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Worship: Discovering How to be Christ's Church in the World

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(This is an abbreviated form of an address given to the Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, 9-14 July 1991, Edmonton, Alberta. The title has been added as appropriate to the appearance of the address in published form.—The Editor)

When the World Council of Churches (WCC) held its sixth assembly in Vancouver in 1983, many of you were a part of the preparations; others arranged your holidays that summer in order to attend. Those who couldn't, watched the assembly proceedings on CBC as the work of churches throughout the world was broadcast in an unprecedented way across Canada.

My own involvement in that assembly began with the closing worship of the convention of what was then the Western Canada Synod. The preacher was Bill Lazareth, and I can remember him looking out upon an expanse of Lutheran faces and preparing us for the WCC assembly. He told us to be prepared to swim out of our quiet Lutheran lake into the surging waters of the ecumenical ocean. As a staff member of the World Council of Churches, I have now been swimming around in that ecumenical ocean for some years.

It is a very great privilege to have been invited to speak to you this morning. I would like to use this time to say two things; First, to encourage this church, my church, to be bold and imaginative in your witness to the world, and to understand that you are part of a family of baptized people which stretches beyond Lutherans and around the globe. Secondly, I

want to affirm the work and gifts of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) and to applaud and encourage and thank you.

In addressing these two points, encouraging you to be bold and imaginative in your witness to the world, and in affirming your work here at home, I would like to speak to you about worship, and to invite you to discover the meaning of ecumenical worship as it is experienced within the World Council of Churches.

At the seventh WCC assembly held in Canberra, Australia last February, I was privileged to be part of the staff team responsible for worship.

Organizing worship in a WCC assembly is a bit of a trick, when you consider that you will be planning for 311 member churches and 21 confessional groups, including German Lutherans, Chilean Pentecostals, Cuban Methodists, Ethiopian Copts, Ugandan Anglicans, Russian Orthodox, and Canadian Lutherans. Before you start, you know that you will need to work in at least the five official languages of the WCC—English, French, German, Spanish, and Russian. You realize that you begin with no common music, no common liturgy and no common culture. In addition, you can expect that people will arrive every morning at the worship tent lugging their vastly different regional, economic, and gender perspectives, as well as their personal concerns, and their concerns for their country and their church.

How does one plan for worship with such a diverse international and ecumenical congregation? Part of the answer to this question was given to me by my daughter Sarah when she turned four.

On the day that she turned four, Sarah had a birthday party. It will often happen that a four year old will want to invite big friends, as well as, or instead of, little friends to a birthday party. And this was the case for Sarah. When her guests arrived, mostly big friends, she ran to greet them, and when she did each one bent down to her and asked the same question: "Well, Sarah, what is it like to be four?"

And to each one she offered the same curious response: "I'm not four ... I'm three."

It was a wonderful party. We played games; laughed together; told stories about Sarah and when she was born and

what she was like when she was little and how she had grown in wisdom and stature. Gifts were brought, opened, exclaimed over. Then there was a point when things got quiet. Sarah grew restless, and kept looking towards the door. Just when she thought she couldn't wait any longer, her mother appeared carrying a cake. Oh it was beautiful! It had two layers, with bright pink icing; her name was written on the top and four candles burned brightly.

Sarah's eyes were wide as her mother put the cake on a low table where she was seated. Around her the song swelled; not just any song, but a special song—"Happy birthday to you, Happy birthday to you . . ." Sarah closed her eyes tight, took a deep breath, made a wish and blew out the candles.

It was then—only then—that she looked up and announced to all who were gathered around her: "There, now I'm four!"

Oh, what a minglement of meaning one gaudy pink cake and four flickering candles were able to carry in the mind and heart of this small child! It was not just the days and weeks of expectation and longing, although that was part of it; it was not just being surrounded by those she loved, although that was it as well. All that Sarah knew about family and love and friends and growing up and turning four; all that she knew about the past and the future was baked into a cake and served to her on a plate by her mother.

Sarah needed help in turning four. In the same way, we as an ecumenical family, and we here in the ELCIC, need help in discovering how to be Christ's church within the world. Worship is one place which invites this discovery.

What happens in ecumenical worship is what happened for Sarah, and, as you may realize, is also what happens in your congregation every Sunday: the family is gathered, stories of faith and faithfulness are told, gifts are offered, candles are lit, songs are sung and food is served. All that you know about family and friends, death and life, sin and forgiveness, despair and hope; all that you know about the past and the future is blessed and broken and given to you.

We could use this time to reflect in some detail on what happens in worship in your congregation. Who gathers at the table? What are the issues that they bring? What needs to be forgiven, redeemed, infused with new life?

Or, together we could reflect upon what it means for us and the work and witness of this church that we worship at this convention. What does it mean to worship together when we have disagreed over sacramental practices? When we have battled over abortion?

Or, we could raise the question for the World Council of Churches. What happens when this international, interconfessional, intercultural family of baptized Christians gathers for worship?

First of all, despite the many points of disunity within the body of Christ, worship is the place where we attempt a foretaste of the unity which we seek. Within the World Council of Churches, this question of unity is a troubling one, for the pressures to move apart from one another are tremendous. Just as Sarah needed help turning four, we in the ecumenical movement need help in staying together. Worship helps us to do that.

One could say that in the ecumenical family we don't agree on much. In the early days, the divisions within the ecumenical movement tended to be primarily along confessional lines. A great deal of work which is now contained in what is called the BEM document on baptism, eucharist and the ministry has successfully addressed many of these divisions. Now, other divisions are foremost—those between rich and poor, gender issues, gospel and culture, how we understand God and the Bible, the ordination of women. Always, there is a great danger of internal self-destruction because of sectoral/political/ethnocentric agenda masquerading in theological clothing.

As one member of the Canadian ecumenical work has expressed it, "We bite our tongues constantly to keep from coming into conflict with one another, because we believe so strongly in the importance of what we are doing together that we will not abandon each other. We intend to stay together!"

And so it is that we as an ecumenical family dare to gather in one worship tent to say the words "I believe in God the Father Almighty ..." The WCC must ask—we in the ELCIC must ask—how do we balance the creative tension between the whole and the part within the body of Christ? How do we find unity within the diversity that sometimes threatens to drive us apart?

Secondly, it is in worship that the wounds of the world are lifted before God. And yet, how do we move beyond languages, cultures and traditions which divide to discover symbols which bear the stories of God's faithful action for all of God's people, and which evoke the mission and witness of the church?

I would like to describe to you, from the experience of ecumenical worship, four issues which are central to the life and work of the council, and which are also a part of the mission of the ELCIC.

Aboriginal People

How do we discover symbols which will bear the meaning of the struggle of many churches, including our own, to walk awhile with aboriginal people?

Perhaps the most deeply moving and politically laden event at the Canberra assembly took place in the opening worship service. A single individual, a young man, entered the worship tent, carrying in his hand a message stick. It had been given to him by Emilio Castro on behalf of the member churches of the WCC. The message which the runner bore was a request: the churches were asking permission to enter the land on which the aboriginal people of what is now called Australia have lived for over 40,000 years.

The worship leaders waited outside while the runner carried the stick to the aboriginal elders gathered at the front of the tent. He handed it to Matilda House-Williams, who is the traditional owner of the land on which the assembly was to be held. With great solemnity she put the stick on her head, signifying the importance of the message which it bore. She conferred with the other elders. Together they agreed, and gave permission for the WCC to enter the land.

For the duration of the assembly, the message stick rested on the altar. It was made of wood, with intricate carvings, but simple in appearance nonetheless. However, the issues which Matilda House-Williams laid before God and before the assembly when she placed the message stick upon the altar were not simple. These are issues which have grown out of five centuries of systematic economic, cultural and social destruction of aboriginal peoples in all parts of the world. We in Canada know them well.

It is remarkable, given the history and experience of aboriginal people, that their response to the request of the churches to enter their land was one of gracious hospitality. The elders, standing at the altar, looked to the entrance of the tent, and motioning with open hands, pronounced the words of invitation: "COME!"

Ecumenical Decade in Solidarity with Women

How do we discover symbols which will bear the meaning of the wounds of women and of the commitment of churches around the world, including our church, to the Ecumenical Decade in Solidarity with Women?

One of the most moving worship experiences which I have ever had took place during a recent meeting of the Central Committee, which is the governing body of the WCC. The worship was built around the text from Hebrews 11 which describes the cloud of faithful witnesses which have gone before us and which inspire our commitment to run the race that is ours in this time and place. There was a time during the worship when people were asked to be silent, and bring to mind the names of those people who have inspired them in their faith. Who had modeled the faith for them? Whose lives had reflected what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ? Whose witness had brought their own faith alive? Then, people were asked to leave their seats and to write the names of those persons on papers which had been placed around the walls of the room.

Later, I took time to walk amongst this cloud of witnesses, and to read the names written there. And what I saw was amazing; although not so amazing once you think about it. With all due respect to the many sermons carefully wrought by generations of pastors, including myself, what I saw, in writing and printing, in careful script and in scrawl, were these words, over and over: my mother; my grandmother; my mother; my Sunday school teacher; my mother. The cloud of witnesses surrounding this worship, and framing the faith of this Central Committee was nothing less than two thousand years of women in solidarity with the church—sitting at bedsides singing hymns and praying with children crying from bad dreams or empty stomachs; two thousand years of women holding on to their faith through indescribable violence and abuse; 2000 years of

children watching their mothers and their grandmothers, and learning from them.

Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

How do we discover symbols which will bear the meaning of the yearning of the world for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation?

Before I left Geneva, I spoke with a colleague who had just returned from a visit to churches in the Sudan. I asked her about her trip, and her response was "Oh Becki, it is beyond misery. Beyond misery."

How are we as the church to respond to the many situations around the globe which cry out to us? How are we to understand the complexity of issues relating to justice, peace and creation?

We do respond, and as Canadians, and as this church we respond generously. I plead with you, however, not to give in to what is called compassion fatigue. I encourage you to continue your high commitment to the humanitarian work that is done through the churches. The work of Canadian Lutheran World Relief, which is done in cooperation with other Lutherans from around the world through the Lutheran World Federation, continues to face enormous challenges and needs your generous and consistent support.

As your convention reports will tell you, our church also works ecumenically to address the root causes of injustice. Particularly, we work through the interchurch coalitions which are the envy of many groups and churches throughout the world. You need to know how important the work of these Canadian coalitions is to the international task of addressing issues of hunger, economic justice, refugees and human rights. You need to know how much the international community relies on these coalitions as a research and networking base, and how much people and churches in the south value this work.

How do we find ways to bear the meaning of this work in worship? At the Canberra assembly, which took place during very critical days of the Gulf War, an all night peace vigil was held. Church people from all over the world came together to sing and pray—people whose countries were a part of the UN-supported forces; people from the mid-east; Palestinians.

Just before dawn, the participants from the United States were leading the vigil. They were suffering, literally, about what this war meant and the role of their country. Even as the oil fields were burning, they began to speak about oil, and the political and economic role of oil within this military confrontation. The issues of justice, of war and peace, and of the violation of the creation were tangible. And then, within the context of worship, they offered oil in the Old Testament, mideastern tradition of anointing, and of healing. Tears streaming down faces, people offered oil to one another, in a mutual anointing. And as the lines moved slowly forward to the altar in the early light of a Sunday dawn, the song that was sung was this: "There is a balm in Gilead, that makes the wounded whole; there is a balm in Gilead, to cure the sinsick soul."

The Search for Unity

How do we discover symbols which will bear the pain of the ongoing search for unity within the body of Christ?

One way, which is not easy to discuss, but which cannot be left out, are those eucharistic elements which more powerfully than any other symbols bear meaning for us. Within the ecumenical movement, bread and wine are painful symbols, for we still set up barriers for one another around the table of the Lord. And yet, bread and wine still call us to be fed in all of our hungers, including and especially our hunger to be one. Therefore, even as we gather in worship to express our unity, we are painfully aware within the church that at this most intimate point of our life together we are still divided.

Worship helps us to become the church in mission in the world, addressing issues of aboriginal people, women, justice, peace and the integrity of creation, and the search for unity. That is way, in ecumenical worship, we are bold to pray "thy kingdom come". It is in the Lord's prayer, spoken simultaneously in many languages, that the ecumenical family in all of its diversity and unity comes together. Joyce Christensen has described the experience of many who have shared this way of praying as a "Pentecost event". And that it is, as together in many voices, in different dress, from churches who otherwise don't agree on much, we dare to ask that the signs of the kingdom for which we all yearn, be made present here and now.

It is our prayer, too, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

We need help to be the church, to be faithful, in Canada and throughout the world. Worship and liturgy help us to do that. And for me, as for so many others, when I move beyond my Canadian Lutheran family to gather within a global community, my ecumenical horizons vastly expanded, I have something of the experience of Sarah at her birthday party. I discover that worship engages me in a new way, and I am overwhelmed, take a deep breath, and exclaim, "Ah, so that is what it means to be Lutheran!"