

Connections

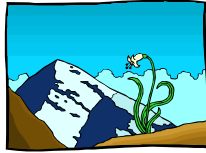
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Worship that revives



In the May/June 2006 issue of *Weavings* magazine, Maggie Ross tells about a disconcerting worship experience. With a few companions she was perched on a cliff carpeted with wildflowers in Glacier Bay, Alaska, above jagged ice towers that marked the edge of a gigantic frozen river. “We sat on the edge of this abyss, stupefied by glory,” she writes. “Simply to be in such a landscape is utterly beyond words.”

“We had intended to celebrate the Eucharist while we were up there,” she continues, “but after we scrambled through the last tumble of boulders only to be absorbed by the visionary landscape, our human rite of word and symbol became inadequate to the liturgy we were living.” But the priest in the group broke the spell by pulling some bread and a cup from his backpack.



Everything had been said from eternity

“His action,” explains Maggie Ross, “seemed extraneous, an intrusion. (Some cautionary words echoed in my mind, ‘It is good for us to be here. Let us make three booths ... ’)

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them. ... There appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three booths ...” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ...

—Mark 9:2-8

... He was a by-the-book man, and pulling [a wafer] out, began to drone the words I normally love but which in that context were almost an obscenity. Everything had already been said from eternity.”

Ross, says *Weavings*, is an Anglican Solitary who divides her time between Alaska and Oxford, England. That

What helps, what hinders?

Recent experiences have made me think about what motivates or helps people to worship, and what hinders worship. Music can have a big influence, as can silence or the lack of it. So can the words that are said and sung, So can the use of symbolic gestures and images.



“Who are my mother and my brothers? ... Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”
—Mark 3:33-35

Our relationship to other worshipers can matter, too. Some people give great importance to sitting with family members, but that’s not very important for me. More important for me is being with people whose understanding of the Bible’s nature, the church’s purpose, and what constitutes Christian behavior are similar to mine.

A diverse group with similar reactions



A building and its decoration can also contribute positively or negatively to worship. A recent trip to Sicily reminded me of that. I was traveling with a small group that included Jews, Quakers, and members and ex-members of several mainline Protestant denominations. We saw many churches as well as ancient temples to Greek and Roman gods.

Despite our religious diversity we all reacted similarly to these religious buildings, The church that struck most of us as most conducive to worship was a very small eleventh-century chapel. It had almost no decoration and no furnishings, but its beautiful simplicity and silence made us feel we were in sacred space. By contrast, a giant contemporary church building that was spectacular from the outside struck us all as cold and forbidding. Other huge church buildings filled with magnificent paintings, sculptures, and gold mosaics were awe-inspiring but somehow didn’t seem as worshipful as the tiny, intimate chapel we had seen.



What inspires you to worship? What hinders you? Why do you think these factors matter to you?



means her life is very different from mine and from the daily lives of most *Connections* readers. Still, I recognize the feeling she describes. I often have it in church. Words and by-the-book methods sometimes intrude rather than help.

What makes the difference? Could we more often use words and methods that promote worship rather than that intrude on it? Do we “build booths” that Jesus wouldn’t want, merely because like Peter we’re terrified and don’t know what to say but feel we ought to say or do *something*?

A refreshing week

I welcomed the three daily worship services at a week-long retreat I recently attended. They omitted familiar features that to me seem like inappropriate booth-building, and they included features I wish I could find more often. Such services would be a turnoff for some churchgoers, yet the retreat attendees were as diverse as most congregations, with varied theological views and personalities. They weren’t all like me. And they belonged to several different denominations.



The services I liked best were at 7:30 each morning. (The “night people” reading this are probably groaning already.) A few minutes earlier, worshipers began entering the dimly lit chapel in silence. All took their seats without touching or speaking. (Extroverts are no doubt groaning here, but their opportunity to hug and talk came later.) At 7:30 the lights went up and soft chimes were played in a random pattern. A pitch-

erful of water was poured into a bowl as a reminder of baptism and all else that water symbolizes.



A welcome contrast

Then the music leader sang “O God, open our lips,” and we all sang in response, “and we shall declare your praise.” What a welcome contrast this was, to the worship services that open with a worship leader almost shouting “Good morning!” to get a chattering congregation’s attention.

After an opening hymn we said this prayer together: “New every morning is your love, great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world. Stir up in us desire to serve you, to live peacefully with our neighbors and all your creation, and to devote each day to your son, our savior Jesus Christ.” Then a scripture was read and we sang the “Canticle of Zechariah” (#209 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*).



Next came spontaneous short prayers from worshipers, with all responding to each prayer of thanksgiving by saying “Loving God, we give you thanks,” and to each prayer of petition or intercession with “Merciful God, hear our prayer.” After the Lord’s Prayer, another song, and a benediction, hugs and conversation broke out and we went to breakfast.



A daily late-afternoon worship service included Communion (by intinction) and a sermon (by a different person each day, some lay and some ordained). Each day closed with a short 9:30 P.M. service, after which everyone remained silent until the next morning’s worship service began.



Each of the daily services included the Lord’s Prayer, sometimes sung but most times spoken, always in a contemporary translation. We never used the “Our Father who art in heaven” translation. What a welcome change!

Welcome omissions

What these services didn’t include was as important to me as what they included. We didn’t recite creeds. We didn’t sing the Gloria Patri or the Doxology. Almost everything we spoke or sang re-

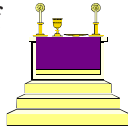
The week I describe here was presented by the Academy for Spiritual Formation, an excellent program sponsored by the United Methodist Church but attended by clergy and laity of many denominations. The basic Academy is composed of eight such weeks over a two-year period, but a one-time, five-day version is also available. Both happen regularly in many parts of the U.S. For full information see www.upperroom.org/academy. I participated in the two-year Academy years ago, a memorable, life-changing experience.

The songs and prayers I quote here are from the *Upper Room Worshipbook* (Upper Room Books, 2006; Elise S. Eslinger, editor)

ferred to God simply as “God,” not with personal pronouns, and as “you,” not “thee.”

Most hymns we sang had familiar tunes, but their words were in today’s English and were about following Jesus in today’s world. We didn’t sing about blood sacrifice, about what wretches we are, or about looking forward to heaven. Instead, we sang about what Jesus taught and did and wants us to do in order to help make this world a better place.

Our churches could include more of these features in their worship services to good advantage. They could still include some of the features that traditionalists consider essential, such as person-like images of God and references to Jesus as savior and son, yet avoid some of the features that many of today’s Christians find most offensive and inappropriate.



A real revival

For me the week I describe here was a real revival, not only through its worship services but also through its stimulating speakers and opportunities to talk with thinking, forward-looking Christians. What a contrast to what many churches call revivals, with outdated hymns and speakers who talk as if today’s knowledge about the Bible and the world didn’t exist. That’s not reviving. It’s deadening. It’s an effort to keep from seeing today’s world.

Maggie Ross’s *Weavings* article addresses this concern. “Church,” she writes, “is supposed to be a vehicle that helps us along the road to God.” That



should come as no surprise, yet some of our vehicles take us backward instead of forward along that road. “We need to be ruthlessly honest about what we

are doing,” Ross warns. “If a congregation wants to meet for a purpose other than beholding [God], fine, but say so. Do not waste the time of those who come to pray, who come for the liturgy of beholding that leads to spiritual maturity and the truth of God.”

The best liturgies and presiders vanish

I found her comments about liturgy especially potent. “The best liturgies, and the most gifted people who preside at them,” she writes, “will tend to disappear even as the liturgical action goes forward. ... A litmus test of every facet of religion, but most particularly of liturgy, is this: Every true sacred sign effaces itself. Effacement does not mean destruction. It means pointing the attention of participants beyond themselves, their ideas, their expectations. Language, symbol, action—all gesture beyond. This ... is a test of every sacred sign.”



As an example, she mentions Jesus telling Mary Magdalene (according to John 20:17), “Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” To Ross this means, “Do not cling to your image of me as Jesus the human person.”

She reminds us of the need to avoid clinging to any visual or verbal picture of Jesus or God. “Our ‘religious experience’—that is, our interpretation made up of concepts and words—may be necessary to being human but is always distorting.”

Words that gesture beyond themselves

“Religion,” Ross observes, “is an attempt to gesture with words toward what is beyond words.” Here’s how she describes what happens as we keep turning loose of words and concepts whose distor-

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 14 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

tions we have come to recognize, and move to more expansive images of God. “We are trans-figured—that is, we are taken again and again beyond the form, the shape, we give to our interpretations, the way we ‘figure things out.’ We replace them with newer, better interpretations as our perspective becomes more and more that of the transfigured Christ.”

A means of transfiguration for the world

Even more harmful than failing to keep moving to better interpretations is the failure to recognize that our personal interpretations and even our churches’ official interpretations are interpretations.

They aren’t literal and complete descriptions of reality. Remembering this is essential to being revived and led closer to God by our worship services, rather than being deadened and deluded by their portrayals of God, human beings, and the world.



“Only when churches are willing to stop grasping at self-perpetuation and to create rites that gesture beyond themselves will they be able to fulfill their mission,” Maggie Ross believes, as I also do. “Only then will they have a chance of becoming a means of transfiguration for us and for the world.”

Barbara



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Worship that revives

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Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

