

Grit and Grace: Creativity in the Life of the Church

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Vital congregations are creative congregations. That does not mean that they change the hymns every week or have swapped out the sermon for a conversation or that faith formation for the kids focuses more on movies than the Bible – though I’m sure there are churches that have taken actions like these. Instead, I mean that vital congregations are always bringing together the old and the new, history and mystery, the Bible and this morning’s headlines. For a congregation to speak to us, it must reach us in the present even if it does so to connect us to the past, not least so that we are receptive to considering whether and how the past can inform the present. In this essay, I briefly consider three types of creativity employed by congregations and end with the text of my hymn History and Mystery, which I believe has bearing on this topic. (A more complete essay would consider creativity in the life of the church far more broadly, and historically as well as in the present.)

Liturgical creativity

Liturgical creativity exists in at least two contexts: marrying the old and the new in routine worship, and making more substantive changes in worship structures or processes.

Most of us have heard the quote attributed to theologian Karl Barth that pastors should preach “with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” In fact, apparently the more accurate version of his quote reads as follows: “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” This approach, while in keeping with Barth’s particular theological commitments, need not be our approach; we might find a two-way interpretation to be more useful. Either way, this form of liturgical creativity is a standard part of worship life and preparation, and will inform not just the sermon but music selected, prayer language, and potentially other elements of worship. In this sense, pastors and worship leaders are creative on a routine, even weekly, basis. Bringing the past and the present together meaningfully is particularly important in worship, as it is one of the main places that religious tradition informs practices (and our lives) in the present. If we are attentive to the kinds of creativity practices and commitments covered in other materials for Grit and Grace, our routine liturgical creativity is likely to be enriched.

Then there is the matter of larger changes in how worship is conceived or carried out. Worship during COVID-19 has forced many churches to be creative in various ways, whether in moving from in-person to online worship or in modifying in-person worship to make it safer (minimizing or stopping congregational singing, practicing distancing, worshipping in masks, rethinking Communion). This liturgical creativity has been particularly visible, not least because of the groups of clergy and worship leaders gathering via Facebook and other venues to learn from each other about how to manage worship during these fraught times. But even in more normal times, congregations that are not tied to an unchangeable weekly ritual might consider modifying worship structure and details to make the worship experience richer and more meaningful, to connect it to new congregational or denominational initiatives, or to otherwise enhance congregational life.

Liturgical creativity might involve changes as small as modifying transitional language between worship sections or as large as reordering those sections. Any worship component is potentially fair game for revisiting, though thoughtful worship leaders will only modify the liturgy if there is a good reason. COVID-19 has been a good reason; for some congregations, attempts to build social justice commitments more directly into worship might be a good reason. However, given the extent to which worship traditions are familiar and comforting to many congregants, substantive liturgical creativity often needs to proceed with caution and careful communication about what changes are being considered and why. Clergy and worship leaders considering such changes might benefit from discussing these changes broadly in the context of some of the ideas about creativity covered in this short course, especially those related to theology, ethics, and prophetic creativity.

Pastoral creativity

Because creativity is so often tied to artistic or academic work (or to other kinds of ideas or material things), it is easy to forget how important creativity is in interpersonal relationships. Pastoral care and spiritual direction are based on and built around sound and solid relationships, and some aspects of both the effort and the gifts of creativity apply to the developing and maintenance of social relationships as well.

Religious leaders deal with the same two types of creativity in pastoral interactions as they do in liturgical planning: the routine creativity of being fully present with someone in need and the less frequent and perhaps more substantive creativity of addressing a major crisis or challenge. I recall an online presentation by a music director of a Canadian church about developing a pastoral gathering in response to a mass shooting; what struck me most was the role and value of creativity in enabling this person to develop the gathering in a way that met the needs of a variety of stakeholders and that would address gun violence directly without alienating anyone at the gathering. This kind of pastoral presence is, admittedly, not the most common form, but I find it a useful example of how the combination of working and waiting, presence and patience, made possible a gathering that was powerful and meaningful for many in a politically delicate context.

Prophetic creativity

I say more about prophetic creativity in the essay dedicated to that topic, but it's worth a mention here because the life of the church is not merely liturgical and pastoral; it is inherently prophetic as well. Jesus's life and work drew on the life and work of the prophets of his Jewish tradition, and his followers (and some early Christians after his death) understood what he was doing at least partly in the context of the prophetic tradition. Moreover, Jesus's vision of the Kin-dom of God as a society of flourishing included a strong critique of social and cultural structures that enabled a small number of people to flourish while most people suffered instead; for us to co-create the Kin-dom today, we must be prepared to share, act on, and communicate that same critique as it is relevant to our society in the present. The church must be a prophetic presence in the world, calling for justice, compassion, and the willingness of the powerful to use their power in the service of healing and inclusion of the least among us. And, as I discuss elsewhere, creativity has a strong connection to prophetic justice work.

History and Mystery: A Hymn

(Isaiah 43:18-19; Matthew 8:22; Matthew 24:42; John 3:8; 2 Corinthians 3:4-6); Amanda Udis-Kessler, c. 2019

History and mystery, each one in its place, granting us a future and a past,
Drawing on tradition and open to new grace, honoring the first ones and the last.

History and mystery make a greater whole, working to ensure that we're complete.
Memory enriches us; wonder moves our souls, guiding heart and mind and hands and feet.

Though we are in need of both we are also told, leave the dead to put away their dead.
When there is a choice to make, where should we be bold? Can we choose the mystery instead?

Where the letter limits us, Spirit gives us life and the Spirit travels where she will.
God is yet creating us, sending truth and light. if we can stay open to it still.

Though we love the truth we know, something new springs forth,
Something we can hardly yet perceive:
Pathways in the wilderness, tables set for all, endless love if we would just believe.

History and mystery: we have room to grow even as tradition helps us live.
Let us keep our hearts awake for we do not know all the gifts that love has yet to give.