
SPEAKING GRACE, MAKING SPACE: THE ART OF WORSHIP LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: Leading a meaningful worship service requires an understanding of the history, theology, and practice of worship—along with passion and deep spiritual work to help congregants encounter God through scripture, preaching, sacraments, and prayer. A good presider must focus less on self, relinquishing anxieties and the desire for control, and honoring the gifts and understanding of all members of the congregation, while relying on the power of the Holy Spirit.

The complexities of liturgical leadership

Every Sunday morning, people make their way to churches in hopes that something significant will happen. Hungering for an encounter with the holy, they come, but often they leave disappointed. There might be any number of reasons for this—they were distracted, or the sermon fell flat, or the music failed to soar. Or perhaps God simply was silent.

One could name many more reasons why worship can seem lifeless, but sometimes the problem lies with those of us who lead worship. We are confused about who we are supposed to be, what we are supposed to do, and how we are supposed to relate to the congregation. Sometimes we pray as though we do not really believe anyone is listening and address the creator of the cosmos in the same cadences we use to talk about football or recipes. We jog around the sanctuary with a microphone and call it preaching, without seeming to notice that the burden of proclaiming the Gospel is a holy and frightening thing. Or we enter the pulpit “depending on the Spirit” after doing little praying and less studying or contemplating, expecting that whatever happens to tumble out of our ill-prepared mouths

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will be a “word from the Lord.” Maybe those of us who are cantors or songleaders are more intent on impressing listeners with our voices than on expressing the text and tone of the music. The truth of the matter is, few of us who lead worship have thought about, or have been taught about, how our voices, bodies, and spirits affect the ethos of worship. We study preaching, pastoral care, and education in seminary, but few of us have the opportunity to study the history, theology, and practice of worship. Musicians are often schooled as performers but receive little guidance in theological or pastoral matters. And layfolk, while given responsibilities for leading worship, rarely receive training for their tasks.

Probing into the whys and hows of liturgical leadership—not just what to do, but the theology and spirituality that underlie the practical techniques and skills—is a complicated endeavor. It is challenging to learn to lead worship because so much about being a good leader of worship is difficult to describe. Certainly there are things to say about the proper use of the voice and evocative gestures and appropriate words, but much of what lies at the heart of the matter is less about correctness and more about passion. There is more involved here than honing one’s skills or even cultivating personal charisma. Those who are entrusted with leading worship must do deep spiritual work in order to be equipped—not just when they are in training, but throughout their vocational lives. A crucial part of that work is clarifying a model for liturgical leadership that is biblically and theologically grounded, taking seriously the role of the leader in relationship to the congregation. That task is the goal of this essay.

Articulating such a model is not easy; to begin with, we’re not sure how to even imagine ourselves in the role of worship leader. Who are we when we lead worship? Are we priests representing the people before God, preachers proclaiming the truth of the gospels, pastors caring for the needs of the flock, or worship enliveners making sure the people are engaged? There is a bit of truth in all these labels, but none of them is sufficient. Since Justin Martyr used the term in the second century, some have called

worship leaders “presiders”—people called out from the midst of a community of believers to ensure that the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments enacted. That name serves our purposes well, because it describes those who are all at once, priests, preachers, pastors, worship enliveners, whose calling is to faithfully lead a worshiping assembly in its encounter with the one, triune, holy God who meets us in scripture and preaching; in water, bread and wine; in singing and praying; in almsgiving; in gathering and sending.

To focus on what presiders do, and how they do it, is tricky business, because such a focus implies that the one who leads is the star of the show. This, of course, is far from the truth. Gordon Lathrop reminds us that there would be no presiders without the people gathered for worship, and no people without the Word.¹ And yet as Calvin firmly believed, the worshiping community needs one of its own to be called out to proclaim God’s Word through all the means of grace—preaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper—not for the sake of the presider’s status or honor, but for the sake of the people. In considering the theology, spirituality, and practice of presiding, we hold in blessed tension two truths—that those who preside are *called out* from the body for a particular ministry, and that their chief end is to *serve* that same body. In other words, it is the body—the congregation, the assembly, the worshipers—who are the real focus of this article.

A second complication lies in the fact that while it is indisputable that there are presiders who carry out their tasks with great skill and depth, excellence in presiding is not a goal in and of itself. There are presiders who never seem to miss a beat, whose pronunciation and intonation are perfectly executed, who seem to say all the right words and perform all the right gestures. And yet something is still missing—some inclination of mystery, perhaps, or of deep joy. Or maybe we long for the sense that this person leading the prayers really does imagine that we dare to

¹ Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor, A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 6.

speak in the presence of God and marvels with us, “Who are we, that you care for us....?” (Psalm 8:4) Sometimes what makes for great theater doesn’t always make for great worship.

If excellence is not the chief concern, then, what is? “Effective” presiding is the goal—that is, faithful leadership that most fully evokes the people’s worship. To be sure, certain skills and techniques make for good worship leadership; yet the underlying, and most important, discussion is about the spirituality of it all. This, of course, is what makes the task of writing about presiding so difficult, because so much of it is about what cannot be seen—it is about spirit and flame, obedience and abandon, speech and silence. And yet it is a task we must undertake, for this calling to lead God’s people in worship demands the faithful devotion of all that we have—body, mind, and spirit.

It might seem that an article about presiding would be addressed to those Christians who are ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament, but much of this discussion speaks to all people who have a part in leading worship—musicians, elders, deacons, lectors, dancers, and artists. Certainly questions of ordained ministry come into play; yet the discussions surrounding how we understand ordination as well as the nature of liturgical leadership inform the whole church, and therefore a wide range of folks who are engaged in leading worship.

It is impossible to write a one-size-fits-all essay on presiding in the current North American context, in which a wide range of liturgical expressions exist side-by-side. What speaks to an Episcopal priest in a parish committed to the Anglican tradition may not seem so relevant to a worship leader in a praise and worship service, and the concerns of the minister of an emergent urban house church might seem, on the surface, to have little to do with those of the pastor of a Presbyterian suburban congregation. Yet underneath our differences in style and expression, there are theological convictions about who we are as worship leaders—and how to be most faithful in that work—that we might hold in common.

To be sure, an author's own context necessarily shapes her assumptions and convictions about worship; even vocabulary marks an author as being from one corner of the church or another. It will be clear to readers that I write from a Reformed theological framework and that I have been informed by leaders of the liturgical renewal movement in North America. I hope that it will be equally clear that I harbor not only a deep appreciation for the ancient traditions of the church, but also a keen desire to help shape new and vital ways of worshiping in the twenty-first century.

Called out from the body

“What do you need in order to have *church*?”² Depending on who you are and what worship tradition or style you come from, you may answer this in different ways. Some might say that you can't “have church” without a stirring word from the Lord. Some would say that you've got to go to God in prayer. Others would insist on eucharist as the defining feature of “having church.” Some would require silence while others would insist on joyful, praise-filled singing. Those are all good answers, but the one thing that every tradition or style has in common is people. Not only is worship impossible to do without people to lead it, but there would be no need for worship leaders without worshipers. To put it in the theological parlance of one scholar, the gathered congregation, or assembly, is “the most basic symbol of Christian worship.”³

One could argue that we need other things, too. Calvin insisted that the church is not the church without two essential marks: “Whenever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists [cf. Eph. 2:20].”⁴

² Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People, A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institute of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.I.9.

Undergirding that statement, however, is the assumption of a gathered community, for he continues, “For his promise cannot fail: ‘Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them’ [Matt. 18:20].”⁵ It is the people who are essential to worship, and as the gathered assembly they have symbolic significance, just as do the Bible and pulpit, the water and font or baptism, and the bread and wine and table.

It’s been true ever since the earliest days of the church—when Christians gather for worship, they gather to *do* something. After the Spirit stirred three thousand new believers to be baptized through Peter’s Pentecost sermon, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). In other words they proclaimed the Gospel to one another, shared the Lord’s Supper, and prayed together. We recognize this pattern, of course, because it is our own. We are initiated into the body of Christ—the priesthood of all believers—through baptism. When we gather as the body, we take part in preaching, sharing the meal, enjoying fellowship, and giving gifts for the poor.

Not only is baptism our initiation into the body, it is also our ordination to ministry—that is, to our Christian vocation. We believe, with Paul, that all of us are given charisms, gifts of the Spirit, for the common good.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

Wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, the interpretation of tongues—all of us are given gifts for ministry and service, and no one member of the body is valued more than another.

At the same time, however, the church has always needed some way to order itself. We know from the book

⁵ Ibid.

of Acts that deacons were chosen early in the church's life. The letters to Timothy, probably written near the end of the first century, mention bishops, who may well have been presbyters, or ministers, of a congregation (cf. 1 Timothy 3). There is evidence that by the middle of the second century, worshiping communities had appointed presiders (or presidents), people designated to preach and give thanks over the bread and cup in the context of the many ministries of the assembly. Some would offer prayers, some would present the gifts of bread and wine, some would read the sacred texts, and others would take up the collection. Worship, then, would be led by various members of the body, with one of their number called out to preach and pray over the bread and the cup. From early on, then, the church recognized the need for someone who would make sure the church did what it was created to do—to tell the story and celebrate the mysteries of God, so that the whole body of Christ could go and act them out in the world.

Calvin, too, thought that there was “a need for a voice within the community that proclaimed God's word and presided at the sacraments.”⁶ It was not enough for Christians to puzzle over Scripture alone, outside of a community of believers; they needed to gather to hear, understand, and apply the Word to their lives. So God gathers the church and calls forth some to be such a voice within the community of faith. In other words, sooner or later someone must rise from the assembly to speak. Someone must be chosen—to be called out—to proclaim the good news in speech and in sign. It's not only a matter of order, however; we need someone who has come from our midst to take on the profound burden of speaking God's blessing to us. We need one who will, in the words of Catherine Gunsalus González, “proclaim in speech and sacrament the word of God to the people of God.”⁷ Or, as William Seth Adams has put it, we need someone to be

⁶ Catherine Gunsalus González, “Some and All: Ordination and the Sacraments,” *Reformed Liturgy & Music* 28, vol. 1 (1994): 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

“the community’s sayer of grace.”⁸ Those who are chosen for the task are called from the community of the baptized, and this is the foundation upon which any discussion of what it means to be a leader of worship—to preside—must be built.

Presiding in worship, then, involves an inherent tension. On the one hand, we nurture the deep conviction that the church is a priesthood of all believers. In our baptism we are made one, and each member of the body is considered equal to all others. On the other hand, we recognize that the community needs members who are set apart for particular tasks. To be called out and set apart is to be endowed with a certain authority. This is not authority *over* the people, however, but authority *for* the people, authority that rests only on the Word of God and not on any notion of ecclesiastical hierarchy—and certainly not on any fiction that one who is called out is (or has any hope of ever being) holier than any other of the baptized. Scott Haldeman has put it well:

There is one ministry of the church that extends from the font to the promised “river of life.” Born in the womb of baptism, the church and all its members walks steadily on toward the new Jerusalem, where God will dwell with God’s people, where there will be no more death and every tear will be wiped away. The ordained are not the only ones on this journey—all the baptized must go the distance. As we have seen, the ministry of all is communal, demanding and daunting; yet the font provides sufficient strength....All of us are to speak good news to our neighbors. All of us are to participate in and nurture the Body. All of us are to participate in public prayer. All of us are to preserve the truth and promote justice. All of us are to point out signs of God’s promised future. These are not things that only pastors, deacons and elders do. Washed, all of us are made ready to serve.

⁸ William Seth Adams, *Shaped by Images: One Who Presides* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1995), 67.

We need leaders, certainly....We need those who call us back to the waters, and to the bread and to the wine, so that weary arms are revived and stale visions are replaced by fresh imaginings of what could be, what has been promised, and where we must go next. The Body requires such service.... But those called out from among the Body are not to function as the Body, only to help the Body function.⁹

Servant of the assembly

How then should we imagine the one who presides? Ask a room full of people who have spent any time at all in one form or another of Christian worship, and the answers will be surprisingly similar. Ask “What qualities do you appreciate in a worship leader?” and you will hear things like presence, authenticity, warmth, grace, humor, reverence. Ask “What do you hope you never see again?” and the list is usually even longer: lack of energy, easily distracted, no eye contact, distant, dull, verbose. Like good art or great music, we may not be able to explain what makes a good worship leader, but we often know it when we see it—and when we don’t.

In fact, good presiding requires more than a charismatic personality or a bevy of particular skills. What is required is a model of faithful and effective presiding for those who are called out from the midst of the body to be leaders of worship. Any number of images have been suggested. Kierkegaard’s scheme of worship as theater is well-known: the members of the congregation are the chief actors, God is the audience, and the pastor serves as prompter for the actors, who are the primary worshippers.¹⁰ William Seth Adams has put forth the idea of a conductor of an orchestra. The conductor’s work depends on the musicians assembled and on their willingness to follow his

⁹ Scott Haldeman, “Washed and Ready: Baptism as Call and Gift of Ministry,” *Call to Worship* 40, vol. 2 (2006): 6.

¹⁰ Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1948).

or her lead, which means that a certain reciprocity is required.¹¹ Elaine Ramshaw has suggested that the pastor who leads worship is like a midwife for the people's labor. "She presides, leads, directs, and organizes, all to help the people of God do *their* work: the lector's reading, the assistant ministers' speaking or chanting, the whole assemblies' movement and singing and phrasing of petitions in prayer...a good presider who draws her congregation into the ancient dance with a new song."¹² Other images have occurred to people along the way—father or mother figure, resident theologian, enabler, and (though few would own up to it) talk show host or emcee of a variety show.

The best models convey that it is the gathered assembly who is the chief actor—the central symbol—in Christian worship. This assembly is not just a collection of individuals (or consumers) who are serviced, but a gathering of people among whom has been cultivated a sense of community and an awareness that they have assembled for their shared work of worship.¹³ The presider may be best understood, then, as the *servant of the assembly*, the one who, as Gordon Lathrop has expressed it, "by word and by bearing, with dignity and focus and love, invite[s] a community to gather around the central signs" of book, bath, and table.¹⁴

This means that while the assembly is the chief symbol in worship, the presider, or pastor, also has symbolic weight. As Lathrop has pointed out, "we need such a symbol among us, and we would be fooling ourselves if we thought we could live without it. A responsible steward of the mysteries awakens among us the hope for Mystery."¹⁵ Yet this symbol is one that must, in Lathrop's parlance, be

¹¹ Adams, 13.

¹² Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1987), 22. [Note: quoted in Adams, 14.]

¹³ Benjamin Stewart, "Robert Hovda: Facing the Assembly," *Worship* 78, vol. 5 (Spring 2004): 428-429.

¹⁴ Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 167.

¹⁵ Lathrop, *The Pastor*, 6.

“broken” since those who lead in worship live within this tension of being one called out from the body, that is, as one who presides in the midst of the priesthood of all believers.¹⁶ “Trustworthy pastors, he says, will always realize with both humility and relief” that they are not the shepherds of the flock, but they point

beyond themselves to the One who lives at the heart of the assembly’s symbols. Trustworthy pastors will be transparent to the one shepherd. And trustworthy pastors will know that the Spirit of God raises up many people in the assembly with the gift of leading others to pasture and freedom. Taking up the challenges and tasks of this paradoxical title, the inversions of this broken symbol, can rightly fill up a lifetime of good work.¹⁷

This is not an easy thing, to live in the tension between recognizing, on the one hand, the symbolic weight and significance of being one who presides in worship, and on the other, the need for humility and transparency. We can indeed live there, though, if we understand ourselves as servants of the assembly and stewards of the kingdom of God.

Enacting the reign of God

In the final scene of the film, *Places in the Heart*, a remarkable thing takes place. We see worshipers gathered

¹⁶ Lathrop often speaks of a symbol being “broken” as a way of warning against any symbol being the last word. As weighty as the pastor’s symbolic nature is, it must be mitigated by other powerful symbols, such as the community itself. As Lathrop puts it, “the content of the pastor’s work, like the content of the Bible, the Eucharist, and Baptism themselves, must continually surprise these expectations, turning our religious hopes toward new references: the community gathered around the mercy of God in ordinary life; the community gathered around the life-giving cross; the community brought to new maturity in finding such mercy and life here, within our daily limits; the community open to the stranger and to a wider world in need of mercy and life; and that very mercy and life also given to the beggar-among-beggars who is the pastor. A pastor lives with symbols, is a symbol. But a profound spirituality for pastors must involve a lifelong engagement with the reversals and surprises of these symbols.” In *The Pastor*, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

in a small country church. The church is in Waxahachie, Texas, and the year is 1935. There aren't many people there, but the faithful few who are scattered around the little sanctuary stand and sing "Blessed Assurance" with as much fervor as they can muster. The minister reads from scripture, familiar words about love from the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. As he reads, the wife of a man who has been discovered in an adulterous affair takes his hand for the first time since the terrible secret was out. This is no syrupy hand-holding to sweet-sounding words of love, but the gesture of a woman determined to live out the Gospel she believes no matter how painful, a gesture received by a man who knows that forgiveness and reconciliation come at a price.

Soon it is time for communion, and the tiny choir stands to sing "I Come to the Garden Alone." While they sing, we watch the worshipers pass plates of bread cubes and small glasses of grape juice down the pews. It gradually becomes clear that there are more people in those pews than when the service began. Sharing the body and blood of Christ are all the people we have seen throughout the film: the bank president who tried to foreclose on the young widow; the white men who lynched a black boy after he mistakenly shot the town's beloved sheriff; the players in the honky-tonk band and the floozies who followed them from dance to dance; Moze, the African American laborer who had helped the young widow bring a prize-winning crop of cotton to save her farm, and the Klansmen who drove him out of town; and finally, the sheriff himself and the boy who had killed him. "The peace of Christ," the sheriff says to the boy as he shares the bread and wine. "The peace of Christ," the boy whispers in return. Here, at the Lord's table, life triumphs over death, love overcomes hatred, mercy covers guilt, and those who could not or would not live together in peace are reconciled in Christ's name. It is not reality, but a vision—yet it is a vision more real than any earthly truth. It is a vision of the coming reign of God.

This is the vision enacted whenever Christians gather to worship faithfully. Those who pass through the waters

of baptism are made equal, and equally beloved. Those who read and preach scripture proclaim that good news. When believers gather at the table, everyone is welcome and there is plenty for all. “Liturgy is a kingdom scene,” says Robert Hovda:

where people are supposed to be naked, stripped of their daily burdens and statuses (even of their sex and color) and the only thing that can make tolerable such a surrender of our defences is a palpable corporate consciousness of God. Before God, we are sisters and brothers only, and if we cannot find, or lose, the sense of mystery and reverence we are thrown back on our clothes or class or work, back into a relatively trivial situation which cannot support common prayer.¹⁸

In other words, people and presiders together enact a vision in worship where all are equal in the sight of God, and all are treated as such, with dignity and love. We act out the grace that all receive, poured out in equal and abundant measure. We live out, in our worship and—at our most faithful, in the world—that vision where the rules of the world cease to have any power and God’s realm is the one that is really real. In enacting together the promised reign of God, we lean expectantly into the coming of the kingdom even as we wait and pray for it. In other words, in worship we describe the vision with our words and act it out with our hands and feet and faces—indeed, with our whole bodies. And then we take that same vision and enact it in the world, seeking to live out the coming reign of God as if it were already here, feeding the hungry, working for justice, and treating all with equal dignity, even love.

This is work that changes us. As Lathrop puts it, “we are made a holy people,” something new, something we would not otherwise be.¹⁹ Adams puts it another way, explaining that the worshiping community “is the showing forth of the Body of Christ in tangible human form. There

¹⁸ Robert W. Hovda, *Strong, Loving and Wise: Presiding in Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1976), 67-68.

¹⁹Lathrop, *Holy People*, 17.

members of the Body are reconstituted by the liturgy into what can never be shown forth so fully or with such power in any other time or manner.²⁰ To be sure, this is the work of the whole community, and the presider is the steward of that work.

Hungering for epiphany

It is gradually becoming clear why leading in worship requires more than a particular combination of skills, techniques, and charisma. There is deep spiritual work involved here, and the best presiders do not shy away from it. This is not easy to do, because it means being willing to be open to mystery and to relinquish our fear of losing control. It is essential, however, for people come to worship “hungering for an epiphany,” as one pastor has put it, and those who are called out to be liturgical leaders dare not sell them short.²¹

The temptation to do otherwise is constant. Instead of coming to worship expecting to meet God, creating space for divine encounter, we limit the possibilities by filling every moment with chatter and business. Edward Farley calls our bluff:

To attend the typical Protestant Sunday morning worship service is to experience something odd, something like a charade. The discourse (invocation, praises, hymns, confessions, sacred texts) indicates that the event celebrates a sacred presence. But this discourse is neutralized by the prevailing mood, which is casual, comfortable, chatty, busy, humorous, pleasant and at times even cute. This mood is a sign not of a sacred reality but of various congregational self-preoccupations.²²

Farley is on to something, and regardless of our tradition or style of worship, presiders need to heed his words. We

²⁰ Adams, 15.

²¹ Yme Woensdregt, “The Pastor as Liturgist,” *Reformed Liturgy & Music* 30, vol. 4 (1996): 167-172.

²² Edward Farley, “A Missing Presence,” *Christian Century*, March 18-25, 1998, 276.

pray in such a passionless tone that no one could be expected to enter into prayer. We put more energy into the announcements than we do into our communion liturgies, and we insist on explaining everything to death. We parade newly baptized babies around, coaxing the cooing of the congregation as though this child had not just been saved from death and delivered from the worst the world can do. Or we rush through the words, saying them by rote, using as little water as possible so we can hurry through a neat and well-packaged ceremony in order to get on with the rest of the service. We nibble on a pinch of bread and wash it down with a thimbleful of grape juice, forgetting the deep hunger of ourselves, our communities, and the world and settling instead for a private moment with Jesus. Or we dispense with the sacrament altogether, figuring it is really not so important to modern people such as ourselves. We have stopped expecting God to show up in worship.

Some of us experience other temptations. Sometimes those of us who are the most gifted for the work of leading the body in the worship of God are so gifted, in fact, that we become the “stars” of the liturgy. We enjoy the laughter we evoke when we are entertaining in our preaching or presiding. We love being the one up front, and we know we’re good at it. Yet even our best gifts can get in the way of making space to encounter the holy. As Hovda puts it, if the presider “fails to communicate a sense of prayerful performance, of *being (first of all) a worshiper and a member of the worshipping assembly*, then he or she is not a leader but an intruder. And the gifts of such a one or such a group damage rather than enhance worship.”²³ Even our own talent can get in the way of seeking an encounter with the holy.

And so we all need to come hungering for an epiphany. Yes, worship leaders bring our best to our work, but not for the sake of being wonderful presiders. Rather, as Hovda says, we bring “a God-consciousness so awesome,

²³ Robert W. Hovda, “Liturgy’s Many Roles: Ministers? . . . Or Intruders?” in *The Amen Corner*, ed. John F. Baldovin (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 154.

so strong, so powerful that all participants are focused not on ourselves and our many splendid gifts, but on our common and mysterious Source, on the only One who is Holy.”²⁴

It is important, of course, to acknowledge that every congregation is different and that all worship is contextual. Those who would plan and lead worship must consider the particularities of the community who gathers. In some churches, a great deal of attention is given to the forming of community, and this is apparent in their church’s worship life. Other congregations place more emphasis on seeking an experience of the transcendent in worship. This is not to say that churches should do one or the other—ideally all congregations will intentionally build community and also crave transcendence! Yet most congregations fall at various points along the scale. Decisions about worship will also be made based, in part, on whether congregations are large or small; rural, urban, or suburban; poor, wealthy, or somewhere in the middle. In every situation, however, the church gathers to worship God, and the worship of the Holy One is what must remain central to our decisions about what happens in worship and how.

In every context, then, we must make space for the holy. In some places that might mean entering into fervent prayer, whether extemporaneous or written, or urging worshipers on to a more lively expression. In other places it might mean cultivating silence. In any case, in order to make space for the holy—or perhaps to get out of the way of divine encounter so as not to prevent it—those who lead worship must also come hungering for an epiphany, expecting to be changed—and communicating that expectancy and openness to those who gather for worship. For we come to be shaped and formed by something—Someone—greater than ourselves and to be part of something more than ourselves. Those of us who lead worship must learn the techniques, do the preparatory work, and hone our skills—and then we must let go of our cravings for affection, admiration, and affirmation and give

²⁴ Ibid., 154-155.

up our perfectionist anxieties. It's something like working without a net—you train and practice, you come prepared to be part of a remarkable holy drama, but in the end you give yourself over to the Holy One.

Nothing in worship is *pro forma* then; even when we are speaking familiar words and enacting well-worn rituals, it is with the awareness that we are on holy ground. Hovda says, “Presiding in liturgy, because it is the common deed of the entire church, requires a kind of modest prayerfulness that is heavy on awe and mystery, light on answers and recipes.”²⁵ Those are good words to guide us as we explore what it means to preside in worship in the midst of God's people, dedicating body, mind, and spirit to the task.

The Worshipping Body

Most of us understand that preparing for worship involves intellectual engagement, and the best of us recognize that there is a spiritual component at work as well. Many of us, however, have a harder time imagining ourselves as bringing our *bodies* to the task of leading worship. Except for the dancers—and perhaps the athletes—among us, many presiders, at least in the mainline traditions, present themselves as people with capable minds and faithful spirits that are utterly detached from the torsos and arms and feet that reside somewhere below their necks.

Worshipping, however, is a fully embodied act, and so presiders necessarily lead worship as embodied people. In other words, we bring our minds, spirits, *and* bodies to the work of presiding. It's not just a matter of performing better. As anthropologist Talal Asad speculates, “the inability to ‘enter into communion with God’ becomes a function of untaught bodies.”²⁶ Or, to put it another way, to bring our bodies to worship (whether or not we are leading in worship), cultivating our physical engagement

²⁵ Hovda, *Strong, Loving and Wise*, 34.

²⁶ Talal Asad, “Remarks on the anthropology of the body,” in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 48.

along with our intellectual and spiritual engagement, opens up a greater space for meeting God.

It is significant that the primary model for presiders articulated here is of one who is called out from the body—that is the assembly, the body of Christ—to be a servant to that body. To bring one's whole self—spirit, mind, will, faithfulness, skills, talents, hands, feet, and heart—is to honor not only one's own body, but also the hearts, minds, and bodies of others, those beloved children who were made in the image of God. And it gives glory to Christ himself, who lived and breathed, who suffered and died, who was raised, body and all, that we might be, too.

The more worship leaders give thought to the weighty responsibility of leading people in worship, the more we know, in our heart of hearts, that this task requires all we have to give—and sometimes more than we think we have. As we embark upon this journey into what it means to preside in worship, we remember what is proclaimed in the Presbyterian commissioning service: whatever it is you are summoned to do, your baptism is sufficient for your calling.