

**SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT TO THE AR&LW NEWSLETTER – Spring, 2009**  
**Paul Westermeyer Series: *Presentations to the Presbyterian Hymnal Committee***

**THINGS TO KNOW AND DO:**  
**WORDS FOR THE PRESBYTERIAN**  
**HYMNAL COMMITTEE**  
**(a series in two parts)**

**PART I**

**“Things to Know: The Current Landscape”**

*The comments found in this series are written-out versions of two presentations I was asked to make on September 22 and 23, 2008 to the Presbyterian Hymnal Committee in Louisville, Kentucky, at its first meeting. For the Committee I purposely worked from notes in a more dialogical format, less in the nature of lectures. The written versions requested here do not include the give-and-take of the conversations with the Committee.*

*Assignment and Approach*

You have asked me to address you about two topics: today it's the landscape of worship and music among us, with particular reference to hymnody, and tomorrow it's working together as a committee. Before I do that I want to thank you for what you are doing. As I will say again later, it is very important. I also want to congratulate you on being an impressive group, which includes people with fine mettle and appropriate backgrounds for this work.

I set out to analyze the landscape by describing what I have seen on the visits I make to various churches. When I finished the analysis I was surprised. I'll come back to the surprise.

Anything you or I might make up about worship in our time—and some things that are beyond our imagination—is true. For example, an actual advertisement from one church said, “Come to church on Good Friday and have fun,” as if crucifixion is fun. We are not likely to make that one up, but it's out there. Since I saw that advertisement, I began to listen to pastors' announcements more carefully and realized that Good Friday as fun fits a bigger picture. In many churches, one can easily get the idea that the fundamental measure of value for everything is whether it is fun or not. In any case, the landscape certainly has virtually anything and everything in it. If you stare at the details, it is hard to describe it. But there are contours, and they seem to fall into three groups. Fun is most characteristic of the first one.

*Market-driven*

Worship in this group is perceived as a way to sell things, in this instance to sell Christianity. The way the culture proceeds is by selling, and the way it sells things is by means of music. The Church, in this model, sees itself as identifying with the culture and decides that to be “missional” is to do what the culture does. The logic is that, if you can get music rightly located in the culture's mindset, the laws of the market place will take over and many people will come.

This perspective, with good reason, is usually associated with praise bands. Praise bands are driven by their own logic and intent to imitate the culture. The point in having them is to sound exactly like the culture or at least close to the culture. This means the music is soloistic and amplified. The logic says, “The culture doesn't sing, so sing for it.” Use the culture's forms—solo style, amplification, a beat, and entertainment. In a parallel way, preachers attuned to the culture avoid Biblical readings altogether or select only a carefully chosen verse or two.

We need to be clear about this, however. The fundamental issue here is not style, but perspective. There are classically trained organists who do exactly the same thing as the praise bands I've just described: they attune their music to what people want. They quite consciously try to individualize and personalize what they play, just the way the commercial culture does. They may or may not sound exactly like the surrounding culture, but their intent is to match the commercial culture's drive to meet people's perceived or manufactured needs and wants.

*Non-Market-Driven*

Standing against the market place at the other end of the spectrum are those who will not budge from what they have been doing. Every Sunday the same few hymns are sung. Every Sunday the service is exactly the same, or as close to the same, as possible. Only the same parts of the liturgy—or something that consciously attempts to avoid the liturgy—is done and done in the same way each week. The Church's historic liturgy as whole cloth—with its Ordinary, Propers, and multiple musical options—is not welcome, new hymns are not welcome, and new music is not welcome. Though churches in this group are often called “traditional,” they are traditional only in the sense that they represent what one particular

church has chosen to do for the last generation or for the last few years. (“Tradition” as used here has little or nothing to do with longevity. It has to do with choosing to solidify certain practices, old or new, into invariable legalisms.) This may bear a relation to a small piece of one denomination’s history, but it has little relation to the wholeness of that denomination’s theory and practice, and less relation to the tradition of the whole Church.

Whereas churches in the first group are likely to get rid of hymnals altogether, churches in the second group are likely to have a hymnal in the pew racks. But they are equally likely to use only a small portion of it. These churches have not explored the resources in their hymnal, and they have little or no interest in doing so. Whether the hymnal is the denomination’s current one or some other one, only a few pages are used. This is true even though the distinction between the first two groups can often be articulated like this: the first group will not use anything in a hymnal, and the second group will not use anything outside its hymnal.

#### *Figuring It Out*

There is a large third group of churches that is uncomfortable with either of the poles the first two groups represent. This group is trying to figure things out without the certainty of the other two. Churches in this group are characterized by a remarkable ecumenical consensus about the shape of worship on Sunday, the Lord’s Day. They have looked at their traditions in light of the tradition of the whole Church. The shape to which they have gravitated is not surprising, therefore, because it is the shape to which the Church’s worship in the East and the West has gravitated for twenty centuries. Its motifs are Gathering, Word, Table, and Sending. Some kind of *gathering* rite, large or small, is followed by *Word*, which includes the reading of the Bible and preaching. Often the three-year lectionary is used. The *Lord’s Supper* follows, or, if it does not, there invariably seems to be a hunger for it and plans or wishes to do it more often. Finally, the church is *sent* out into the world to be what it is, Christ’s body to the neighbor.

Another characteristic of these churches is that they live below the radar. The polar types get the publicity, because they highlight conflict. The first group especially gets publicity because it matches the novelty the commercial culture prizes and it draws the crowds that attract media attention. The middle group is characterized by

smaller churches. They are more apt to go about their work quietly and with little fanfare. Though they may sense (often rightly) that they are under attack because the culture does not prize their size, they nevertheless seem to keep going about their business. If they get snared by internal warfare or feel called to take a prophetic stance about something, they may get some publicity because of the conflict that is created. But, as long as they are going about the business of pastoral care, education, worship, and sometimes even social as well as personal ethical concerns, they live below the radar.

Here’s an example. A small Lutheran church has taken up its responsibility in the world by seeking to do the kinds of things the Church generally—and in its Lutheran dress specifically—has done. It

- celebrates the Eucharist every Sunday
- prays morning prayer, with substantial intercessions, every Wednesday;
- has good congregational and choral singing;
- is led by a cantor who, with chorales at the center, chooses a very wide variety of appropriate music for the Church year and leads it well;
- has a pastor who is not a glad-hander, but one who thinks out the liturgy and presides well, works hard at preaching and does it well, teaches well, and provides solid pastoral care;
- engages in serious Biblical, theological, and historical study alongside moral deliberation about current issues like war and peace, conflicts in Israel, sexuality, and ecology; which led them to choose to become a Reconciling in Christ congregation, welcoming gays and lesbians just like they welcome everyone else.

An active and insightful middle-aged member of this church died of cancer. He was gay and estranged from his family, who lived several states away. They wanted nothing to do with his funeral, though they wanted his body sent to them for burial. He had gay and lesbian friends, however. They were mostly not members of the church, yet they wanted to have something to say about the funeral. They wanted “Amazing Grace,” “Precious Lord,” and “In the Garden” sung at the funeral. These would probably not have been the dead man’s choices. The congregation sings the first two of these hymns, but not “In the Garden.” The pastor and cantor worked things out with the friends. The Lutheran liturgy was in place straight up, with its funeral Propers and “O God, our Help,” “Thine Is the Glory,” and the three

hymns the friends wanted, including “In the Garden” sung by a soloist during communion. The friends had instruments they wanted to play. The cantor worked that out quite well with them, though not without difficulty, because they had no idea what the discipline of congregational song entailed and the time for working things out was quite short.

This involved careful deliberative theological, ethical, pastoral, liturgical, and musical activity below the culture’s radar, yet it was of immense value to the community who gathered for this funeral. And here’s the final symbol of “below the radar.” The man who died had been a drag queen. His friends wanted him to be laid out in a dress. That happened without spectacle, quite tastefully, and with a “queen” medallion around the man’s neck. “Below the radar” is important to note here. For the church and the friends who gathered, things were constructively and helpfully in place for an exceedingly meaningful and faithful funeral. If the media had known, however, the whole thing would have been sensationalized into spectacle and turned into something alien and ugly.

#### *Christ and Culture*

Whatever you may think about how this church figured these things out, you can find communities all across the country trying to do just that—and doing it under the radar. They do not represent one solution, nor do they fit into one denomination. They may be Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Moravian, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ, or any denominational flavor. What’s common to them is the consensus about worship’s shape and the attempt to figure things out in context. Denominations as organizational structures seem to make no difference, but theological themes from the denomination’s roots keep springing up. As I was trying to analyze these themes and their roots, I suddenly realized—here’s the surprise that should not have surprised me—that H. Richard Niebuhr had already described them. You can go to a Presbyterian or a Methodist service where a variety of music and hymnody is being used, none of it from the Genevan Psalter or from Charles Wesley, yet you will know you are in a Calvinist or Wesleyan environment where a transformationist motif is at work. You can go to a Roman Catholic Church, which includes Lutheran chorales in its service, and you will still know a Christ-above-culture perspective is at work. You can go to a Lutheran Church where

no chorales are sung at a given service—like the one I just described—and realize Christ-and-culture-in-paradox is determinative. And, yes, you can go to churches in any one of these traditions and find them trying to change their spots, though this turns out to be very difficult, if not impossible.

What I had not anticipated as I tried to describe the landscape by looking at it (rather than starting with a pre-conceived grid) is that I would find H. Richard Niebuhr’s typology. Group one is our period’s version of *of* culture, group two is a bland version of *against* culture, and group three comprises the three mediating types—*transformer*, *above*, and *paradox*. Nor had I realized that it was the three mediating types in the center group that were the ones who were struggling with the issues you are going to have to struggle with. The two polar groups have things figured out and can neglect the following matters, but the mediating types—whatever their flavor—have to confront them. Churches in this middle group respect what came before them and are not embarrassed to use ancient forms, but they also are trying to figure out what is required in the current context. So they are the ones who are most interested in what you are doing—which by definition includes both old and new. Here are two areas that they confront and that you will have to confront.

One has to do with music. For your project this involves service music and hymn tunes. What about musical style? Does it make any difference? Is there what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls fittingness for worship? What does that mean? Does it bear on music? What about musical syntax? It recently dawned on me that at the roots of all three mediating types—chant for the above culture type, chant plus Genevan psalm tunes plus John Wesley’s ideal for the transformationist type, and chant plus chorales for the paradox type—stands an unaccompanied vocal unison for the congregation’s singing. What makes this especially poignant is that, of late, we have been arguing about instrumental styles, as if the voices of the congregation were at best secondary if not ancillary.

Another set of questions concerns hymn texts. What does the vernacular mean? Can “thee” or “thy” or other old English forms be used—sometimes, all the time, never? What about justice in relation to the memory bank? How do your choices relate to choices editors of other hymnals have made? Is an ecumenical consensus about common texts possible and a good thing? Does it require modifications for

your denomination's theological flavor? Which side bears more weight—the ecumenical or the denominational? What about inclusivity? Can male pronouns be used generically for humanity? What about language for God? Do we still have to break down what Brian Wren calls our overly patriarchal use of language, which programs our brains to think of both humanity and God in exclusively male terms? I thought we had this figured out in broad outline a decade or two ago, only to find that there are now young women who are more likely than men (young or old) to object to inclusive language—which creates some perplexity. These young women have not convinced me to give up on justice, even if those who appear to argue against it will pay the price. But I cannot deny their voices either. You will have to struggle with these things that characterize the mediating groups.

And you will have to work together. That is what I am assigned to address tomorrow.  
(to be continued)



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