

Notes on Effective Worship:

Thematic Coherence and Emotional Consistency

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Thematic Coherence

Thematic coherence means adjusting the entire liturgy, not just the entrance hymn and hymn of the day, to have a common thread. For example, this can be done within even the most strict confines of the LBW by

- prayers of the day which fit the texts more precisely, (one for each year of the lectionary cycle would help),
- more choices of post-communion canticles,
- post-communion prayers that were lectionary based,
- musical settings related to seasons of the church year (some do exist),
- orienting our preaching to draw on the main images of the theme,
- organizing worship (including preaching) enough in advance so the choir can choose something to support the theme.

Themes must be chosen carefully, distinguishing between images and concepts. The 1993 ELCA theme, "Rooted in the gospel" was an image, and a good one. "Stir us, free us," the 94 theme, was a concept. You cannot have a theme for worship on the subject of being stirred, because talking about stirring is not stirring. You can *have* stirring worship, but you cannot *talk* in worship about how you are having stirring worship. The 94 theme could be used by worship planners, but rarely in the worship itself. Talking about a theme rather than using a theme is a common error.

What is a theme? Often, worship planners are either presented with or ordered to use a theme like, "Boy Scout Sunday" or "Mothers Day." In this form, these are not proper themes because they do not focus on God. A theme should be what piece, aspect, or dimension of the gospel we are contemplating in worship. Since the standard parts of the liturgy do focus on God, attempting to use a theme like this produces conflict almost immediately.

However, these "improper" themes can usually be translated into something appropriate for worship. It isn't proper to hijack worship for an Independence Day celebration on the Fourth of July. It would be proper, and even wise, to do some of the following:

- Write a confession of sins that focused on "national" sins as well as our failure to give thanks to God for liberty.
- Write a prayer of the day that proclaimed God's sovereignty over the nations and thanked God for the gift of peace and freedom.
- Included, by name, prayers for elected and appointed officials at all levels of government.
- Preach on Luther's view of the two kingdoms or on Christian freedom.

The point with these "improper" themes is not to reject them, but to change their orientation. "Boy Scout Sunday" is not to be used to "honor children," but to honor

service and learning, both gifts from God. "Mother's Day" isn't about placating moms or patronizing them, but could be about the difficult subject of self-sacrifice.

In general, themes must be about God directly or indirectly (by being about a theological concept). Themes shouldn't be about us as the center and focus, but they must be about us in relation to God.

This focus on theme is necessary because it is not the typical approach for a group planning worship. The typical orientation of worship planning is to start with some new thing that could be done ("I was at St. Swizzens and the choir all wore cowboy hats.") This bottom-up planning generally leads to worship being a series of detached bits of liturgy. This leads to worship being, (quoting PLTS's sainted Prof. Aune) "one damn thing after another."

Emotional Consistency

Emotional consistency is the concern for the tone of words and music, rather than their content. *What a Friend we have in Jesus* is about friendship or prayer, but its tone is something else: mystical, tugging the heart, lovely. If our prayers were going to be about, spiritual warfare, this would not be the right hymn for a call to prayer. *Battle Hymn of the Republic* might be more congruent emotionally, even though it isn't "about" prayer.

Constantly, I see the disasters that failing to attend to the emotions of worship bring. A gospel-style service is chanting the psalm. The body of the psalm is a standard psalm tone. The antiphon is done to a near-rock beat. Both were wonderful, together they resulted in liturgical whiplash. Even the tone of announcements matter. An All Saints' Sunday worship began with the pastor telling some jokes. They were religious in content, not offensive, helpful for seeing our foibles, and genuinely funny. They did not, however, put us in the right mood to contemplate the saints of every time and place.

Our various collections of hymn topical indexes don't help because they focus on what hymns are about rather than what mood or tempo is created by the music, or the feeling produced by the combination of tune and text. Actually, most hymn indexes do not even index images ("refuge", "rock", "light") but focus on concepts ("Reformation Sunday"). Totally missing is an index of moods ("upbeat", "grand", "mysterious").

Emotional consistency is only occasionally a topic you can speak to people about. There are a number of reasons for this. In our culture of entertainment, short attention spans lead to use of changes of pace to attract attention. People have become adept at insulating themselves the endless blather of our commercials. Our growing informality and reduced sense of place means we no longer pay such attention to what is proper in a certain place or setting. The only language most people have for talking about ritual is the language of watching a show or a sporting event. This language leads to virtue being described as what was powerful, what was spectacular, new, different, or immediately grabbing.

When you add in people's low expectations for worship and their years of experience with ineffective ritual, the result is that worshippers will commonly insist that abrupt shifts of emotional tone are not important. They will also simply not detect some crushing conflict of emotional tone in the service, or won't think it affected them.

It's hard for people to ask for what they have not experienced. However, my experience is that when you get emotional tone consistent and right, people are surprised by the power of the liturgy. I think our LBW funeral liturgy is a good example of a service consistent in tone which naturally supports worship leaders in preparing a powerful ritual.

A consistent tone does not mean there is no variation. The intensity of the experience can move up and down, back and forth during a service.

Emotions are not emotionalism. There are proper emotions for worship and improper ones. Worship should encourage our feelings of beauty and transcendence without being sentimental. Worship can create joy which is not the same as slapstick or humor. Worship can create awe, a sense of mystery, leading to fear of God, and that is not the same as intimidating people with a mind-boggling show. Worship can be invigorating and motivating, helping us overcome all that whispers in our ear that our lives are stuck, and that is not the same as motivating us by hatred or contempt. Worship can be centering and bring a dispassion that help us control our violent reactions, our anger and easily offended attitudes, and this is not the same as draggy music and a dead environment. Worship can lead us to declare war on evil, even to be angry at evil, but that is not the same thing as stirring us up by pandering to our basest fears.