

# Worship Matters

*A Study for Congregations*

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## Preface

*I*n the book of Revelation, John describes an image where absolutely every creature on land and sea sings praise to God at the same time and with one voice:

To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor and glory and might  
forever and ever!

(5:13)

That's just what we do when we gather for worship. A familiar prayer states, "We join our voices with prophets, apostles, and martyrs and with all the faithful in every time and place who forever sing to the glory of your name."

Doesn't it seem odd, then, that most congregations spend very little time talking about worship? It is *the* central act of the Christian faith. Our silence about worship has serious consequences. People become unsure about what they are doing in worship and why. It makes conversations about our spiritual lives difficult. Many Christians have the impression that spiritual matters are strictly individual and personal rather than shared in the community of faith. Most serious of all, the church's silence dulls our ability to discern God's presence in worship.

Worship invites a congregation into God's presence through many elements: people, space, furnishings, the arts, symbolic objects, music, words, actions. These many elements are often called the "languages" of worship. The languages of worship are symbolic rather than literal ones. For example, we recognize a worship space by its shape, size, and layout rather than by any sign declaring it a church. The space itself becomes a symbol for the worship of God. Another example is the words we use in worship. The language of Scripture is largely the language of metaphor and image, where the words

point beyond themselves to deeper meanings. Look again at the passage from Revelation as this chapter begins. It describes God as the One on the “throne.” No one knows, of course, whether or not God actually sits on a throne, but the image communicates God’s greatness in terms that humans can understand. All of worship’s languages work this way. In sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, and action, along with words, they communicate to us knowledge of God and ourselves that we could not otherwise understand. When congregations haven’t been introduced to these languages and the ways they relate to one another, it is difficult to discern God’s presence through them.

Imagine what might happen if congregations were encouraged to notice and seek to understand all of worship’s many languages. Think what difference it would make if congregations grew in their ability to worship with eyes, ears, bodies, minds, and hearts wide open, anticipating and expecting the presence of God . . . and then to talk about it! The more worshipers enter wholeheartedly into worship, with its generous array of moods and actions, and the more they gather to ponder worship’s meaning for their lives, the more thoroughly worshipers will find themselves joining heaven’s unending songs of praise.

### Getting the Conversation Started

The purpose of this book is to provide resources for conversations that can support congregations and their leaders in their search for a deeper discernment of God’s presence. Like many educators, I want to claim that all of the Christian life is a process of action and reflection.<sup>1</sup> The process of experience and reflection seems to be part of our human DNA. We humans are experiential beings who take in the world “whole” and then set about to figure out what our experiences are all about. We are *storytelling, pattern-seeking, meaning-making* beings. We participate in both special and everyday activities. We recall and reflect on those activities, searching for patterns. We connect new experiences with what has happened in the past. We also connect our experiences to the experiences of others, people we know well and people we meet in history, literature, Scripture, theology, and more. We tell our stories back to ourselves and to others as we “make meaning” that informs who we are. And then we anticipate some future experience in which we might participate, equipped with new understanding of what might be.

Although this process is natural to humans, why don’t we use it when thinking about worship? There are many complex reasons for this. Yet ongoing conversations about worship could have incredible effects on our life

together. Worship is, after all, the central defining act of the church. Conversations about worship are well worth our time and effort!

Conversations about worship require at least three things. First, congregations need to find suitable occasions for these conversations. And here the possibilities are richly varied and already exist in most congregations. They include groups of worship leaders such as choirs, ushers, lectors, acolytes, and eucharistic ministers; committee meetings, beginning-with-worship committees, altar guilds, and worship planning teams; teachers of children, youth, and adults and the classes they teach; and programmatic events such as circle meetings, luncheon programs, mom's-day-out programs, weeknight suppers, and so forth. Leaders can use these gatherings as opportunities to enter into conversations about worship in ways that will deepen the spiritual discernment of the whole congregation. Settings must provide a supportive environment that helps participants avoid the friction often associated with worship wars while at the same time facilitating straight talk about worship. Such an environment is marked by respectful listening, graceful questioning, and honest communication. Clear directions, wise leadership, and plenty of time are essential. When this way of talking together becomes commonplace in a congregation, all conversations, including conversations about worship, are more likely to occur.

Second, congregations need a set of categories that open them to a fuller examination of worship's many features. Sometimes worshipers become so accustomed to their congregation's way of doing things that they fail to notice the details. Social scientists often recommend "making the strange familiar and making the familiar strange." When we encounter communities whose practices are strange or new to us, we are called to become more familiar with them and to understand things from their point of view, from the inside. Thus we make the strange familiar. Likewise, when we make the familiar strange, we take the perspective of newcomers and strangers and view "the way we've always done it" with fresh eyes. This is not easy, so it is helpful to separate our worship practices into more manageable bits. Social scientists are again helpful in offering us categories they have found useful when studying rituals in worldwide contexts. These categories include the *space* for worship and the ways the space is decorated and used; the *time* for worship, including the ways in which hours, days, and seasons are marked; the *actions* of worship—who does what when; the ways *language* is used in worship; and the use of *music* in worship. Thinking of these as the "languages" of worship helps us understand worship as an *event in which we participate* rather than a series of texts to be read. They help us notice how worship is carried out and how participants engage in the event itself.

In his list of “maxims for planning of Christian Rituals,” Tom Driver declares that “Ritual loves not paper.”<sup>2</sup> Rather, he says, worship is about *doing something*, about using our bodies and voices to call upon God and offer ourselves, body and soul, to the Creator of heaven and earth. It is this *event* quality, this *doing*, that deserves our attention. Rather than focus on analyzing the texts in the Sunday bulletin or on our own response, we are able to broaden our perspectives to include the many elements that make worship an event and the ways these elements interact with one another. While each of the languages of worship communicates an indispensable aspect of worship, “the liturgy is meant to speak to us as one total language, richly and harmoniously varied. It seeks to evoke in us an experience of ourselves as God’s people. We do [well], then, to think of each sensory language as a unique and valuable way in which . . . experience is opened up to us in harmony with all the other languages being used.”<sup>3</sup> Recognizing, understanding, and asking questions about these languages outside of worship encourages worshipers to discern God’s voice through the multiple languages of worship.

Third, congregations need skills in asking the right question at the right time. Learning the Christian life from the experience of congregational life requires participation and reflection. A central strategy for initiating and sustaining reflection is the asking of carefully crafted questions and allowing plenty of time for exploring possible responses. Not all reflection is the same, so surely not all questions are the same. A pattern of *description* of past events, *analysis* of those events in light of Scripture and tradition, and opportunities to *imagine and plan* for future events—these form a pervasive pattern in human learning. There are times when reflection consists of recall and exploration of past experience in all its multifaceted complexity. Questions might include “Describe what you heard, saw, touched, felt. . . .” At other times careful analysis is required as meaning is being distilled. Here we need questions like “How does this story from Scripture compare with our experience of . . . ?” When we are looking into the future, imagining what a future event might be like, we need questions like “What hopes do we have for the coming season of . . . ?” and “How would that hope be embodied and enacted in our worship?” At each chapter’s end, the questions for discussion are organized in this way. Each set of questions is introduced by an “Ideal” that describes some aspect of worship. Then participants are asked to “describe” some aspect of worship, to “explain how” they are affected by it, and to “imagine” worship in the future. The pattern provides a structured but flexible template for open, honest, constructive conversations. No one conversation could make use of all the questions provided in the following chapters. Choose two or three questions that are especially fitting for your

congregation, and come back to the rest at another time. Try to include a question from each category: *describe, analyze, imagine, and plan.*

Inspiration for this book comes from two sources. One source is the congregations I visit and have belonged to that nurture my own liturgical spiritual formation. In congregations, Christians are formed and take on the likeness of Christ. People of faith are hungry for encounters with God in their congregations and for ways more thoroughly to absorb and be changed by those encounters. It is for these congregations that I write.

The other source of inspiration for this book is Gilbert Ostdiek's classic text *Catechesis for Liturgy: A Program for Parish Involvement*.<sup>4</sup> I have used this book, written for Roman Catholic congregations in the midst of liturgical renewal, for over ten years. As extensive experimentation in mainline denominations begins to mature and we reflect critically on what we have learned, it is my hope that this book for Protestant congregations will serve purposes similar to those offered to Catholic congregations by Ostdiek.

I have spent time in congregations across the mainline Protestant spectrum in order to "overhear" the conversations these congregations are having, with hopes that as readers listen in, they will be inspired with a vision for conversations in their own congregations. Congregations were chosen according to three criteria. They take worship seriously and place it at the center of their life together. They are healthy congregations that have stable pastoral, musical, and educational leadership. Conversations about worship are a regular part of their congregational culture. Yet they want more! Over and over during the course of this research, members of congregations and their leaders, even those who were already talking fruitfully about worship, told me that they would love to talk more about worship but they did not know how to go about it. They were stymied by the conditions of congregational life that inhibit conversations and are eager for strategies for overcoming some of these obstacles.

A spirit of hospitality was pervasively present in all these congregations. In these congregations I found groups of faithful Christians who talk openly and creatively about the presence of God in worship and their efforts more fully to discern and respond to that presence. My heartfelt thanks go to the members, lay leaders, musicians, and pastors of Little River United Church of Christ, Annandale, Virginia; ChristChurch Presbyterian, Bellaire, Texas; Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia; Grace Episcopal Church, Newton Corner, Massachusetts; Christ Lutheran Church, Richmond, Virginia; Tustin Presbyterian Church, Tustin, California; Spanish Springs Presbyterian Church, Sparks, Nevada; Saint Luke's Lutheran Church, Park Ridge, Illinois; Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Saint Cloud, Minnesota; and First Congregational United Church of Christ, Asheville, North Carolina.

This book is written with the hope that new and fruitful conversations will ignite congregations in both the depth of their own worship and the breadth of their invitation to others to join them in the worship of God. Chapter 1 explores some of the reasons congregations don't talk about worship and proposes strategies for overcoming this reluctance. Chapter 2 examines the languages of worship and their symbolic ways of communicating. Chapters 3 through 8 examine each liturgical language, drawing on denominational documents and on the worship life of congregations for its descriptions. It is hoped that conversations inspired by these chapters will allow congregations to reflect critically on their worship and affirm those practices that bring honor to God and form the assembly into the people of God.<sup>5</sup>

Research in these congregations has been generously supported by the sabbatical and faculty support provisions at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education. In addition, further support has come from a grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. Special thanks go to Betty Grit and John Witvliet for their encouragement and wise counsel. Thanks go most of all to my husband, Dan, who proved to be an excellent travel agent, traveling companion, and copy editor.

## Not Talking about Worship

*T*he sanctuary of Saint Luke’s Lutheran Church in Park Ridge, Illinois, is festively decked in red—table covering, paraments, banners—as Pastors Stephen Larson and Kristi Weber and I sit and talk about the worship life of the congregation. The pastors, educators, musicians, and lay leaders at Saint Luke’s are a great team! They work collaboratively, cumulatively, and intentionally as they invite the congregation—young and old, newcomers and longtime members, leaders and pew sitters—into the presence of God each Lord’s Day. So I am more than a little surprised that as we conclude our conversation the pastors turn to one another and say, “Gee, we’ve never really talked about worship like this together, have we?” In the midst of all their excellent collaboration, conversations about worship seldom go below the surface. As I begin a similar conversation with two longtime lay leaders at Little River United Church of Christ just outside Washington, D.C., I hear something of the same sentiment. Jane Hustveldt says, “Talk about worship? What’s to talk about? The service is the service!”

Imagine you are with my friends Chip and Paul as they conclude worship at a regional conference and move to a seminar titled “Worship Reflections.” The conference is focused on exploring the seasons of Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost, and the seminar is a place where participants are invited to explore more deeply the worship events in which they have just participated. Chip and Paul, both experienced pastors and worship leaders, introduce themselves and invite the group to begin their conversation together by naming images and metaphors they recall from the morning’s “Easter” service. To their surprise, most of the comments bypass this invitation to explore the metaphorical languages of worship and focus instead on aspects of worship that trivialize worship’s intention of inviting encounter with God (“I didn’t like the place of the announcements in the service nor the way they were done”).



It seems that Christians don't talk much about worship and, if they do, they confine their conversations to a narrow range of, some would say, trivial topics. When I've asked members and leaders in congregations across the country to tell me about the conversations they have about worship, they often have a hard time recounting actual conversations, saying their congregation doesn't really talk about worship very much. The conversations they report reveal that it is easier to talk about the pragmatic aspects of worship—who will do what when—than it is to talk about the role of worship in the life of the congregation and its deep meaning for the gathered assembly. This seems odd, given the extensive changes in worship that have been introduced into mainline churches over the past twenty-five years or so. The life of the church is grounded in its worship of the living God. Week by week, season by season, year by year, the church faithfully assembles each Lord's Day to turn its undivided attention toward the creator of heaven and earth. Christians gather, bringing praise, thanksgiving, confession, lament, and intercession; engaging in singing, dancing, storytelling, washing, eating, and drinking. How is it that Christians find nothing to talk about?

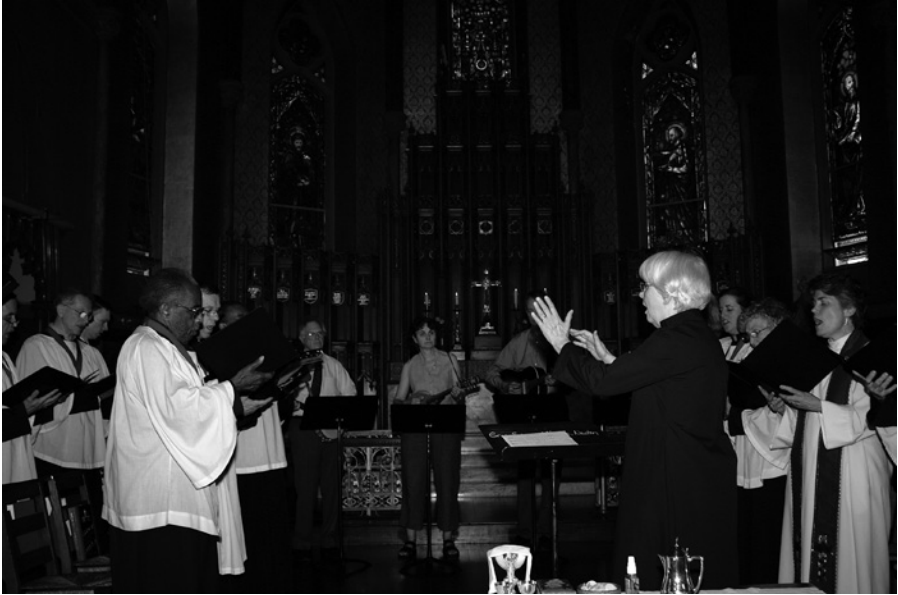
When people confess that they don't talk about worship, my next question always is, Why not? I've collected an interesting list of responses that point toward the need for more effective strategies to help congregations discuss the gathering that is the primary focus of their common life.

### Congregations don't talk about worship because . . .

. . . people are too busy

Most active members of most congregations are very busy people. Try to schedule an extra meeting, and you will know what I mean. Because worship is important in the life of a congregation, conversations about it require careful attention, and that takes time. Rather than enter into such conversations in a halfhearted way, many members step back from engaged discussions about the liturgy and let others take care of things.

When the leaders of Grace Episcopal Church in Newton Corner, Massachusetts, faced this situation, the pastors and musician saw their best opportunities for conversation within gatherings that were already going on. At choir rehearsal every week, musician Linda Clark is quick to make theological and liturgical connections between the music the choir sings and its place in the liturgy. On a recent summer Sunday, Assistant Rector Ed Pease led an



Grace Episcopal Church choir, Newton Corner, Massachusetts, with Linda Clarke, director. Photo by Carol Robinson. Used with permission.

“instructed liturgy.” As the community gathered to worship, each element of their celebration was explored theologically and liturgically, exposing its deeper meanings. Ed says he avoided a mechanical, practical explanation of the liturgy, opting for a deeper kind of exploration, with hopes that it would lead to congregation-wide meaning-making conversations. And it had the hoped-for outcome. In late fall when I visited them, the congregation was still talking about that Sunday, still exploring the liturgy’s meaning for their ongoing life together.

. . . Worship belongs to the pastor (and maybe the musicians)

Most mainline denominations have produced materials related to the liturgy during the past decade and have made strong systematic efforts to expand each congregation’s participation in and understanding of their liturgical heritage and practice. Nevertheless the assumption persists that liturgy is something best left to the “professionals.” It is easy for people to come to the conclusion that they *shouldn’t* understand. People say they don’t know

anything about worship so they shouldn't comment. They just want someone to tell them what to do. That's good enough. If they've gotten the message that worship belongs to pastors and musicians, they are not motivated to become curious and ask questions, and that's too bad. It does make life easier for pastors and musicians. It is easier and more efficient to plan worship themselves and leave the "amateurs" out of the process. Unfortunately this keeps most lay leaders and members at arm's length from opportunities for learning about the liturgy and from the kind of theological reflection it engenders. And the people in the pews are quick to get the message that their role is to become spectators and do what they are told.

In many congregations laypeople often take active parts in Lord's Day worship, but without much preparation for their roles. I have said (loudly) for decades that, as an educator, the task I would most gladly undertake in my congregation would be to help prepare worship leaders—greeters, ushers, lectors, crucifers, acolytes, leaders of prayers—for their roles. Recently I was able to work with my colleague Ronald Byars to help the lectors at our church understand and carry out their role as readers of Scripture. We began with prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit and then moved to some of the practical aspects of their ministry, but before long a conversation about a theology of Scripture began to emerge, and the connections between these lectors' tasks and their own spiritual formation were evident. These longtime lay leaders had never before been given the opportunity to develop sufficient confidence in their task so that its inherent spiritually formative qualities could be explored. They were eager for the opportunity and grateful for the spiritual fruit it could bear. The word *liturgy* means "the work of the people." In order for this to become a reality for the church today, pastors, musicians, lay leaders, and all other members are called to share responsibility for worship in new and different ways that include preparation, full participation, and reflection on their roles.

#### ... Worship leaders don't want questions

I've known congregations, and perhaps you've known them too, where pastoral, educational, and/or musical leadership is not receptive to questions about worship. Sometimes leaders are distracted by other issues or programs. Perhaps they view such questions as a challenge to their authority. It may be that leaders make some of the same assumptions as members of congregations, assumptions reflected in this list. Whatever the cause, there are subtle signals that let members of congregations know that their questions about worship are not welcome.

## . . . Worship is too controversial

Much has been written about the worship wars and congregational conflict centered around worship style. Many people have been left with the twin impressions that worship is all about style and that disagreements about style are much too painful to get into. These conflicts have taken place during one of the most broadly experimental periods of recent church history and have resulted in both heartbreak and spiritual deepening. Often liturgical experiments are initiated by small cliques of would-be worship leaders whose enthusiasm outstrips their understanding of the congregation's worshiping traditions. Those outside these cliques know from bitter experience that trying to talk through different hopes and expectations is risky indeed. Sometimes the only question people know to ask one another about worship is, "Did you like it?" This immediately makes worship a matter of personal preference. In my experience "Did you like it?" is the wrong question. Church architect E. A. Sövik takes note of this question, saying, "The questions some people put to themselves when they encounter a new architectural form, or any new art form, are, 'Do I like it? Does it please me?' The questions are the same as one asks oneself about a new flavor of ice cream or a new brand of cigar. . . . It cannot be right to judge Chartres Cathedral and a piece of pie by the same criteria."<sup>1</sup> One of the aims of this book is to offer different (better) questions to ask when inviting discussion about worship.



Christ Lutheran Church, Richmond, Virginia. New paraments, tablecloths, and banner. Photo by Dave Swager. Used with permission.

When the altar guild of Christ Lutheran Church in Richmond, Virginia, began to consider the worship environment of their church, they started with questions about the liturgical year: What are the origins and meanings of the liturgical seasons? What images and metaphors are found in the Scriptures read during each season? How might those images and metaphors become a part of our liturgical environment? What difference might their presence make for our worship? With these questions in mind, the altar guild held a lengthy conversation with a fabric artist and a theologian/biblical scholar. Out of that conversation the artist designed a tablecloth, paraments, and banner for the congregation to use during the season of Pentecost. The questions they asked had more to do with the centrality and meaning of the liturgy than with personal preference and opinion. Questions like these can lead to conversations about worship that bring controversial issues to light but help to avoid disagreements over likes and dislikes.

... “Fad-o-phobia”: Fear of blindly following the latest trends

When the contemporary and seeker-friendly worship styles emerged a couple of decades ago, congregations began a broad range of experiments, some of which were appropriate to their congregational life and heritage and some of which were not. Even people who were not opposed to such innovation were wary of just following current fads. Congregations and their leaders found themselves without adequate resources for charting the direction of changes in worship. Without opportunities for constructive conversations, experiments in many places were tried for a short time and then set aside as the congregation went back to its customary patterns.

At Saint Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, worship traditions provide a stable foundation for a wide variety of experiments and innovations in worship, most notably a weekly Celtic evensong service. Within the ongoing life of this traditional congregation, a variety of kinds of music, liturgical action, storytelling, and prayer have been introduced. Pastors, musicians, and worship leaders draw on a broad range of resources, all the while staying within their own deep theological traditions. Thus their worship is always fresh and lively, never trendy or faddish.

... We don’t want to be labeled “narrow minded”

At the other end of the spectrum from the need to have worship “the way I like it” is the notion that only the narrow-minded are reluctant to accept innovative worship practices. Sometimes conversations about worship are



Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia. Baptismal font. Photo by Sarah Bartenstein. Used with permission.



First Congregational United Church of Christ, Asheville, North Carolina. Photo by Christopher Oakley. Used with permission.

undermined because of an implicit message that if someone else likes worship this way, who am I to disagree? Being a moderate or liberal congregation seems to mean “we accept everything.”

At First Congregational United Church of Christ in Asheville, North Carolina, which recently moved into a historic downtown church building, conversations about worship began to center around inclusive language. For some time, members and leaders had been sensitive to issues of language in worship, but suddenly these issues began to take on heightened importance. When it came time for open, compassionate, honest conversation, the pastors invited the gathered participants to *tell stories*. They asked members, “Describe the times and places when you became aware of inclusive language as an important element of worship.” “Tell us about those persons who have been important in shaping your understanding of inclusive language.” These and questions like them led the group into a level of mutual understanding and generosity that allowed them to grapple constructively with more controversial aspects of inclusive language. Rather than “accept everything,” they heard stories of how deep meaning is made and have come to respect differing viewpoints.

As a recent church advertisement puts it, the church is a “come as you are” but not a “stay as you are” kind of place. The church exists within a broad and deep stream of history where the purposes and practices of worship can be clearly discerned. Though there is generous latitude for variety and local practices, worship is not, at its heart, about personal preferences. Members of congregations are called to move beyond both polarization and giving in for the sake of personal preferences. Congregations are called to move toward worship’s central norms, uniquely embodied in each community. In this book those central norms are expressed as “Ideals” at the end of each chapter and lead to questions for discussion.

. . . The church has too many other concerns,  
and Worship is not at the top of the list

Every congregation must balance its activities with its energy and resources. There is usually more to do than the congregation can get done, so choices must be made and efficiencies must be introduced. Under these common circumstances, it is easy to set aside the demanding practice of talking about worship and focus the congregation’s energies on more pressing needs. It is easy to “streamline” conversations so that precious time and energy can be spent elsewhere.

At Spanish Springs Presbyterian Church in Sparks, Nevada, an eight-year-old congregation meeting in a suburban strip mall storefront, careful allocation of energy would seem natural, given all that needs to be accomplished in this young congregation. But members of this congregation are hungry for conversations about worship. They understand its centrality to their life as a congregation, and they are eager to understand why their worship is different from the many megachurches that surround them. The energy they give to exploring the meaning of worship actually *increases* the energy they have for community outreach and mission.

. . . There are not a lot of venues for talking about worship

Sometimes the places where one would expect to overhear probing conversations about worship turn out to be the last places where such conversations actually occur. I’ve been to many worship committee meetings, governing board meetings, and staff meetings where worship is discussed only in terms of its mechanics and logistics, with never a mention of worship’s deeper meanings. For many of the reasons listed above, pastors, educators, and musicians are reluctant to create opportunities where a deeper level





Spanish Springs Presbyterian Church, Sparks, Nevada. Photo by Doug Ramseth. Used with permission.

of discussion might be possible, but the consequences of such avoidance are risky.

Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Saint Cloud, Minnesota, is notable for the eagerness with which adult and children's choirs, Sunday school classes for children and adults, arts committees, worship-planning teams, and families engage in serious study and conversations about the liturgy. These conversations—which happen around dinner tables, conference tables, and during musical rehearsals—demonstrate that conversations about worship need not be confined to special events and groups. Rather, worship is the central event that orients the life of the congregation. Conversations about a whole range of issues often circle back to this congregation's identity, first and foremost, as a worshiping community. There are regularly scheduled opportunities for talking about worship, and the conversations begun there spill over into other times and places.

#### . . . We don't want to offend God

The separation between the sacred and secular, church and world, is sometimes so complete that the realities of life with God seem impossible to comprehend. How can it be that the very ordinariness, complexity, and difficulty of twenty-first-century life can bear the marks of God's presence? How can it be that the sacred mysteries of the church's worship are meant to be understood by "ordinary folk like me"? Christians are supposed to understand this stuff, right? Won't God be offended by my ignorance? What if I say the wrong thing? There may have been a time when all churchgoers understood the church's language, symbols, and metaphors, but I doubt it. And more to the point, human curiosity is God's gift. My historian husband says, "What everybody knows, nobody bothers to write down." For a long time now we have wrongly assumed that everybody knows what worship is and how to understand its multiple dimensions. For this reason, when I teach courses on the liturgy, I usually begin with an illustrated slide show on the history of the liturgy. When we know the origins and explanations for the ways we worship, we develop a keener ability to understand why we do what we do now. God is not offended by this kind of curiosity and investigation: it serves to deepen our discernment of God's abiding presence in the liturgy.

#### . . . We must hide our doubts and theological struggles

A young mother of three looked at me and said frankly, "I like to come to church here because the sermons don't piss me off!" She had come through



Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Saint Cloud, Minnesota. Photo by Steve Cook. Used with permission.

more conservative congregations where the tension between her questions and the required faith response meant that she left church angry almost every Sunday. Her faith, she said, is “hanging by a thread most Sundays.” Under these circumstances, conversations about the church’s worship, where its deepest beliefs are acted out, puts a lot on the line. Her present congregation allows room for her doubts, questions, and expressions of struggle, so conversations about worship are much more natural and comfortable. Worship is intended to gather us before God in an environment that is honest about the human condition and about God’s reconciling intentions for all creation. With this in mind, probing conversations about worship may indeed call for the reexamination of our most closely held beliefs. It is the intention of this book to help ensure that such reexaminations lead to the deepening and strengthening of faith, not its weakening. To suppress such conversations when “faith is hanging by a thread” sends the message that such doubts are unimportant and/or unwelcome—an attitude that can ultimately lead to breaking the thread of faith, not strengthening it.

Many of the reasons given by congregations for not talking about worship are valid and deserve our consideration. On the other hand, the official documents of all the denominations represented in this study—Episcopal, United Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, United Church of Christ—indicate that worship is the central most important aspect of their ecclesial identity. Several of these denominations refer to the existence of the church as the place where “the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> The Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, with which I am most familiar, was adopted “with the fervent prayer that [the new book] may be an effective aid to congregations as they worship God, and that it may further the renewal of the church’s faith and life.”<sup>3</sup> But declaring that worship is the center of the church’s identity and life is not enough. The church must also organize and live out its common life in ways that reflect this orientation. Congregational life will need to move away from “fun stuff to do so people will like to come to church” and toward identifying and lifting up the ways every part of the congregation’s life is related to its central communal action: the worship of God.

### Until All Creation Sings

Chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation offer a description of the cosmic worship of God that is even now under way. The central most important calling for Christians is to join with all creation to give praise and glory to God. It is this

vision for the redemption of all creation that informs and inspires our worship. This central calling issues in two specific missions for the church: to *broaden* and *deepen* the worship of God. The church *broadens* the worship of God when it invites those who do not now give praise and glory to God to join us. Perhaps there are those who have not heard the stories of God's grace, so the church is called to tell those stories as an invitation to join the church's praise. Others may be unable to praise God because of oppression, poverty, grief, or illness. The church is called to ease human suffering in the name of Christ as an invitation to those in need to add their voices to the church's song. Likewise, the church is also called to *deepen* its own capacity to give ever more faithful and complete praise to God by an enriched life of prayer, study, companionship in Christ, careful self-examination, repentance, and discernment of God's grace. Committed, open conversations about what we do in worship and why we do it contribute to both these missions, so that one day *all creation will sing to the glory of God*.