Treasures New and Old: Developing Resources for Renewing Worship

MICHAEL L. BURK

We should note from the outset that this description of one church body’s approach to developing a new generation of worship resources is best understood in a much broader context. People who watch the Renewing Worship project unfold will see the periodic publication of provisional resources. These will shape what finally becomes a constellation of things that may well shape worship among worshiping assemblies in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) for a generation. Still, the project title points to the greater goal—renewal rather than resources.

The Design of Renewing Worship

Twenty-five years after the introduction of the Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW), it is evident that what so many Lutherans refer to as "the green book," and the work that led to its development, has been a treasure within Lutheranism and a gift to wider, ongoing liturgical renewal. As important as it has been, many of the renewing trajectories established or continued by LBW are more important than the volume itself. Even detractors who argue that the time to move beyond the LBW has long passed acknowledge that the church's deeper sense of baptismal identity, with the implications of being both claimed and sent, can be attributed in part to the influence of the LBW. The rich baptismal theology reflected in the volume, together with the embedded vision that worship leadership is best shared because worship is the work of the people, are two aspects of existing resources that should be celebrated and preserved.

Still, the time has come to move forward. In addition to the wear and tear that is evident when you look at the books still filling the racks in so many Lutheran pews, it is equally evident that some matters of design, some ways language is used, and some texts and tunes included in LBW are showing their age.

In the last twenty-five years much has changed in and around the church. The LBW process had been a cooperative pan-Lutheran endeavor that foreshadowed the merger that created the ELCA. In some ways, the diversity of thought and practice among members and congregations of this church are more pronounced now than when the predecessor church bodies were distinct. Much of that diversity corresponds to what is happening in other church bodies. It is a multi-layered "cultural thing" that includes and influences worship. A responsible approach to resource development requires an awareness of and a response to the differences that shape the worship life of faith communities. For the ELCA that means that the time is right to replace the LBW precisely because the cultural landscape, to which God's mission is addressed, has changed and is changing.

As one response to the changing landscape, the church council of the ELCA authorized Renewing Worship, a five-year churchwide initiative (2001–2005). This project is unfolding in a series of five interwoven phases.

- Consultations—more than one hundred "consultants" from across the church (including some non-Lutheran participants), representing a wide variety of perspectives, gathered in a series of meetings over the course of a year. Their
task was to identify and articulate principles for worship that reflect a sort of "common ground" related to worship.

- **Editorial Teams**—smaller working groups gather to identify and develop texts, rites, and music for use in provisional worship materials. Their work is supported by the input and review provided by larger development panels whose members reflect a wider variety of perspectives and expertise.


- **Events**—beginning in September 2004, more than thirty Renewing Worship days will be hosted across the ELCA. Events will introduce and interpret provisional worship materials and will encourage feedback. Particular attention will be given to *Principles for Worship* in an effort to emphasize worship renewal rather than the particular resources that may be chosen for use.

- **Proposal**—a Renewing Worship proposal will go to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2005. The proposal is likely to include both a description of the array of resources that might be affirmed for future use and some statements of ongoing strategic direction for renewing the church’s worship.

**Assumptions**

A number of assumptions support and shape a comprehensive effort like Renewing Worship. Because of their broad implications, three are noted here.

- **Central things**—*The Use of the Means of Grace* (UMG) is the sacramental practices statement of the ELCA. In that UMG was adopted by the ELCA in Churchwide Assembly (1997), it is authoritative for this church on matters related to worship. It is therefore foundational to Renewing Worship, which seeks to bring to fuller expression and wider understanding, convictions related to word and sacrament as central to worship. Attention to central things draws the ELCA into a broader ecumenical conversation about worship renewal. While *Principles for Worship* contributes to the shape and content of provisional resources being developed, *Principles for Worship* is itself provisional (a study document) and does not have standing as a statement of the church.

- **Lutheran identity**—as an initiative of the ELCA, Renewing Worship values Lutheran tradition and identity. As a relatively young church, we are still
learning what it means to be together. Increasingly it means acknowledging our differences and discovering that differences are often more blessing than burden.

- The variety of worship practices in the ELCA reflects different patterns and pieties within Lutheranism, as well as different ethnic backgrounds and experiences that include the gifts of newer immigrant communities. It also reflects the influences of non-Lutheran worship practices and materials, both good and bad. In other words, there is a complexity to the variety that goes well beyond local tastes. Renewing Worship is intent on honoring both the Lutheran instinct for freedom in the ways we worship, and the value of worshiping in ways that are consistent with Lutheran confessional and historical identity.

- **Wide participation**—worship renewal is by nature participatory. Since worship is the work of the people, so also worship renewal is the work of the people. All the people. In addition to the many who are directly involved with resource development, (consultants, editorial teams, development panels), the entire effort depends on the involvement and investment of people from across the whole church. Renewing Worship is designed to flow out of and back into local worshiping assemblies.

- Participation requires accessibility. A dedicated Renewing Worship website (www.renewingworship.org) provides up-to-date information about the project as it continues to unfold. Feedback is encouraged. Contents of the Renewing Worship series (with the exception of some copyrighted material, mostly music) are available for free download. Published volumes are also available for purchase and include a form for evaluation and response. Churchwide notices invite contact by mail or telephone. In addition to the planned Renewing Worship days, presentations are made in a variety of settings. The insights and influences of recognized liturgical scholars and of local worship leaders are important to churchwide renewal. Still, Renewing Worship assumes that members of every worshiping assembly have a stake in the outcome, and should have the opportunity to be heard even as they take responsibility for sharing in the work.

**Ecumenical Connections**

Renewing Worship is attentive to the church beyond Lutheranism. Not only is it important to take seriously the ritual material historically held in common with other communions, but also the ELCA effort benefits from exploring resources and worship practices, whether newly developed or widely used, in Christian assemblies outside the Lutheran church. We value a particularly close relationship with church bodies that have entered into full communion agreements with the ELCA. Representatives from each of our partner churches participated directly in the consultative phase of the project (phase 1). These same church bodies continue to provide input and review through their representatives on Renewing Worship development panels (phase 2), and through the collegial staff relationships between our respective churches.

It is important to note that from within North American Lutheranism, but from beyond the
ELCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is a strong co-operative partner in Renewing Worship.

**Who Decides?**

If it is true that there are certain central things around which we gather in worship and that somehow it is those central things that hold us together—more precisely, that these central things are the means by which God holds us—then it is likely that there will be greater clarity about those central things, and about a shared identity regardless of location, when certain things happen in most places most of the time. In other words, the notion of principles for worship or norms for liturgical practice makes some sense. Whether born of genuine interest or suspicion, debates about the worship itself, as well as the resources that will help to shape it, often boil down to the question of "who decides?" Who decides what should be happening in most places most of the time? Who decides what will lend continuity and cohesion to a diversity of practices? Who decides what makes Lutheran worship Lutheran?

I think the church decides. And by "church" I mean what Lutherans have historically meant when they say "church." The church is people—believing people—gathered or assembled around the means of grace. The Augsburg Confession says it like this:

It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.4

The church is the Gospel coming to expression in word and sacrament, in and among the gathered people of God. It is the assembly at work. The people.

It is, after all, people who agree on a time and place to gather. People make the music. People are praying and praising and giving thanks. People are sharing food and pouring water. When the Holy Communion takes place, it is all the people gathered who celebrate. So, when it comes to the deciding what Lutheran worship ought to look like, ought to be like, the deciding—like the worship itself—involves all the people. And the deciding is underway without regard to the project, Renewing Worship. In ways that are sometimes intentional, sometimes spontaneous, in the midst of a sometimes-intense debate, the church is about the business of deciding what makes worship "Lutheran" by worshiping. It isn't always pretty. It is not always immediately recognizable or familiar. But local assemblies are leaving their imprint on how to understand Lutheran worship in the present day. Sometimes that imprint is left in helpful ways. And it has to be said, sometimes in ways that contribute to the confusions.

Renewing Worship seeks to attend to what is happening locally—the lived-out decision making—because Lutheranism, like the church itself, like the mission of God, is not static. We cannot simply look to the past, dust off and brush up the best of our heritage, to determine how Lutheran worship ought to look or feel. In some locations, Lutherans are worshiping in ways that, to many of us, seem unfamiliar. And we learn from that doing. We benefit from watching and hearing and experiencing the stories of what takes place among different people who bring to the table a variety of different backgrounds and gifts.

This is where the stylistic categories like "traditional" and "contemporary" fall apart, especially
for Lutherans. Worship is Lutheran when the people gathered are recognizably the church in that the Gospel is preached with integrity and the sacraments are celebrated according to the Gospel. That can and should happen in a multitude of ways, which are locally informed. And wonder of wonders, by that understanding, so called Lutheran worship often comes to rich expression in settings outside the Lutheran church.

But it is not a matter of "anything goes," whereby planners are free to do whatever works, or seems to work, locally. The challenge is to recognize and insist that the local assembly, which is so important, is not the whole church. The challenge is to be a local community of faith that is more than local, always linked to the people of God in every place and in every time, when it is so often our tendency to act as though we are a coincidental gathering of individuals who place our own taste and desires among the highest priorities.

**Challenges to Renewing Worship**

Since at best the whole church decides, that is, participates actively and directly in worship renewal, it is important to acknowledge that there are some substantial challenges that a project like Renewing Worship must address.

There is a cluttered landscape of diverse worship practices that are informed and shaped by cultures within and beyond the church. The ongoing attention to disputes over style masks some underlying points of tension that too rarely get named, let alone addressed. For instance, differences swirling around debates between church-growth advocates and proponents of historic liturgical renewal sometimes reflect deep theological disagreement. Failure to address underlying tensions makes it difficult to provide resources that are genuinely helpful across a wide spectrum of liturgical practice, and almost impossible to recognize what people who hold opposing views about worship call "renewal."

The formation of worship leaders, like the formation of almost any sort of leader is a matter that deserves ongoing attention. A greater challenge to renewal is coming to terms with the formation of whole communities, particularly Christian assemblies. That worship is the work of the people remains little more than a theory in some settings. In most settings, renewed worship demands more than a renewed or renewing leader. Worship is less about leaders and followers than it is about participants who have different responsibilities and roles. Identifying and fostering the appropriate balance in the relationship between worship leaders and the whole assembly is a matter of faith formation that demands innovative thinking in order to facilitate formative action.

Any effort that claims to be churchwide is susceptible to the sort of institutional suspicion that is prevalent among North American Christians and is particularly pronounced in a church body that is still coming to terms with its own institutional identity. In an attempt to minimize the concerns of those who assume there is an inner circle of single-minded decision makers, or of those who are passionate about one particular approach to worship at the expense of others, or of those who are generally hostile toward anything the church undertakes, Renewing Worship seeks to be genuinely transparent. Comments, questions, and critiques are consistently invited and, in many ways, concerns are addressed.

Listening to the whole church is an ongoing commitment. But listening does not mean
incorporating every point of view. It means bringing as many perspectives as possible "to the table," and taking them seriously. Some representational voices are difficult to "hear." For instance, youth and young adults, whose perspectives are often interpreted by other generations on their behalf, have a rhythm to their lives that does not easily coordinate with typical ways of developing resources and strategies. And people new to the faith have a perspective that can be hard to assess.

It is difficult to think about developing resources that genuinely reflect the multicultural church the ELCA hopes to be. There are so many obstacles to developing resources and providing guidance for worship practices that are accessible to most of the church and that seek to reflect and honor multicultural realities. Renewing Worship relies heavily on representative voices and multicultural experiences to inform the ongoing work.

Finally, the resource development aspect of Renewing Worship is demanding, if only for the expectations that already exist. Books and compact disks. Leaders' editions and supplements. How do we develop the right combination of things?

Renewing Worship has a management staff that directs the day-to-day aspects of the project—the ELCA director for worship, the general manager for worship and music from the publishing house, and the project coordinator. For broad oversight, there is one group from among the many groups that is charged with reviewing and responding to every aspect of the project toward the goal of crafting the proposal that will go to the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in 2005 (phase 5). The final shape of the array of materials is not yet determined. It is clear that it will include more rather than less when compared to resource development efforts that have gone before. It is clear that not every expectation will be met. And at a time when some people question whether primary print resources have a future, it is clear that there will be a new book.

A Primary Common Resource

At the center of what flows from Renewing Worship there will be a volume that is common in that it will be accessible to the whole church. Here, the "whole church" really means people in the vast majority of ELCA congregations. Since it is most likely to be an English-language resource, this common book will not be accessible to congregations that rely on resources in languages other than English. But it will seek to reflect a cultural diversity that substantively includes all congregations.

The volume is primary in that it will reflect the breadth of the living traditions for assembly use. It is primary in that it will equip and encourage the Christian assembly to baptize and remember baptism, to encounter Christ in the preaching of both law and gospel, to sing and pray, to give thanks and share a meal, and to be sent into the world to continue God's own mission. It is primary in that it will provide a vehicle for ongoing worship renewal.

This primary common resource is intentionally the assembly's book. Providing liturgical texts and songs that are too important to risk forgetting or to neglect, it will place in the mouths, hearts, and minds of the gathered people, memorable words that can bear the truth of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. It will contribute to the faith formation of whole communities and the individuals within them.
At the same time it is intentionally the church’s book. A common resource provides a reminder that the local assembly is connected to the church’s worship in every place and every time. As the primary worship book of the ELCA, this common resource will contribute to the sense that congregations are connected, a communion of local assemblies sharing in the same mission of God. And it will draw on the broader Christian tradition, providing a sign of our wider communion within the church of Jesus Christ. Lutheran identity will be reinforced in an ecumenical and historical context.

Renewing Worship is more than an initiative or project of one particular church body designed to develop new worship resources. It is a promising sign that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is committed to a deep and shared sense of connection between individuals gathered and between the gathering and the whole people of God. That connection coming to expression is itself a sign that the renewal continues or, in some places, has finally begun.

ENDNOTES

1. While the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) was a partner in much of the work of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW), which developed the LBW, the LCMS withdrew from the process prior to finalizing proposals and the subsequent publication of the LBW. The American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) merged to form the ELCA in 1988. It could be argued that the LBW was a significant part of the "glue" that has held the predecessor church bodies together in what is still a relatively new communion.

2. New Hymns and Songs (RW5) has a companion pew edition entitled Renewing Worship Songbook.

3. Episcopal Church USA, Moravian Church, Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ.


5. It is important to note that perspectives "at the table" must include the witness of Scripture and of this church’s confessional heritage.

The Rev. Michael Burk, Ph. D., is Director for Worship in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In addition to overseeing the work of the ELCA worship staff, he travels extensively to represent the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on matters related to worship.

Dr. Burk is a graduate of Wartburg College (B.A.), Wartburg Theological Seminary (M.Div.) and the University of Iowa (M.A. and Ph.D.).

In 2002, he was recognized at the University of Iowa as the Albert E. Stone Distinguished Alumnus in American Studies.