

Consensus

Volume 44
Issue 1 *Religious Community in a Digital World*

Article 12

1-25-2023

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Mark W. (2023) "Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the Ends of the World," *Consensus*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 12.
DOI: 10.51644/EGJ08687
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol44/iss1/12>

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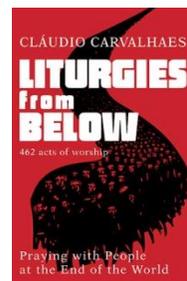
Book Review

Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the Ends of the World.

Cláudio Carvalhaes.

Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2020.

Readers of *Consensus* will likely be familiar with *liturgy* being described as “the work of the people.” Worship that is liturgical relies upon the intentional and active engagement of both the congregation and worship leaders in a dialogical exchange of listening and responding to the Word of God. As such, unlike forms of worship wherein the congregation play a passive or subordinate role, liturgy is collaborative in character. It embraces the unique contributions offered by the congregation and worship leaders (presider, assisting ministers, lectors, musicians, etc.), each with their own voice, perspective, and role in what is a deeply communal endeavour. Only as the contributions of each and all are honoured and embodied is liturgy truly “the work of [all] the people.”



However, in recent years, critical theory has begun to raise some questions regarding this understanding. While challenging our traditional practice, these questions may also hold the potential to expand our understanding and practice of liturgy. For example, when we speak of liturgy as “the work of the people,” do we really mean all the people or just some? Who is included, overlooked, or disregarded in the planning and doing of liturgy? Whose voices and perspectives are heard or unheard? Does “the work of the people” refer solely to their active participation in the liturgy itself, or does that “work” include the people’s active engagement in the preparation of the liturgy, assuring that it reflects their voice and experience, engaging them in the theological work of preparing the worship? In short, as has traditionally been the case, does liturgy refer solely to the form of worship, wherein the liturgy is planned by religious professionals and then delegated to the active participation of the laity? Or do the fullest expressions of liturgy call for something different, a grass-roots process wherein “the work of the people” encompasses both the theological engagement that crafts the liturgy as well as its embodiment within a context of public worship.

In the book, *Liturgies from Below*, edited by Cláudio Carvalhaes, the framers of this volume clearly claim the latter as their starting point. Siding with those who claim that the Gospel reflects a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, a position in keeping with Carvalhaes’ own Methodist background as well as Catholic social teaching, this remarkable compendium is comprised of the voices, perspectives, and grass-roots theology of those who are often overlooked and unheard-from in the global Christian community.

The origins of this volume speak succinctly regarding its content. During 2018-19, over 100 pastors, theologians, students, artists, and activists from various Christian traditions, churches, and walks of life, from about 50 different countries, gathered on four different continents to learn how to pray with local, marginalized communities. The goal of this project was to work with these communities to create liturgical resources which reflected their local knowledge, faith, and experience. At the same time, these resources would then be used by communities around the world.

The contents of this compendium are helpfully organized into materials that can be used for specific portions of the liturgy (e.g., Invocations; Prayers of Confession,

Thanksgiving, and Intercession; Psalms; Liturgies of Baptism; Eucharistic Liturgies; Seasonal Prayers; and Topical Prayers). However, it must be noted, that much of the material reflected in this volume does not reflect the easily consumed, pasteurized material that often characterizes North American liturgy. Many of the pieces included in this collection are raw and challenging, not for lack of editing, but because they reflect with unvarnished honesty the struggles, sorrows, and longings of specific individuals and communities. As such, they speak with a candour and intensity that is uncommon in much of our published, liturgical material. As such, *Liturgies from Below* provides both a helpful and challenging critique to more generic approaches to liturgy which can permit one to leave a Sunday liturgy untroubled and unchanged.

The first impulse for any reader of this volume may be to see it initially as another collection of liturgical resources, from which one can pick-and-choose pieces for inclusion in a congregational liturgy; however, to do so uncritically is to miss the real power of this volume.

I would encourage pastors, church musicians, and worship teams, first to consider the use of this volume as a devotional guide. Make certain to read the preface and introduction of this compendium. It is noteworthy in outlining the scope of project and the approach in developing the following resources. Then, read your way through the various pieces, one-by-one. It is a powerful experience. One cannot emerge unchanged, when listening to the voices, faith, cries, and longing of those who are reflected in the collection.

Only then, I would suggest, can one be sensitized to use the materials contained in this volume in a manner which moves beyond casual appropriation. Use of the bountiful resources in this collection will compel worship planners to wrestle with the issue of how to genuinely hear and honour the voices of those who contributed to this volume. It will similarly challenge readers to renewed understandings and a faith language that moves beyond questions of personalised salvation to honestly name and challenge the social and economic powers that entangle us all.

Finally, the 462 acts of worship reflected in *Liturgies from Below*, are a remarkable example of contextualized liturgical theology. Whether it was communities or individuals being asked to take pre-existing liturgical material and rewriting it to reflect their own contexts or the crafting of new psalms, prayers, or dialogues, the materials contained in this volume consistently reflects the faith's wrestling borne out of genuine human experience. As such, it invites us to similarly honest engagement in our own contexts.

Those of us who reside in the North American setting are living in an era when the institutional church, as we have known it, is undeniably in decline. As such, we are particularly in need of this volume, the imagination it reflects, and the challenge that it offers. For while, on the surface, this is a book of liturgical resources, the soteriological, ecclesiological, missiological and ethical implications of the material contained in this compendium are significant. They invite new conversations and an imaginative re-envisioning of faith and the faith community in a time that is desperately in need of such alternatives. As such, those who delve into this volume will find themselves deeply grateful both to Cláudio and to all those who contributed it.

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