

Gathered and Scattered: Worship and Service as What it Means to be the Church

by [Martha E. Stortz](#), Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
Presented to the ELCA Executive Council December 17, 2002

Thank you for the opportunity to be here. I am a fellow laborer in the vineyard, and I can get pretty focused on my task. It's good to be called back to think about the common enterprise we all share: being Christ's church in this new millennium. I was both delighted and honored to be a part of this important discussion -- I also relish a chance to work with Mark Powell again. At Heidi Torgerson's suggestion, we have been in contact, and we trust our two contributions will be in conversation with one another, as well as sound partners in this conversation with you.

We realize that we enter a conversation that's been going on for some time, and the background material you've provided has helped us get up to speed. I'm excited by the work you've outlined, and I offer what follows to buttress that work. I speak from the disciplines in which I've been trained, ethics and history, though I will swear off the jargon that infests them. I speak rather that first language of faith, which it is the task of the church to teach and to help its children learn to speak fluently, dare I say elegantly. I begin in the present, make a longer foray into the past, and from them take bearings for the future.

From here.... Some years ago a woman from a congregation in the Northwest offered her congregation's mission statement: "Gathered to worship, scattered to serve." It stuck in my imagination -- for any number of reasons -- but in part it stuck, because it so succinctly stated the mission of the church: worship and service. And it stated them so much better than that: dynamically, as verbs, action verbs, no less. Worship and service: the images suggest some great body-- indeed, the body of Christ, breathing in, breathing out, gathering and scattering its various members. Ah! we could play with that in helpful ways. Because breathing is so necessary, we hardly think about it -- and yet it is the foundation of everything that we do. We inhale in order to speak, to sing, to shout, to lament. We exhale to sigh, to signal relief, to die. Breathing in and breathing out are such interdependent actions, one leads to the other, the other leads back to the one. This is exactly the right relationship between worship and service, because worship without service is empty, and service without worship is joyless and barren, a sure formula for burnout.

...to there... Hold this simple, but not-so-simple mantra in your heads for a moment: "Gathered to worship; scattered to serve." I want to do a little time travel. I want to look forward by looking back, so this is the historical part, and it will be fun, I assure you. After all, we have the great Florentine artist Giotto to accompany us, and he offers visual assistance. Besides, history is both a window and a mirror. It permits us to gaze through a window onto centuries vastly different from the twenty-first. The display dazzles, and the sensibilities seem so different from our own, sometimes achingly noble, sometimes so quaint as to be bizarre. But at the same time, because every window acts simultaneously as a mirror, as we look, we catch a glimpse of ourselves looking. We look intently at certain figures and artifacts, completely ignoring others. We stare at buildings -- and miss the sunsets. History teaches us as much about ourselves and what we hold dear, as about those dusty ancestors from centuries of yore.

I want to watch Luther watching someone else. That would be Francis of Assisi, present in a poor reproduction of Giotto's magnificent fresco. Late one night on Mount Alverno, Francis saw a vision of Christ crucified on a cross with six wings like a seraph. From that night forward, as the fresco by Giotto depicts -- talk about literal interpretation! -- Francis bore on his own body the wounds that were on the body of Christ. He was quite literally a marked man. Two years later in 1226, Francis died. He was canonized as a saint two years after that (1228). The elevation to sainthood marked him further as an exemplary individual, removing his piety from the realm of ordinary human possibility. It sent a message: this guy was holy -- but unusual. Don't get any ideas!

Medieval Catholicism revolved around "holy people" and "holy things," around saints and relics. Prayerbooks featured invocations to any number of exceptional and extraordinary people, whose intercession was salutary: prayers to St. Brigid were alleged to be highly helpful. Pilgrims journeyed to sites where saints, martyrs and apostles had been interred: Assisi quickly became such a site, as this is where Francis had spent his days.

Alongside the saints were relics; alongside these holy people were holy things, literally pieces of the saints' bodies. Every medieval altar contained the relic of a martyr embedded in it. There was a veritable forest of splinters from the True Cross, a finger from St. Anne, a thighbone from Saint Sebastian -- and my favorite, two heads of John the Baptist, one residing in Barcelona, the other in Spain! The world of a medieval Christian was full of these relics, or "holy things," contact with which somehow sanctified. It was a world of saints and relics, holy people and holy things.

Luther is both a creature of this world -- and creator of a new one. He preserved the saints, but made them also sinners, ordinary people like you and me. These saints are not exceptional and extraordinary and dead; they are fathers and mothers and children, bakers and brewers and barbers. Indeed, insofar as these ordinary people did the works of their everyday callings, nursing children, brewing beer, baking bread, they encounter Christ.

You realize the revolutionary impulse behind this, only if you watch Luther watching Francis. Recall that it took Francis a month of fasting and prayer on a mountaintop to encounter Christ crucified. Luther levels that mountaintop experience. He was quite convinced that one encountered the same Christ daily in the flatlands doing the works of one's calling. As one serves the neighbor, one sees the face of Jesus. Doing the works of one's calling, however humble, etches service deeply into Luther's revisioning of the church. -- and this is how. As the saints serve, they meet Christ.

But, like Francis, these everyday saints were marked, marked men and women. Luther wasn't about to give everyone the stigmata, but he did suggest ways in which these saints bore the marks of the body of Christ in the world. And he defined those marks as God-shaped and God-shaping activities tell people where the body of Christ is to be found in the world and mark the people that do them.

I want to unpack briefly both edges of that statement, because both are important. These activities tell people where the body of Christ is to be found in the world. Luther's in the strange situation of relocating the church -- and I don't mean moving it down the street or finding a new

building. He shifts the location from popes and cathedrals, from buildings and priests to "the Christian holy people" and the simple gifts that God has given them. In brief, he shifts the location from a place to a people -- and an active people at that.

At different times and in different situations he defines these gifts differently, and for the moment I'll go with the list found in the magnificent treatise "On the Councils and the Churches." For Luther these practices revolved around the preaching and hearing of the Word like planets rotating around the sun: baptizing and making new Christians; sharing the Lord's Supper; forgiving and asking for forgiveness; ordaining and commissioning leaders; praying, praising, teaching people the faith; discipling or following in the way of the Cross. These "marks of the church" signaled where the church could be found in the world; they told "what, who, and where" the church is.

Think of the Taize chant: *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*. "Where there is love, there is God." Think of altering that slightly, and what Luther intends becomes clear. Where there are people baptizing; there is the church. Where there are people teaching; there is the church. Where there are people listening for the Word of God; there is the church. If you want to find the body of Christ, this is where to start looking.

Think about the body of Christ for a moment as a human body. Think of the marks that were on it at the time of Christ's death: marks in his feet and hands where nails were pounded, a mark in his side where a spear pierced him. The apostle Thomas would not believe that he was in the presence of Jesus, until he could see these marks in the body of Christ.

Luther does not expect the rest of us to do much better. We are, after all, neither exceptional nor extraordinary; we are saints, but also sinners. We too need to put our hands into the marks of the body of Christ to know that we are in the presence of the Son of the living God. That reassurance is given. The marks of the body of Christ in the world are a series of practices, dynamically defined. Where people are doing these acts, there is the body of Christ. Like Francis, Luther's saints are marked men and women. But look at how -- and how differently he played this out. For Luther's saints worship is the other side of service. In serving the neighbor they encounter Christ. In the simple acts of worship they bear Christ. He weaves worship and service together into a seamless whole, one the warp, the other the woof of the fabric of Christian life.

An aside about relics, because I find this another fascinating way in which Luther creatively appropriates the church he was born into. Disdainful of the bodies of the saints, he becomes dead serious when talking about the body of Christ. Indeed, as the saints serve the neighbor, they remember the body of Christ. I mean "remember" in two senses: a) "remember" in that they recall Christ by doing what he did; b) but also "remember" in that they re-member that body in the world. In the simple acts of worship and service, the saints represent Christ's body in the world. Return to Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, and remember what the Lord commanded the prophet to prophesy -- and Luther would have loved this: "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live." (Ez. 37:4-5). As members of the body of Christ, we literally re-member that body, bone on bone, sinew on sinew.

...and back again: a glimpse in a mirror Enough historical voyeurism: this is beginning to feel like Alfred Hitchcock's "Rear Window." We leave medieval historians to figure out whether and how Luther stole the stigmata. It's probably more helpful to pause for a minute to catch a glimpse of ourselves in this window of history that also acts as a mirror. What do we see? What do we learn, watching Luther who is watching Francis? We should show no surprise at this desire to mark and be marked. Look at our kids, their piercings, their tattoos, their hair colors not easily found in nature. Like Francis their bodies are marked. And while I have a hard time not wincing at the multiple piercings in the check-out clerk's ears, I understand the desire to be marked, to bear something no one can take away, to have on one's body some inscription that identifies who you are. If you can imagine how chaotic some of these young lives are, you know why the body might be, as T.S. Eliot put it, the only "still point of the turning world." The need to be marked.

For Christians that marking comes in acts as familiar as baptizing and catechizing our children, listening to sermons, breaking bread, struggling toward forgiveness, waiting to be found by a prayer. Yet, these simple acts of worship shape us, even as they witness to the presence of Christ in the world. This isn't simply what Christians do; this is who Christians are. More importantly for Christians, *who* we are is shaped decisively by *whose* we are. As Christ's body, we belong to Christ. The Apostle Paul rang the changes on this one: "...and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God." (1 Cor. 3:23)

Where does this leave us today, marked women and men, dumped out of our time machine, plopped at the end of a century that had seen two great wars and the beginning of one promising transnational terrorist skirmishes that may prove as deadly?

I know I've got to wrap this up, and I can't promise the seamless garment Luther wove of worship and service. I'm going to conclude with a series of syntheses. I won't dare compete with Luther's theses, and I won't even try for Ninety-Five. Four will do.

But first I want to eavesdrop someone from the last awful century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He's writing for his seminarians at Finkenwalde, another tiny community struggling to be church. Eventually the Nazis closed down the seminary, but the experience of operating on the underground distilled two books from Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship*. Probably the more famous is *Cost*, and in that book the most-quoted section is Bonhoeffer's ringing indictment of the saints of his time for selling out to "cheap grace." An ethic of command drives the first part of the book and derives it from the synoptic gospels, and it's hard and it's harsh and it's demanding. As befit the times. But the second part of the book describes an ethic of formation and draws on Paul, and there the marks of the church emerge, these key practices that like Christ, are God's gifts to God's people. These same practices are the subject of *Life Together*, as Bonhoeffer tried to order the life of Christians in a world where they might have to live in secret, where they might not have the luxury or the freedom to worship together, where they would need to remember and to be re-membered. In the simple acts of forgiveness, baptism, preaching and hearing the Word, sharing the Lord's Supper, the people sorely chastened in *Cost* are gently reformed. Enlivened by the Spirit of the living Christ Bonhoeffer describes how a people of dry bones might live. Reformation of the church of his time takes place through formation of its people. It's a situation analogous to Luther's; it may be -- it may *have* to be -- a blueprint for our own.

Now to my syntheses. I realize I've offered these as fragments of counsel, and I trust you'll remember them as they are helpful.

1. Don't lose this symbiosis between worship and service. It's a distinctive contribution of our tradition, and frankly as I read the materials I see more emphasis on service than on worship. We don't need to convince our people that they need to attend to the needs of the neighbor. They know that; they do that. The problem is that they feel they can do that without going to church. And the worship piece drops out. All service with no worship is like endless exhaling. Gradually you run out of steam.

As I read through the materials Ken Inskip has so carefully compiled, I see some folks want more service -- more social justice emphases; some want more worship. How lucky we are to have both groups in our tent! Somehow we have to make clear how much they need each other, because worship without service is empty -- and service without worship is joyless, barren -- and oh! so serious.

2. Capitalize on our rich ecclesiology, which defines church not as a *corporatio sanctorum* but as a *communio sanctorum*, saints who are also sinners, as we can painfully attest, but saints nonetheless. The institution is always less than the sum of its people, the Christian holy people, those marked men and women, who encounter Christ as they serve the neighbor. And as they worship they re-member Christ's broken body. Luther defined the church as the people and the activities God gave and gifted them to do, and that's a definition of church that depends less on places. It can travel light, shift gears easily, and move.

3. Remember that people have bodies, and they want them engaged. I see this everywhere, in pleas for spiritual formation -- and if we don't tap the rich resources in our own tradition, people will go off on Ignatian retreats. But I also see it in calls for the church to be engaged in advocacy for the "widow, the orphan, the stranger in your land." And if we don't call people to serve, they will all go off and build houses for Habitat.

Here's the deeper truth: if we don't attend to worship and service, we aren't being who we are. We aren't being faithful to the One whose we are.

4. Finally, I end at the beginning, with the simple wisdom of the congregation with which I started: "Gathered to worship, scattered to serve." Take heart in that, because the truth is that the Spirit gathers and the Spirit scatters. Now we know that the Spirit also blows where she wills, but this does not blow away structures and institutions. Rather we need to see them as instruments in service of the Spirit, and listen for her bidding.

Martha E. Stortz
Professor of Historical Theology and Ethics
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
2770 Marin Avenue Berkeley CA 94708
mstortz@plts.edu

Endnotes:

1. See David Yeago's essay, "The Office of the Keys: On the Disappearance of Discipline in Protestant Modernity," in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (eds.), *Marks of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 95-122.
2. Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," in *Luther's Works: vol. 41*, trans. by Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 3-178.
3. Cf. Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 539-575.
4. T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton, IV," in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1971), p. 18.
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 5: Life Together/Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).
6. Luther underscores worship in his commentary on Genesis. Adam "had been created in such a way that he was, as it were intoxicated with rejoicing toward God and was delighted also with all the other creatures...." Martin Luther, in *Luther's Works, Volume 1: Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1-5*, trans. George V. Schick (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), p. 94.