Clergy and Musicians Creating Vibrant Worship Together: A Reflection on the Art and Spirituality of Liturgical Planning

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My planning and preparing of liturgy begins with who I am, which is the raw material I bring to ministry as a liturgist, and so this reflection begins there, too.

I didn’t grow up in any religious tradition, and indeed had no sense at all of the spiritual nature of life. By the time I was in my early thirties I had a successful career in children’s book publishing, was married, and the mother of a child. But underneath those outward signs of a happy and fulfilling life, there was no "there" there—just a great and aching emptiness. Then I had a conversion experience in which I came to realize that God was, and was there, in that emptiness. I was drawn toward the church, where I thought I might discover what that would mean. I was baptized when I was thirty-three, and so I have a little more than twenty years of experience of worship and liturgy.

The Episcopal Church was the door in for me, a very high Anglo-Catholic parish in Brooklyn, New York. It was an historic old parish that had fallen on hard times, with a gorgeous but dilapidated church building, and about twenty members—of whom perhaps six attempted each Sunday to carry off an extremely intricate liturgy that really cried out for a cast of thousands. I loved it in all its faithfulness and faded splendor.

If I were to experience that liturgy now I would probably think it was not very good liturgy: somewhat fussy, overly ceremonial, bordering on the antique, opaque to those "not in the know," and much too big for the number of people trying to do it. Yet, the mystery of God was present there, speaking to my empty and yearning heart, saying, "Take heart! There is more to life than you can see!"

As a person with the responsibility for preparing liturgy for others, I am reassured to know through my own experience that God can draw people in through liturgy that I may think is not very good, or liturgy that I may plan that turns out to be not very good! When I become arrogant about my own liturgical "good taste," I have only to remember the liturgy that spoke deeply to me and drew me into the life I am now living. Although it was in a style different from that I would now choose, something authentic and real moved within it. While my own sense is that the best and strongest liturgy for the church today is simple, straightforward, clear and focused, I know it is essential always to leave room for that mystery to enter. The liturgy needs to be hospitable to God’s mystery.

In my seminary time I didn’t have the opportunity to do any extra liturgical studies. My working in liturgy and talking about liturgy comes from my experience, and also from being a liturgical person to my bones. As a child, I was shaped by the secular "liturgical year," those major feasts of Back to School and Halloween and Thanksgiving, with all their symbols and attendant rites: new pencils and notebooks and a fresh pack of paper and maybe a haircut and shopping for new shoes (saddle-shoes!); pumpkin-carving and making a costume and trick-or-treating; turkey with all the trimmings and a school play about the pilgrims and football on TV—and so on. When I encountered the church’s liturgical year I felt immediately at home in that rhythm of moving through the ordinary and marking extraordinary times within it, having something new told to you about your life in the course of moving through those repeated seasons and feasts.
I'm not a musician; I think I have a useful musical sensibility and perhaps some teachability. Most of the music I enjoy (just to confess) is contemporary interpretation of the eras in which I grew up and have lived, so I listen to Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Alison Krause, Guy Clark, Tom Waits, Paul Simon, Compa Segundo, Ibrahim Ferrar, Billie Holiday, Keith Jarrett. I listen to rock, to jazz, to bluegrass, and now to organ and choral music, which I discovered once I came into the church.

I also hope I've learned something from knowing Christ a little bit, as he makes himself known to me in my own prayer and in the wrestling of my daily living, and also as he reveals himself in the liturgy.

So that's what I bring to this ministry, along with a deep sense, probably coming from my experience of emptiness and conversion, that liturgy really matters. That liturgy is our approach to God at God's invitation and God's urging, a venturing, a daring to venture toward the Holy, who is utterly unknowable and unreachable but who draws near to us and is as intimately present within us as our own breath. That liturgy is making us church and forming us as the body of Christ, shaping us in God's image, the image in which we were made and the image into which we need to be transformed.

Liturgy is inward and outward engagement. In a high Anglo-Catholic liturgy you sink to your knees, and if you're aware of anyone else it may only be because they are singing next to you. My first experience of liturgy was as individual piety in a group context, but I've come to understand liturgy as a corporate endeavor. God calls people into community; liturgy is our communal engagement with God as a hoping and yearning and sinful and forgiven and celebrating and creating and life-journeying people.

Liturgy reveals God—it is a place of God's self-disclosure and self-giving; it reveals the church (us!) and who we are; it reveals the kingdom (or not, depending on what's going on in the liturgy and in us)—but, liturgy is truly revealing of whatever is really going on. Liturgy speaks a word of truth, engages us in being and doing God's truth. Liturgy is God's justice making over the world. In our doing of worship, the people of God are being transformed for the sake of the transformation of the world. In eucharistic terms, just as the bread is taken and blessed and broken and given in the liturgy for our life, what we are enacting in the liturgy is our own being taken and blessed and broken and given for the life of the world. So liturgy really matters. It really, really matters.

A long-ago abbot whose name I've forgotten urged his monks in a Christmas sermon to "let Christ become immense within you." I think that's what we are doing in the liturgy—we're letting Christ become immense within us, and we are living as the risen body of the risen Christ, an Easter people, immense in the world. That's the hope. The actuality, how we live that out as church, falls short. But in planning liturgy we are dealing with these ultimate things, because in the liturgy we are daring to approach the immensity of God's intent and desire for us and for the world, from before the foundation of the world. We're approaching the wonder of God's self-giving and suffering in Christ. We're approaching the joy and agony of God's kingdom coming into being within us, within our hearts, and the making of us into a great-hearted, compassionate, self-offering, self-expending body for the sake of the world. We are not engaged in church growth—in being attractive for the purpose of increasing our numbers or bringing in the unchurched. If we do our liturgy authentically, we will be attractive for Christ. But liturgy as
church growth tool is not what we are about. We are about worship.

If this is what God and we and the liturgy are all about, then our liturgy is worthy of and demands our most careful thought, our highest intentionality, our deepest prayer, our greatest gifts, a constant mindfulness, and, I think, a certain restraint and discipline. One's own personal discipline, the discipline of the tradition, the discipline of communal practice, the discipline of seeking excellence, the discipline of being prophetic, the discipline of humbling oneself in the face of the ultimate.

So planning liturgy asks for a kind of resistance to the sudden whims and enthusiasm that so often afflict us today. It calls for a seriousness of purpose that comes from a deep attentiveness and response to God's Spirit. Often whimsical things are imposed on the liturgy in an attempt to suggest that this is God's Spirit moving among us. God's Spirit, however, moves over the deep, and draws out of the deep great, indeed ultimate, things. God's spirit doesn't seem to be able to do a whole lot with the shallows; so we're into deep, deep endeavors, we're moving in deep water, when we engage the liturgy.

In my liturgical ministry, I try to stay grounded in three things: the hospitality of Christ, who invited everyone he encountered into intimacy with him, and through him with the Father; the servanthood of Christ, who humbly knelt and washed his disciples' road-weary, dirty feet; the self-offering of Christ, who poured out and pours out his life, in his living and dying and rising, for the life of the world.

_Hospitality_—planning liturgy is about being invitational, not forcing, being hospitable to all who gather, including the God who comes among us. I'm not much for the liturgist who, through lack of preparation, carelessness, or a need for control doesn't share the liturgical plan with others, so that everyone else must be directed as the liturgy unfolds. Thoughtful, transparent liturgy ensures that all ministers of the liturgy feel at home in their ministry, and by all ministers I mean the entire assembly, only some of whom are assigned to do specific liturgical tasks on that specific day. Everyone, as a minister of the liturgy, needs to be at ease and comfortable and able to "own" his or her own participation in the liturgy. Will I, through my planning, open that door, or keep it locked, clutching the keys to myself?

_Servanthood_—planning liturgy is about serving the assembly, which in gathering to worship serves Christ, and, in dispersing from worship, goes out to serve the world. On my best days perhaps my planning and preparation for liturgy will have more to do with what best serves the community than with my ego, my own preferences, my good or bad mood.

_Self-offering_—planning liturgy is about freely offering the gifts one has, not so those gifts may be manifest, but so that through them God's love and saving action in Christ will be manifest. This asks for a genuine self-emptying. As does preparing a liturgy and then freely giving it over to God and to those whose ministry is to bring it into being—the assembly and its leaders for the day. My hope is that the liturgy I plan will be so naturally lived and effortlessly done that there is no thought at all as to who may have planned it.

Those three qualities guide my planning; the plans themselves are shaped by the shape of the eucharistic liturgy itself; the symbols that reveal the meanings of our actions; and the tradition within which I work (the Anglican tradition and the Episcopal Church's practice within that).
In a sense every liturgy is new: we are "new every morning" when we gather for worship. But every liturgy is also as old as the Ancient of Days. Whatever our tradition, we don't have to reinvent it; rather our task is to allow its gifts to emerge, and to respect what is being handed on. Not a five-centuries-old practice that hasn't changed since then, but this living tradition that

\textit{The Shape}—the Eucharist has a given shape, a pattern of practice handed down: the taking of bread, blessing, breaking, and giving of it; the proclamation of the Word illuminating the action of the bread and wine; the sharing of the bread and wine enacting the Word proclaimed. This basic structure doesn't need to be re-invented, although it can be authentically celebrated in many ways and many styles.

\textit{The Symbols}—the bread, the wine, the baptismal font, the water, the oil, the Gospel book, the cross, the ambo, the table. These need to be strong, visible signs of God's action and presence, chosen to be worthy of and genuinely consonant with what they represent. They should have the dignity and sturdiness of "primary things," separated out from the secondary and less necessary aspects of doing liturgy. Clarification, I think, is really important. Through the clarity of the primary symbols, the mystery is made manifest.

\textit{The Tradition}—the liturgy doesn't spring anew from the side of the liturgist, but has its origin in communal tradition. The liturgies I plan have their origin in the tradition of the Episcopal Church, as it is practiced in "this place and time." This place: the diocese of Olympia, the community of Saint Mark's, the city of Seattle, the Pacific Northwest (which is its own kind of culture). This time: where we are in the liturgical year, what aspect of the Paschal mystery is being called to our attention now, what is being opened and its meaning teased out, how we will move into the next season, what's going on at this time in our lives locally and in the world. The tradition in conversation with contemporary concerns, cultures and practices.

Planning a liturgy means considering many other aspects as well. What is this worship space, its size and style, its gifts and drawbacks? What is this occasion? Is it a Sunday? When, and what Sunday? Is it a special one-time occasion? Who is this assembly? Is it the ordinary Sunday assembly or a one-time-only assembly? Are the members of this assembly used to worshipping together or are they strangers to one another? Are they a fairly homogeneous group or will there be great diversity? Will the space in which we gather be familiar to the assembly or new?

In all of my planning I am not looking for the esoteric. It is a sign of great danger when we feel we must resort to the esoteric to "liven up" the liturgy, make it somehow "more interesting." If our liturgy is deadly and uninteresting, we would do better to admit our failure to allow it to be its engaging, vigorous, lively self, and then learn how to be better liturgists. What I seek in my planning is the sturdy, authentic ordinary that gives the assembly and God something to work with—that is going to be transformed.

As we engage the question of "contemporary" versus "traditional," it's important to honor the ongoing, creative dialogue between the old and the new. We never want to lose the corporate memory that underlies what we do in the liturgy, and which the liturgy is constantly touching in many, many different ways. If we become overly innovative and fluid in our practice, in one or two generations we will lose the ground of that memory. This deep, deep centuries-old memory is what "anamnesis," the remembering the liturgy does, is all about. In our planning, we are not creating easy, cheap "memorable moments"; we are inviting God's memory, God's own memory of God's people, to be present in the present for the sake of the future.

In a sense every liturgy is new: we are "new every morning" when we gather for worship. But every liturgy is also as old as the Ancient of Days. Whatever our tradition, we don't have to reinvent it; rather our task is to allow its gifts to emerge, and to respect what is being handed on. Not a five-centuries-old practice that hasn't changed since then, but this living tradition that
is constantly being made and handed on by the people of God. Attempts to re-create the liturgy often have more to do with our culture's mindset than what will serve the people of God and those who yearn to become the people of God.

We need to trust our liturgy, to know that our liturgy is relevant, that it’s not up to us to make it relevant. God's activity in the liturgy through Christ addresses the human condition in all its possibilities and problems. We don't have to force our own sense of relevance on the liturgy; it is already relevant. Christ's saving action is relevant, Christ's giving himself in the bread and wine is relevant. There’s something fundamentally exciting about the encounter with God in the liturgy that doesn't have to be stirred up or applied from outside. There is a joy in the liturgy when it has integrity, is authentically done, has energy, is alive; a joy that is deep and abiding and ministers to people, whether they come in grief or in happiness.

The partnership of liturgist (who is often a clergyperson) and musician (who is usually a layperson) is critical to all these things. As Mel Butler and I flew out here from Seattle, we were sitting in a three-seat row with an empty seat between us, enjoying the room to stretch out our legs as we worked on our presentations. But I thought that maybe our seating arrangement was also a symbol of how clergy and musicians often have worked together. In my Child Study class in college I learned about something called "parallel play": children who aren't old enough yet to know how to play together play in parallel, doing individual play next to each other. Maybe clergy and musicians are used to parallel play and need to learn more how to play together.

I have some thoughts about that. One is to acknowledge the difficulties that have come from power inequities and the clericalism of the church: where the rector or minister in charge has authority over the musician and often does not exercise that power in a collegial way. What would happen if the clergyperson (or liturgist) and musician approach one other with the mind of Christ? "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:5–8 NRSV). For me, that might mean the death of my favorite hymn or the particular fraction anthem I like. Not such a great sacrifice after all! So, coming to one other in a place of humility—in all of our giftedness, but in a place of humility, which is how Christ arrived at the cross.

Another thought is for the clergyperson (or liturgist) and musician to appreciate the complementarity of our competencies, knowing that from the dialogue between our gifts better, richer liturgy will emerge. Then we can stand together over against our culture's co-opting what the church is about, helping one another to be alert to the trend toward self-referential liturgy rather than liturgy that points to God; helping one another recognize when what is being put forward is really a restless search for self-fulfillment, or a desire to be successful in church growth, or a lack of trust in the attractiveness of Christ authentically proclaimed, or a reliance on feelings and sentimentality; helping one another in the ministry of providing bread, not stones, to a people hungering for God (see A. Daniel Frankforter's critique of contemporary worship in Stones for Bread).

During the flight from Seattle, Mel and I each received something the airline had the nerve to call a meal tray. It was a bagel and a packet labeled "'Real' Cream Cheese." I thought, what is "real" cream cheese? What does "real" mean when it is in quotes?
Clergy and musicians must stand together against the "ersatz-ification" (if I may make a word) that threatens to undermine the authenticity of who we are and what we do as church. We must establish values and goals for the community's worship in which to ground our planning endeavor—values and goals worthy of God's desire and people's yearnings.

So our ministry should not consist of filling in one another's blanks on a liturgical outline, but should be carried out in an ongoing conversation grounded in agreed-upon values we have arrived at together, such as recognizing that the assembly owns the liturgy and we don't. (Maybe God owns the liturgy, but we clergy, liturgists, and musicians certainly don't.) Does our worship direct us toward God or is it all about us? Does it gather us into a body or is it individualistic? Is it capacious enough and sturdy enough and intentional enough to hold all of life's hopes, joys, griefs, and terrors brought by the people who come? Is it worthy of God and the assembly? Does it have discipline and rigor? Is it true to our theology? Does it reveal the theology it seeks to do and does it do the theology it seeks to reveal? Is it living? Is it energetic, authentic, vigorous, engaging? Is there a clarity of intent and action and symbol? Does it allow mystery? Is it prayer? Does it stand over and against culture?

That kind of clergy/liturgist/musician conversation would call us to a deep partnership that goes far beyond the parallel planning of liturgy that we often do because of—dare I name it?—fear of the self-denial required to work together in such deep relationship.

I close with a piece of music that many might call un-sublime, but it's sublime to me because it has something genuine and important to say to us. It's by a Texas troubadour named Guy Clark, whose work I'm pleased to bring to the attention of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, if it is not already known here. Clark has a song called "Stuff That Works," and the refrain goes:

Stuff that works, stuff that holds up,
the kind of stuff you don't hang on the wall;
Stuff that's real, stuff you feel, the kind
of stuff you reach for when you fall.

In the verses he sings about an old blue shirt that suits him just fine, he likes the way it feels so he wears it all the time, stuff that works; he sings about his old guitar that never stays in tune but he likes the way it sounds in a dark and empty room, stuff that works; he sings about an old pair of boots that fit just right, so he can work all day and dance all night; he sings about a pretty good friend who's seen him at his worst, who can't tell whether he's a blessing or a curse, but is always there when the chips are down—that's the kind of stuff he likes to be around. The stuff that works.

For our liturgy, we want actions like that and symbols like that and prayer like that and proclamation like that and music like that, no matter what the style. We want "stuff that works . . . stuff that holds up, stuff that's real, stuff you feel . . . the kind of stuff you reach for when you fall."

**RECOMMENDED READING**


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