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Images of Church and Worship: “Family” Versus “City”

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In an insightful article published in the journal *Worship*, M. Francis Mannion, Rector of the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City, has pointed out what he sees as some negative effects impacting on liturgical life and its transforming drive. He sees these originating in what he calls the “intimization of society”. “By the intimization of society, I mean the process by which social complexity is eschewed in favour of a model of human coexistence that puts ultimate value on bonds of intimacy, personal closeness, and radical familiarity.”¹

Drawing on the work of Richard Sennett,² Mannion criticizes the view that intimacy between persons is intrinsically morally good, and observes that close community and social interactions involving the revelation of personality are often positively contrasted to relationships embodying impersonality, public distance, and complicated human dynamics. The complex nature of social existence, including the world of politics, diplomacy, and corporate structure, he says, is often rejected as unreal, artificially ritualized, and phoney. There has been a consequent loss of confidence in public life, in the social arena, and also in the objective rituals of liturgical worship. This, he claims, has had a desultory effect on the way persons worship, and on their expectations from the liturgy.

The pervasiveness of this shift accounts, in part, for the considerable emphasis today on the small group as the ideal configuration of the liturgical assembly. Accordingly, a high priority is placed on the promotion of intimacy, closeness, and familiarity in liturgical gatherings. The large, traditional congregation is rejected as anonymous, alienating, and as a barrier to authentic communal faith and worship.

In the shift towards intimacy, personality rather than rite tends to

become the medium of liturgical communication and performance. Indeed, the personalities and charismatic qualities of clergy and liturgical ministers easily become the crucial success factors in liturgical celebration. With this comes a rejection of the formal and the impersonal in liturgy and an amplification of the "little pieties" and "brief rituals" focussed on moments of interpersonal sharing. Conventions of social distance are left behind in favour of the criteria of intimacy. The ministry of hospitality is often understood as creating friends and intimates, rather than graceful and respectful interaction between the friends, fellow citizens, and strangers that make up the Christian body.³

Mannion goes on to conclude that this style of envisioning relationship and liturgy is destructive in that it trivializes worship and dwarfs the potential range and scope of power inherent in liturgy.

In the process of intimization, liturgical rites and symbols lose the scale and complexity capable of engaging the Christian assembly with society, tradition, and history. As liturgy is conceptually repositioned within the configuration of intimate groups, it is shorn of broader cosmic symbolism and consequently loses the traditional ethos of grandeur, glory, and majesty. In effect, the journey into intimate community is a journey out of the public world.

As with the subjectification of reality, the ecclesial appropriation of the dynamics of intimization distorts the power of the liturgy to transform society. In a church where the power of intimization is advanced, social and ecclesial complexity is conceptually and practically rejected, and the institutional experiences a loss of confidence. Consistent with this, the liturgy is tailored to meet the characteristic needs of intimate groups. It is deprived of public, social symbolism. Consequently, it no longer stands as a model of redeemed society, and for that reason retains little ability to generate enthusiasm for social and cultural transformation.⁴

He is not condemning all emphasis on subjectivity in ministry and liturgy, but simply warning against making subjectivity the first principle of any pastoral theology or liturgical rite. Liturgy should be hospitable, involving, and supportive; and the liturgical leader, as Robert Hovda taught us some time ago, should be "strong, loving, and wise".⁵ But for Mannion, the problem lies

...in the tendency to absolutize intimacy as the principal element of authentic Christian community to the effect that public, formal, and institutional elements of the church are rejected as meaningless and

inauthentic. The challenge, then, is to incorporate pastoral possibilities for hospitality and for mutual engagement and support into parish and ecclesiastical communities without generating the ideology of intimacy and its anti-institutional consequences.⁶

One of these "pastoral possibilities" which he offers as a helpful corrective to this misplaced intimacy in liturgy, is to set aside the tradition of referring to the church as a *family* (extended or otherwise), and to adopt the image of the *city*. "Given the importance of images and metaphors in sharing and orienting faith, the image of the church as city seems, in the present context, more adequate than the image of church as family or community of friends."⁷

Assuming the accuracy of Mannion's analysis of intimacy as a destructive influence in liturgy, it would seem that his suggestion of envisioning church as *city* is a helpful one. It has a history at least as far back as St. Augustine.⁸ But is Mannion's critique of intimacy in liturgy and church valid? He writes from a Roman perspective in a post-Vatican milieu. Since the Council, there has been a dismantling of the objectivity and formality of the earlier Roman Tridentine liturgy, and in many Roman parishes the process may have been carried too far for the tastes of some, to the extent that formality has been totally cast aside in favour of attempts at liturgical intimacy. The change from Latin to the vernacular, the increased role given laypersons in the Mass, the use of contemporary music, and the overall reform of the Mass, have all contributed to an attitude of informality and intimacy in the Roman liturgy. In addition, most Roman parishes are very large, so large that, to the Lutheran observer, any attempt to create an ambience of "family" would appear difficult. Hence, within his tradition, Mannion's image of *city* seems to make sense.

How about Lutherans? Can we be accused of fostering a destructive, false atmosphere of *family* and *intimacy* in our churches, to the detriment of the potentially universal impact our worship might have upon us? Most Lutheran congregations in the country are small, so small that to envision them as anything *but* "family" would seem impossible. Furthermore, there are underlying factors which indicate that we *do* absolutize intimacy in our congregational life and in our worship, and that more often than not, we are locked into imaging our churches as families. Here is some of the evidence I have observed.

(1) Many Lutherans seem to understand the "Exchange of Peace" not as an opportunity to greet and bless any and all worshippers with a handshake or formal embrace, but rather as a time to affirm intimacy with old friends with a warm and intense physical embrace. This seems to have become among us what Mannion calls a "brief ritual" or "little piety" within the liturgy.

(2) Any survey of hymnody I have conducted or seen, inevitably turns up two hymns as all-time favourites: *Amazing Grace* and *How Great Thou Art*, both readily characterized as warm, intimate, personal and subjective in melody and lyrics.

(3) One hardly finds a Lutheran congregation anywhere which follows the rubrics of the liturgy closely! Almost every congregation tailors the Sunday service to meet the needs of its own family, whatever they may be. As a result, the stranger or visitor often does not feel at ease.

(4) The number of congregations which use Setting Three of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* is very small. This setting is most often rejected because it sounds strange, unfamiliar, and untuneful to many. Yet it is based on ancient plainsong, perhaps the most objective and formal style of music ever created and practiced within the church. It is virtually impossible to sing plainchant in an informal, subjective, intimate manner!

(5) In many congregations, the Church Council operates much like a family compact. Outsiders are welcome, but are expected to integrate into the family. And, if a congregation should grow to the point where this sort of family council is no longer practical, the whole governing process will often flounder and come to a halt for want of a more appropriate and complex vision of administration.

(6) Many congregations measure the health of their spiritual life by the number of small groups functioning within their fellowship, and by the kind of intimacy and family incorporation which these groups foster. Objective study and action groups are more poorly supported.

(7) The pastor is normally expected to be "close" to all the people, anticipating their problems and aware of their personal needs, like a kind and benevolent parent. When the pastor fails at this, he or she is chastised for being cold, unfeeling, aloof, and too "profes-

sional”.

(8) Even in the handful of large congregations across our country, pastors are often expected to know more than is humanly possible about the personal, intimate lives of parishioners. One wonders how the pastors of these congregations (the 1997 *Directory of Lutheran Churches in Canada* lists 14 congregations with more than 1000 confirmed members)⁹ manages to function under such pressure.

Having lived and ministered for many years in urban Canada, I often drive past large Roman, Anglican, and United Churches. And the question arises in me, “I wonder how a person does ministry in a place like that?” The interesting thing is that no answer comes back. My years of ministry in small Canadian Lutheran “families” has provided me with no clue as to how I might function professionally in such a context. But one thing, I sense, is certain: that ministry in these large communities would bear almost no resemblance to what I am familiar with in our intimate little Lutheran family congregations.

Writing some years ago, Mark Gibbs and T. Ralph Morton estimated that the average pastor could maintain a meaningful personal relationship with about 200 persons.¹¹ Given a long ministry in a stable, relatively unchanging Christian community, one might be able to double this figure. But what happens when the pastor reaches a saturation point in his or her ability to absorb and maintain close intimate relationships? To how many persons can one continue to be “father” and “mother”?

Perhaps one of the reasons why we are a church of small congregations is that we have been unable to discover another role for our pastors, other than that of the all-knowing, caring, and benevolent parent. Perhaps the mutual adoption by pastor and congregation of Mannion’s image of the church as *city*, would help us to break out of the old pattern and enter a new style of ministry and worship.

Below are several suggestions to assist pastors and worship leaders who are interested in what this pattern of Church as City might mean. We begin with a few reflections on the theological, sociological, and psychological implications of viewing Church as City, and move on to some more practical observations.

(1) The loss of true emotional intimacy in our technological society often leads some persons to put false pressure on worship, to try and create a superficial intimacy with God and with one another. Feelings and emotion in worship are less important than objectivity and substance in the view of Church as City. Instead of striving for intimacy, warmth, and familiarity, work toward achieving wisdom, love, and justice in the presentation of the various aspects of worship. And remember, the purpose of worship is not to create intimacy with anyone, but to offer confession and praise to God. In reality, truly warm and satisfying relationships are not dependent upon cozy feelings with one another or with God, but begin with RESPECT. Respect, rather than intimacy, is the point of departure for, and also the goal of, relationships within the Christian community.

(2) Do not fear or reject ritual: it is a powerful tool of acceptance and communication. Ritual often provides the necessary barriers and screens to protect guests, visitors, and regular worshippers from unwelcome intimacy or familiarity which is too rapid. It allows persons to conceal what they wish about themselves.

(3) Avoid the use of the word "Family", and prefer words such as "Community" or "Household", a good biblical word which connotes a broader vision including servants, slaves, retainers, and those under the protection of the clan or tribe. The terms "community of faith" and "household of faith" are richer and more inclusive in our society than "family". It is also important in this regard to recognize that families are NOT easy to break into. Furthermore, recognize that we are only "family" to one another through our relationship to God. And that makes all people on earth God's "family". This is far too much weight for the word "family", as it is defined in our society, to bear.

(4) Imagine and describe the church building as a PUBLIC SPACE of a community, not the intimate and private space of a family. This is an aspect of hospitality to the stranger that is important to remember. As one comic has put it, "What do we let into our homes? Family, close friends, flies in the summer, moths in the winter." If we want people to feel UNWELCOME, begin with the assumption that in your church, everyone should feel "right at home". Hospitality to strangers is important. But it must begin by our making room for them in a respectful way. What we are about is to create not an EXTENDED

FAMILY, but a COMMUNITY OF STRANGERS. Remember, ultimately God is the host, and we are all God's guests.

(5) The texts of the liturgy are fixed, and the lectionary readings are appointed beyond the congregation. However, HYMNS provide a weekly place of choice for worship leaders. Choose hymns from all periods of the church's history, and not just "family favourites". In addition, God-directed hymns rather than Me-directed songs, will enhance objectivity and hospitality, and unite the community of the church as an objective "WE".

(6) The use by worship leaders of the historic vestments of the church is preferable to more casual dress in worship. This enhances the identity of the worship leaders with the City of God and the broader community of faith, rather than with the local "family". The same applies to the use of clerical garb by clergy at official "community" functions outside worship.

(7) Observe the basic functions of hospitality, as we know them to have been developing and growing in our time: the use of greeters and ushers; bulletin announcements regarding place and parameters of nursery care; signs locating washrooms and church offices; a large and elegant Guest Book; names of clergy and staff printed in the bulletin, with addresses and telephone numbers; clear directions for the flow of worship in the bulletin, reinforced with verbal announcements of non-standard procedures such as communion flow; printed announcement of who is welcome at the Table and on what confession of faith.

(8) Let it be known that the congregation does not operate autonomously under its Pastor as a "mother" or "father", but is under the oversight of the extra-congregational authority of a Bishop.

(9) Let it also be known that loyalty to the traditional confession and pattern of belief of the denomination is not under the control of the "community", but is a given and objective aspect of the congregation. This will enhance hospitality and objectivity by affirming that the congregation is not a singular, nuclear "family of faith", but part of the broader community of faith.

Not all congregations and patterns, of course, will find these attractive suggestions. Many will be perfectly comfortable to remain as parents or children within the parish "family". But for those who find

themselves on the cutting edge of diverse and dynamic communities, and who feel the pressure of growth and change forcing them to look for other models of liturgy and community, the image of the Church as City will appeal. Something will be lost: the old closeness of village and family life, where everything seemed to be simple and decisions were made by a few, will disappear. In its place will be adopted a criterion of relationship based not on *intimacy* but on *respect*.

With this, the broader symbolism of the liturgy, extending as it does beyond the "family" to the "city" will be allowed to re-emerge. The complexity of life today will be engaged. "Ritual" and "formal" will no longer be dirty words. And the model of the congregation as a redeemed society, able to transform the society around it, will be recovered. Finally, the liturgy will regain its grandeur and majesty, and its status as a universally-performed public act, inclusive of all persons, and directed to the God of all creation.

Notes

- ¹ M. Francis Mannion, "Liturgy and the Present Crisis of Culture," in *Worship*, Volume 62, No. 2, March 1988, 108.
- ² Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).
- ³ Mannion, "Liturgy," 112, 113.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.
- ⁵ Robert Hovda, *Strong, Loving and Wise: Presiding in Liturgy* (Collegetown, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1976).
- ⁶ Mannion, "Liturgy," 121.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (various translators and publishers).
- ⁹ *Directory of Lutheran Churches in Canada*, 1997, ed. Leon Gilbertson (Winnipeg: Lutheran Council in Canada, 1998).
- ¹⁰ Mark Gibbs and T. Ralph Morton, *God's Frozen People* (London: Fontana Books, 1964) 49.