

Worship Diversity Respects Culture
Part 2 of 2
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Some lessons are learned the hard way.

Twenty-one years of missionary zeal and effort. But just thirty-five baptized and catechized to show for it. LCMS pastors, lacking neither in zeal nor sacrifice, labored from 1847-1868 to “break the might of heathenism” among the Chippewa Indians of Frankenmuth, Michigan. They saw God make a big difference for those 35. But how many hundreds more could have been reached for Christ during those 21 years if the eager missionaries hadn’t insisted that the Indians first learn German so they could “properly” worship?

Early missionaries saw the continued use of German as a principal means of preserving Lutheran heritage. A few argued that preservation of their language was a “God-given task from the heavenly Father who had bestowed upon His favorite children the precious gift of the [German] language through which the Holy Spirit could speak as in no other tongue.”¹

In fact, the Synod in 1905 resolved in convention to always remain German in its official meetings and minutes, work and worship, even though 376 congregations or preaching stations already had some or all services in English. Misgivings about English were expressed on both cultural and confessional grounds. The conclusive argument: “the dearth of good Lutheran literature in English.” (Similar sounding arguments have oft been used against diverse worship songs and expression for their “lack of good Lutheran content.”)

A language shift was not the only hard lesson learned by Missouri. Can you imagine church life without the Sunday School? Until 1914, the St. Louis Seminary faculty opposed the publication of Sunday school literature by Concordia Publishing House. The argument was that a Christian day school was the only proper instrument of instruction. “To allow ‘godless’ teachers...to train one’s children and to be satisfied with the Sunday-school smattering of religious knowledge cast doubts on one’s own commitment to Lutheran doctrine and to the welfare of children.”² Today, no one raises a voice against Sunday School. Some good things are discovered the hard way.

All the above is but extended prelude to the point of this article: worship diversity respects culture. The church does not exist to change culture but to **change people** by the

¹ Nyholm, *Immigrant History*, pp. 225-26

² Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, p. 427

power of the Spirit working through the Word. But transmitting the faith requires speaking in a language that is understood. As Paul observed, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Corinthians 14:18-19).

Besides the obvious need to speak in the language of those who need to be evangelized, something else should be just as obvious: the musical heart-language of people is a powerful communication vehicle for the Gospel. Luther called music the “handmaiden to the Gospel” and wished the Gospel to be preached “as clearly from the loft as from the pulpit.” Our Gospel treasure is distinct from the earthen vessels of musical style we may use to communicate. Diversity in people requires diversity in music style. Diversity is strength, not weakness. More diversity of style means more people can be reached with the life-saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There has been a dramatic shift since 1964 in the musical heart-language of Americans. Less than 2.8% of us listen to classical radio stations. Meanwhile, the “top 40 rock ‘n roll format” rules. I was in grade school in 1964, and I distinctly remember the night my father, an LCMS pastor, pointed to the TV in horror as we watched four guys called the Beatles, with haircuts “like girls,” singing “It’s Been A Hard Day’s Night” on the Ed Sullivan Show to the relentless screams of girls. To my father’s question, “You would never wear your hair like that, would you, boys?” we responded with a sincere, “Oh no, dad, we would never want to look like that!” Less than a year later, we were arguing with him over our hair length. Unimaginable changes can quickly become the norm.

I recently met an LCMS church planting pastor with three ear-piercings. Ten years ago I might have considered his style a disaster (at best). But now I thought, “Hmm. I’ll bet he’ll be able to reach a lot of people with the Gospel that many others couldn’t reach.” I’m not ever going to sport an ear piercing. But I’ve learned to rejoice in any diversity which serves as a handmaiden for the Gospel.

The diversity I’ve experienced in worship on the foreign mission field has helped me realize how much cultural baggage I bring to the table when I think about worship. For instance:

- In India, I’ve worshipped with Christians who insisted on shedding their shoes at the door and sitting on the floor as a sign of respect to God. The women all wore head coverings for the same reason.
- In Nigeria, I watched the entire congregation dance and sing for 15 minutes as they brought their offerings forward to the Lord. When I asked why, I was told, “We’re so poor that we don’t want the Lord to think we’re not happy to give in spite of our poverty, because ‘the Lord loves a cheerful giver.’”
- In Argentina, the worship service began with each person in the room kissing every other person in the room as we sang a scripture-based song about “greeting one another with a holy kiss.” It made our sharing of the peace seem pretty tame by comparison.
- In Moscow, dancers with ribbons highlighted the words to “celebrate what God has done.” Just like David did.

- In Kazakhstan, the congregation jumped up and down every time the word “Alleluia” came up in a song. The American lady next to me said, “Boy, you really have to be in good shape to be a Christian in this country!”
- In Peru, one of the most poignant communion services I’ve ever experienced took place in the only place the congregation had available – a car garage. With a vehicle on my left I heard: “Take, drink, this is Christ’s true blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins.” How rich were those words in comparison to the poverty of the outward, humble circumstances! The treasure was in, with and under the bread and wine and it didn’t matter one hoot that I had to trade the sight of beautiful stained glass or a marble altar for the sight of an oil-leaking car and an altar made of cardboard.

During each worship situation that was new to me, I felt challenged to reflect on the truth that worship diversity respects culture. The obvious conclusion is that a diversity of styles is needed because of the diversity of people, culture, experience and heart-language.

May it be so also among us. With mutual respect. For the sake of the Gospel. And for the sake of the blood that was shed by God who took on human flesh so that He became no longer *just* God, or *just* man, but *both* God and man for all eternity. Our God is diverse: three persons in one divine essence, the second person of this Trinity consisting of two natures, neither divided nor separated. Who can fully comprehend this diversity in unity and this unity in diversity? We worship this God-man Jesus Christ with all the diversity of our resources and makeup. For His sake, we can “become all things to all men so that by all possible means we might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22).

¹ Nyholm, *Immigrant History*, pp. 225-26

¹ Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, p. 427