
**“Worship Design and Liturgical Leadership as Primary Pastoral Responsibility:
A Practical Preliminary Consideration”**

Charles Young-Chul Ryu

I

When we set apart servant-leaders for the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ, each act/event of setting apart grants/confers specific identity and tasks to the person being set apart, whether this act of setting apart is understood as commissioning, consecration or ordination, whether for a specific period of time and for some specific tasks or for a lifetime of vocation, or whether this act of setting apart creates a class of clergy or while remaining as laity. In the case of pastor or ordained minister, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) sets apart their clergy members by ordaining them as “minister of word and sacraments,” in contradistinction to the ordination of their elders and deacons who remain as laity even after the ordination. In the United Methodist Church, elders and deacons are ordained clergies of the church, and the elder, who is ordained for “Word, Sacraments and Order,” is equivalent to the minister of word and sacraments in the PC(USA). In other words, for both churches and for the most main-line Protestant traditions, “word and sacraments” are the *sine qua non* identity and primary job description of what it means to be an ordained minister.

Even though the ministry of “word” can take place in other teaching settings, it is important to note a very obvious fact that both “word and sacraments” for a local congregation take place in the context of worship. In other words, “worship” is the primary ministry context in which the identity of the ordained ministers and their pastoral ministries is most clearly understood, articulated, and practiced. It is almost as if we in the Christian faith community

ordain our pastors specifically for “worship,” if we take seriously the designators of their ordination. This does not preclude other important pastoral responsibilities, but clearly underscores the importance of worship as the primary pastoral responsibility of an ordained minister.

For Protestant pastors, as they are often known in the South as “preachers,” the emphasis of their ministry tends to have more “word” than “sacraments,” and a large portion of their pastoral ministry is related to preaching and teaching beyond pastoral care and basic administrative duties. Even though the worship is understood as “service of word and table,” most Protestant worship services focus more on “word” than “table,” and for the most part have not developed a more balanced ministry of word as part of a worship service that is both of word *and* table/sacraments. With the advent of contemporary service, some Protestant worship services often look more like a preaching event with praise music as prelude to the preaching, rather than a full worship service.

Generally speaking, the sacraments in pastoral ministry tend to become something pastors get to do once in a while, and have not taken the center stage of the pastoral consciousness for the most part, that is, until very recently. Compared to the preparation related to the ministry of “word” (not just preaching, but also all those emphasis on Bible, doctrine and theology), the training in “sacraments” was almost non-existent for the most Protestant pastors. As the sacraments are more closely connected to worship in its practice and execution than the ministry of word, this lack of emphasis on sacraments actually reflects a more basic neglect in worship and liturgy as an essential part of the training and preparation for pastoral ministries. For example, when we think of the most important qualifications of a pastor being called or appointed, excellent preaching almost always comes to the top of the list, while being an excellent worship leader or creative worship designer or deep and profound sacramental theologian for the faith community is often not even mentioned. Again, until very recently, this has not been considered essential to the pastoral identity in most Protestant communities, and more starkly so for the Korean and Korean American Protestant churches.

Yet, if we really want to be faithful to the “ordination” of our pastors as servant-leaders set apart for “word and sacraments,” then it is critical that we begin to see the pastors not only as preachers and pastoral caregivers, but also as worship designers and liturgical leaders for the

faith communities. Only when we can reclaim the importance of worship as the central nexus of all ministries of a given faith community, and therefore when the leadership in all aspects of worship life of the congregation becomes the primary pastoral identity and responsibility, will even the preaching ministry of the pastor find a more authentic and meaningful place in the life of the congregation concerned. Different pastors have different gifts, and the larger church community as a whole needs all these different gifts of our pastors. It is true that not all pastors are gifted preachers; yet, all pastors are expected to strive in some concerted way to raise the quality of their preaching ministry. In the same way, we need to begin to expect every pastor to grow as worship designer and liturgical leader. Some are clearly more gifted and more interested in worship than others. What is required of pastors from their ordination is not that they all become worship scholars and liturgical buffs, but they continue to learn and grow in the area of worship, and take seriously their role as worship designer and liturgical leader of their faith community. Pastors are called to provide, on a consistent and regular basis, the place and time for the holy encounter for the faith community with the divine God, i.e. worship, and they are to do it with passion, commitment, excellence in quality and with creativity and imagination.¹

II

Nowadays, with quick-fix mentality pervading our culture including that of the congregational life, we are often tempted to seek allegedly fail-proof recipes or the latest tips from the how-to gurus in a given field. As pastors who are trying to improve their ministry as worship designers and liturgical leaders, they may fall into the same trap. True, some specific suggestions can readily be applied to and improve worship services, and all liturgical renewal happens through “doing” something in worship. However, for the meaningful and authentic growth of a pastor as worship designer and liturgical leader, “the ten best worship design strategies” or some such list of things to do, will not do the job. The key concept that needs to be aimed at here is “intentional formation” of a pastor as worship designer, liturgical leader and sacramental theologian in and for the faith community she/he serves. We are seeking to heighten the “liturgical sensitivity” of a given pastor both as designer, producer and as liturgist/presider of worship services. We are to aim at embodying what “worship” is all about in the person/being of the pastor so that all she/he does becomes worshipful. It is deepening of the pastor’s spiritual life

in such a way that the deep and constant encounters with the divine in all aspects of her/his life and ministry informs and pervades all aspects of worship when she/he designs and leads it, and vice versa. In this regular communal encounter with God, everything the pastor does becomes a better and more effective channel, conduit, environment and encouragement for the congregation to worship and encounter God more authentically and meaningfully. This intentional formation process for the pastor as worship designer/liturgical leader is in many ways the pastor's own intentional spiritual growth and formation process by means of her/his role as primary worship leader of a faith community.

Once we have accepted the “intentional formation” as the primary focus of living out the call to provide leadership in “word and sacraments,” we can do certain things to help this formation process, and in turn, improve the worship life of the congregation. These are the preliminary preparation and on-going background behind actual worship design and liturgical leadership.

(1) Get familiar with and be educated about worship.

Begin with theological reflection on worship, asking what is it all about that we do every Sunday and every time there is a special occasion for it. Depending on the kind of theology of worship a pastor holds, his/her worship leadership will be quite different. Rather than just tinkering with certain aspects of worship, it is important to “think theologically” regarding worship. Reading now ever abundant and readily available books on worship and worship resources would be helpful. What is needed is not necessarily academically technical theology of worship. That may be helpful for those who are so drawn and inclined in that direction. For our purpose, any general introductory books on worship will help the pastors begin to think theologically about worship, and even though these books are not usually written specifically in terms of “worship design and liturgical leadership,” thinking theologically about worship will help the pastors in their roles as worship designers/liturgical leaders.²

Pastors also need to get to know in some broad strokes the general outline and shape of the lectionary and the lectionary based worship services. The lectionary is a way to set our Christian journey and congregational life in a liturgical frame work. For this, looking through the

denominational resource catalogues would readily fulfill the most needs of the pastors in most situations. Even though the language tends to be a bit too formal for more creative worship services and not always younger-generation friendly, *Book of Common Worship* for Presbyterians and *The United Methodist Book of Worship* for United Methodists are official publications for the worship life of their respective congregations, and they still continue to provide very helpful “suggestions” for worship in many and various occasions.³

After this initial stage of thinking theologically about worship and getting to know the liturgical structures and some of “how-to’s,” then continue to learn as much about worship, liturgy and lectionary as possible, and if not already doing so, begin the discipline of preaching/designing worship reasonably strictly from the lectionary. The lectionary framework is a good structure to utilize for the “intentional liturgical formation” of a pastor.

In learning about worship, it is important to seek out “good worship experiences,” as nothing can replace the actual experiences of grace in good worship services. A pastor needs to be nurtured, not only as worship leader, but also as “worshiper” on some regular basis, and this will help her/him grow as worship leader. Seek liturgically rich and artistically sensitive worship experiences. Enjoy high quality and often creative worship services in larger church gatherings or presbytery meetings or annual conferences. Experience them as worshiper, and then later reflect on how such experiences would relate to the worship life of his/her congregation. If occasions permit, it may be helpful to visit worship services of historically liturgical denominations, e.g. Roman Catholic, Anglican or Lutheran as well as more liturgically sensitive Methodist or Presbyterian churches.⁴ The energy and rhythm of their worship services would probably be very different from one’s own, but there is something important to learn from the communities that take worship liturgy seriously, even when some of them may appear to be simply repeating it almost lifelessly. There is a certain invisible liturgical pattern and structure, even an archetype that provides connection to a larger reality beyond liturgy itself.

One of the most exciting and rewarding ways to experience and learn good worship services is to attend high quality worship conferences as part of intentional continuing education of the pastors. What is interesting is that it is often the church musicians that provide most relevant and meaningful worship conferences for general church members. The Presbyterian Association of Musicians (PAM) for decades has been providing their week long worship and

music conferences in three different locations every year.⁵ The Fellowship of United Methodists in Music and Worship Arts offers their biennial convocation. For Korean Americans, there is the Korean Worship and Music Conference (KWMC) produced by the Presbyterian initiated ecumenical group called Council for Worship, Arts and Culture (CWAC), and this is the only intergenerational, bi-lingual family gathering of its kind available to Korean Americans. These are gatherings of Protestants who love worship, and they are great ways to learn worship and how liturgy is and can be practiced, often very creatively. The Pastor(s) and the church musician(s) from the same congregation attending one of these conferences together as a team would create a very fruitful opportunity for meaningful transformation of the worship life of their congregation.

(2) Intentionally raise the liturgical sensitivity.

Liturgical sensitivity is more than just knowing the different liturgies for different situations and seasons, learning the anatomy and logistics of worship. That would be like musicians knowing only their notes or actors having learned just their lines. For the music and the drama to come alive, a lot more is involved, even though how this is so is very difficult to describe or articulate. So is the liturgical leadership. I call it “liturgical sensitivity.” Just like a musician can work on sharpening and deepening their musical sensitivity even when they are not born a child prodigy, so can the pastor as worship designer and liturgical leader work on her/his liturgical sensitivity. In a way, a pastor is like an artist, a worship artist, and worship leadership is an art, more than a science or a skill-set. This is why we need to be on the journey of “formation” over a long period of time.

For an experiment, without making any changes in the order of worship service or the style of music in that worship or any other worship practices, just paying attention to this invisible area of liturgical sensitivity can subtly or sometimes dramatically change the substance of worship itself. Because changes are difficult and always resisted, it is also pastorally advisable that worship leadership focus first on liturgical sensitivity before trying to make any major changes in worship. Once the worship is regularly and consistently well prepared and led with a certain level of heightened liturgical sensitivity, the congregation’s worship experience would

deepen to the point where natural and organic evolution and transformation in the style and liturgical structure, yes, even worship order and the different musical genre, can be more easily introduced to the congregation. For ultimately what is needed is not a specific kind of worship liturgy or musical style, but rather authenticity of the worship experience provided by the liturgically sensitive leaders.

The key is “paying attention” to and “thinking theologically” for each segment and each element or aspect of the worship service. Simply by observing intentionally and trying to do it more authentically and making theologically informed decisions regarding its execution will over time deepen that moment or aspect of worship experience and influence other segments in worship as they are all related. In most worship, there are moments of gathering/ praying/ praising and glorifying/ confessing and forgiving/ exchanging peace and reconciling/ proclaiming and speaking/ being present and offering/ remembering/ being sent out, etc. Spending some focused time for each moment would deepen and heighten the liturgical sensitivity over time, and in turn subtly shift the worship services.

We can also delineate some of the basic dimensions of worship experiences and pay attention to them as any performing artist would to all aspects of performing their music or art work. Simply raising the question of “time” and “timing” in the worship would alter the way the worship leader would engage in the service, and imperceptibly the fellow worshipers would feel the difference, even though not always consciously. What about the “emotional movement”? At a given service, explicitly or tacitly, a full range of emotion is displayed and experienced: anticipation, apprehension, fatigue, fear, numbness, reluctance, anger, grieving, being startled, confused, disappointed, overwhelmed, comforted, challenged, moved, elated, ecstatic, hopeful, inspired, etc. In authentic worship, there is no emotional manipulation, but rather an environment or a certain safe space-time container that allows full and authentic emotions to be experienced and expressed. Paying attention to this emotional movement allows the worship leadership and the congregation to enter into the deeper level of “worshipping.”

Pay attention to the “physical movement” in the worship, such as when to sit and when to stand, especially as it relates to the transition in the worship and its “timing,” to the “space” where the movements are made, e.g. isles, chancel area, entrance foyers, etc. and to the space and the movement all the worship leaders in the service need to make during the worship.

Pay special attention to the “visual message” in the worship, including especially in the “non-essential” elements of the worship. Raise the question as to whether and how the necessary equipment for the worship service creates or hampers worship environment. This becomes more important as we are utilizing modern electronic equipment with higher frequency.

These are only a cursory list of suggestions. Once we raise the question of liturgical sensitivity, there will not be a time when there are no more questions to be raised in this regard. So, once again, this is the journey that pastors as worship leaders are called and invited to embark on.

III

Worship is a communal act. Liturgy literally means the labor of the people of God. So is the pastoral leadership in worship and liturgy. This process of “formation” discussed briefly above is something that pastor needs to do with her/his congregation. It is important to see worship design and leadership process as a collaborative process between the pastor and the musicians, the pastor and other pastoral staff, the pastor and the worship committee or worship team, and ultimately with the whole congregation. To find ways to pay attention and think theologically about their worship life together as a community of worship not only forms the pastor as worship designer and liturgical leader, but also forms the congregation as a community of worship designers and liturgical leaders. So as people are gathered in the name of Christ, He will be there, and the community of faith that encounters God in their worship will be given the identity as people of God. The church ordains ministers of word and sacraments to “facilitate” this process, literally “to make it easier” for the faith community. May ordained pastors ever be faithful to this sacred calling.

Abstract

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Rev. Young-Chul Ryu
Director of Program Ministries of Stony Point Center
Stony Point, New Jersey

As the designator of ordination is “minister of word and sacraments,” worship and liturgical leadership is central to pastoral identity. Given that most pastors did not receive liturgical and sacramental training in their preparation for ordained ministry, some practical suggestions are made to begin the process, “intentional formation” as the key concept in this.

* Key words:

Worship, word, sacrament, liturgical leadership, liturgical sensitivity

¹ One of the Constitutional Questions for ordination of minister for word and sacraments for PCUSA includes the following: “Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?” *Book of Order* G-14.0405-b. (8)

² Some of the helpful general introduction to worship: James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, Third Edition (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 2001); Howard Rice and James C. Huffstutler, *Reformed Worship* (Geneva Press, Louisville, KY, 2001)

³ The one resource that has helped me most frequently during my “learning” period as pastor trying to implement more liturgically sensitive weekly and special occasion worship, is Hoyt L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, Laurence Hull Stookey, and James F. White, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1992). The short introductory essays and commentaries for various worship services and liturgical seasons are helpful for non-worship specialists as most pastors would be.

⁴ When I look back at my seminary days, the frequent attendance at carefully prepared daily worship services at Marquand Chapel at Yale Divinity School and almost daily participation in the early morning mass at an Episcopal church one block away from my apartment on the way to school did much good for the “liturgical formation” of someone like me, a low church Methodist pastor-in-training, whose concentration was not in the area of worship and liturgy.

⁵ PAM offers their week long Worship and Music Conference at two weeks at Montreat, North Carolina, at Westminster College, New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, and PAM West at various locations and different times in the region west of Mississippi. For more information, www.presbysmusic.org.