

## Common Errors in Lutheran Contemporary Worship by Mike Zehnder

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It was probably the dumbest blunder I've ever made in worship planning/leading. Twenty-two years later it still stands out in my mind as a poignant illustration of a common error made by sincere Lutherans who wish to expand their worship palette.

It happened in 1984, when we were first experimenting in what is now usually termed 'contemporary' worship. We had few models to observe, and no training, so I relied on my time-honored theological and musical training in worship planning. The rubrics state that at the "Hymn of Praise," you can sing "This is the Feast," "Glory to God" or "Another Hymn of Praise may be sung."

This particular Sunday, we were trying to move toward a more "blended service" (a term not even yet used in 1984). So after the pastor and congregation had beautifully chanted the Kyrie of Divine Service II, First Setting (LW p. 158 ff), accompanied by a light organ registration, we went, without pause or introduction, with full organ, into our alternate Hymn of Praise – Jack Hayford's "Majesty."

As noble as was the intent, so inversely fallacious was the planning. The musical jolt from 6<sup>th</sup> century Gregorian chant-style to incipient praise rock of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was like whiplash. The congregation wasn't even four measures into singing "Majesty, worship His majesty/Unto Jesus, be all glory, honor and praise" when I, red-faced, realized I had made several huge errors in judgment. Only a Garrison-Keilor-Lutheran sense of duty, and not knowing quite what else to do in the heat of the moment, kept me moving forward, with an ache in my guts that I had unintentionally train-wrecked the service with false assumptions and limited understanding. And did I mention that I had never previously introduced the song "Majesty" to the congregation? Hard to imagine now, but this number one Christian hit-parade song was just three years old at the time and I assumed everyone had heard it. Ha.

I share this ridiculous, true story with a grin. All of us have and will continue to make some blunders as we explore how best to plan diverse worship in a Lutheran context. But with 22 years of experience and observation, and without laughing at anybody, let me point out some of the most obvious contemporary blunders that I regularly experience as I visit churches around the nation. Eliminating most of what follows would make a **world of difference** in missional Lutheran worship. I could list dozens but I'll give you the five biggies, all simple common sense.

Five Fallacies:

### 1. The bulletin is king.

No, PowerPoint is king. People with noses down and hands holding a worship folder cannot experience the freedom of clapping to the beat of the music or expressing themselves bodily to the Lord. Promise Keepers and charismatics did not invent clapping or the raising of hands to the Lord in song or prayer--read your Bible.

**2. Musical notes are king.**

No, words are king. You think you need to see notes to learn a song? So did I. But having traveled world-wide and seeing nothing but projected words, I realized that I, with a master's degree in church music, was the handicapped one when it came to learning a new song. It took some humbling and some effort, but I wouldn't go back now that I've caught on how to listen, learn and sing. Modern musical notation with 5 lines and 4 spaces wasn't fully developed until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Think you can't learn a song without seeing notes? Get over it!

**3. Litany is king.** (Pastor reads a line; congregation reads a line in response, etc.)

No, what is king is authenticity, sincerity, scripture read with passion, worship-leader guided reflection, song and spontaneous, heartfelt prayer. What on earth did Christians do before the invention of Gutenberg's printing press in 1450 AD? What on earth did secretaries and churches do before photocopying became commercially available in 1950? Consider the worship of the New Testament church described in 1 Corinthians 14. Sounds pretty authentic, sincere, heartfelt and biblical to me, without the aid of a printed worship folder.

**4. Dropping contemporary songs into a liturgical framework is king.**

I've already given you good reason to laugh at me; don't make me laugh at you. Liturgical worship is great, spiritual, and wonderful. Let's keep doing it until Jesus comes back for us. But all worship doesn't have to use the same liturgical rubrics. Keep the theology; learn how to "flow" with the same theology in a different format. God is looking for worshippers in spirit and in truth (John 4) and the form is not king. Spirit and truth are king. The United States, with 200 million unsaved, ranks only behind China and India in the number of breathing pagans. What indigenous style might you use in China or India for worship? Then consider what indigenous style you might use in the world's third largest mission field, here in our own backyard.

**5. Prayers that are read are king. Prayers are especially a time to pray for the sick.**

Is that in the Bible or in the Lutheran Confessions? Many great prayers are recorded in the Bible—the laments, praise, heartfelt cries, despairs, hopes, and thanks. But when Jesus was asked by the disciples for a lesson in praying, he didn't say, "Just read the ones recorded in the Old Testament out loud and you'll be fine." Rather, he gave them a model of seven prayer topics which encompassed glorifying God, confession and lifting up our spiritual and physical needs. Jesus Himself spent many wee hours of His mornings praying to the

Father without benefit of book or bulletin and He has showed us how we can do the same whether privately or corporately. Let's just do it!

What happens in corporate prayer is one good thermometer of the spiritual fervor of the pastor, worship leader and congregation. What is asked, what is praised, what is confessed--even vocal tone and inflection tell a story.

Formal language and "perfectly read" prayers are not recommended for non-liturgical worship. People need to observe/hear the touching informality of sincere prayer. "Heartfelt" prayer also models straightforward prayer language that anyone can use at home, in the car, the office and so forth.

Jesus prayed for the sick, to be sure. But in his recorded prayers, including his longest one, the high-priestly prayer in John 17, He doesn't pray for even one sick person, though without modern medicine, there were surely many sick people around him. No, He prayed "that they may all be one," that "God would be glorified," and that they would "be safe from the evil one." Not one sick person is mentioned.

I'm not suggesting we shouldn't pray for the sick – we should! But why isn't the central place for this in small groups, where extended, heartfelt prayer can be made for those who need it? I'd certainly rather have four people place their hands on me as they prayed extensively for my healing than to have my name included in a list of 15 others who are sick, that my name might receive a microsecond of concern from four-hundred worshipers: "We lift up, George, Barb, Winona, **Mike**, Patrick, Dolores..." I sometimes wonder if our prayers for the sick border more on "pastoral care announcements" than healing petitions before the Throne of God. In the Lord's Prayer, out of seven petitions, only one ("Give us this day our daily bread") mentions our physical needs.

We need to increase our prayer repertoire in corporate worship if we're going to increase our private prayer repertoire. 1 Timothy 2 gives us a good starting list for our spontaneous prayer topics...for all people and for those in authority and that all might be saved.

If you're planning/leading diverse worship, look at these five easy things to fix with an attitude that we're all on a learning curve. Know that the greatest benefit of worship in spirit and in truth, guided by God's Spirit, makes possible a heart-warming walk to Emmaus...or into your local neighborhood as you fulfill the Great Commission by the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.