



Worship and Outreach

In a Mission Restart

By Scott Henrich

I have been asked to share how our congregation's outreach efforts intersect with our worship life. The first part of this article will be a description of those efforts. How do we reach out to our community? What are our worship services like? To be honest, I am not sure those answers will be especially interesting or insightful. I am not an innovator. Worship and outreach, if viewed separately, remain under our control. But where they intersect, the Spirit blows, and things get more interesting, at least for me. I will conclude with excerpts from interviews I conducted with new members about how they experienced our worship.

Background

"Fish or cut bait."

That was the directive ringing in my ears five years ago when I was assigned to a mission restart in Knoxville, Tennessee. Dwindling attendance, a lack of leadership, and a massive projected budget shortfall meant that the 40-year-old church would not remain viable for long. "Fish or cut bait."

The frustrating thing about fishing is that the end results are beyond our control. This is also true about those Jesus called fishers of men. But knowing this didn't necessarily lessen the frustration. It did, though, lead me to focus on the things I could control.

Outreach: The Basics+

To return to our Lord's metaphor, I didn't have to learn how to sew a net when I arrived in Tennessee. During my training I had learned numerous ways to engage my community. As I share some of what our congregation has done over the past five years, there may be little, if anything, new for most of you. That is a great thing.

In no particular order, here are some of what I considered "The Basics" as I led our church to actively reach out to our community:

- Frequently teaching and modeling the appropriate balance between reliance on divine monergism and recognition of human responsibility in outreach.
- Frequently teaching and modeling outreach as an essential part of our church's mission without making outreach the sum total (or even the most important part) of our church's mission.
- Equipping and encouraging members to invite their FRANs and to share the gospel with them. (Does that acronym make you groan because you have heard it so often? That is another good thing!)
- Praying for the Lord to give the increase to our efforts.
- Maintaining a "good enough" online presence. It doesn't need to be great, but it should be somewhat active and professional. Post-2020, I believe this now includes a livestream or some sort of video content to give a digital window into the church.
- Personal pastoral care and follow up.
- Traditional canvassing (rarely) and door hangers (more frequently).

Pastor Henrich graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 2018 and has served Shepherd of the Hills in Knoxville, TN since then. While he states in this article that "quantitative results are largely beside the point," it's worth noting that attendance has doubled since 2018 to over 140.

- Targeting major services (especially Christmas and Easter) for community invites. We send out thousands of postcards and spend hundreds on online advertising. Most importantly, we encourage and facilitate FRAN invites at these times.
- Maintaining a clean and attractive church building, including decent signage.
- Making sure guests are “greeted and seated.” I changed the flow of our foot traffic so I would have a chance to personally interact with everyone who enters our building on Sundays.
- Clear worship folders.
- Sharing a brief, clear, and compelling welcome and worship focus each Sunday.
- Encouraging attendees to fill out some form of worship registration.
- Gathering that information, reviewing it, and following up on guests within 48 hours of their attendance.
- Maintaining prospect records. Frequently praying for them and following up as appropriate.
- Frequently inviting guests to a Bible Information Class.

While the goal is that our congregation understand and share in this work, these basics are largely under my control. If need be, I could make everything above happen on my own.

In addition to the basics, we are blessed with unique opportunities to reach out to our community. Several engaged volunteers offer themed educational playdates for children (Mornings with Mommy—more info at knoxvilleshepherd.com/mwm) and early childhood music classes (Music Makers—more info at knoxvilleshepherd.com/aboutmusicmakers). We train these volunteers to engage the parents and invite them, as appropriate, to church.

Finally, our building has a beautiful education wing. When I arrived, it was only being used for Sunday morning Bible study and Sunday School. It sat empty for six days, 23 hours, and 15 minutes each week. For the past four years, we leased it to a small private school that teaches children on the autism spectrum. This provides a valuable service to our community. It has also led to



dozens of connections with teachers and families, a boost to our reputation, and some much-needed rental income.

We have been, in our own modest way, fishing. Has it worked? Sometimes, even for months at a time, nothing seems to work. Other times, it all goes according to plan. (Family gets a flyer, attends children’s music classes, meets the pastor, talks about baptism, attends pre-baptism classes which lead to BIC which lead to membership!) Sometimes, people showed up at church out of the blue. (Knoxville is a growing area. People still church shop around here.) Sometimes, they showed up because a friend invited them. Some showed up because we were the only Bible-believing church they could find that was not shaming people for wearing masks. Sometimes, the voice of the Good Shepherd echoed in the conscience of one of his long-lost sheep, leading him to seek out a church after many years away. One time, that voice of God took the form of a pastor who locked his keys in his car and needed to borrow a phone after going for a run in July. (Definitely my sweatiest evangelism story!)

There is always more to say. Bunches of WELS members have transferred in (a perk of being in a growing area) but some transferring away. The quantitative results are largely beside the point, except to highlight the variety of ways in which God may choose to work.

We’ve been blessed with unique opportunities to reach out to our community.

In fact, and to close this section with perhaps the only unusual part of our approach, we have purposefully avoided opportunities to scale up or streamline our efforts. We limit mass messages to prospects. Post-COVID, I teach most BIC classes one-on-one. (We even treat transfers like a special kind of prospect. They take a four-part course before we accept them into membership.) This comes from a series of convictions: People increasingly hate being marketed to. Every soul is not just precious, but unique. Idols hide well, even in small groups. Assent to a series of doctrinal propositions is only a small part of discipleship. This approach also addresses the immense difference in biblical knowledge and faithfulness found among prospects, a gap that will only increase in size as cultural Christianity fades away.

Worship: The Basics+

Worship, to a significant degree, is the *goal* of our outreach efforts. We want as many people as possible to hear the efficacious Word of God proclaimed in responses, prayers, songs, and sermon. Worship is also something we can *control*. That control, even for congregations that most aggressively exercise it, has limits. The Spirit blows where he wishes. Lutheran worship has a distinct flavor and progression. People react based on their backgrounds, prejudices, what they’ve heard youth like, and a host of other reasons beyond our control. Yet we do control, at the very least, the songs chosen, the instrumentation, the sermon text,

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and the sermon itself. We control the effort we put in as we strive for excellence.

Again, I doubt you will find much exceptional in what we do. I wear an alb. We print the order of worship in the bulletin. We sing hymns from the hymnal. We follow the lectionary. We do not offer a staffed nursery or any children's programming during the service. If we exercise additional control over the order of worship, we do so in a way that we believe to be judicious. You may, of course, disagree. The following is offered as a description of some of those choices. It is not a defense, nor is it a prescription.

- We often replace the Kyrie/Gloria with a hymn. We appreciate the opportunity to sing an additional song and tie it in with the season of the church year.
- We take a fewer-is-better approach to song selection, working toward what the old Germans called "Kernlieder"—core hymns that become deeply embedded into the hearts and minds of God's people.
- We have introduced some guitar-based contemporary songs into this repertoire, as well as some more modern versions of classic hymns.¹
- We have a children's sermon after the Prayer of the Day. It explains one of the readings or tells a Bible story appropriate to the day's theme.

As with outreach so also in worship: our congregation is blessed with several unique advantages. The worship space is attractive and has good acoustics. In a sea of Bible Belt big box churches, we stand out as a church that looks and feels like a church. The Lutheran emphasis on the arrow-pointing-down love of God stands out, too, as does the fact that we allow children to participate in worship. We also have the personnel to worship well. Our members have always sung strongly. My wife is an excellent pianist and choir director. We have other high-caliber musicians.

The Intersection of Outreach and Worship

We fish, as best as we can control. We worship, as best as we can control. Yet it is impossible to control what happens next, as worship and outreach intersect. But we can notice, appreciate, and learn from the experiences of guests who do join us for worship.

What were your initial impressions?

I found the congregation's active participation in the worship service more formal than what I was accustomed to with decades of attendance at a Baptist church but a bit more engaging.

Sierra's reflection

Sierra is a gifted singer, song writer, and guitarist. She and her husband joined the Lutheran church as adults, along with their children. I asked her to reflect on her initial experience attending a Lutheran church, as well as her work as our music coordinator.

When first visiting a Lutheran church—as cheesy as it sounds—it felt like coming home. The church felt like a group of people who collectively loved the Lord. They sang songs that spoke of his promises that specifically claimed his words. As a Christian I had never experienced the level of sound doctrine in congregational worship songs before. While I had always loved contemporary Christian music, I didn't know what I was missing until I dove into the heart of the Lutheran hymnal.

I was so shocked at the clarity of the sermon. Growing up in multiple denominations, I was used to a very bland sermon. In stepping into the Lutheran faith, I feel like the level of education of the pastors truly shows in their knowledge of Scripture.

I have had the privilege of becoming the music coordinator, and I'm truly loving it! I get to help Pastor pick music for Sunday services. The biggest factor that goes into music choice is Scripture. I would say that the way that the readings are set up every month as a church body encourages a clear guideline for worship that allows me to plan ahead and connect the hymns with the doctrine provided. I would say that some of the hymns are difficult because they are not bland or made to be simple for first-time singing. They are meant to clearly relay the messages of the Bible. I feel truly blessed to help the church choose these songs to sing weekly and to worship our Lord with my fellow believers.

I expected that such a formal service would be stone-cold silent, but instead the ambiance of small children was heard throughout the service.

Certainly from the very beginning I really appreciated the music. While performance quality is a nice addition, what I really appreciated was the substance. (The choice of doctrinally solid hymns over worship choruses.)

I appreciated the sermon the most. It was easy to understand, relatable, and it held my attention. Nothing laced with guilt about what you did or didn't do or how you missed mass last week. It was all about Jesus and his promises.

Did you find anything especially confusing or strange?

I didn't recognize very many songs (Lutheran songs tend to be a lot older and more theologically dense). The banners marking the church season were foreign to me as I didn't really know what the church calendar was. The congregational responses were very strange to me as they sounded a lot like chanting.

I grew to appreciate the congregational responses. I think there is value in stating beliefs corporately as a body of believers.

Phrasing the absolution as "I forgive you" was strange. Was nearly a deal breaker.

The feeling of "not in Kansas anymore" kept running through my head.

The joint congregational responses made me feel like I was in a room with a cult.

The robes were a surprise to me.

Have you grown to appreciate any particular part of the service?

After learning of the biblical and historical reasoning for the Office of the Keys, I grew to appreciate audibly hearing that my sins had been forgiven each week. As I learned the truth about Baptism being the historical moment we were brought into the family of God, the subtle reminders of my Baptism throughout the service (primarily through the invocation of the Triune Name) became really profound to me.

Baptist churches put a huge emphasis on the altar call. It is the point up to which the whole service builds; one final opportunity for us to decide to offer our lives to Christ at the front of the church. The Lutheran church, instead, has the Eucharist at this point where Christ willingly gave himself to and for us. Now I see beauty in every piece of it.

I immediately appreciated that creeds were recited, doctrinally rich hymns were sung, and political power/grievances were not the substance of the sermons.

I grew to appreciate the congregational response; I think there is value in stating beliefs corporately as a body of believers.

It took me a long time to see, believe, and fully embrace that we're saved by grace and not by our good deeds.

There is an obvious selection bias at play in this sort of conversation. Prior impressions or ignorance of Lutheran worship may prevent someone from visiting our church. A negative impression may prevent them from returning. This is somewhat inevitable.

That said, I have consistently found discussions about worship to be fruitful. I have learned to appreciate parts of the service to which I hadn't given much thought. I have learned what some appreciate and what others don't. Sometimes it's the same thing!

Some people did not return because we're far too liturgical, and others left because we're not liturgical enough. Some stormed out because of closed communion; others joined because we practice it faithfully and unapologetically. I have heard, "We love everything about your church except that there is no children's church. We are moving on." And I have heard, "We are so grateful to finally be able to go to church with our children. What a gift!"

To return to the metaphor at the beginning of this article, these conversations prevent me, a lifelong Lutheran, from being like the proverbial fish swimming along, ignorant of the water. They help me appreciate the manifold ways the Spirit works and highlight just how much of this is beyond my control.

¹ A growing variety of resources for both are available at online.nph.net/musicians-resource for both congregations with the new hymnal and those using CW93.

2024 National Conference on Worship, Music, and the Arts

Save the dates: July 30 to August 2, 2024, at Carthage College, Kenosha, Wis. (Pre-conference rehearsals for the Festival Choir will begin Sunday evening, July 28.)

A 2020 conference was moved to 2021 to better take advantage of new hymnal resources and to link the summer conference with the fall release of the new hymnal. Then, after the pandemic we planned for 2024 to avoid scheduling in the same year as the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership (2023).

Pastors, please forward this info to various people. See wels.net/worshipconference for details on the following:

- Who is this conference for? (Not just pastors and musicians!)
- Were other sites considered?
- How were the dates selected?
- What's the cost for congregations that want to budget ahead?
- I'm an advanced-level musician who hasn't been involved in the past. How can I sign up to be considered?