Find the article under "View Presentations" at the hymnal intro page above.

Have you seen the **Hymnal Highlights**? You can subscribe to receive them, along with other information, at welscongregational-services.net/subscriptions. Or visit the hymnal intro page above. The most recent one (the title includes "In This Holy, Blest Communion") includes lots of ideas for fall or long-range planning.

Also helpful for future planning: the **Year A worship planner** PDF and Excel files for Advent through Epiphany were released on June 17.

⁸ The more I've learned about worship, the more I enjoy leading the Service and teaching the Service. If the old advice is helpful, "Read Walther's Law and Gospel yearly," I gladly add to that: "Read something decent on worship every year."

⁹ welscongregational-services.net/one-by-one

¹⁰ everyoneoutreach.com

¹¹ Pastor Jon Zabell at St. Paul's, Green Bay has been doing this for years. I think he would tell the same story: this has been a rich blessing for many. A new book, *Prayer in the Night*, by Tish Harrison Warren has served as an eye-opening guide to the prayers of this service.

¹² Topics have included: Vocation; the Family Altar; Witnessing to Mormons; Psalms in the life of the Lutheran Church; Galatians.

¹³ *Christian Worship*, iv. One would also benefit from a re-read Pastor Jon Bauer's article in *Worship the Lord* (#106, 2021) available at worship.welsrc.net.

¹⁴ Wade Johnston, *Let the Bird Fly*, 1517 Publishing, pp. 45-46. Johnston is on the faculty at Wisconsin Lutheran College.