

Worship the Lord

No. 117, November 2022



Worship and Outreach

In Suburban Metro Atlanta

By Jonathan E. Scharf

I often describe Covington as “Metro Atlanta meeting Old South.” It’s a place where you’re either from here and you remember when the six-lane highway was a dirt road, or you moved out from Atlanta to here because it’s cheaper and you might even be able to have a yard. When I got here 20 years ago, it was one of the fastest growing counties in the state. Countless subdivisions were being cut out of the forest and farm fields, and the neighborhoods were quickly making the county more diverse. Covington is in the heart of the Bible Belt, and those from here remember getting picked up by the buses on Sunday morning and going to the Baptist or Methodist or Pentecostal churches regularly, but then fading away. When Abiding Grace started, we were worshiping next door to one of the longest running annual camp meetings in the nation (think tent revival), a staple to the community since 1828. If you were used to church, you were used to a Spirit-led, Bible-based, fire-and-brimstone worship that lasted all day. But most had walked away from that scene years earlier. Then you add so many start-up churches following the population boom that the county had to make rules about how long they’d allow a church to rent space in their schools.

I’m giving you this background because I’ve been asked to describe worship and outreach in my setting, so it might be helpful to know that setting at least a little. Although, truth be told, worship and outreach are simpler than we usually make them out to be, so the truths we’ve experienced here will likely have application to just about any setting.

So, what does worship look like at Abiding Grace, and how does that work for outreach? Here are some ways our worship has been described.

I appreciate the clarity with which grace is proclaimed throughout our liturgy.

“Very Traditional” and “Kinda Contemporary”

I know these two are usually seen as opposite ends of the spectrum, but it really depends on where you’re coming from. We use the Western Rite (the hymnal liturgy) and aren’t afraid to have regular variety in the parts of our service, alternating several settings for the Kyrie, Gloria, Gospel Acclamation, etc. We’ll occasionally use gathering rites and our choir tries to present various styles of music to carry the message. We include a children’s sermon in each service and write a local Prayer of the Church, often borrowing sections from those provided in the hymnal resources but including special petitions about what’s going on in the community and in the lives of our members and prospects.

Pastor Scharf serves Abiding Grace in Covington, GA. He is also Circuit Pastor of the Peachtree Circuit and chairman of the following: the seminary’s governing board, the Cottonbelt Conference’s Program Committee, the South Atlantic District’s Commission on Evangelism. He is an advisor for the Synod’s Commission on Congregational Counseling. He was a member of the new hymnal project’s Scripture Committee (lectionary). He has been privileged to serve many new Christians (an average of 25 adult confirmations per year since 2011) in an area where Lutheran worship is rare.

Different

This is probably the most common response I get when I show up on the doorstep of the first-time visitor and give them my standard line: "We're so glad you came to worship with us. I know that sometimes when people worship with us for the first time, it's exactly what they were expecting. But for others, it's totally different. So, I just wanted to see if you had any questions about our worship and find out what you thought about it." More often than not, they cut me off before I get to end of my spiel and tell me it was totally different. That's when we get to talk about why different is a good thing. After all, they aren't connected to whatever church they used to be going to, probably for a reason. Would we want to be exactly the same?

We get to talk about why different is a good thing.

But it's more than that. Church is a different place from the world around us. Our message is fundamentally different from society's and from most of the churches in our county. Several years ago, after a lesson of Bible Information Class, a retired prison guard pulled me to the side and told me with tears in his eyes that he had been going to church and been around God's Word for more than 70 years and until that night, he had never understood grace. He wasn't the first or last person to make a statement like that. I'm constantly amazed at how amazing grace is to those who have grown up with the "obedience" understanding of religion that is so prevalent in churches that claim to preach the Word. Hearing that makes me appreciate the clarity with which grace is proclaimed throughout our liturgy, from the reminder of the gift of Baptism in the Invocation to the power of the Absolution, to



the thrill of the Supper and the peace of the Benediction. That's a good different from worship that is all about me and my response.

When visitors see something different than what they are used to, I hope they ask why. In fact, that was one of the key principles our building committee kept in mind as we worked to design our church building. We didn't want it to look like everything else in the community. We wanted people to notice that we were different, that we took God's message for us seriously, that we had a big God and a God of love. In a county full of white clapboard churches with the narrow steeple or movie-theater looking *contemporary* structures, the powerful stone exterior and stately belltower proclaim that we worship a powerful God that is worthy of reverence, and the stained-glass windows and open doors proclaim that he is a God of love.

So, yes, I'm okay that we are "different." But that's not all. Our worship has been described as...

Accessible

We understand that what we do is unfamiliar to some, so we strive to make it accessible. That meant, from early on, printing everything in the bulletin so that it was easy to follow along for those who were new to our worship and for those parents who had simultaneous kid responsibilities. They didn't need to turn pages in the hymnal and switch sources.

In BIC people are regularly encouraged to ask about whatever they don't understand in worship.

That means explaining church-speak whenever possible. We regularly put notes in the margins of the bulletin describing why we do what we do and explaining the parts of our service and how they communicate the gospel and tie us to the Holy Christian Church. In Bible Information Class people are regularly encouraged to ask about whatever they don't understand in worship. I often tell them that everything in worship is designed to communicate the good news of Jesus and his love for us. I'll say, "If we do something and you don't know why, it's not doing that. Please ask. Then either I'll be able to explain it, and every time you see it from here on out you'll be reminded of God's love for you. Or I won't be able to explain it, and we'll need to rethink why we do it or if we should."

The repetition the liturgy provides helps make what we do here quickly comfortable, even as the texts and applications of the Proper change. Our sermons strive to consider the biblically illiterate, explaining our references and including them in the audience. We want to help them realize this is a great place to grow in that knowledge of the Word. We invite the children up for children's sermons and give them opportunities to serve in the service. Even in our announcements we make sure not to use shorthand

(explaining WELS or LWMS every time they are mentioned), encourage all to be involved, and thank the guests for coming.

We want them to know that they are coming to something that is worthwhile, so our worship is also...

Transcendent

In the first year of our work, I remember a pivotal moment in our history. It was a statement made by a lady who had grown up in a Muslim home but had taken us up on a canvassing invitation. Long story short, she was baptized and confirmed and then accepted an invitation to come to our planning meeting for this young church. We had been worshipping weekly from the very beginning of the mission work in Covington, so we were having a meeting about how we worshiped, about what we needed to change to reach the unchurched in our area. We also wanted to maintain our Lutheran heritage and doctrine as we were reaching out to a community who most often responded to our name with the question "What's a Lutheran?" Several of our mostly white core group were there and a couple of our new confirmands, one black and one Hispanic, to give us the "outsider's view." We were talking about the music in worship and lamenting that our music was foreign to the ears of those who didn't grow up Lutheran (which was more than 99 percent of our target area, really!). People were throwing ideas around about finding what music we should use and how we could sound like what was familiar to our community. One lady said we could grab some of the Christian songs from the radio and play them. The people in our community would recognize them at least. That's when Najia said it, "I don't think we need to do that. It's okay for it not to sound like what's on the radio when I come to church. It's church. It's supposed to be different from what I hear day in and day out. I hear what I hear every day. When I come to church, I want to hear what I need to hear. Church is supposed to be special."

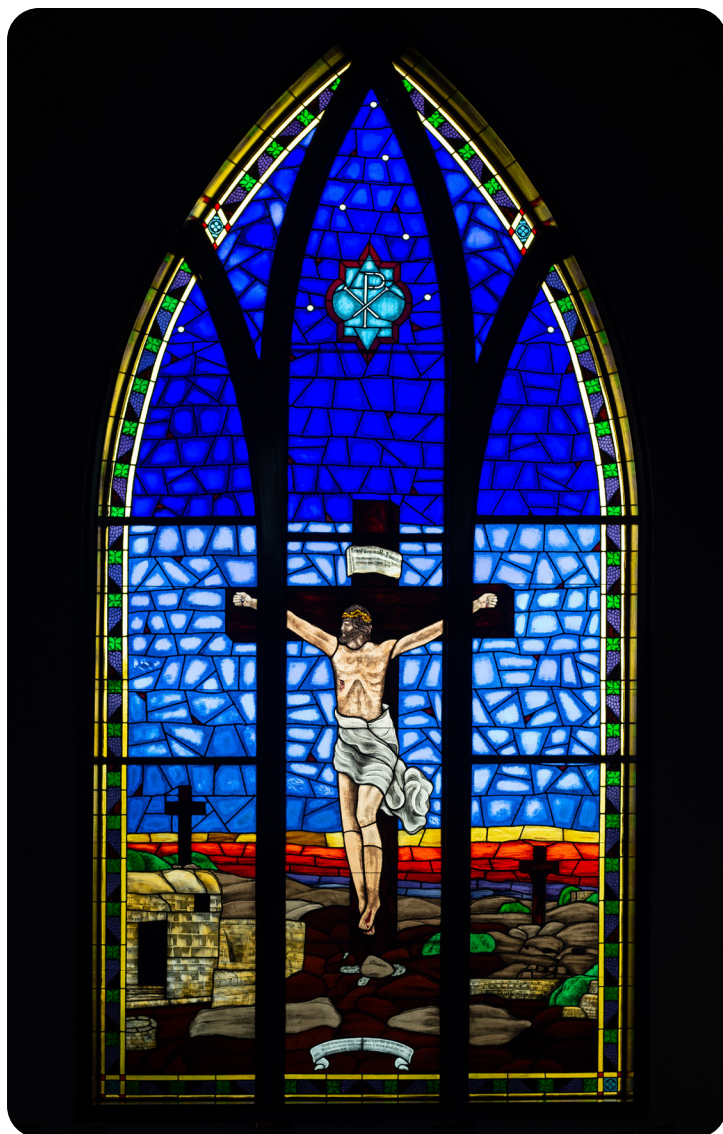
Plus, the message is different. Our hymns proclaim the greatness of God, not our obedience. The robe, the candles, the acolyte, and banners all have something to say, and a big part of that message is that God is God. He is worthy of our respect and honor, fear and reverence. "Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:28).

"It's church. It's supposed to be different from what I hear day in and day out."

Yet even though our worship strives for transcendence, we pray it is not aloof, cold, or detached. It is our goal that worship is also...

Authentic

It's worship. It is real people coming before God because he is worth something to them. It is a conversation between sinners



and a holy God. Satan wants to make it a show, a "going through the motions." The sameness of liturgical worship makes that a real temptation. The business side of church makes it possible for people to see our outreach in that way too.

A story.

Melvin was a prospect for years. He was always friendly, so I kept coming back and showing up at his door for another conversation. He regularly told me he'd come to church...sometime. And then he didn't. This went on for years. Then Bill showed up (remember the septuagenarian prison guard above?). I'll tell it from Melvin's point of view. I just heard him tell the story again because every time I bring a new vicar to introduce him to Melvin and Melvin's bed-ridden son, Melvin tells the story about how he got connected to Abiding Grace.

"This guy was bugging me for years. Every time he showed up, I told him 'Yeah I probably should get back to church.' Every time I told him, 'I'll show up one of these days,' and then Sunday would come, and I just didn't. Then he sent the closer. That's what I

call Bill, because well, I couldn't not come when Bill invited me. I figured Pastor had to do that stuff. He was the pastor, but then Bill shows up and tells me how good it is to go to church there and I told him I'd come, so I just had to. I thought it would be just one time and I'd be able to say I did it."

The robe, the candles, the acolyte, and banners all have something to say.

The best part is when Melvin talks about what he thought about worship. "Now, don't get me wrong. It was weird, but Bill seemed to like it and I realized that everything was based on God's Word, so I came back, and before you know it, I'm in the class and then I'm a member."

Did you notice what he noticed about worship? It was weird, but Bill, this real man, this "good guy," was into it. It was real people worshipping a real God using their own gifts, not someone else's. I guarantee you that on the Sunday he came, the choir wasn't perfect. The piano had a wrong note or two, and I'm sure I tripped over a word more than once. But it was real. The pattern of the church year, the familiarity of the liturgy, the gifts of God's people allowed us to worship.

Going along with that, worship at Abiding Grace is...

Flexible

Like I've said before, we use the liturgy. We preach on the church year. We make use of many of the resources in the hymnal, we follow the rites and rubrics suggested. Unless we don't. For a reason.

When we were still in the middle school cafeteria, Linda came to worship with us. We had been visiting her for a while and had great conversations. Then, she promised to come worship with us. This was going to be great. Then she showed up. She worshiped. We talked about it. It was great. She came the next Sunday. Then she didn't. She missed a couple in a row, so I went to talk to her. She told me she really liked that we were so focused on the Bible and enjoyed worship, it was the kind she had grown up with—but she just can't do it. The standing and sitting doesn't work for her. Last Sunday she had grabbed onto the folding chair in front of her to help her up, and she stumbled and almost fell. She wouldn't have been able to handle that, so she was done. I told her she didn't have to stand when everyone else did. She told

me that would make her stand out and embarrass her. I told her if she came back, we'd stay seated the whole service. She said okay, thinking she was calling my bluff. I emailed my council the heads-up and they said, "Go for it." So for the next month we didn't stand for the Invocation or the Gospel or the Creed or the Prayer of the Church. The congregation was happy to help make her feel comfortable. Since then, we've brought back standing for the Gospel and the Creed—with Linda's okay.

Worship is the family of faith being the family of faith. It's more than you can get from a screen at home, even though that is a nice option to have when necessary. Worship is more than receiving a message or hearing great music. Worship is the family of faith being the family of faith, and that is attractive to those who need a family of faith. In other words, that's attractive to everyone. Study after study, anecdote after anecdote, social media site after social media site show that we long for connections. We are wired for it. That's what God said was "not good" about the first perfect human created. He was missing connection. He needed connection. So do we. What suburbanites in the Southeast and people everywhere need is the "gathering together" the writer to the Hebrews tells us not to give up (Hebrews 12:25). Our neighbors can find from other sources more entertainment value than we can provide. They can find plenty of talking heads to tell them they are giving them God's Word. What they need, and deep down they know it, is a connection with God and his people rooted in and flowing from God's love for us all.

May God use our congregations, and each of us as individuals, to give people exactly what they need. And may he bless all our efforts to connect with our neighbors and our communities.

The Service: Settings 2 and 3

Instrumental parts and more for both modern ensemble and brass/timpani are now available from the *Musician's Resource* (top right on [NPH's home page](#)). Find these by selecting "Setting Two" or "Setting Three" from the Rites dropdown. For more information, including comments on why *Musician's Resource* content isn't coming at a faster pace, see the Hymnal Highlights from September 30 and October 14 (welscongregationalservices.net/hymnal-introduction-resources). September 30 also includes links to Google lectionary calendars.