



# Worship the Lord

No.6, March 2004

Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

## A SERIES ON CONTEMPLATIVE WORSHIP

Much recent attention given to worship, at least in some circles, is about making worship upbeat, energetic, and exciting. This trend has contributed to the much-discussed worship wars; a recent Google.com search showed almost half a million worship war links! This trend has led to arguing and division about an event that should display a parish's love and unity: public worship.

Receiving far less attention, but significant and even newsworthy, is a growing interest in contemplative worship—worship that is quieter, calmer, and slower-paced. This worship allows time to pause and reflect, time for wonder and awe. This worship doesn't depend on an energetic leader or music for its appeal. Its power lies in a simple dialogue between God and his people with ample time for meditation.

The next few issues of *Worship the Lord* will bring descriptions of contemplative worship from parishes in WELS that have been exploring such worship. Before hearing from these parishes, Wayne Schulz sets the stage for the descriptions to follow. His article focuses on the potential for contemplative worship to connect powerfully with younger generations. But a growing interest in this worship transcends generations just as ways to implement this worship are quite varied.

**When might a WELS parish use a contemplative service?** Here are some ideas, each one a possible

supplement to the congregation's normal worship schedule.

- Prayer at the Close of Day (Compline) for a women's retreat, or a teen or college student retreat.
- Annual evening All Saints Taizé service.
- Special service of prayer or repentance, e.g., following the 9-11 terrorist attacks or on the first anniversary of those attacks.
- English/Spanish bilingual Taizé service at a district retreat.
- A special service one evening per month.
- Campus ministry.
- 30 minute Advent Taizé service preceded by dinner/fellowship (in a parish that has not previously offered midweek Advent worship).

Contemplative elements can be incorporated into familiar services, especially evening services. People may be invited by a simple direction in the worship folder to observe a time of silent reflection following the Psalm or Lesson.

The silence is ended by the Psalm Prayer or the Seasonal Response or another musical element (choir, hymn).

NPH's annual Lenten resource again suggests services or rites from the forthcoming *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* for Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and

Good Friday. These services offer opportunities for focused and intentional times of silence. The CWOS *Tenebrae* service includes a direction for silence at seven points in the service.

Some web articles and comments about contemplative worship are posted on the Worship website. You'll note some problems there, including a false ecumenism, the pervasive "music as means of grace" distortion, and confusion about the presence of God. For some people contemplative worship seems to be about aesthetics (the right atmosphere or mood) or mysticism (a direct and intense "spiritual" encounter with God apart from the means or grace). But when confessional Lutherans use certain tools in worship (candles, subdued lighting, silence, certain kinds of music, a presiding minister's demeanor), the reason is not mysticism or aesthetics. It's rather a sense of awe and reverence as we reflect on the mystery of God's influence in our lives.

Just as sixteenth century Lutherans used historic buildings and liturgies without perpetuating a false theology, so confessional Lutherans today may use the strengths of contemplative worship without adopting potential distortions.

Bryan Gerlach

## CONTEMPLATIVE WORSHIP: TOUCHING DEEP NEEDS

by Wayne Schulz

All those whose feet may falter, lead unto the sacred altar!

Show us the way unto our God, we pray!

(from a sacred music setting by Alexander Kopylov, 1854-1911)

This is a deep and reflective prayer to the Christ of God. It lurks in the dark shadows of millions of hearts. It recognizes that life, real life, fails by itself, and misses out on the important. Sins deceive. Feet falter. Noises overpower. Doubts grow. Fears hide.

Multi-tasks exhaust. Friends disappear. Disappointments overflow. Hopes fade. Life buzzes. Trust fizzles. "Is there someone, anyone, who will talk to me, listen to me, understand me, help me sort out the loneliness of self?" It is the anguished cry of

the many young adults who live in a postmodern world but do not comprehend it, who see deceitfulness in daily doses of relativism, who do not have things together, who have seen failure after failure in their parents' lives—their friend's lives—their

own lives, who are unaware of the past and are not sure about the future, who do not know how the world holds together and how they fit in, who have few answers to questions about death. "Is God out there somewhere? How can I hear him?

Experience him?" This is an echo of the age-old prayer that is prayed in different ways and with different words: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord" (Psalm 130:1). These are the deep requests and wishes of many of our own young people and the friends to whom they are trying to witness. And these words are not unfamiliar to maturing generations.

Too often we may overlook the depth of these concerns and shell out sporadic and thoughtless answers to what we can do for young people. We may think we have all the answers and that everything they are looking for is right there in our worship. It may be there, but they may also be missing it in the crowd, in the style of language, in the distractions, in the way people go through the motions. Today's young people are looking for mentors, people who model the message, not just people who seem to know and proclaim the message. As such they observe and scrutinize each other and their friends who claim to be Christians. Has God's Word made a difference in their lives? Does the light of Christ shine through in attitudes, dispositions, loving concern and actions? If so, they want to learn more about that God.

Growing numbers of evangelical writers are second-guessing some of their worship practices of the last decade. Their concern is that a smooth, professionally-run program with big sounds and flashy video-clips may be by-passing the deeper needs of many young people. At the same time, anecdotal evidence and research show that many young people are researching and rediscovering the simplicity and quiet and candles of ancient worship practices. At least for some, quiet, contemplation, time for prayer, Scripture readings, hymns,

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songs, and Psalms represent a return to vintage, historical worship.

Contemplative worship can be done in a large church that symbolizes God's transcendence. Or it can be planned for the more intimate surroundings of a small church, often as a Sunday evening event. It may also be arranged in small, inconspicuous settings, set up by the initiative of young people themselves with simplified furnishings, religious art (or PowerPoint projection of religious art), symbols, and stained glass. The singer or cantor who introduces songs and hymns does so from a chair, often off to the side. He explains how the songs and chants, old or new, have come into the life of the church and fit in with the theme for the evening. Anything that shows how worship actions and practices have their foundation in the lives of early Christians will impress young people who are looking for stability, deep connections, and continuity in an unstable world. The person who introduces, reads, and comments on the Psalms and Lesson(s) may also do so from a chair rather than a lectern, thus reinforcing the subdued character of this worship. A full length sermon may or may not be part of contemplative worship. If the worshiping group is small, it may be natural at the end of worship to continue sitting for a time of shared investigation of God and his Word. This is especially important if members are encouraged to bring their searching friends to contemplative worship.

To introduce this form of worship requires planning, cooperation, and hard work. Pastors might seek the involvement of a task force to organize the work, to find people willing to lead the singing, and to work with parish leaders and coordinators to



make contemplative worship an integral part of the congregation's ministry. This will require gathering the GenX and millennial generations together for a discussion of goals, to seek their input on how they can reach out to friends who are searching for answers to spiritual questions, and to give them permission and encouragement to promote this form of worship.

Today's historical and cultural climate begs us to give time and consideration to the deep longings of emerging generations. They are looking for authentic friendships and relationships in which they can observe and discuss the depths of the Christian faith. Contemplative worship may serve as a witness to the outsider who sees the family of God in authentic worship and then accompanies Christian friends out of church into real life situations with Christ as Savior and leader.

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# contemplate

