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# Mission-Shaped Worship

**In this article Stephen Burns takes the classical four-fold shape of Christian worship – gathering, word, table, sending – and considers how this shape has been affirmed in the development of modern liturgical resources. Taking this shape as a pattern he considers how it might be used and interpreted in both ‘solid’ and ‘liquid’ forms of church, offering many practical suggestions for use. He considers how this shape of worship might be used to nurture a community towards a shared sense of mission.**

## The four-fold shape of Christian worship

Writing from Rome around 150AD, a Christian called Justin Martyr wrote to the emperor describing Christian worship. Here is a portion of what he wrote:

On the day named after the sun all, whether they live in the city or the countryside, are gathered together in unity. Then the records of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as there is time. When the reader has concluded, the presider in a discourse admonishes and invites us into the pattern of these good things. Then we all stand together and offer prayer. And, as we said before, when we have concluded the prayer, bread is set out to eat, together with wine and water. The presider likewise offers up prayer and thanksgiving, as much as he can, and the people sing out their assent saying the amen. There is a distribution of the things over which thanks have been said and each person participates, and these things are sent by the deacons to those who are not present. Those who are prosperous and who desire to do so, give what they wish, according to each one's own choice, and the collection is deposited with the presider. He aids orphans and widows, those who are in want through disease or through another cause, those who are in prison, and foreigners who are sojourning here. In short, the presider is a guardian to all those who are in need . . . .<sup>1</sup>

This is in fact the earliest description available to us of how early Christian worship was ordered. Like the earlier hints found in scripture, particularly Luke's account of the risen Lord's meeting with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, both the stories of faith are told and bread is broken and shared (Luke 24:27, 30-31a). Justin's account suggests how, in at least some places, the stories of faith and the sharing around a table came to be incorporated into a congregational setting on Sundays.

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1 Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 67; quoted in Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1993, pp 31-32.

It speaks of that Sunday gathering, of reading from prophets and apostles, of preaching, prayer, setting a table, thanksgiving, distribution of bread and wine, sending out of portions to those unable to be present, and a collection for the poor.

Despite these details, there remains much that we do not know about Justin and his early account of worship. For example, we do not know if he describes a one-off event or a regular pattern, the practice of one congregation or that of the congregations of Rome or, indeed, those even further afield. And because his letter is an explanation of what Christians do together when they meet, addressed to a pagan emperor who has, presumably, never been present, neither do we know whether or not he is describing an “idealized” version of the kind of meeting to which the Christians aspired, or something they achieved each time they gathered. All this notwithstanding, however, Justin gives us the best clues we have as to how early churches may have organized their communal worship. And in what he gives us there is some continuity with the patterns embedded in the scriptural witness in the Emmaus story.

Particularly in recent years, Justin’s account has become the key to how many different denominations have reformed their liturgies. Hence, worship in many Christian traditions does now, Sunday by Sunday, follow the basic contours of Justin’s description: with an emphasis, in turn, on gathering, word, table, sending. An interesting example is a recent document promoted by the World Council of Churches which is clearly indebted to Justin in suggesting that the “fundamental shape” of eucharistic celebration unfold as follows:

GATHERING of the assembly into the grace, love and *koinonia* of the triune God

#### WORD-SERVICE

*Reading* of the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments

*Proclaiming* Jesus Christ crucified and risen as the ground of our hope

(and confessing and singing our faith)

and so *interceding* for all in need and for unity

(sharing the peace to seal our prayers and prepare for the table)

#### TABLE-SERVICE

*Giving thanks* over bread and cup

*Eating and drinking* the holy gifts of Christ’s presence

(collecting for all in need)

and so

BEING SENT (DISMISSAL) in mission in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Unsurprisingly, as many British denominations are engaged in the World Council of Churches, the shape affirmed in this document is also in evidence in many contemporary denominational worship resources. For example, the Church of England’s *Common Worship* resource opens with the statement that “The journey through the liturgy has a clear structure with signposts for those less familiar with the way. It moves from the gathering of the community through the Liturgy of the Word to an opportunity of transformation, sacramental or non-sacramental, after

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2 Thomas F Best and Dagmar Heller, eds., *Eucharistic Worship in Ecumenical Contexts: The Lima Liturgy - and Beyond*, World Council of Churches, Geneva 1995, p 35.

which those present are sent out to put their faith into practice”.<sup>3</sup> And characteristically, in the actual orders of worship outlined in Church of England resources we often find four main headings corresponding to gathering, word, table, sending which provide a framework for everything else.

It is important to recognize that as well as Justin’s description influencing the shape of celebrations of holy communion, his account, from which the four-fold pattern is derived, has also come to shape non-sacramental services of worship in many denominations today. *Common Worship* speaks of worship involving “an opportunity of transformation, sacramental or non-sacramental”. In non-sacramental contexts, it is envisaged that rather than gathering around a table, the act of worship will invite some other opportunity to respond to the word. Similarly, the *Methodist Worship Book* shapes its services of the word around “a common fourfold structure of Preparation, Ministry of the Word, Response and Dismissal”,<sup>4</sup> in which the third section – “response” – involves an accent on thanksgiving. So services of the word clearly echo the pattern of communion: the *Methodist Worship Book’s* “guidance for ordering a morning, afternoon, or evening service” includes first of all under the heading “response” the guide that “prayers of thanksgiving are offered for God’s gift of creation and redemption in Christ through the Holy Spirit” and default forms of such thanksgiving prayers are present in both the first and second order.<sup>5</sup>

The four-fold shape is, then, of central importance in understanding how patterns for worship are structured in the official denominational resources of a number of churches, both in Britain and across the world. Of course, though, not all Christian worship falls neatly into this four-fold pattern, and it might well be noted that it is not so evident in some traditions of worship which have as yet not been mentioned. For example, some – notably the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends (Quakers) – do not celebrate sacraments in their gatherings; indeed, neither may Quakers encounter preaching. Other traditions – perhaps of Pentecostal heritage – may appear to gather in less structured, less organized – although undoubtedly graced – ways. However, we might note the observations of the Pentecostal scholar Walter Hollenweger describing worship in Pentecostal mode:

In the structure of the Pentecostal liturgy one might find most of the elements of historical liturgies: Invocation, Kyrie, Confession, Gloria, Eucharistic Canon and Benediction. Yet these parts are hardly ever so named. . . [They are linked together with the help of] so-called choruses, i.e. short spontaneous songs, known by heart by the whole congregation. . . If someone sings a song of praise in the Kyrie part, gives a prophecy in the Invocation part, he will be corrected either by the pastor, or by an elder, or, if he persists, by the immediate and spontaneous singing of the whole congregation. Most Pentecostals are not aware of the liturgical function of these choruses, yet they are clearly observable. The Pentecostals thus demonstrate that the alternative to a written liturgy is not chaos, but a flexible oral tradition, which allows for variations within the framework of the whole liturgical structure, similar to the possibilities in a jam session of jazz musicians.<sup>6</sup>

3 *Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England*, CHP, London: 2000, p x.

4 *Methodist Worship Book*, p 26.

5 *Methodist Worship Book*, pp 32-33, 44-5.

6 Walter Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals*; quoted in Jean-Jacques Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play: Toward a Charismatic Theology*, SCM Press, London 1994, pp 21-22.

As both Hollenweger and other scholars of Pentecostal worship (perhaps most notably Daniel Albrecht<sup>7</sup>) have shown, Pentecostal celebration is in fact considerably more ordered than may at first be imagined. And such patterns do oftentimes fall closely in line with the basic classical four-fold shape of worship in other Christian traditions, even though neither that nor any other shape is scripted on paper.

## Blending form and freedom

At the same time, denominations which do formalize their liturgical resources into structures contained in prayer-books have recently both clarified and amplified the four-fold structure, and at the same time allowed much more generous space for the kind of extemporization that the Pentecostal tradition exemplifies.

A dual emphasis on both form and freedom is emphasized at the opening of the *Methodist Worship Book*: “These forms are not intended to curb creative freedom, but rather to provide norms for its guidance,” adding that “within our heritage, both fixed forms and freer expressions of worship have been, and should continue to be, valued”.<sup>8</sup> This Methodist statement re-iterates affirmations made in the *Methodist Service Book* of 1975. Even so, the new book from 1999 significantly increases the number of “permissive rubrics” – “this or another”, “may be said” and so on – interspersing the “default” texts provided.

The church in which there has perhaps been most radical change to inherited patterns is the Church of England, in which the understanding of “common prayer”, once understood in terms of uniform recitation of texts, has undergone something of a revolution. Latterly, the Church of England has developed an understanding of common prayer modelled not on the imposed use of a prayer-book – like the *Book of Common Prayer* – but rather in terms of a “common core”, a number of marks which are considered to maintain continuity with historic Anglican tradition. These are now said to be:

- a recognizable structure for worship
- an emphasis on reading the word and on using psalms
- liturgical words repeated by the congregation, some of which, like the creed, would be known by heart
- using a collect, the Lord’s Prayer, and some responsive forms in prayer
- a recognition of the centrality of the Eucharist
- a concern for form, dignity, and economy of words. . .
- . . . a willingness to use forms and prayers which can be used across a broad spectrum of Christian belief.<sup>9</sup>

This list of things at the common core of Anglican worship was first found in the remarkable liturgical resource *Patterns for Worship*, which for the first time in the history of the Church of England included services comprising no set texts and which popularised the notion of the liturgical “directory”, from which appropriate

7 Daniel Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality*, SAP, Sheffield 1999 – for more on which, see below; also Steven Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom*, SAP, Sheffield 1993.

8 *Methodist Worship Book*, p viii.

9 *Patterns for Worship for the Church of England*, CHP, London 1989, p 5. Also, Michael Vasey, ‘Promoting a Common Core’, Michael Perham, ed., *The Renewal of Common Prayer*, SPCK, London 1993, 81-101, p 101.

materials might be selected by local congregations according to occasion. The other main part of *Patterns for Worship* (also new to the Church of England's worship resources) was a large "commentary" section that suggested how various pieces of the "directory" could be put together. Originally appearing in 1989, and undergoing updates through the 1990s, the resource was republished in 2002 as *New Patterns for Worship*, a "teaching resource" for the *Common Worship* series.

In various ways, then, the contemporary denominational resources encourage a blending of form and freedom which goes significantly beyond the styles promoted in previous generations.

## **Mission-shaped worship**

My conviction is that both the basic four-fold shape of classical Christian liturgy, and recent encouragements to blend forms and freedoms to extemporize, enable mission-shaped worship. In worshipping traditions – or indeed, for particular services – in which planning begins "from scratch", as it were, without mapping onto basic guiding shapes, the classical four-fold shape can provide a light structure that invites a balance of word and response, and that fosters the conscious and purposeful self-understanding of being sent from the gathering to share in God's mission to the world. And congregations who inherit the four-fold shape from their denominational tradition can ensure that it is explored in preaching and teaching and made explicit on their paperwork for liturgical celebrations. Such a simple move would help to counter one of the downsides of the revolution enabled by new technologies which has allowed each congregation to produce its own orders of service, whereby many congregations have used such paperwork only for the actual texts for prayer in the service, hence losing much of the sense of movement in the structure. Good use of four headings on such paperwork for liturgy would, then, do much to recover a sense of the mission-shape of the patterns they employ.<sup>10</sup> For example, the following might be used:

**We gather in Jesus' name**

**We open God's holy word**

**We celebrate at the Lord's table**

**We are sent out to share in God's mission for the world**

Particularly if used with appropriate images at the head of each section, local orders of service could, in their very style and content, invite understanding of the mission-oriented shape of worship. And just as, without such headings, bespoke orders can lose a sense of the flow of worship, materials projected onto screens through use of such technology as Powerpoint can likewise seem somewhat shapeless. An inevitable characteristic of projected text is that it can only be presented one page/screen at a time, and this can sometimes result in projected material having little sense of direction. This weakness could, however, be remedied by projecting key headings in a "slideshow" sequence as worshippers assemble, or in a quiet pause between gathering songs and a more formal beginning to proceedings. If the four basic headings are embedded alongside images – perhaps

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Earey, *Producing Your Own Orders of Service*, CHP, London 2000, is an invaluable guide to producing attractive and accessible local orders.

digital photographs of the congregation – gathering, centred on the word, feasting at the table, and being sent with a purpose, the associations between the assembly and the movement of their praise is likely to be more greatly appreciated.

Henceforth we shall consider the four parts of the four-fold shape, beginning with “sending” and working backwards through the shape in more detail to consider its potential to serve the church’s mission.

## Sending

The links between sending and mission are perhaps the most obvious, given that “mission” means something like “sent”. The final part of the four-fold shape of Christian worship invites worshippers’ active engagement with mission in the world, their having being renewed by participation in praising God. Historically, there have in fact been a number of ways in which this built into orders of service. Many Reformed churches are currently recovering an aspect of their tradition by stressing an emphatic mission focus as their orders of service shift from the sharing at the table to turning to face the world into which worshippers are to be sent. And so they often now include an explicit “word of mission” as the first part of the order under the fourth major heading. This “word of mission” may simply be a powerful verse from scripture. In *Uniting in Worship* of the Uniting Church of Australia, verses from Matthew 28:19-20 are set alongside other suggested scripture sentences that emphasize the missionary calling of the people of God: Deuteronomy 31:6; Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:14,16; Acts 1:8; Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 16:13, 14; 2 Corinthians 5:18, 20; Colossians 3:17; 1 Peter 2:21, 4:13 and 1 John 3:23. These are all suggested as “default” words of mission, suitable for any occasion, although a related rubric suggests that “the sentence of the day, or words from the psalm or other reading for the day” may also be put to use at this point.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Alternative Service Book* of 1980 a sentence of scripture was in fact used at exactly the same point in the celebration of holy communion (although, unfortunately, it was not then entitled a “word of mission”). If it was a re-iteration of a scripture reading proclaimed earlier in the act of worship, perhaps the heart of the preaching of the day, it might perhaps have provided a powerful means of orienting worshippers on the shape of their living and witness in the days ahead.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the *Common Worship* baptism services uses the notion of a “commission” straight after the sacramental action. It is addressed to the congregation, parents and godparents, and - in the case of baptismal candidates able to answer for themselves - the newly baptized. This “commission” may take the form either of the default text suggested in *Common Worship* or use “similar” words. Following the same example, perhaps every act of worship might likewise be more consciously ordered to involve a moment of focused, mission-oriented extemporization at the place of transition into the sending section?

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11 *The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper: Leader’s Book*, Uniting Church Press, Melbourne 1988, pp 659-660.

12 *Common Worship* has, perhaps disappointingly, removed scripture sentences from this point in the services. However, it is typical of prayer at this moment to focus on turning to the world

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God loves. (A bold, contemporary North American Episcopal (Anglican) prayer asks “send us out, a people forgiven, healed, renewed, that we may proclaim your love to the world and continue in the risen life of Christ our saviour” (Episcopal Church of the USA, *Enriching Our Worship* Church Publishing, New York 1997, p 70).

Finally in terms of sending, we might recall that early account of worship from Justin Martyr who speaks of people engaged in forms of mission at the very point that the word of mission is being recovered in some contemporary resources. Justin speaks of both portions being sent to the poor and a collection being gathered at the conclusion of the sharing around the table. Congregations might also do well to revive and celebrate these and other acts of generosity at this moment in their liturgies, so enacting the mission of which the word speaks.

## Table

As we have seen, the third – “table” – section of the classical four-fold shape may or may not involve an actual celebration of holy communion, although in whether it does or not, the eucharistic accent of the third section invites thanks and praise at this stage in the movement of worship, which is an “opportunity of transformation” in “response” to the word. In much common practice, however, unfortunately many congregations omit all of these emphases: muting thanksgiving, missing the evangelistic potential of the occasion, and ill-serving the established congregation by failing to enable particular and personal response to God’s presence. There is, then, much to be gained from careful reflection on what this third section of the classical pattern may enable, and perhaps at the present time, there is much to be learned especially from the forms of “alternative worship” that have come to constitute a significant development in the life of some churches. The third section of the four-fold shape is particularly welcoming to what alternative worship can offer.

Although the label “alternative” is one with which many people involved in this style of worship are uncomfortable – because it can suggest a lack of seriousness on the part of participants or, indeed, a marginalization on the part of the churches – it nevertheless is commonly used to refer to a certain style of worship. It is most obviously marked by participative activity, an absence of books, and use of multi-media technology (though it is important to note this is not just the projection of *texts* by means of Powerpoint technology, but rather use of new technologies so as enable musical and visual art to make a key contribution to the style of worship). “Alt. worship” (as it is often abbreviated) is sometimes misunderstood as being uninterested in the inheritance of Christian tradition, though this is, generally, not the case; rather, as Jonny Baker and his colleagues write, an appropriate analogy for how alternative worship employs the tradition is that of “sampling”, an analogy borrowed from electronic musical technology:

One of the distinctive features of alt. worship has been a revival of interest in the worship traditions of the church. . . The interest in tradition was one of the factors in alt. worship being labelled ‘post-modern’, because of the way it combines use of advanced mixed-media technology and techniques with an eclectic use of the worship traditions of the church. One way of understanding this is through the metaphor of ‘sampling’ from music technology. In sampling, a slice of music is extracted from its original setting (whether a break beat from a James Brown song to a moment of the Hallelujah Chorus) and inserted into a new music context, where it combines with other elements to form a new whole. . .<sup>13</sup>

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13 Jonny Baker and Doug Gay with Jenny Brown, *Alternative Worship*, SPCK, London 2003, p xiv.

Baker and his colleagues' book, entitled *Alternative Worship*, is itself a kind of directory of such resources and ideas.<sup>14</sup>

Congregations shaped by the classical four-fold pattern have much to gain from blending the emphases and the creative imagination employed in alternative worship especially at this point. There is also potential for alternative worship to benefit from being lightly structured in the classical four-fold shape whilst still retaining its highly distinctive character. Perhaps above all, however, alternative worshippers have a major contribution to make in modelling to other congregations how worship can be freed up from its book-boundness, as well as gaining from strong symbolic enrichment.

Much that has just been said of alternative worship might also be said of worship in Pentecostal style. Daniel Albrecht identifies a number of responses to the word that characterize Pentecostal worship, including "rites of passage and/or rites of intensification (e.g. calls for conversion, for Christian recommitment or dedication, for Spirit baptism)",<sup>15</sup> corporate prayer, and rites of ministry and healing in which "no felt need seems to be out of bounds".<sup>16</sup> Notably, Pentecostal practice of these diverse responses typically involve "praying for and ministering to each other, ritualist to ritualist, in an egalitarian fashion".<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps the highly participative, egalitarian aspiration embodied in response which the Pentecostal tradition has to offer as a model to Christians of other traditions.

## Word

One of the most notable features of recent denomination resources is the commonplace encouragement of alternatives to the traditional sermon. So the *Methodist Worship Book* suggests that in the ministry of the word "God's word is proclaimed and shared in songs, hymns, music, dance and other art-forms, in a sermon, or in comment, discussion and in silence".<sup>18</sup> The notes on the service of the word in *Common Worship* suggest that "The term 'sermon' includes less formal exposition, the use of drama, interviews, discussion, audio-visuals and the insertion of hymns or other sections of the service between parts of the sermon. The sermon may come after one of the readings, or before or after the prayers, and may be omitted except on Sundays and Principal Holy Days".<sup>19</sup> What we see in the case of both Anglican and Methodist traditions is the word "sermon" being given some new content, pushing preaching into a potentially more dialogical mode than the "traditional" monologue. Dialogue with a range of contemporary voices is invited most obviously in the suggestion that "discussion" is an appropriate component of preaching. In practice, the most ready means of introducing discussions into the ministry of the word may be to open a time of comment and questions following each reading. The congregation could often quite easily be notified of the readings in advance, by means of the previous week's notice-sheet, church magazine or website, perhaps with bible study questions which suggest ways of thinking into the readings in preparation for their proclamation in gathered worship. Liturgically, this

14 Baker et al, *Alternative Worship*, p 97.

15 Albrecht, *Rites*, p 167.

16 Albrecht, *Rites*, p 168.

17 Albrecht, *Rites*, p 169.

18 *Methodist Worship Book*, pp 51, 221, in the context of services of the word and holy communion, respectively.

19 *Common Worship*, p 27; also *New Patterns for Worship*, p 14.



option might be introduced by way of a simple question such as “how do you respond to the reading?” following on from any liturgical affirmation of the reading itself. An alternative would perhaps be for such a time for question, comment and so on to be opened up following a monological sermon, after which the preacher might then be given the last word as a way of bringing to a close the conversation s/he started.

It is important to note also that at the same time as the denominational resources have been encouraging approaches to the sermon which many congregations may still encounter as novel, they have also been embracing forms of an ecumenical pattern of scripture reading, known as the Revised Common Lectionary (often known by its initials: RCL). For the Church of England, *Common Worship* both slightly adjusts the RCL and sets down some guidelines about its employment. Readings given in the lectionary are to be followed through certain seasons of the liturgical calendar, and permissions are given for local churches to construct sermon series of their own through what is in fact the majority of the year.<sup>20</sup> So although the contemporary denominational resources may be “diffusing” the sermon in various ways, there is a corresponding encouragement to enrich and widen the range of contact with scripture in the context of gathering.

## Gathering

Finally, then, we come to “gathering” as the first step of the four-fold movement of Christian worship in the classical tradition. Despite, for example, the oft-noted decline of biblical literacy in contemporary western societies, it is nevertheless perhaps in relation to gathering itself that the challenges for Christian communities are greatest. Western societies are commonly characterized as being based on “consumer values” and “an individualistic mentality”, two marks of life in the privileged world that can hardly be disputed.<sup>21</sup> Duncan MacLaren elaborates on this to suggest that there has been a consequent “loss of collective obligation”.<sup>22</sup> Of course, this implies a significant loss to the churches: gathering itself is unfashionable.

Some congregations have responded to such cultural trends by providing for Christian worship in ways that consciously accommodate the individualism of the surrounding culture. For example, in the United States of America Christian initiatives such as that pioneered in Willow Creek, Illinois - which has spawned dozens of other “mega-churches” - now present worship in a mode close to popular styles of entertainment: “celebrations” are compered by a master of ceremonies, congregational song may be absent - replaced by music performed by bands, who are observed by those present. And the space in which such celebrations take place may be modelled on public entertainment spaces, such as cinemas or theatres as opposed to being shaped by inherited models and uses of space for Christian worship – as one instance, seating is almost certain to be individual, rather than shared, as with pews.<sup>23</sup> In these contexts, it is not uncommon for scripture reading to be reduced to a handful of verses, indeed, perhaps a single verse; and

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20 *Common Worship*, p 540, note 7.

21 Duncan MacLaren, *Mission Implausible: Restoring Credibility to the Church*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle: 2004, p 132.

22 MacLaren, *Mission*, p 132.

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23 I am in no way advocating uncritical appropriation of “inherited” space for worship. My point here is simply that seating in “mega-church” settings almost certainly prioritises above all the comfort of the individual.

sacramental celebration is highly unlikely to take place.<sup>24</sup> Gordon Lathrop points to the danger of absenting scripture and sacraments from such proceedings in his statement that “There is much talk about God and about Jesus in North America. In many ways, our cultures are soaked in religion and spirituality” . . .

But without the stories of the scriptures, without ‘this is my body, given for you,’ without the living water of baptism, this talk can be hazy, unhelpful, perhaps Gnostic, often simply code words for the self.<sup>25</sup>

Such a warning suggests the need to be alert to the potential problems accompanying cultural accommodation as well as grounding the promise of the traditional “means of grace” in holy scripture and the sacraments received as gifts from the saviour himself. Such reserve about cultural accommodation in Christian worship urgently needs to be brought into conversation with proponents of cultural relevance, who of course also speak and write with concern for the gospel from their own perspectives. Yet a bringing together of such concerns from both liturgical and missiological angles has not happened to any great extent, in the British context at least. This lack is reflected in both the more cautious writing of official denominational reports as well as the independent writing of creative theologians. For example, the recent and widely read Anglican report *Mission-Shaped Church* notes with approval the “new strategy” and “common core” underlying *Common Worship*, which “emphasizes patterns and structures instead of giving detailed and prescribed texts”<sup>26</sup> and which we have noted above. However, it treats this separately from “alternative worship”, “network churches” and “youth congregations”, and in the latter case repeats the omission in the earlier church report *Youth-A-Part*<sup>27</sup> which also failed to reflect on *Patterns for Worship*, in which encouraging things might perhaps have been found should the report have connected with its vision. Although noting the “new strategy” underlying *Common Worship*, *Mission-Shaped Church* includes no reflection on what *New Patterns for Worship* might offer to help enable worship in “fresh expressions” of church, and while *Mission-Shaped Church* does note some examples of how “traditional forms of church” – “as part of a shift to a pattern of multiple congregations” – have sometimes seen growth, what is “traditional” in the examples cited is use of the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662)<sup>28</sup> rather than the deeper patterns of ancient provenance being recovered to shape worship with scriptural and sacramental content, and in an outward-oriented way.

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24 This is not to say that scripture reading or sacramental celebration are absent from the meeting in “cells” that sometimes accompany mega-church models of meeting. However, they are not central in such models, as they are in the classical model indebted to Justin, and finally, perhaps, to the Lucan communities in scripture itself. For a critique of mega-church models of church, see Gordon Lathrop, “New Pentecost or Joseph’s Britches? Reflections on the History and Meaning of the Worship *Ordo* in the Megachurches”, *Worship* 72 (1998): 521-538.

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25 Gordon W Lathrop, ‘Liturgy and Mission in the North American Context’, Thomas H Shattauer, ed., *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1999, 201-212, p 208.

26 *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*, CHP, London 2004, p 117.

27 *Youth-A-Part: Young People and the Churches*, CHP, London 1996.

28 *Mission-Shaped Church*, pp 73-74.

Pete Ward's rightly acclaimed *Liquid Church*<sup>29</sup> highlights some of the issues specifically to do with the challenge of "gathering" in the contemporary cultural context. *Liquid Church* is an imaginative challenge to the church to employ more contemporary forms of communication (Ward cites cell phones, text messaging and email)<sup>30</sup> as well as inhabiting more contemporary – "fluid, flexible" – forms per se, closer to the "liquid culture" in which churches are now inevitably set. In Ward's thinking, "congregations" are inevitably identified with missiologically inappropriate and dated modes of "solid church" which have "internalized some of the core values of modernity",<sup>31</sup> are concentrated in Sunday morning attendance, and in which worship tends to be "a one-size-fits-all-environment".<sup>32</sup> Conscious of the problems of this kind of "solid" institution in terms of evangelism to "liquid" post-modern individuals, Ward imagines what a church more expressive of liquid culture might look like, so as to begin to engage the situation that even when post-modern young people "might have met Jesus, [ ] they still don't want to meet the congregation!"<sup>33</sup>

His "dreams" are of "worship in a liquid church" in which worship is a "decentred" activity so that it "does not rely on a congregational dynamic".<sup>34</sup> It is highly important to recognize that each of Ward's examples has precedents in Christian tradition: in this sense, they share the "sampling" dynamic also present in alternative worship. First, he cites as an inspiration the labyrinth – a "symbolic journey [ ] with a series of prayer stations"<sup>35</sup> – which has enjoyed something of a contemporary revival. In his own explorations of labyrinth prayer, Ward writes of "each worshiper [being] given a personal CD player" of music to accompany the activity, yet of the form of prayer inviting both individual and wider dimensions (e.g. "individuals were invited to think for a time of a friend in need or a situation in the world"). Importantly, "several people could walk the path at the same time", lending the activity a communal dimension as well as "considerable individual prayer and spirituality".

Secondly, Ward appeals to the medieval spectacle of the elevation of the eucharistic host, perhaps in coterminous consecrations by priests at altars scattered throughout the same building. He sees that as a precedent for worship comprised as "a series of private prayers". Ward rightly notes both the "private and corporate spirituality" at play in such medieval settings, as well as their resonances with some aspects of worship in the Orthodox tradition to this day. And the Orthodox also provide the inspiration for his third "dream": in allowing for "a variety of activities" – kissing icons, lighting candles, eating blessed bread, filling bottles with holy oil, etc – he sees Orthodox worship as permitting alternatives for engagement in the singing, chanting and liturgical action conducted by the priest at or around the altar. Participation in Orthodox worship may be "varied and individual. . . corporate [ ], but also decentred". Much to his point, Ward notes the contrast of such variety to the kind of corporate participation envisaged as being important in most forms of worship in contemporary western churches. He writes of the various modes of devotion he explores as shaping his own "attempt to get away from the

29 Pete Ward, *Liquid Church*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle 2002.

30 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 90.

31 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 17.

32 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 19.

33 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 14.

34 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 94.

35 Ward's "dreams" of worship in a liquid church are found in *Liquid Church*, pp 95-97.

congregational style of corporate worship that is characteristic of solid church” and of the emphases of the western tradition. Ward’s notions are not, though, consciously connected – either by way of appreciation or critique – to movements in liturgical renewal in the western churches to gather together those engaged in what are often referred to as private “personal devotions” into the communal enterprise of liturgy, which is “by its nature. . . more than shared celebration meeting private needs”. As Mark Searle elaborates:

it is an act of civic responsibility, of public duty. An anonymous early Christian apologist in his *Epistle to Diognetus* described the relation of the Christian community to the larger society as that of the soul to the body, the source and expression of society’s relatedness to God: “Such is the important post to which God has assigned them, and it is not lawful for them to desert it”. The local church, then, has public responsibilities, among which not the least important is the offering of public worship.<sup>36</sup>

Here, perhaps, is the heart of the challenge of gathering. For it is precisely this kind of understanding which is threatened by cultural concessions to individualism in worship, however much elements employed in the “sampling” that constitutes “liquid” devotion employs aspects of the tradition. The heart of the dilemma for the churches is perhaps that unless concessions along the lines of Ward’s proposals, or of some other kind, are allowed, there may be little hope of ever gaining or regaining a viable, durable sense of what it might mean to *congregate* together in Christ’s name.

My point here is emphatically not to “knock” the suggestions of those willing and ready to evangelize their peers in contemporary culture, but rather to point to the lack of insights from liturgical theology finding their way into current and pressing missiological questions. Pete Ward himself suggests that his “dreams [of worship in a liquid church] are only that at present”<sup>37</sup> and in an important discussion of “the flow of word and sacrament” he also offers the seeds of a potential critique of his “dreams” in insisting that “it is essential that we do not float away into a world of our own imagining”<sup>38</sup> but rather remain oriented on “a right communication of Christ”.<sup>39</sup> It is at a such point that conversation with the likes of Gordon Lathrop, cited above on the centrality of word and sacrament, might be most fruitful.

Furthermore, in an interesting later book, *Selling Worship*, Pete Ward discusses a notable decline in “participation” in contemporary charismatic worship, suggesting there that in an earlier generation of its life in the UK (in the 1970s), the charismatic movement embodied a quality of “folk” participation which reflected the wider cultural interest in forms of folk music, community and creativity.<sup>40</sup> He observes, though, that by the 1990s, much charismatic worship had come to invite a different form of participation, shaped by “consumer-based, commercial and media-based” interests,<sup>41</sup> which again reflected a wider coterminous cultural trend. In contrast

36 Mark Searle, ‘Private Religion, Individualistic Society and Common Worship’, Anne Y Koester and Barbara Searle, eds., *Vision: The Scholarly Contributions of Mark Searle to Liturgical Renewal*, Liturgical, Collegeville 2004, 185-203, p 195.

37 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 98.

38 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 67.

39 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 68.

40 Pete Ward, *Selling Worship: How What We Sing has Changed the Church* Paternoster Press, Carlisle: 2005, p 183.

41 Ward, *Selling Worship*, p 184.

to the folk-style of an earlier generation of charismatic renewal, the 1990s saw a view of participation develop which involved “a kind of consumption [of records, related products, and so on] rather than as an active role in composing songs or the creation of worship”.<sup>42</sup> Ward’s significant insights fall under his telling heading “Participation: From Folk to Fan”, although again Ward himself brings no perspectives from liturgical theology to bear on his reflection in this context. Yet there is much potential for connection with perspectives from liturgical theology, for “participation” is the key-word of contemporary liturgical renewal. Indeed, “participation” has even been regarded as almost a translation of the meaning of “liturgy”, derived from the Greek words for “people” and “work”, which implies if not requires a communal enterprise and endeavour.<sup>43</sup> Ward’s “dreams” might well gain from the patient probing to which the central notion of participation – as a multifaceted term, involving both active and passive dimensions – has been subjected by a generation of liturgical scholars.<sup>44</sup> Most basically, the strong insistence that “a congregation is not an audience”<sup>45</sup> is an important statement to bring into some kind of dialogue with Ward’s valuable reflections, for what is at stake – again – concerns appetite and capacity for “gathering”.

Ward’s various reflections are important in terms of reflection on mission-shaped worship because they so sharply raise a challenge to “the assumption that what is offered in the morning service is good for you, even though it may be boring and unpalatable”.<sup>46</sup> He also helpfully raises the question of what “responsive, flexible”<sup>47</sup> patterns of church and of worship might look like when they “seek to deliver what individuals want and also draw on the depth and variety of the Christian tradition”.<sup>48</sup> Yet his ideas invite a range of responses: Duncan MacLaren – who is most certainly conscious of some “problems” attending Ward’s proposals<sup>49</sup> – nevertheless echoes Ward’s challenge when he writes, “What individuals want – well, why not, for a change?”<sup>50</sup> A liturgical perspective brings a more cautious reserve to the conversation, conscious of the tension between the very nature of liturgy as a communal activity and Ward’s proposals for “liquid” worship loosed from congregational dynamics.

## Conclusion

This reserve notwithstanding, many questions remain: can the four-fold shape of gathering, word, table, and sending cross-over both “solid” and “liquid” forms of church? Can it help to keep durable means of grace at the heart of contemporary evangelism? Can it help to “melt”, relax, free-up forms associated with “solid” church, perhaps by providing a “container” for worship blended in such a way as to embrace *some* of the ways of a liquid culture? Can it nurture a sense of shared

42 Ward, *Selling Worship*, p 189.

43 For an extended exploration of this point, see Stephen Burns, *The SCM Study Guide to Liturgy*, SCM Press, London 2006, Chapter 1.

44 Of immense importance is the work of James F White, whose distinction between “active” and “passive” participation has been particularly significant. James F White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition*, Abingdon Press, Nashville 1989, p 17.

45 Here quoting the preface to the *Methodist Worship Book*, p vii.

46 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 89.

47 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 89.

48 Ward, *Liquid Church*, p 89.

49 MacLaren, *Mission Implausible*, p 136.

50 MacLaren, *Mission Implausible*, p 182.

community as part of mission in ways that are both sensitive and subversive? Might it begin to shape a *counter*-culture that maps some first steps towards a retrieval of “collective obligation”, assuming that this is essential to personal maturity and human flourishing?

Although these questions have not received anything like definitive answers in this paper, it should at least be obvious that the four-fold shape is far from jaded and might well occupy a central place and a very lively, dynamic role in keeping worship on the agenda as churches engage with God’s mission.

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