

## God's Mission in the Practice of Assembly

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It was a Saturday afternoon in Capetown, South Africa, August 1998, and together with one of my colleagues from Wartburg Seminary, I was checking out the some of the local Lutheran churches to determine where we might attend worship on Sunday. In our wanderings, we came upon a German Lutheran congregation, an outpost of the German national church. And there on the sign listing the schedule of services for the next day, there were a couple familiar designations of the services: *Frühgottesdienst* (early service), *Hauptgottesdienst* (principal service), and then this one: *etwas anderes Gottesdienst*, literally “the something other” service, or as we would say “the alternative service.” There it was: German Lutherans doing alternative worship in South Africa; and there I was: the North American academic tourist looking in. Somehow all the historical and cultural incongruities of that sign and my standing there before it that day resonated in such a way as to leave an impression on me. What struck me then and what continues to intrigue me is the depth and breadth of the search among many western Christians for *etwas anderes*—something other, something alternative in their assemblies for worship.<sup>1</sup>

I have no report to make about what constituted alternative worship among those German Lutherans in Capetown. My point, however, has to do not so much with what they did, but rather with the notion that they understood themselves engaged in *etwas anderes*, something alternative. Alternative to what? In what way? For what purpose?

I had for some time been studying the impasse between proponents of so-called contemporary and traditional forms of worship.<sup>2</sup> I was not satisfied with readings of the situation that pitted the adherents of tradition and those seeking a contemporary alternative in direct opposition to each other, although there seemed to be plenty of evidence in congregations to see it that way. My Capetown experience, among others, helped to push my thinking in another direction. What if those advocating for a contemporary worship were not so much searching for an alternative to tradition, but rather to something else? Indeed, if we understand tradition as a process involving continuity and change, rather than a static

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<sup>1</sup> James Nieman is the Wartburg colleague who was with me that day. I am grateful for conversations with him then and now that have contributed to my thinking on the matters addressed here.

<sup>2</sup> For my previous work on the issues surrounding the contemporary ferment about worship, see “A Clamor for the Contemporary: The Present Challenge for Baptismal Identity and Liturgical Tradition in American Culture,” *Cross Accent*, no. 6 (July 1995): 3-11; “How does worship relate to the cultures of North America?,” *What does “multicultural” worship look like?*, vol. 7 of *Open Questions in Worship*, ed. Gordon Lathrop (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 6-15; “The Cultural Pattern of Christian Worship: Language, Order, Song,” *Encountering God: The Legacy of Lutheran Book of Worship for the 21st Century*, ed. Ralph R. Van Loon (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 1998), 162-180; “Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission,” *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas H. Schattauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 1-21; “Faithfulness at the Threshold: Church Music, Culture, and Mission—A Response to Rimbo, Just, and Marshall,” *Cross Accent* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 16-23; “Seeking Peace in the Assembly: God’s Mission, Our Worship, and the World’s Hope,” *The Difficult But Indispensable Church*, ed. Norma Cook Everist (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 3-11; “The Löhe Alternative for Worship, Then and Now,” *Word and World* 24 (2004): 145-156. Research grants from the Association of Theological Schools (1993-94) and the Louisville Institute (1994) encouraged the earliest stages of this work.

deposit of faith and practice as a check against the emergence of anything new, then the traditional and the contemporary are rarely opposites. Tradition is best understood as a process of handing over (*paradosis, traditio*) faith and practice from one generation to another. There is never tradition without engagement with the contemporary moment; nor is contemporary faith and practice constructed without reference to tradition.

The contemporary search for *etwas anderes*, for something alternative in the practice of worship, it seems to me, is more about the opposition to conventionality—to conventional ways of worship, and ultimately to conventional ways of being Christian. It helped me to recall the English title of a somewhat obscure 1972 book by Juan Mateos, the Jesuit liturgical scholar: *Beyond Conventional Christianity*. As the original, Spanish title (*Cristianos en Fiesta*) indicates, the book is a reflection on the distinctive nature of Christian festivity. The English title, however, captures the deeper aim of the book to break open conventional understandings of liturgy, indeed of Christianity itself. Listen for a moment to Mateos:

After a number of years spent in studying the different liturgical traditions of the church, I began to wish to probe more deeply into their evangelical roots. . . .

As we read the Gospel and the whole New Testament we learn that Christ the Lord came to communicate God's life to the world, and this new and eternal life is meant to pervade and give value to the whole of human reality. From this fact one could deduce that a Christian celebration, to be what it should be, must reflect and express the new life that fills all Christian being and doing. Such was therefore, the link between life and celebration.<sup>3</sup>

For Mateos, the practices of Christian worship were not to be understood as historical and institutional conventions, but directly in relation to the communication of God's life to the world in Christ. Despite his historical-liturgical erudition, Mateos' aim was not merely to maintain a liturgical inheritance, but to construct an alternative to conventional Christianity through liturgical celebration radically renewed in its relation to God's purpose in Christ witnessed in the scriptures. Mateos imagined *etwas anderes*, an alternative practice of worship opposed to conventionality, not tradition, and turned toward the purpose of God for the world.

The Capetown church sign announcing *etwas anderes* and the recollection of the title of Mateos' *Beyond Conventional Christianity* have encouraged me to see that those promoting what is often called contemporary worship and the heirs of the modern liturgical movement share a common impulse toward an alternative practice of worship.

Furthermore, this impulse is directed, not primarily against tradition, but toward imagining and constructing an alternative to conventional ways of worship and conventional ways of being Christian. This impulse holds the promise for a constructive re-imagining of the Christian assembly and its purpose in present circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Juan Mateos, *Beyond Conventional Christianity*, trans. Kathleen England (Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1974), introduction.

<sup>4</sup> For some recent attempts at constructively re-imagining the Christian assembly beyond the impasse between so-called "contemporary" and "traditional" forms of worship, see Don E. Saliers, *Worship Come to Its Senses* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2001); Ronald P. Byars, *The Future of Protestant Worship: Beyond the Worship Wars* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., and Sue A. Rozeboom,

There are in fact a number of different perspectives on how to shape this alternative practice of worship that have influence upon congregations in the North American context. Here is one list of five: the liturgical movement, the contemporary worship movement, liberation perspectives, post-modern approaches, and Pentecostalism. Each of these proposes an alternative to the conventional practice of Christian worship. Each can be historically located and identified in relation to particular persons and groups of people. We can tell the story of the liturgical movement in its European roots as well as its particular development in North America; we can speak of its leaders and associations, its proposals, and its influence among Roman Catholics and Protestants. Similarly, we can report about current developments in the post-modern emerging church, with its base among younger evangelicals, in contrast to the contemporary worship movement among an older generation of evangelicals; and we can take note of the impact of these evangelical movements across the North American denominational landscape. So too, we can explore the worship practices that have arisen among gatherings of the poor and oppressed or communities of women where the theology of liberation has taken hold; and we can delineate the affect of such voices from the margins upon the center. And finally, we can acknowledge the explosion of Pentecostal worship, with its origins among lower class whites and blacks in North America, its spread throughout American society and its wide-ranging global impact upon newer, independent churches in the developing world. Although extraordinarily diverse, these movements together represent a broad search for an alternative practice of worship among contemporary Christians.

If we are to understand the impulse toward something alternative, we need to say something about the notion of conventional worship, against which these alternative proposals press. The conventional has to do with what is generally accepted and customary, and that will necessarily vary from one gathering of Christians to another. What is considered conventional in a given worshiping community is shaped by the particular tradition of worship, by a given social and cultural context, and local choices made over time. I want to suggest, however, that there are certain general characteristics in what is regarded as conventional. Conventional worship—and with it, conventional Christianity—focuses in one direction on the maintenance of the church as an institution and in the other on the individual as the recipient of spiritual benefits; it tends to support the social and political status quo. One form of conventionality among North

American Protestants would be the tall-steeped congregation where worship is shaped around the preacher and the music program; people come to worship to hear the sermon, to listen to the choir and organ, to sing some hymns, and to say a confession and perhaps recite the creed; participation at worship and life in the congregation is part of a set of commitments that make people upstanding citizens in the larger community. Whatever its particular form, the conventional act of worship tends to be clergy and leader dominated, highly verbal (and often text-driven), and limited in the forms of congregational participation.

Here is the map of the current situation among North American worshiping communities that I am suggesting: the conventional practice of worship surrounded by an array of proposals for an alternative practice of worship arising from the liturgical movement, the contemporary worship movement, liberation perspectives, postmodern approaches, and

Pentecostalism. And I offer this map in contrast to the commonly, but much too simplistic distinction between traditional worship and contemporary or alternative worship. In fact I want to argue that the various alternatives that I have identified all draw upon different impulses in order to re-imagine the Christian assembly, now constrained by conventionality, and to redirect it toward God's purpose for the world, God's mission, which is the proper aim and the measure of truly apostolic tradition.

While any typology of worship practice risks being incomplete and inadequate to the complex realities of worshiping communities, the value of such a map has to do with its heuristic potential. What does it help us to discover? Does it contribute to our understanding? And where does it take us?<sup>5</sup>

One way to use this map of alternatives in contemporary worship practice would be to evaluate the adequacy of each as an alternative to conventional worship. How does a given alternative regard and relate to the institutionalism of conventional Christianity? to its religious individualism? to its support for the social and political status quo? To what extent does the practice of worship move beyond the control of clergy or leaders? beyond the verbal and textual? beyond limited forms of participation? Here the aim would be to determine the relative strengths and weaknesses of each alternative as a critique of conventionality, and to ask how that critique might be further strengthened through dialogue with the other perspectives.

While that approach has some merit, it puts the focus more on the critique of conventional worship and less on what each of the alternatives envisions. I would like to take another approach here: one that asks first about the principal source for re-imagining the Christian assembly in each alternative and, secondly, about the distinctive aim of each alternative. What this yields, in my estimation, is a picture of the fundamental impulses that drive the search for an alternative practice of worship. Once identified, the understanding of these impulses provides a basis for a critical and constructive conversation among the alternatives.

### **Impulses for Re-Imagining the Christian Assembly**

Two questions will guide our use of the map of alternative worship practice. The first is this: what is the principal source that is drawn upon to re-imagine the Christian assembly, and thus to shape an alternative to the conventional practice of worship? Shaping an alternative practice of worship, and by implication an alternative way of being Christian, is in its inception an act of imagination. It requires imagining things differently and there must be something that stimulates that imagination. So the first question seeks after the source that funds this re-imagining of what takes place when people gather to worship. There is a second question because the imagination operates not only in relation to a source but also in relation

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<sup>5</sup> Other ways of constructing such a typology are available in the work of James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1989); Lester Ruth, "A Rose by Any Other Name: Attempts at Classifying North American Protestant Worship," *The Conviction of Things Not Seen: Worship and Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Todd E. Johnson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2002), 33-51; and two unpublished articles by Fred Holper of McCormick Theological Seminary, "New Occasions Teach New Duties: Traditional Worship in a Post-Traditional Age," and esp., "Like a Fiddler on the Roof: The Mentoring Role of Tradition in a Time of Liturgical Upheaval." See also Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2004), 127-165, who offers a fascinating sociological perspective on the variation of worship practices in American congregations.

to direction and purpose. So the second question seeks after the aim of this gathering for worship: what is the distinctive aim toward which the alternative practice of worship is directed? With these two questions about source and aim we now turn to each of the alternatives.<sup>6</sup>

**Liturgical Movement.** For the liturgical movement, the historic patterns and practice of Christian worship have been the principle source for re-imagining the assembly and shaping the practice of worship. The distinctive aim in this recovery of historic practice has been to renew the church as a distinctive community in Christ, witnessing to and participating in God's purpose for the world.

Nearly two centuries of modern historical research into liturgical practice, with particular attention to its origins, has yielded a treasury of material for the Christian imagination. The appeal to history, especially the precedent of early Christian practice, has been a major impetus for contemporary liturgical renewal. The historical picture of how Christians worshiped in the past has offered a way to imagine the church and its worship differently in the present. From a Sunday assembly focused on a unified and participatory act of word and supper, to baptismal practice supported by a catechumenal process, to celebration of the vigil of Easter and the accompanying liturgies of the triduum at the heart of the church year, knowledge of the past has shaped proposals for current practice. Liturgical reform and renewal among Roman Catholics and Protestants has drawn upon historic liturgical practice as a source in order to break from the constraints of what I have called conventionality and to imagine something alternative.

The aim in this has been to renew the church in its distinctive communal identity and purpose. In reaction to the predominance of an amorphous cultural Christianity, liturgical reform and renewal has sought to give the church clearer definition as a community in Christ through the focus on central practices that constitute persons in relation to Christ and to one another, most especially the reading and proclamation of scripture, baptism, and Eucharist. Moreover, the purpose of this community in Christ constituted in its liturgical assembly is to be understood in relation to God's purpose for the world. Alexander Schmemmann's often-cited phrase "for the life of the world" has summarized the purpose of the assembly in cosmic terms, beyond any limited focus on spiritual benefits for the individual and beyond the community of the church as an end in itself.<sup>7</sup> The community gathered in Christ is directed towards God's eschatological purpose to reconcile the world to Godself. This is the horizon of the practice of worship.

It is important to recognize that the appeal to historic liturgical practice has often ignored the complexities of history and the variety of early Christian practice in particular. Paul Bradshaw has warned us about the dangers of homogenizing the liturgical past as well as the present.<sup>8</sup> What interests me here, however, is the use of the past to imagine an alternative

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<sup>6</sup> For another treatment of these alternatives as perspectives within the field of liturgical studies, see Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Studies: Disciplines, Perspectives, and Teaching," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 11 (2007): 106-137.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, "The Homogenization of Christian Liturgy—Ancient and Modern: Presidential Address," *Studia Liturgica* 26 (1996), 1-15. See also his 1993 NAAL Vice-Presidential Address "Worship in an

future and consequently to give shape to that alternative in the present. What is at work in the use of the past is never the direct transport of Christian practice from whatever century into the present, but rather the correspondence between a practice from the past and present need, which stimulates the imagination toward an alternative practice. History provides access to a rich storehouse of material and possibilities, some of which will be useful in the present.<sup>9</sup>

One example from Lutheran quarters will have to suffice. As a result of Luther's vehement critique of the post-Sanctus prayers of the canon of the mass as sacrificial, Lutheran Eucharistic practice focused on the proclamation of the words of institution set apart from prayer. With the renewal of Eucharistic praying promoted by the liturgical movement and inspired by early and eastern forms of such prayers, some North American Lutherans in the mid-twentieth century included a full Eucharistic in a service book prayer (at least as a first option); and ever since such prayers have found a growing place in worship books and increased usage in practice among Lutherans.<sup>10</sup> The approach to the past was indeed highly selective. The model of Eucharistic praying adapted from the past was taken from one stream of early Christian practice, the Syro-Byzantine (or West Syrian). It was, however, not only the historical precedent of early Christian practice that argued the use of such a prayer. The Christological focus and clear Trinitarian structure of this pattern of Eucharistic praying as well as its broad ecumenical currency commended it to Lutherans. Furthermore, it seemed to provide the opportunity to open Lutheran Eucharistic practice to larger meanings of the Lord's Supper beyond conventional individualistic and penitential understandings. Historic practice became the occasion for imagining something alternative.

**Contemporary Worship Movement.** For the contemporary worship movement, certain elements of contemporary North American culture have been the source for re-imagining the assembly and shaping the practice of worship. The distinctive aim in this cultural adaptation and accommodation of worship has been to reach those outside the churches, to make disciples, and to grow the church.

The contemporary worship movement encompasses a wide spectrum of approaches to worship: from strategies that distinguish between worship for seekers and worship for believers to those that offer a menu of service styles geared to different target audiences. All

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Alien Land," *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy, Annual Meeting, Albuquerque, N. M., 2-5 January 1993*, ed. David G. Truemper (Valparaiso, Ind.: North American Academy of Liturgy, 1993), 5-16 (esp., 8-12); and most recently, "Liturgy in the Absence of Hippolytus," *Colloquium: Music, Worship, Arts (Yale Institute of Sacred Music)* 1 (2004): 1-10.

<sup>9</sup> There are, of course, repristinating approaches to the use of the liturgical past as a source for current practice, where present need is less in focus than the authority of some past moment, e.g. attempts to preserve medieval ceremony, to restore the Tridentine Mass, or to return to sixteenth-century forms of Lutheran worship. I am indebted to Gail Ramshaw and Kent Bureson for suggesting "archaism" and "neo-traditionalism," respectively, as labels for this contemporary alternative.

<sup>10</sup> See *Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis: Augsburg and Philadelphia: Board of Publication, LCA, 1958), 9-12; the trajectory of eucharistic praying continues in *Lutheran Book of Worship: Ministers Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg and Philadelphia: Board of Publication, LCA, 1978), 207-227; in *With One Voice: Leaders Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 57-73; *Libro de Liturgia y Cántico* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 61-66; and *This Far By Faith: An African American Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 84-87; and most recently in the provisional materials found in *Holy Communion and Related Rites, Renewing Worship 6* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 14-16, 61-71.

these approaches, however, share a common source for the alternative practice of worship and a common aim. Tim Wright, one of the pastors at Community Church of Joy, a megachurch in suburban Phoenix, speaks to both the source and aim in advocating for this alternative:

[I]n order to effectively reach new people, congregations must find ways to attract their attention. By creatively responding to consumer values, without compromising integrity, churches can impact people with the gospel.

New consumer values are changing the face of worship. But worship is undergoing a transformation for another important reason: mission. After decades of declining membership, mainline congregations and denominations are looking for new ways to impact secular society. Innovative worship, focused on the unchurched, grows out of this desire.<sup>11</sup>

The principle source for this alternative to conventional worship is the cultural context of the worshiping community, specifically the values and patterns of consumption in a market economy and the closely related values and patterns of entertainment. The adaptation of Christian worship to these strong and pervasive forces at work in contemporary North American culture is the source that funds the re-imagining the Christian assembly. The music of worship has become the most telling sign of this alternative approach and its use of cultural materials. Led by a band, a song leader, and perhaps a small group of singers, the music and singing reflect the popular musical styles that many people listen to and that characterize the immediate cultural context, in contrast to the inheritance of music, hymnody, and song associated with the church in its European roots. In addition to music, the use of materials from the consumer and entertainment culture is also transforming the architectural, visual, and acoustical environment of worship as well the nature and style of leadership.

The aim in this is, as Rice puts it, “to reach new people.” The familiarity of music, environment, and approach to people is designed to make the church and its worship more easily accessible to the unchurched.<sup>12</sup> The contemporary worship movement is closely allied with strategies for church growth that originated among evangelical Christians and have had significant impact on mainline Protestant churches in the face of steadily declining membership. The numbers of people gathering for worship in the megachurches employing these growth and worship strategies has gained considerable attention. The deeper purpose, however, is not simply to enlarge the church but to make disciples of Christ, who will themselves participate in an ever-expanding witness to the gospel message in this time and place. In this alternative vision for the Christian assembly, the gathering for worship is re-imagined as an accessible and engaging point of entry for persons on the path to Christian discipleship. And cultural materials become the means for envisioning an alternative practice of worship.

**Liberation Perspectives.** From the perspective of liberation theology, the experience of marginalized people is the principle source for re-imagining the assembly and shaping its

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<sup>11</sup>Timothy Wright, *A Community of Joy: How to Create Contemporary Worship*, ed. Herb Miller (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 23.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, the aim seems to be to reach the once-churched, who are now alienated from the church and conventional forms of church life. I owe this insight to the late Paul R. Nelson, the former director for worship in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

practice of worship. The distinctive aim in this turn toward the marginalized is to signal the justice and well-being of God's reign for all people and to bring about change in present circumstances.

The theology of liberation has sought to give voice to those who have been excluded from the structures of power and privilege in society and in the church—to those excluded from the opportunity to secure their political, social, and economic well-being as well as from the exercise of influence upon theological understanding and communal practice. This perspective has come to encompass a great diversity of human experience: the poor in every place, oppressed racial and ethnic groups, women, sexual minorities, and most recently the earth itself as the result of environmental degradation. The impact on worship proceeds from the claim that God is near to the experience of the marginalized, that “the Mighty One . . . has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Lk. 2:49-52), as Mary sings in Luke's Gospel, and that God will continue to act in this way. This experience becomes the source for imagining an alternative practice of worship. This alternative unfolds in at least two directions: in practices that seek justice, freedom, and release and also in practices that affirm the life of a particular people as a place of encounter with God. For example, the feminist concern for gender-inclusive reference to human beings in the language of scripture, prayer, and song is a matter of the visibility and just inclusion of women. The feminist encouragement for collaborative forms of liturgical leadership and non-hierarchical arrangements of space is something more than justice; it is a matter of giving theological value to the particularity of women's experience.

In relation to racial and ethnic groups, the valuation of experience includes the use of materials from their cultures at worship. In the vision of this alternative, the cultural forms of worship are to be those of the people who gather—African-American, Hispanic, Native American, and so forth—rather than an inheritance imposed by the dominant culture.<sup>13</sup>

The aim in all of this is to show forth God's just and life-giving purposes for all people envisioned in the reign of God. The gathering for worship is re-imagined as a place where that justice is something prayed and hoped for, but also accomplished in lives prepared to seek it, and furthermore where the abundant diversity of human life is affirmed and finds expression. Attention to the experience of the marginalized is the way that this alternative practice of worship comes about.

**Pentecostalism.** For Pentecostals, the free and spontaneous manifestation of the Spirit of God is the principle source for re-imagining the assembly and shaping its practice of worship. The distinctive aim in this turn to the Spirit is to foster holiness, healing, and personal transformation and to sustain hope.

Any map of contemporary alternatives to conventional Christian worship must take account of the rise of Pentecostal worship. Beginning in twentieth-century North America, Pentecostalism has expanded rapidly around the globe, most especially in the southern

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<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to Jill Crainshaw for encouraging me to think about where the movement to contextualize worship in a variety of cultural forms fits in my typology of worship practices. This is one place to note that impulse, but clearly the question of the relation of worship practice to culture(s) cuts across all the alternatives that I am exploring here.

hemisphere.<sup>14</sup> This alternative practice cuts across the barriers of race, class, and culture as well as the boundaries of denomination and worship tradition. In his masterful survey of Protestant worship traditions, James White points directly to the source for this re-imagining of the Christian assembly: “The chief characteristic of the Pentecostal tradition is its unstructured approach to worship in which the Holy Spirit is trusted to prompt not only the contents of the service but also its sequence. . . . [T]he real emphasis in worship is on the immediacy of the Spirit. . . .”<sup>15</sup> A variety of practices associated with the manifestation of the Spirit—speaking in tongues, shouts and songs of praise, laying on of hands and prayer for healing, hands uplifted and bodies dancing, testimony and prophecy—characterize Pentecostal gatherings. The Holy Spirit prompts a full-bodied and highly expressive act of worship.

The distinctive aim in this practice of worship is to transform persons in the present, to heal and make holy, and to sustain them in hope toward the future. People witness and experience the Spirit’s healing both in direct acts of healing as well as in the ecstatic nature of the worship as a whole, which draws people out of themselves and out of present circumstances. The Spirit’s presence and activity also empower people to live in a hope that is not constrained by present realities. This explains the particular appeal of Pentecostalism among the poor and those who live at the margins of society. It is also worth noting the correspondence between Pentecostal worship and the widespread interest in spirituality with its focus on personal healing and wholeness as well as the increased attention to rites for healing in many churches. In the Pentecostal alternative, the free and spontaneous movement of the Spirit is the source for re-imagining the Christian assembly.

**Post-modern Approaches.** For the post-modern emerging church, the life of a relational community with fluid boundaries in a local place is the principle source for re-imagining the assembly and shaping the practice of worship. The principle aim in this focus on a local, fluid, and relational community is to bring persons into a network of relationships where they can experience the belonging and wholeness that is God’s purpose for all people and there explore the gospel message.

In recent year what is called the emerging church has received considerable notice in both the secular and Christian media.<sup>16</sup> The emerging church embraces a growing number of Christian communities shaped by the perspectives of a post-modern generation. And with it comes another approach to the contemporary search for an alternative practice of worship. While there is no prescribed model for worship in the loose network of emerging churches, there are common tendencies, including an eclectic and creative mix of pieces of historic Christian liturgy, rock-style music, devotional or spiritual practices, and teaching, testimony, and conversation in an informal setting and non-coercive atmosphere. It would be tempting to identify post-modern eclecticism as the source of this alternative. There is, however, a

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<sup>14</sup> See White, *Protestant Worship*, 194-197; and also Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 7-8, 60-78. I am indebted to comments from a number of respondents that encouraged the inclusion of Pentecostalism in the typology.

<sup>15</sup> White, *Protestant Worship*, 192.

<sup>16</sup> For example, John Leland, “Hip New Churches Pray to a Different Drummer,” *New York Times*, Wednesday, 18 February 2004, sec. A; Scott Bader-Saye, “The Emergent Matrix: A New Kind of Church?,” *The Christian Century* 121, no. 24 (30 November 2004): 20-27. See also <[www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com)>.

deeper source that holds these pieces together: the attempt to fashion a highly relational, local community, with fluid and permeable boundaries. My colleague Nathan Frambach contends that there is an orienting question at work in these communities and their gatherings for worship: what does it mean to be who we are, where we are?—a two-pronged question of communal identity and context.<sup>17</sup> What we find in the emerging church is an attempt to explore Christian claims about this identity in a non-coercive, relational environment and, furthermore, to engage with openness the post-modern cultural context and its many competing claims. One proponent envisions a liquid church corresponding to the fluidity of contemporary culture in contrast to the solid, institutional structures of conventional Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

Such a local, fluid, and relational community is the source for a re-imagined assembly and its practice of worship. In Minneapolis, they gather at Solomon's Porch in a church building adapted to their purposes. The space for the weekly "Gathering" is in what was formerly the sanctuary. Now with the pews and other churchly furnishings removed, it has become a large room full of couches and soft chairs with the bread and wine (or grape juice) for communion set out on coffee tables. On the perimeter of the room, there are screens for projecting images and text; the center of the room is an open space from which various people lead prayer, give testimony, read scripture, and teach. In Seattle, the church of the apostles, which normally gathers in a coffee house, rents out a much larger venue for its annual Easter Vigil/Party called "Rise," which combines an art show, two concert stages, and a series of stations for unstructured, individual or group interaction with the vigil readings; there is "mass/Eucharist/ communion" at midnight and a dance party to follow.

The aim in all of this is to bring people into a network of relationships where they can begin to experience a sense of belonging and wholeness so often lacking in the isolation, fragmentation, and brokenness of contemporary life. Within such a relational community, they can begin to explore the gospel message and its implications for their lives. The aim is decidedly missional, but it focuses foremost on establishing the personal-communal relationships which are God's purpose for all people. The relational community itself is the basis for re-imagining the gathering for worship.

### **Christian Assembly and God's Mission**

This is far from a complete account of these various alternative perspectives. The aim has been to describe the fundamental impulse in each of the perspectives by identifying its principle source and distinctive aim. The whole set, then, represents the variety of impulses operating in the overarching search for an alternative practice of worship in the contemporary situation of the church in North America:

Recovery of historic practice toward a distinctive community witnessing to God's  
purpose for the world

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<sup>17</sup> I am grateful for Nathan Frambach's partnership in the planning and teaching of a course at Wartburg Seminary on the whole range of contemporary worship practices. Our conversation and the dialogue with several groups of students in that course have shaped and encouraged me in my approach to these matters.

<sup>18</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002).

Use of cultural materials toward a wider embrace of people (be it the unchurched or particular ethnic groups)

Attention to the experience of the marginalized toward the justice and inclusion of God's reign

Focus on relational community toward social belonging and wholeness

Openness to the movement of God's Spirit toward personal healing, holiness, and hope.

Clearly these are not antithetical impulses. Is it possible to bring them into conversation rather than allowing them to define distinct perspectives or movements in tension with or in opposition to one another? In fact a full account of each of the perspectives would show a significant cross-over of these impulses. For example, we have already noted the importance of engagement with cultural materials in both the contemporary worship movement and the liberation perspectives. And further, we can point to the growing interest among some Pentecostals in historic liturgical practice as well as the longstanding concern about cultural questions and issues of justice among many involved in the liturgical movement.

By way of conclusion, I want to explore one way into a constructive and critical conversation surrounding these impulses toward an alternative practice of worship, toward a re-imagined Christian assembly. Let us begin with this claim: the alternative character of all these contemporary perspectives or movements—as alternatives to conventional worship and conventional Christianity—has to do with a fuller realization of the Christian assembly in relation to God's mission. Is it possible that God's mission and its practice in Christian gatherings is the deep and common well-spring of the contemporary search for an alternative practice of worship?

Missiological and theological conversation beginning in the last century helpfully shifted the discussion about mission away from conventional understandings of mission as an activity of the church toward mission as the purpose of God for the world. The missiologist David Bosch has summarized the discussion about the *missio Dei* (mission of God) concept in this way:

In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church" [Moltmann]. Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.<sup>19</sup>

The *missio Dei*, God's mission, is the outward movement of God toward the world in creation, in the reconciling purpose of Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit who signals the eschatological consummation of this purpose.

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<sup>19</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 390.

With this understanding, the worshiping community itself becomes integrally related to mission. At worship, the assembly witnesses to and participates in God's own life-giving and reconciling mission in and for the world. Conventional ways of thinking and practice, tend to view worship and mission as church activities, one internal to the community, the other external, but not in their dynamic relation within the purpose of God. In their reflections on a missional church, Darrell Guder and his colleagues give a determinative place to worship:

Our postmodern society has come to regard worship as the private, internal, and often arcane activity of religionists who retreat from the world to practice their mystical rites. By definition, however, the *ekklesia* is a public assembly, and its worship is its first form of mission. . . . The reality of God that is proclaimed in worship is to be announced to and for the entire world.<sup>20</sup>

What I am suggesting is this: the contemporary search for an alternative practice of worship, in the variety of its impulses, is finally about re-imagining the Christian assembly in relation to God's mission.

God's mission, then, becomes the basis for a conversation about the impulses toward an alternative practice of worship. It offers both a constructive framework for dialogue and a critical principle for evaluating the alternative impulses. As a constructive framework for dialogue, God's mission encompasses the array of central concerns—for a Christian community renewed in its distinctive, formative practices, for the significance of culture in the evangelization of a people, for justice and inclusion, for social belonging, and for personal transformation. The constructive conversation will focus on how we understand and practice the relation of all these concerns. As a critical principle, God's mission provides a way to explore the adequacy of concrete proposals for alternative practice. For example, it clarifies why historical precedent is not a sufficient argument for taking up a liturgical practice in the present; the Christian assembly serves God's mission not historical preservation. It also provides ways to discern the appropriate use of cultural materials and to set limits on the cultural accommodation of liturgical practice; the Christian assembly serves God's mission not a particular culture. And so on.

A thorough-going focus on God's mission will enrich and enliven the conversation among those who are re-imagining the Christian assembly and continuing in the search for *etwas anderes*, something alternative, in the practice of worship.

#### Two questions for discussion:

- 1) How does the description of the landscape of Christian worship in North America resonate (or not) with the experience of Christians in other contexts?
- 2) What are the implications of understanding worship as God's mission in the practice of assembly, most especially for Lutherans?

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<sup>20</sup> Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 243. For some provocative reflections on the connection between the Trinity, mission, and worship, see John Hoffmeyer, "The Missional Trinity," *Dialog* 40 (2001): 108-111.

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