

Worship the Lord

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Worship and Outreach

At Our Redeemer, Madison, WI

By Philip Moldenhauer

In his excellent book of devotions titled *Our Worth to Him*, Mark Paustian described the music of the church as a “soft apologetic” that reaches out into the world, an apologetic not “of evidence and argument, but of beauty, mystery, and...nostalgia.”¹ A “soft apologetic” strikes me as a perfect descriptor not only of church music but of how the whole worship life of a congregation serves in interfacing with the broader public, and it puts into words the approach we’ve attempted to take at Our Redeemer in Madison, Wisconsin. We’ve been careful not to treat the preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments as a product in need of marketing, nor do we wish for our services to be subservient to a shopkeeper’s mentality that follows the whims of the customers in order to keep them satisfied. Still, our church doors are open to any and all on Sunday morning, service times and an invitation to come are routinely broadcast to our community, and a channel on YouTube allows anyone who is interested to peer in on what is taking place within our walls when we gather for worship.

In other words, our congregational worship life is public facing, and on most weekends we do have visitors joining us. What will they notice when they come? We hope they will find a soft apologetic—not an in-your-face sales pitch for Jesus, but the quieter witness of a body of believers who are gathered together around Word and sacrament, who believe that Jesus comes to them with forgiveness through these means, and who are engaged in mind and body in receiving the gifts of Christ and offering up prayer and praise in the Spirit. Some specific things might catch their attention right away: I begin the service standing next to the baptismal font for the invocation and confession and absolution, a silent reminder that this is a gathering of believers who are joined by water that runs thicker than blood. They will notice, like the well-known former Southern Baptist Beth Moore did on her visit to an Anglican Church, that we are intent on letting Scripture speak on its own by the inclusion of three readings,² and

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that these Scriptures are applicable to our lives today as they are expounded in the sermon. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, they can’t miss the importance we place on the sacrament Jesus gave in which the body of Christ gathers to receive the body and blood of Christ.

Since it is these means through which the Holy Spirit works faith when and where he pleases, we make sure that they are front-and-center. But those means never come bare, so we also pay attention to the form in which they are delivered. Not to worship our worship, but so that such things as beauty and mystery and nostalgia might serve, as Paustian puts it, like a John the Baptist, pointing away from themselves and to Jesus, the Lamb of God.³

Beauty - liturgy and music that adorn preaching and the sacrament

Our Redeemer is a mid to large congregation of about 500 souls, and we have a vibrant school and early childhood ministry. That

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brings a lot of children into our midst, and it is what I have heard and seen from the kids that has reinforced in my mind the role beauty fulfills in worship. For example, for our school Christmas service every year, we have the children sing one of our standard settings of the *Gloria* that we use on Sunday mornings. Without fail, every year as I am walking through the school hallway some day in early December, I hear children's voices spontaneously breaking out into that liturgical canticle as they pile on snow gear to head out for recess. They sing the *Gloria* strong and loud and all together at the Christmas service, but even better is hearing the voices of some of the littlest ones joining with the rest of the congregation on other Sundays throughout the year. The beauty of this great Christian song of praise that grows out of the liturgy has a way of getting into kids' ears and onto their lips and sinking into their hearts. I love that!

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The children also remind me that beauty is not something that is narrow and rigid by definition. The best hymns, whether very old or very new, are hymns that bring together strong images with powerful and moving melodies. Our school teachers do a fine job of drawing the children into these hymns, but they are aided by the beauty that's already there. The hymn captures some facet of the gospel, and it also captures the hearts of children. You can see it in the intensity on their faces as they sing those hymns in worship.

There is also a time-tested quality of beauty in the orders of service that have survived the winnowing fork of church history and have wound up codified in our hymnal. The way that the liturgy strings together a coherent path of worship, drawing us in, gathering us together around Word and sacrament, and then sending us out, is something I appreciate more and more with each passing year. Again, I've noticed the way this simple beauty makes an impression by what I've witnessed among the children of our congregation. Every month we hold a Vespers service on



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the first Wednesday evening. We just follow the order of service straight out of the hymnal, but we do a few things to draw attention to the where the worship form is leading us: dimming the lights, having an acolyte light the candles during the singing of the *Phos Hilaron*, burning incense while the congregation sings Psalm 141. For a number of months, now, we've had a group of children who ask their parents if they can sit together for the service. But they don't choose to sit in the back so they can goof off—they sit as close to the front as they can get so they can see the action and participate in it.

In my mind, that's the power of beauty, and while I might argue that reaching children is doing outreach to the next generation, I could also add that what appeals to children is not likely to be lost on adults. So we strive in our worship for beauty that is not ostentatious but simple and dignified. We want to adorn the real meat of the service, Word and sacrament, in a manner that reflects the great gifts Christ is giving.

Mystery - worship with a low floor and high ceiling

With its economy rooted in government, university, health care, and technology, Madison is a community of professionals. Every week I'm preaching to people who are a lot smarter than I am. For that reason, one of the important soft witnesses that marks our worship is our embrace of mystery. People who are pushing the boundaries of knowledge need the humbling reminder that there is a limit to human wisdom. None of us can wrap our minds around who God is and what he has so wonderfully done for us and for our salvation. So we strive to reflect this in our worship by crafting services to be accessible but not remedial.

One asked my school principal for advice on teaching Bible study. He gave me an image that has stuck with me. He told me that you want a classroom with a low floor and a high ceiling—that is, no one on the low end of comprehension will be lost, but at the same time no one with a good deal of learning will feel bored or as if they have nothing more to gain. That's a good way to think of worship. It needs to be accessible enough so that a newcomer isn't totally lost, but it needn't overexplain everything nor chop out everything that cannot be understood in one pass. We want worship to offer treasures that even lifelong members (and pastors) can grow into and discover—one good reason to keep coming to church.

There are some practical things we do in this regard. We print the entire order of service, but sing hymns out of the hymnal. That strikes a balance in making it easy to follow along, but also gets the book into people's hands to show the wealth of resources there for personal devotional use outside of the service. Likewise

with hymn selection. We sing a Hymn of the Day that is often meaty and always tied closely to the Gospel, but we select more familiar and crowd-pleasing hymns for other spots in the service.

Thinking of the apologetic of mystery on a deeper level, I see the wisdom in using resources that I did not create but received. Such things as the liturgy and the lectionary are at some level accessible, but they also offer a lot that is yet to be understood or discovered. At least, it has helped me to realize that I don't need to sweat it so much if a visitor doesn't "get" everything in a service. After all, I myself don't get it all, either—and that's a good thing. It means I have the opportunity to keep on growing into all that liturgy and lectionary have to offer.

So, for example, I had heard the post-communion collect prayed countless times for more than three decades and had myself prayed it at the altar for six or seven years before it dawned on me one Sunday that this prayer includes petitions that look both backwards and forwards—back in thanksgiving for the forgiveness of sins that we receive in the Lord's Supper, and forward to the way this sacrament increases our love and fuels holy living. That Sunday, I realized that the prayer reflects the same ordering of doctrinal truth that is found in articles four, five, and six in the Augsburg Confession. Justification (AC IV) comes to us through the ministry of Word and sacrament (AC V) and leads to good works and new obedience (AC VI). The post-communion collect demonstrates that perfectly, but it took me a long time to see it and appreciate it.

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Likewise, the lectionary is a helpful tool that has both a low floor and a high ceiling. People with no church background whatsoever are still acquainted with Christmas and Easter, and they know what they should expect to hear if they come to church on one of those festivals. From there, it doesn't take much to figure out that the seasons around these holidays fill in the story of Jesus' life and that the church follows a calendar that makes it impossible to miss out on the main details of God's plan of salvation. Yet there is always room to grow in understanding how a given Sunday's readings fit into the broader church year and connect to one another. I think that is the delight of the lectionary—it is always inviting us to see new connections as it reveals the fullness of Jesus and his saving work and leads us through an annual review of all the chief doctrines of Scripture.

These kinds of mystery bear witness to the fact that the God we worship is bigger than ourselves and beyond our ability to comprehend. Yet in grace he has revealed himself to us in his Word, so that all of us might continue to grow into our knowledge of him who fills everything in every way. I've found this to be a helpful dynamic in a town like Madison.



Nostalgia - homecoming for pilgrims

Madison is a fairly transient community. People move here for school or work, but just as quickly find a job offer elsewhere and move away. So a lot of our outreach has to do with connecting to Christians who are new to town and looking for a church home. With them in mind, one of the things we strive for is that our worship would evoke a sense of nostalgia in the best sense of that term. We want people who encounter us to feel like they've come home, and we've had good success in that regard by trying to look and act like a church as we gather together.

Since we're pretty much worshiping straight out of the hymnal, it's not surprising that in this regard we do very well with people who come from a Lutheran background. Many of them tell me that our church feels like the church they grew up in or came from recently. But I have also heard similar things from people who have come to us from very different backgrounds, whether former Evangelicals or Roman Catholics.

How might this be? I suppose that former Roman Catholics feel somewhat at home in the format of our service and in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Evangelicals, on the other hand, connect readily with our preaching that is based on the Bible and brings the Scriptures to bear on our Christian lives. Call it the Lutheran middle—or call it what the Christian church at its best has always done in worship. We are at our best when we are gathering people around preaching and the sacrament, and therefore it shouldn't be surprising that such worship would feel like home for God's pilgrim people as they make their way through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

For people who have come to us with no church background, we have the opportunity to start from scratch and give them a solid

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A 2015 renovation removed carpet and polished the concrete beneath, painted the beams, and installed hardwood in the chancel. All photos in this article are from *Our Redeemer*.

foundation on which to build future nostalgia, if I can call it that. They tell me, too, that they appreciate a church that tries to look and act and feel like a church. I'd like to think that if they move away they will also readily feel at home in other WELS churches because of what they've experienced at *Our Redeemer*.

A soft apologetic with a personal touch

I am ever-mindful of Eugene Peterson's observation that pastoral work is geographical and tied to a specific locale—the real, mappable Nineveh and not Tarshish, the dream.⁴ But I would venture to guess that it's not only in Madison that worship seems to be less of a front door to the church as it once was—our visitors are largely those whom I described above as already having some Christian background. That means we also need to get out and meet people outside of our services if we wish to reach those with little or no experience in church. We've found that opportunities to witness have come simply by training our people to ask their friends or family members, "Do you have a pastor who is visiting you? Would you like my pastor to stop by?" That personal interaction goes a long way—people are hungry for personal touch. It stands out to them when they are not treated as just a number or another customer, but as individual souls worthy of individual attention and care.

Then, when they come to church, they see the same guy who visited them in the hospital or elsewhere. That dynamic, I think, is something we will keep trying to capitalize on. We have the real advantage that the preacher in the pulpit is also the pastor who makes hospital calls and personal visits. Especially in the era of mega-churches where the preacher is inaccessible for the rest of the week, this is something I've noticed that really makes an impression. But I suppose we've always known this: the old adage

about a home-going pastor making a church-going congregation is as true today as ever.

I've tried to describe some of the circumstances in Madison that have shaped the worship of our congregation. Situations may vary, but I think that the concept of worship as a soft apologetic will prove a helpful framework for fitting worship to any locale.

¹ Mark Paustian, *Our Worth to Him: Devotions for Christian Worship* (Milwaukee, WI: NPH, 2021), 145.

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/march-web-only/beth-moore-book-sbc-church-stranger-anglicans-welcomed-me.html>

³ Paustian, *Our Worth to Him*, 145.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 122-123.

2024 National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts

A 2021 conference was canceled due to the pandemic. Rather than rescheduling in the same year as the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership (2023), the next worship conference will be in July of 2024. The site and exact dates are not yet firm. For the latest information, see wels.net/worshipconference. Advanced ability musicians who have not previously played at a conference and those whose contact information has changed are invited to submit their information at this site. This information is requested even from those who aren't yet sure they will attend the 2024 conference. Pastors, please share this invitation with instrumentalists of above average skill who entered or graduated from college since 2017 and with other adult new members since 2017 with similar skill.

Adorn the liturgy for outreach.

Moldenhauer writes about using liturgy and music to adorn the real meat of the service, Word and sacrament. The word "adorn" recalls an essay by Jonathan Schroeder from the 2005 national worship conference—still valuable reading almost 20 years later: worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/worship-and-outreach. When Schroeder wrote this essay, he was serving a small, mission congregation. Since then it has grown to become the largest single site congregation in the South Atlantic District.