Worship on the northwestern frontier

Rod Stafford

Two hundred years ago, Captains Lewis and Clark set out with their Corps of Discovery to explore the uncharted West. President Thomas Jefferson had commissioned them to look for the mythic Northwest Passage. (Along the way, perhaps they would run into the wooly mammoths, Peruvian llamas, and blue-eyed Welsh-speaking Indians that were rumored to live here.) For all their epic adventure, they discovered no great passage and no mammoths, but the West was irrevocably opened, and explorers have been streaming this way ever since.

Given its roots in a Wild West past of logging camps and endless range, it is perhaps not surprising that the Northwest has become the least churched region in the United States. Census studies show that on any given holy day, fewer people find their way to church, synagogue, or mosque in Oregon than in any other state.

One person who sporadically attends our church posed the question this way: "Is it better for me to sit in church for an hour and think about the mountains, or to sit in the mountains for an hour and think about God?"

For one thing, there is simply too much else to do. One could ski a glacier on Mount Hood in the morning, windsurf in the Colombia River Gorge in the afternoon, and still make it to the Pacific Ocean for a dinner of cracked crab at sunset. One person who sporadically attends our church posed the question this way: "Is it better for me to sit in church for an hour and think about the mountains, or to sit in the mountains for an hour and think about God?" That logic is hard to refute.

Though Christendom may still be in place in much of the South, it never took hold in the Northwest. And in contrast to the Northeast's tradition of the church on the village green—a central, organizing, community institution—Christianity up here

is, at best, one faith among many. Two blocks from my church there is a Wiccan meeting house. And the Goddess Gallery that used to be across the street recently moved down the block into an expanded space.

There is a deep and pervasive spiritual longing here. But much of it is diffuse, some of it is antithetical to organized religion, and some of it is simply unconnected to any religious past. A man recently joined the congregation who for the previous eighteen years would have described himself as "a bit of a Buddhist." He proudly told me that his son was learning "The Lord is my shepherd" in Sunday school. Then he asked, "That's in the Psalms, right?" Then added, "That's in the Old Testament, right?"

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In the Northwest, Christianity does not enjoy the support of a cultural consensus. People don't necessarily grow up learning its stories and symbols, Wednesday evenings are not reserved as church night, and people experience little—if any—social pressure to be in worship on Sunday mornings. Religiously, the Northwest is still the frontier. We are on the leading edge in a time when Christendom is ending. The Bible Belt may not know it yet, and TV preachers may fight it, but the era of the mutually reinforcing connection between Christianity and American culture is nearly over.

So how do Mennonite churches worship in such a setting as the Northwest? Are there lessons in our experience for the broader Mennonite Church in North America?

Worship that fits a post-Christendom context

The Pacific Northwest Conference is a disparate group. Local mythology has it that earlier generations of Mennonites back east fought, split off, and kept moving west until finally they hit the Pacific Ocean and were thrown back by the waves. From our many places of origin, we've ended up at a distance from the Mennonite centers and from one another. We are spread out over Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and even into Alaska and Montana. We are in metropolitan centers and rural farming hamlets.

The challenge, as one pastor put it, is to worship in a way that "fits the context." And, he added, because of geography we are pretty much "each on our own." In the absence of an overarching Mennonite theology of worship, what has emerged is an eclectic mixture of styles and practices. On any given Sunday, a rural congregation in the fertile Willamette Valley sings four-part a cappella music from *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, while another church an hour south wouldn't know how even if they wanted to. A Spanish-language church in inner southeast Portland sings praise-and-worship music accompanied by drums, guitars, and keyboard, while an English-language congregation primarily of homeless people draws on music written by their pastor.

When asked about worship in the Northwest, one pastor commented that because there is not a built-in expectation of church attendance, he has sometimes felt the temptation to compete—that is, to make worship entertaining enough to draw people in. While resisting that impulse, he has introduced PowerPoint projections into the service, sometimes as visual accompaniment to music and sometimes to enrich his sermons.

Another pastor spoke of his experience in starting a new Mennonite church out of another congregation that had left the denomination. As a chorister in the previous church, he had led hymns; within two years, the new congregation had switched over completely to contemporary Christian music of the kind published by Hosanna, Integrity, and Maranatha. In those early years, he explained, the group rented space from a Seventh Day Adventist church and had no money to buy hymnals. More to the point, they had few people with any experience of hymn singing. The change in music in their congregation was directly linked to their "vision of reaching people."

In our worship as Mennonites, we use a variety of books, follow a variety of patterns, and incorporate a variety of symbols. The very diversity of our practices reflects something of our implicit Mennonite theology of worship. We believe that faith is contextual; it must be lived out among particular people and at a particular place and time. Local churches are best equipped to be attentive and responsive to the movements of God's Spirit in their setting. So we trust each congregation to discern how best to be present with God in its gatherings for worship.

And yet we are still connected. For all of our differences, we are all Mennonites sharing a common story and a common faith. Because worship forms us week after week, it must be rooted in our deepest commitments. Out here on the northwestern frontier, we need to be part of a larger community that can help us discern and discover new ways of worshiping—new wineskins—in this new era.

First, we need help to discover new ways of singing. Mennonite Church USA has done a wonderful job in producing *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and the new *Sing the Journey* supplement. But these resources by and large represent a limited range of musical expression. They include traditional hymns, international songs, and contemporary music from John Bell, from publishers such as GIA and OCP. Conspicuously absent are resources from the praise-and-worship songbook, the kind of music sung almost exclusively at one of the largest churches in Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference. Granted, those songs are readily available, but we need to do the same careful theological reflection with respect to that music that has been done with the worship book. In addition, access to that kind of music can enrich the worship of individual congregations, as it enhanced our 2005 denominational gathering in Charlotte, North Carolina.

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Second, we in the Northwest need to be part of a larger community that is discovering new ways of speaking our faith. Much of the language the church has used through the age of Christendom is no longer comprehensible to many in this post-Christendom culture. We can no longer assume the prior knowledge that makes our old formulas intelligible. How can we invite people to "repent of their sins" if they have no idea they are sinners? Does it make sense to plead with people to "accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior" when they are not sure what a savior does, or that they have any need of one?

Robert Guelich, in an article published after his death, asked the question: "What is the gospel?" In answer, he pointed to the

varied expressions in the New Testament—Paul's emphasis on Christ's death for our sins (in 1 Cor. 15:3, for example), and the evangelists' references to Jesus' proclamation that "the kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15). He ended provocatively by asking how adequate those expressions are for our world.

> *How well does language such as "justification by faith," "redemption," "salvation," "atonement," . . . communicate effectively today? To what extent are we simply passing on traditional formulas if we settle for the biblical or historical expressions of the gospel? The very presence of the diverse New Testament expressions of the gospel drawn from and sensitive to the times and contexts of their day challenge us to explore intensely the question of our expressions of the gospel for our day.*[1]

In a post-Christendom culture, we are faced with the task of unpacking the formulas we have used, rediscovering the core commitments embedded in them, and, in continuity with the deep substance of our faith, finding new ways and new words for authentically and evangelically expressing the good news.

Now is the time to develop a Mennonite theology of worship

As the church enters this new age, we must do the careful work of developing a theology of worship that can guide our songs, prayers, and preaching. Historically, we haven't had one—I suspect in part because Mennonites haven't been identified by our mode of worship. Episcopalians are Episcopalians because of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Pentecostals are Pentecostals because they speak in tongues when they gather for worship. Walk into any Catholic church and you immediately know where you are. But Mennonites worship in an amazing—almost bewildering—range of styles and settings. For all of our careful reflection on an array of theological topics, we have rarely thought intentionally about the church's work of worship.

Now is the time. We need a theology of worship big enough to embrace and shape our great range of styles and practices. Instead of investing energy in the hot-button issues that absorb so much

of our attention, Mennonite Church USA needs a period of time to consider our language, symbols, and practices, and the core commitments we reflect and inculcate. Perhaps theologians and pastors could develop a denominational resource that invites and challenges congregations to carefully examine the worship of the church.

People still come to the Northwest looking for all sorts of things, real and imagined. Underneath the quest is the deep longing to know God in the deepest part of our souls. May our worship point the way to such good news.

We have a theology big enough to transform not only us but our world. In a culture that knows only the story of individual achievement and redemptive violence, the church has another, better story to tell—of God's creative power, of Christ's self-giving love, of the Spirit's whole-making grace. People still come to the Northwest looking for all sorts of things, real and imagined. Underneath the quest is the deep longing, present in each of us, to give and receive love, to live lives that matter, to know God in the deepest part of our souls. May the church, in our worship, point the way to such good news.

Notes

[1] Robert Guelich, "What Is the Gospel?" *Theology, News and Notes* (Spring 2004): 7.

About the author

Rod Stafford has been pastor of Portland (OR) Mennonite Church for the past six years. The first thirty-three years of his life were spent in California.