

The Joy of Liturgy: Revitalizing Moravian Worship

It seems that much of what is being written about worship these days goes one of two ways. The first is to try to defend one's preferred style or approach to the topic. The other is to attack the "supposed" inadequacies of other styles or approaches. When Dr. Atwood requested that we write about the renewal of Moravian worship as it is experienced at the Sturgeon Bay Moravian Church, these two temptations were before us. We're going to try to avoid them. We certainly have our list of pet peeves and prejudices.

For Bob, these would include:

1. Those who believe that a quality, meaningful worship service cannot possibly include a mix (or blend) of musical styles.
2. Those who insist that the worship service is a "show" and try to impress rather than include the congregation.

3. Musicians who see their ministry as separate or in competition with the ministry of the pastor thereby creating unhealthy tension rather than cohesion during worship.

For Matthew, the list would have on it:

1. Clergy who approach worship as frustrated musicians or actors.
2. Church business being conducted during worship.
3. Sundays designated for specific groups (typically by gender or age).

Having gotten those out of the way, what we hope to share here is the absolute joy we experience in worship together in Sturgeon Bay. We hope to share some things we have found that we feel help make worship meaningful. Finally we

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want to share our enthusiasm for the Moravian Church's rich worship heritage and how it can very effectively honor God and be a blessing to the people who participate in it.

This is not a theological treatise as the readers of *The Hinge* often enjoy. It is merely the reflections of a musician and a pastor on how we attempt to honor God in our congregation.

We need to say up front that Sturgeon Bay is a very "traditional Moravian" congregation. By this we mean that:

- the organ is our primary worship instrument;
- the *Moravian Book of Worship* is our primary worship resource;
- we use liturgy in all our worship;
- we celebrate most of the traditional Moravian worship forms (e.g., lovefeasts, singstundes), and we celebrate all of the great church festivals.

We are not under the illusion that there is some worship that is more "Moravian" than other worship. In fact there might be some who would say our worship is not "Moravian" enough. What we are trying to accomplish is fashioning worship that is as faithful as possible to our understanding of the great worship legacy of the Moravian Church in our community.

Even in our own congregation there is a difference of opinion on what that means for worship. We have learned to embrace the healthy tensions of a diversity of taste and preferences because we feel these competing viewpoints push us to work hard at creating better worship. As in any family structure, differences of opinion will always occur. However, a solid structure

will allow healthy differences to occur without harming the family itself. In essence, the family becomes stronger rather than weaker because of the healthy tension.

We love worship! We struggle with the same difficulties of other worship leaders — juggling the tension of "putting on worship" as opposed to "creating participatory worship." More often than not, we find ourselves coming from worship with the sense of being truly blessed. This is not simply because we adequately covered our areas of responsibility but because in the midst of all our planning and efforts, the Holy Spirit rushes in, and something completely unanticipated brings us fully into the presence of the Almighty.

Many who read these words know exactly what we are trying to express. It is so humbling and awe-inspiring when God gets worshipped. In these moments, even though you are supposed to be a leader, you end up simply being taken along for the ride just like everyone else — helpless in His love.

So here are a few things that we have found work well for us. Please understand this is merely our small view nestled among the great waters of Lake Michigan. We don't think they are definitive or for everyone. We simply offer them in love that somehow they might be a blessing in your worship life.

Tradition is Good

It is our fundamental belief at the Sturgeon Bay Moravian Church that meaningful, life-changing, God-honoring worship is strengthened by claiming our heritage and not hiding the fact that we are Moravians. It begins with our

believing that God has used and continues to use the Moravian Church as a unique witness in this world. It begins with our listening to our worship heritage and traditions that have sustained and shaped our community of faith for centuries.

It also means that we do not become enamored or confused by the conventional wisdom of marketplace trends that come along. We stick with what works and has worked for 140 years in this community. Down through the decades the hymns as well as the liturgies have changed. What has not changed though is that we have a congregation that expects excellence in what happens on Sunday mornings.

It is good to be a Moravian Christian in Sturgeon Bay. That identity shapes how we worship. Striving for excellence in worship has also helped create a reputation for us in our community. Through consistently structured worship, community members know “what they are getting” when they visit the Moravian Church. There will be no surprises or unexpected “events.”

As mentioned earlier, liturgies are used regularly in our worship life. One aspect of the use of liturgy we enjoy is that it creates unity. The congregation experiences unity through communal participation in the liturgy. Even a visitor can be an active worship participant through the praying of a liturgy. We have found that over time liturgy creates in our congregation a common theological language, fellowship with others around the world, and fellowship with the saints.

An example of communal participation of visitors is our use of a newly constructed Wedding Liturgy. Often the congregation assembled at a

wedding is from varied liturgical backgrounds and may very well include those unfamiliar with a worship setting. Through responsive prayers and appropriate, familiar hymns, the congregation is offered the opportunity to unite and become active worship participants rather than uninvolved bystanders.

Having praised the strength of tradition we must also say we have found that tradition must be constantly reinterpreted. This is why Bob has spent a great deal of time writing new liturgies for our various worship needs. We say “new” with a caveat. Often what is written is a reworking of liturgical forms that have been used in the past.

For example our congregation has a very active youth mission ministry. After multiple experiences of commissioning young people to head off to various mission projects, we realized that we needed to bring consistency to this celebration in worship. In the “Liturgy for Missionaries” which Bob crafted you will find the traditional Moravian prayer for missionaries coupled with both traditional Moravian hymns as well as more contemporary hymns. It is through this blending of older worship forms and newer prayers and hymns we feel we are able enrich our current worship life while keeping a precious connection to the worship forms of our past.

Careful Planning Welcomes the Holy Spirit

One question we continually ask ourselves in worship planning is “Why?” Is there a clear theological reason for how worship is structured? Are there resources from our Moravian community to be used? Are there resources from

the ecumenical community that would enhance what we are doing?

We put a lot of effort into our worship planning, and we are deeply indebted to Bishop Graf who, while he was senior pastor, established a system of planning that is still in use today. At least six months out, the pastors select their scripture lessons, sermon, and worship themes for the next several months. We have the luxury of then passing these along to Bob who takes those pieces and adds the music, hymns, special music, and liturgies. Most of our Moravian congregations are not blessed as we are with a trained church musician, and we never take for granted what this does to help us seek a level of professional excellence in our worship services.

Just the task of keeping track of what hymns have been sung so that we utilize fully not only the *Moravian Book of Worship* as well our supplementary hymnals is a task that the pastors would struggle to accomplish but Bob handles for us. Church musicians as well as pastors may find resource material from Concordia, Augsburg-Fortress, and the American Guild of Organists to be helpful in aligning hymns to weekly scripture.

One of the greatest sources of joy for us is seeing how as pastor and musician we have brought our individual perspectives to a worship theme and how the Holy Spirit then fuses them together. For example, without knowing the content of a sermon, we are amazed that weekly the final hymn Bob picked will effectively reinforce that message. It is this sense of being a team in the creative process that not only improves worship but enriches each of us personally.

It has been our experience that careful planning once placed into God's hands seems to set the Holy Spirit free in our worship. In a worship service, we can never predict what will touch someone's heart. Any part of the whole can by itself be the vehicle that brings someone completely into God's presence. You can't predict how the Spirit will do this:

- She stands in the balcony with her youngest daughter. She has placed her older daughter on a plane to Thailand this week for a year abroad as an exchange student. The congregation had offered prayers of blessing last week and had been supportive at the reception following the service. But that was last week. This Sunday a group of younger youth is being commissioned for a mission trip. In the liturgy, one of the hymns proclaims, "God is in the other place. God is in another's face." She had not seen it coming, and the tears run down her cheeks as she receives this unexpected assurance from her Lord of His presence both here and with her daughter in that land far away.
- It is simply the piano, playing an old gospel hymn. It has been a tough week in the community. There was the tragic death of a teenager, one of the saints had succumbed to illness, and there were many other heartaches as well. It was simply the piano playing an old gospel tune prior to a time of corporate prayer. And when the last note finally surrendered to a deep and profound silence the pastor rose to pray. In looking

into the eyes of the congregation, he knew his words that followed, though important, were now merely a benediction. They were already resting in the arms of the Almighty.

- She is 14 years old, and today she is reading the scripture lesson. The pastor in a moment of insanity decided to preach on the “Begats,” or the genealogy in the first chapter of Matthew. She is faced with a list of the most unbelievably complicated names to pronounce. But she has done her homework and is ready. With an air of confidence that far surpasses her years, she clearly articulates all forty-two generations and ends by looking into the faces of the congregation and proclaims with authority, “This is the Word of the Lord.” The congregation, moved by the grace shining through her, respond with applause and cheers.

We never know what part of the worship service we have planned and prayed over will truly honor God. We never know from where the blessings will come. We never know what piece of the whole will deeply touch which person. Worship is not about what we get out of it. It is about our giving it all to Him. You know when you have worshipped. Being moved deeply in the very core of your being only happens when you have encountered God.

Education is Essential

It is our belief that education is one of the most important contributing factors to meaningful worship. It is really simple to teach

people why we worship the way we do, yet it is such a neglected discipline. Explaining to them the meaning, metaphor, and drama of worship, and helping them to connect as deeply as possible to what they experience when we gather to honor God enriches everyone. The results of these efforts are truly amazing.

I (Matthew) learned the liberating power of being taught about worship while in college. I had been Moravian for only three years when I headed off to school. In all honesty, I did not particularly enjoy Moravian liturgy, I thought communion was confusing, and I was pretty ambivalent about my worship life in the Moravian Church. It had been other things that had brought me into the fellowship.

So what an amazing surprise it was for me to go off to Wheaton College, the Mecca of evangelical higher education, and end up falling in love with Moravian worship in the very last place you would imagine.

My matchmaker for this long love affair was a professor who began his academic journey by attending Bob Jones University and ended up becoming an Anglican priest. I happened to stumble into a class taught by Dr. Robert Weber who, when he discovered that I was a Moravian amid all the other students from evangelical denominations and mega-churches, smacked his lips like he had just tasted a fine wine and proclaimed to the class, “*Ah, a Moravian!*” I was intrigued by what he saw as something so delectable that I had obviously missed.

Over the course of the next two years, Dr. Webber hammered his evangelical, non-liturgical theology students on the biblical testimony concerning worship, the richness of church

tradition down through the ages, and how to put that into practice in our modern world. In the process, my mind was opened to something I had not been properly prepared to appreciate. Every single explanation he offered brought me to one of those “ah-ha” moments where I would say to myself, “*So that is why we (Moravians) do that.*”

Later, in seminary, I was blessed by the teaching of Bishop Kortz, who further expanded my understanding of worship. As I answered the call to ministry, I took the experience of being taught about worship as a great spiritual benefit and dedicated myself to sharing that with the people I had been called to serve.

It has been a sad discovery over the years of doing camp programs, workshops, and consultations in Moravian congregations to find out how many of our folks have never had anyone explain to them why we worship, much less why we utilize the forms and liturgies of our rich Moravian heritage.

In Sturgeon Bay we take every opportunity to teach worship. From Music Director Bob taking time before a service periodically to teach new hymns (a practice initially resisted but now loved by the congregation), to classes for the children and youth, and in adult education. Provided with insight and understanding, the people of God take this to heart, and worship becomes so much more meaningful.

Education must be a continuing discipline so that new members of the fellowship can quickly feel a part of the great drama that unfolds each Sunday morning. The educational process for us has also needed to be sensitive and affirming of the previous worship life of those who join us

along the journey. In our context, we need to be particularly aware of the connecting points for those who come from other faith traditions and who are now members of our worship community.

The greatest benefit of worship education is seen in our young people. The Sturgeon Bay congregation is full of teenagers. Their love of Moravian hymns and liturgy might seem strange to those who think young people only want to listen to a driving bass line in worship. We have learned long ago not to look to the balcony (where most of our youth like to sit) while singing “Sing Hallelujah, Praise the Lord.” We don’t look because we don’t want to breakout laughing at the sheer joy of watching 15 teenagers, with no hymnals in hand (since they know the words by heart), coming to those final words of this iconic hymn. With all the passion they can muster they sing

“For us, (swing your right arm) For us, (swing your left arm) the lamb was slain(throw both arms over your head) Praise Ye the Lord Amen (reach to heaven with all your might)

Lest some think this is disrespectful, let us assure you it is not. It is their expression of the joy and the triumph they feel in this ancient anthem of our peculiar faith.

We have expected them to honor and sing the hymns and pray the prayers of their Moravian forbearers. And they do so with joy. The unexpected result from this worship education that we now need to address is their frustration when they leave home to try to find liturgical worship in college settings. They come home starving for their “Moravian” fix.

Conclusion

Tradition, planning and education have all served to enrich our worship in Sturgeon Bay. But it is always and ultimately about the Lord. When we gather He is always there and on a weekly

basis we are moved by His presence in ways that we simply can't express with mere words. We are so grateful and we never want to take this for granted. How good it is to be in worship!

Responses

Melissa Johnson

I agree wholeheartedly that tradition, planning, and education are essential elements of Christian worship, and I appreciate the description of how this occurs in Sturgeon Bay. Matt and Bob have done a wonderful job of describing their view of worship and how they work together to create it.

I struggle with the language of worship and find myself putting many words in quotation marks as I discuss it. For instance, in my context at Palmer Moravian Church in Easton, Pennsylvania, we say that we have two “traditional” services and one “contemporary” service each Sunday. In actuality, we have two rather traditional Moravian services solely using the *Moravian Book of Worship* for congregational singing, incorporating organ, piano, and brass for most of the music, and utilizing the liturgies from the *MBW*.

In addition, we have another worship experience that is really more “blended” than contemporary. In this worship, we tie together

Moravian tradition and some hymnody with some praise music and different instrumentation. It is an experience that allows for experimentation and stretching. For instance, we celebrate communion in several different ways. We have lovefeasts, but they may appear a bit different from the usual experience. We project our congregational readings on a screen, but the readings themselves often come from our Moravian liturgies.

One worship experience is not more or less effective than the other. The experiences are simply different, and they speak to different people. We have come to call our “blended” worship experience, “New Horizon Worship.” This name may signify a new endeavor for our congregation, but it is more than that. If a horizon is a place where two things meet, then this worship experience is meant to be a new (and different) place where someone may meet God.

Because of my experience in different worship settings, I have come to believe that blended worship is incredibly effective; however, it is not the only way. In my mind, leading worship means