

“Worship Pulse in the LCMS”

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Over the years I’ve read with interest the occasional missive from Rev. Charlie Mueller, Sr. entitled “Just Watching,” now published by Wheatridge Ministries. In it, he journals his observations of the Synod through the perspective of one who has served, studied, supervised and visited LCMS churches of all sizes and in all kinds of urban, suburban and rural settings. His goal is to provide inspirational examples and models for effective ministry.

Borrowing a page from Charlie, I’d like to share some “just watching” comments about Synod in the area of worship as I travel about the country. These are going to be extremely minimalist observations and examples; space here doesn’t allow for more. But there are at least four significant things brewing. I think you should know about these if you don’t already – and I hope you will join me in praying about them.

The first is that in 2004 Synod passed in convention an historic resolution about its worship, called Resolution 2.04, “To Affirm Responsible Use of Freedom in Worship.” Basically, it states for the first time in an official way what many of us have known for 25+ years: that contemporary and blended styles of worship are legitimate and are here to stay. Further, the tone of the resolution affirms the right of congregations to use alternative styles of worship and to get past the polemic of “better-lesser” or “us-them” with words like these: *Resolved*, That the Synod in convention affirm respect for diversity in worship practices... *Resolved*, That the Commission on Worship initiate a process leading toward the development of diverse worship resources for USE (*emphasis mine*) in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

That resolution was a key factor leading to the establishment of the position I now hold as National Missional Worship Consultant, resourcing congregations through consultations, seminars and web-based training in the area of diverse worship. More is on the horizon both from this office and other official and non-official Lutheran-based sources.

Our July 2007 synodical convention affirmed a similar sensibility and unity about worship: 2-01: “To Foster Greater Understanding of Worship through Theological Conferences” and 2-02A: “To Provide Guidance and Direction for Use of Diverse/Contemporary Worship Resources.” May we soon get to a John 4:23-24 understanding of worship that knows no reason for argument over place or style!

Meanwhile, the second thing I want to highlight – hardly a secret, yet a resource not fully tapped – is our new Lutheran Service Book. I still love, use and am committed to our traditional

worship style. I'm finding that many churches still haven't taken a look at this new traditional resource which is a shame. It is simply the finest hymnal our Synod has ever produced!

Besides the wealth of good hymnody old and new, I appreciate the "little things" which, in my mind, add up to "big." Things like listing the Bible references in the margins of all the liturgy so the people can see we are literally singing and saying exactly what God, in His Word, has first said to us. Pagination that is consecutive from the front to the back without restarting to keep from confusing visitors, at the very least – a small decision with missional consequences. "Tri"-angles to indicate doxological verses for standing to help congregations to see good places to rise in honor of God's Name. Hymn texts that aren't afraid to use the rich old English (like "My Faith Looks Up to Thee") in contrast to the poor harmony and text of "My Faith Looks Trustingly). Tunes which go back to the more sensible originals (like "Fight the Good Fight" rescued from the obscure, hard-to-sing "Grace Church, Gananoque" tune, now restored to "Mendon").

Gloriously, p. 15 of TLH is finally back to its original text and music (having occurred in LW in a version that no one wanted to or liked to sing). To be absolutely precise, this LSB version of TLH does contain some minute changes: minor lowering of some TLH liturgical tunes (today's comfortable pitch range is lower than 70 years ago) and language that is ever so gently updated in ways you'll hardly notice the second time through (e.g., "But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them and I pray You of Your boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent bitter sufferings and death of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being.")

The third thing I'm happy to point out is that the polemic about worship style finally seems to be lessening in LCMS – a blessed thing. Just imagine what God can do with us when we get back to rowing the boat together instead of rocking it from side to side. First case in point: the aforementioned synodical resolutions. Second case and example of that point: the Pacific Southwest District's Pastor's Conference this past Fall, chaired by Rev. Roger Sonnenberg. The entire conference was dedicated to experiencing and talking about diverse styles of worship.

First, a Traditional Worship service was held, led by Rev. William Cwirla, a strong and passionate advocate of liturgical worship. The second opportunity to worship featured Praise Worship and was ably led by Rev. Mike Gibson and his worship team. The third style, called Organic Worship (based on the 'coffee house' model which assumes a smaller crowd) was remarkably led authentically by Rev. Travis Guse and team in spite of the super-large venue. All three services were outstanding in terms of content and quality.

During the question and answer period it was clear that all three gentlemen were extremely articulate and thoughtful advocates of what we had just experienced. While differences were noted, opportunity was taken by all three to affirm one another as brothers in the faith in a number of ways. Appreciation was also expressed for what they had learned from the others. For me, tired of the argumentative tone of past worship discussions, it felt like a breakthrough in terms of understanding and kindness, even in spiritual maturity. May this kind of conference spread to all 35 of our districts! I understand that all these pastors were involved in the planning and that there were agreements made on boundaries. Call or write any one of them or Chairman Roger Sonnenberg to find out how to duplicate the genius of this conference. It was a fine model

and I hope and pray it is a kind of “first fruit” of our synodical resolution to “foster greater understanding.”

The fourth and last thing I want to shed a spotlight on and invite you to pray about is the Commission on Worship itself. They have a huge task ahead of them. Now that our fine hymnal is completed, they can turn their attention to the kinds of diverse worship resources mentioned in the resolutions above. Fortunately, God has raised up an incredibly talented group - probably also the most diverse group it's ever been. With Rev. Jon Vieker, Interim Executive Director (Rev. Paul Grime took a call to Concordia, Ft. Wayne), the current Commission Members include: Rev. Dr. Gregory Wismar, Chairman, Rev. Tom Van Duzer, Vice-Chairman, Gary Juhl, Mary Mountford, Bobby Schroeder, Linda Stoterau and Rev. Dr. William Utech. (For more details on the individual commission members, go to: <http://www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=3815>).

I encourage you to pray for these commission members as they prepare and recommend worship materials to the Synod. Further, I urge you to pray for God's guidance in the selection of a new Executive Director of the Commission because he will be so key in facilitating the worship life of thousands of people – those who already know Jesus and those who don't. It feels like a “kairos” moment in time, a time to move forward in a loving and purposeful manner.

As I watch the movement of the Synod as a whole in worship, I see positive progress, newly seized opportunities and a new spirit of brotherhood. May God set it all ablaze with His love and grant Kingdom explosions in every direction, to the very ends of the earth.