

A Spirituality of Change:

Making change happen in a changing context

By Bishop Mike Rinehart

For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. -- Ecclesiastes 3

Everything changes. Nothing lasts, except for the Word of our Lord, according to Isaiah. Nothing endures, except the Pauline trinity of faith, hope and love. Everything changes, including the way we organize our churches, worship in our liturgies and set up our worship spaces. As the photo to the right illustrates, appearances do matter!

What interests me, since I have had the opportunity to go around visiting congregations, is how those changes take place. Over the centuries people have worshipped in homes, graveyards and basilicas. Christians have worshipped in high formal liturgies and informal circles holding hands. They have sung florid cantatas and simple Taizé songs.

So what brings about these changes? How does the worshipping community adapt to changing context? What gets sung? Who decides? How does the worshipping community then organize to serve the poor and love the neighbor?

Liturgy is the work of the people. But one wonders: which people? Do we sing songs that work for those already in the church, or for those outside the church? Young or old? Songs for those who started the church? Those who presently live in the community?

If the pastor or organist or the chair of the worship committee chooses to sing "Beautiful Savior" is it because they like it, or the congregation likes it? Does this internal battle take into account the unchurched or dechurched community that neither loves the song nor perhaps even knows it? I believe many worship planners choose music that evokes a worship memory or experience from their childhood. Many worshippers want this too. But what if you are Latino, and have never heard of "Beautiful Savior," a 19th century Silesian folk tune? (Today's folk tunes are tomorrow's hymns.) What if you grew up in Texas singing "Bringing in the Sheaves" or in Africa singing "Siyahamba?" What if you've never gone to church in your life? Is our liturgy the work of all the people, or of the select few? And again, who decides?

Worship scholar Frank Senn says that liturgy is inherently conservative. He's right. People tend to want to keep doing what they've been doing. We're creatures of ritual. History has shown that the liturgy of the people has a life of its own, regardless of the rantings of bishops and professors of worship who want to tell us how to do things "right." So what is "right?" High church? Low church? Contemporary? Traditional? Formal? Informal? German chorales? Praise and worship?

I'd like to offer a humble suggestion that the liturgy, the work of the people that is right is what "works." What do I mean by works? Works in what way? That's what you have to figure out. What is worship for? And who is it for?

What is it for? Worship should draw people into worship of the living God. If it's done poorly, if it's excessively difficult, if it draws attention to the leader and his or her gifts rather than pointing to the Magnum Mysterium, then people will be distracted and worship becomes poor entertainment. Worship should showcase the Word and Sacraments. Anything that distracts from these is simply clutter.

Who is it for? But the real question is this: If worship is to draw people into worship, which people are we talking about? Are we planning worship for the descendants of the people who started this church or for those who now live in the community where the congregation is located? If the latter, then the music and liturgy chosen will vary depending upon your context. Our Lutheran Confessions make it clear that it is not necessary that rites and rituals be identical in every place. We're not McDonalds. We have a form of worship, an Ordo: Gathering, Word, Sacrament, Sending. But within that form there is much room for adapting to local sensitivities.

What if our worship teams or committees did the kind of demographic work we have our evangelism teams do? They would figure out who is living within a 5-10 mile radius of the congregation's site and plan worship that would draw those people into worship? I suspect our "church people" would be upset.

And all this leads to our present situation: what happens when a pastor or a worship team sees that change is necessary, but the congregation digs their heels in? Or what happens when the congregation is begging for change, and the pastor won't budge? What if a leader is imposing his or her personal wishes on the whole community? How can we get past the worship wars (what I've heard called warship battles) and the impasse of conflicting sensitivities? How do we lead change kindly? How can we be pastoral and yet prophetic?

I've been asking this question a lot. What follows are some of the things I've heard, for what it's worth.

- Learn together. Have your worship team do some work on local demographics. Where do people live? What do they do? How much do they make? Who are they? Have some of your meetings out in the community, at a local café where your decisions are made in the midst of the people, rather than in the midst of the trappings of our church culture. Read *Use of the Means of Grace* together to be clear on what is essential in worship, so your team has a sense of what is gospel and what is adiaphora (optional). Give them copies they can take home. Someone may read it and get interested in various liturgical options that could enhance worship.
- Talk it out. At several churches I have visited, the missal stand has been placed at the center of the altar, and communion was shuffled off to the side. At one church I visited there was so much stuff on their small, high altar (candles, flowers, missal stand, etc.) that there wasn't room for communion. We had to move the missal stand off to a small credence table to make room for communion. At another church a large arrangement of flowers was on the altar in front of the missal stand at the center of the altar, so that from the congregation's view, the pastor's head emerged from the flowers. When I sit across from my wife at a restaurant and the flowers block my view of her lovely face, I move them. I push them to the side, or put them on a nearby table. I don't make snide remarks about the decorator (though I may think them). Places like Garden Ridge nowadays offer inexpensive yet attractive flower

stands, pillars and such that could be used to move the flowers to an unobtrusive place. So talk it out with the altar guild or worship team. Give it time. What is the table for? What is central? If it is for Holy Communion, then doesn't it make sense that the paten (plate) and chalice (cup) should be at the center? Try humor: At Thanksgiving if there's no room for the turkey because the floral person in the family got carried away, we have a problem. I love flowers, but I came for the turkey. The flowers had better not get between me and my turkey, or someone's going to get hurt.

- Change incrementally. Don't pull the rug out from under people. It's just not fair. Three new hymns in one day after years of familiarity will certainly breed contempt. One new hymn is enough, particularly in communities in which there are not many people who read music. And do it for a month, so that people can learn to love it. If you're changing an aspect of communion practices, something that people hold sacred, go slowly. Try things out for a season, go back. Give people time to get used to change.
- Start a new service. SOP in changing churches: Don't take away someone's worship service. Just add another one for the demographic you're trying to reach. If you change the 10:30 a.m. service that has been the same since 1932, you're in for trouble. But if you add a 5:30 p.m. contemporary, Latino, gospel, postmodern, or whatever service, most folks won't fuss.
- Change frequently. If nothing changes in worship for weeks, nothing at all, then even a small change will stick out. But if a little something is different each week, people get used to it and even learn to appreciate the fact that it's not the same old thing week after week.
- Think pastorally. It's not about you. It's about the proclamation of the gospel in purity, and the administration of the sacraments according to that gospel. Don't say, "I'm high church" or "I'm not high church." We are servants of the gospel and of the people. Don't force incense on people who don't want it. Or, if they own chasubles and like processions, then why not? It doesn't matter if you're high or low. If you want incense, go to the Episcopal Church in town for your fix. Or start an evening prayer service and let people know what to expect. We are missionaries, not curators.
- Try things out for a time. "We don't worry too much about change. Things change so much here, if you don't like it, don't worry. It will probably change again next month." I heard this said at a church I served many years ago. They knew we were only doing this or that during Lent, then we'd go back. So they tolerated the change. In time they came to love some of the changes, and they became the normal pattern. (Notice I didn't say permanent.)
- Find interim steps. Let's say your worship team wants to try common cup, a tough sell in any community. You could add common cup as an option, with little battle. You could move to a pouring chalice, from which you pour into little cups, but others could drink. You could offer intinction and/or common cup on festivals, when the number of people could make distribution very lengthy. [Tangent: I personally am worried about the cheapening of communion in our congregations. I go into sacristies and see little plastic cups with consecrated communion wine in the trash. I've seen wafers in the trash. We need to do some work on the proper disposition of consecrated bread and wine after worship. Learning

together is the key. People think the shot glasses (now plastic shot glasses to save having to wash the glass ones) are cleaner. But our hands are much “dirtier” than our mouths in terms of germs. And the little glasses are put in and taken out by hands. End of sermon.]

- Try things at one service but not another. Keeping 8:30 the same may make it easier to try new things at 11:00, or vice-versa. If one of your services is more contemporary or informal, that may be the easiest place to implement change. These folks are there because they want something a bit different.
- Not “My way or the highway.” I’ve done it that way before: pushed through change I felt was crucial. In an emergency, sometimes you must. But there is a high price to pay for that kind of dictatorial leadership. People feel pushed around. Disrespected. You may win the battle, but lose the war. You get your change, but you’ve made too many withdrawals from people’s emotional bank accounts to be effective in the future.
- Go for the “low-hanging fruit.” In every congregation there are things you can change easily and immediately and no one cares. They may not even notice. Look for those things. Higher wattage bulbs may make the worship space seem brighter, more luminescent. Senior members find it easier to see their bulletins. At Grace one summer I just stopped wearing my clerical collar on Sundays to see if anyone noticed or cared. Not one person commented on it. It amazed me. In fact I got several compliments on how “nice” I looked. (I was wearing a suit and tie.) I’m not suggesting this. In fact, I went back to the collar in time. I’m only pointing out that not everything is truly a sacred cow. There may be things you could change immediately, that will benefit you greatly, without a single shot being fired.
- Simply ask. In one congregation I served, instead of receiving communion, people would take it from me. They reach out with their finger and thumb like the beak of some water fowl and “pinch” communion out of my hands. The handoff sometimes failed. I’d let go before they have full control, and the wafer wafted to the floor where it sometimes got stepped on. I pick it up of course, but then what? If I put it on the altar, some well-meaning, untrained altar guild person may, after worship, put it back in the Tupperware® container from whence it came, in order that it may be served to some unsuspecting victim next week. So I just asked, every Sunday for a while, then once a month thereafter. Politely: “Please receive the wafer in your open palm.” And I’d show them one hand upon another. Within weeks the problem was 95% solved.
- Read the signs. There are seasons for change. And there are seasons for no change. A congregation that has just come through an implosion in their life together may need some stability for a while. But a congregation that has just moved into a new worship space or renovated the old one, might be itching for change, like when you move the furniture around in your house.
- Know your voice. When you first arrive at a church, people may be more willing to make changes to please you. Use this, but don’t abuse it. It will fall off sharply as the honeymoon ends. Then, as time passes and trust builds, they will become more receptive to your leadership. A beloved long-term pastor may be able to make changes happen more readily than a younger, newer pastor.

- Trust that change will happen. For hundreds of years Lutherans had communion every Sunday. Then in North America, there weren't enough pastors to go around. Traveling pastors (circuit riders) went from congregation to congregation. Churches would only have communion when a pastor was present, so most Lutheran and Episcopal churches had communion only quarterly. Change happened to fit context. Slowly communion frequency has increased. It went to monthly. When I grew up the majority practice was first and third Sundays. And now, the survey we took last month (see below) suggests that most of our congregations have communion weekly. Change can happen if there are good reasons and strong and kind leaders.
- Preach the change you want to see. If you're a pastor, preach the change you hope for. We preach peace in the world even though it's a long way off. Let them know your heart. If what you want to see is gospel-centered then it's pulpit-worthy. If it's not gospel-centered, then why are you doing it?
- Roll with the growing pains. Congregations respond differently to growth. In many places, if the church is growing, people are joining, offerings are up, the pastor can get away with a lot of change. People are excited. Even if they don't like the change they'll say, "She knows what she's doing. Let's give it a try." On the other hand, some congregations get very anxious with growth. "Who are all these people." "I don't know anyone in this church any more." (What they mean is, "I don't know everyone in this church anymore." This often happens when you move from a small congregation to a medium-sized congregation.
- Be a non-anxious presence. Stay calm. Liturgy is inherently conservative. If they've been doing something for several years, they probably believe it was always like this. We are by nature creatures of ritual. There are some things you will be able to change and some things you won't. Maturity is learning to recognize the difference and accept it.
- Recognize that there is no one right way to do things. Liturgies have been done formally and informally since the dawn of time. Christians met in homes and in basilicas. They baptized in rivers and in hospital beds. Context is everything. There may be very good reasons that your people are doing things the way they are doing them. A little respect is in order. On the other hand, there is the story of the roasting pan. (See below.)

To close, a familiar story about traditions.

A woman cut two inches off the end of the pot roast and placed the remainder into the pan. "Why do you mangle that cut of meat?" her husband asked. "Because my mom did it." "Why did your mom cut it off?" he asked. "I don't know, but when I see her again, I'll ask." Several days later, she asked, "Mom, why do you always cut the end off your pot roast?" "Because my mom did it," she replied. So they called grandma. "Hello," stretched across the phone lines and filled the silence in the kitchen. "Hi, Granny, I need to know why you cut the end off your pot roast." She answered, "My pan is too small."