

What is Ecumenical Worship? (Part I)

There has been worship in Marquand Chapel since it was consecrated in 1923. The sorts of worship practices that have happened there have varied greatly over time. At some points in its history it has been very pastorally-oriented; at others, it has been a laboratory, or a classroom, or a *de facto* chaplaincy, or all the above. When the current incarnation of the worship program started, in 2002, my goal, like that of many of my predecessors, was to make chapel both a teaching/learning venue about Christian worship traditions *and* a spiritually nourishing point on campus. At the heart of this commitment was a desire that daily worship be *ecumenical*.

Although YDS had a long history of admitting students from a range of denominations and although it used the word “ecumenical” to describe itself in much of its promotional literature, there was very little discussion of what ecumenism actually was, and plenty of assumptions about what it was meant to be. Inevitably, such identity issues get played out in expectations about worship, especially when ecumenical theology is not taught often in our curriculum. There are, broadly speaking, three expectations or “models” of ecumenical worship in interchurch engagement, and I have tried to learn from each of them and develop a fourth for our own context, which is primarily concerned with theological education.

The first model is the witnessing model, in which I do my thing, you do yours, and we commit to witnessing one another’s worship. Sometimes called the “show and tell” model, its main advantage is that rites remain in tact and are performed in a way that registers as authentic to the performer. It fosters a version of ecumenism that advocates each person or liturgical community being absolutely and fully true to their own beliefs and seeks mutual toleration through greater understanding of what it is that one another does. This model has been widely used in other seminaries, and they report that the model easily accommodates issue-based groups and caucuses in community life as well as denominational ones. You do this, I do that: we are different, but related, and we respect one another’s differences.

The most widely reported disadvantage of such a model in theological education venues is that the Methodists all come on Methodist day but only a handful do so for other denominations; the LGBTQ students all come on LGBTQ worship day, but hardly ever on any other day, and so on. Moreover, theological schools who have used this model report fairly low daily attendance on the one hand, and a sense that they are rarely “together as a community” on the other. Perhaps not the most visible disadvantage of this approach, but to me the most important, is that it is racist, just one more example of how historically white institutions of theological education are blind to the racism of their assumedly benign “default”. Catholics can

The Marquand Reader

17 September, 2007

do mass in 30 mins. Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists and Reformed leaders can comfortably do a nice morning prayer with organ prelude, hymns and even a short sermon in the same timeframe. Effectively, then, the white folks can do their existing models, decently and in order, in the allotted time. But, show me the Black Church that has a worship form that can be easily and fully displayed in a 30 minute slot? My goal at Yale is, as will be apparent in subsequent Readers, that everyone is required to stretch to the same degree. Everyone has to bear the burden of researching, learning, developing and leading worship practices that are true to their traditions and authentic to their leaders. Everyone has to stretch, equally. So no, you can't just open the book and do Lutheran morning prayer exactly as written when your Black neighbor is being required to dig deep into their practices and adapt them massively. But more about that later.

A second widely accepted notion of ecumenical worship is what is somewhat disparagingly referred to as the "lowest common denominator" model. What characterizes this way of doing things is that everyone present will be able to assent to or join in with everything said or sung or otherwise asked of them. The principal advantage of such a model is that it gives a non-offensive experience of interaction with people of other denominations – which can be a hopeful and a healing thing in a context of conflict or misunderstanding. It can also give a feeling of 'unitedness' which some church people value as an important step on the road to achieving Christian unity. The main disadvantage of such a model is that one usually ends up behaving in a way that is quite alien to one's habitual worship practices and this can feel stiff at best or, at worst, fake. It also often results in worship that is denuded of its artistic or symbolic richness and power, producing a small repertoire of acceptable acts and interactions.

In a multi-denominational seminary setting, such a model presents two serious problems: first, it prevents very much at all from being taught about the depth or breadth of worship practices or theologies in the Christian tradition; second, it prevents students, faculty and staff from actually dealing with their differences. The points of tension, disagreement or conflict are pre-washed out of the fabric of each worship service with this model, and one is left with an inaccurate sense of the Christian church in the world today, which is full of profound tensions as well as differing histories of practices.

Going through old bulletins, and talking to alum's and Emeriti/a professors, it seems that such a model was used at Yale on many days in the years before 2002. One of the student chapel ministers who was here when I interviewed said that when he planned worship he only ever chose things that everyone present could join in with, and this meant he almost never risked sharing from his own tradition (Southern Baptist) because he felt they would be impossible for others to enter into. Consequently, most of the services he planned looked like pared-down old White Congregational services with the occasional Spiritual. He obviously felt a "default" at

The Marquand Reader

17 September, 2007

work, about what worship should look like in Marquand and what was required of him to be ecumenical. It is better, I think, to invite authentically and give others the option to join in, or not, than to feel so inhibited that you never really offer what is distinctively yours.

Talking to other former student chapel ministers and Marquand worship leaders, however, I also discovered strong traces of a third common approach to ecumenical worship, the “ecumenical protestant” model. This became apparent to me because few of them knew their way around anybody’s worship book but their own mainline Protestant one. Now the Books of Common Prayer (Episcopal) and Common Worship (PCUSA) and New Century Hymnal (UCC) the United Methodist Hymnal -- which was most insistently in the Marquand pews until 4 years ago -- are all great books, but if you just use one of them, day in and day out, and week in and week out, how is that ecumenical? This third model of ecumenism has grown on campuses across America in understandable reaction to the disadvantages of the first two models. So, at Harvard Divinity School, I heard much from a colleague about the “ecumenical Eucharist” she held there each week and I heard much from folks at HDS about how welcome this was when so little of any substance had happened for so long. But I was surprised to find that it was simply an Episcopal Rite with an open invitation to the table. Likewise at Yale’s Battell Chapel until two years ago, the service was described as “ecumenical” even though its form was right-out-of-the-book Congregational worship every week. As with Harvard, people felt fondly about it, because it was done with such hospitable intentions, and it allowed folks of various backgrounds to gather and do something that felt substantial. The problem with it is that it requires those who are not Episcopalian, or UCC, etc., to always worship in a manner which is not their own.

Furthermore, the phrase “ecumenical Protestant” is a contradiction in terms. The word “ecumenical” comes from the Greek, “oikoumenikos”, meaning “of or belonging to the (inhabited) earth” and it came into usage in English in the late sixteenth century to mean “belonging to the worldwide Christian church”. Although colloquially “ecumenical” is sometimes used to connote cross-disciplinarity, broad-mindedness or joint-efforts (people describe themselves as having “ecumenical tastes”, meaning they like a wide range of pastimes), in theological and ecclesial circles there is an important aspect to the word’s meaning that such colloquial definitions elide. This is the very specific meaning one finds in the dictionary for ecumenism: “Belief in or striving for the worldwide unity of Christians, transcending differences of doctrine”ⁱ, and it is a definition that the World Council of Churches shares (and we will look at WCC documents on ecumenical worship – or “common prayer” – in future Readers). The phrase “ecumenical protestant” is therefore a contradiction in terms (and a potentially insulting one) because it denies the Christianity of Roman Catholic and Orthodox believers, and it overlooks some extremely important differences in belief and practice among “protestants”.

The Marquand Reader

17 September, 2007

As a phrase, it is problematic; but it is not just the name that is at issue: even as a way of behaving, it is problematic in a theological education venue. This model avoids all the conflict of the first model, and all the hard work of liturgical crafting of the second model (it takes a lot of work to figure out what one might do if one doesn't just do one's own thing). Personally, I do not see how any gathering can be ecumenical if it is protestant only; and I do not see how even a pan-protestant gathering honors its own diverse traditions if one denomination's service format is used as the default either in its structures or its prayers, or both. Requiring that everyone behave like Presbyterians, or Episcopalians, or whomever, may be a way of getting everyone to worship together regularly, and it may be an important act of hospitality, but it is not "ecumenical".

In Marquand for the past five years we have been developing a fourth option for ecumenical worship. What we do is: we invite leaders to draw deeply on their own traditions and to open them up so that others can participate in them. This model is designed to preserve the integrity, diversity and authenticity of worship traditions as in the first model, to maximize the "do-ability" of liturgical acts, as in the second model, and to avoid the third model's premise that all Christians can be united by any single denomination's forms over time.

Sometimes, a person or group says: why can't I just do in Marquand what I do on Sunday morning? First, there would not be time. We have half an hour, maximum, and almost no church meets for only half an hour on a Sunday morning. But there are many other reasons, the principal one among which is that all worship services are context-based, so, taken away from Sunday morning and into a room full of people from forty denominations, or none, you have a congregation full of people who do not know what you are doing when you, for example, make the sign of the cross, or start with a great big confession, or start calling out extemporaneously expecting a response. These things can all be done in Marquand (and have been), but the leaders have had to lead the people into those interactions in ways that allow them to share in them, which means thinking it through, and not assuming that people from one tradition know how to behave in response to the leadership of another's.

Sometimes, this ethic [do what you do, but in a way that invites others from different traditions to participate] means that certain "usual" things are not done. So, for example, it has proved impossible so far to have altar calls in Marquand chapel. The strong pastoral-ecclesial connection behind such practices simply cannot be supported in a venue which is, no doubt, an assembly but which is not a church; however, instead, we have had leaders call others forward for extensive times of one-on-one prayer at the table, while others remain in the congregation supporting those who go forward for prayer. Another example: after extensive discussion, the Catholic group decided that it couldn't lead mass on Fridays because there was too much

The Marquand Reader

17 September, 2007

disagreement in the Roman Catholic group about whether or not the table should be open (official RC teaching has it that only RC's in good standing can receive the bread and wine, although this is not always the case in practice). Rather than just stopping there, we asked: well, what other Eucharistic practices exist in the Catholic church that might be practiced in a way that allows ecumenical engagement (and doesn't split the Catholic group itself in half)? We came up with the idea of foot-washing, something that Catholics do on Maundy Thursday (the Thursday night before Easter when the Last Supper is remembered through the Fourth Gospel, which, unlike the synoptics has no eating or drinking, just a foot-washing narrative). And so, at least one Friday each year, just as people from other denominations lead bread and wine/juice Eucharists every Friday, the Roman Catholics lead a foot-washing.

In the past five years, the depth and breadth of services that we have had has greatly enriched the wider community's knowledge of one another's practices and allowed us to enter common prayer together. But, more than that, individuals from particular traditions and denominations have greatly increased their knowledge of their own worship heritage and thus the possibilities for enriching worship in their own churches as they move forward.

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