Mass and Mission:
Enacting God's Mission in the Christian Assembly Today

Thomas H. Schattauer

I doubt that I need to underscore the ferment surrounding the matters that are the theme of this year's Institute: worship and mission. The practice of worship in our congregations has become fragmented by multiple and competing proposals for what should happen when we gather. As a teacher of worship, the questions and discussions I encounter day by day reveal a general distrust of conventional liturgical practice and a genuine hunger for something—anything—that will engage and enliven people at worship in our time and place. There is no simple and direct approach to matters of worship—this is what we do, this is where it comes from, this is what is means, this is how to do it—with people lining up to receive authoritative pronouncements. There is real engagement with fundamental questions and a willingness to consider the value of our historic liturgical inheritance, but there is less and less common practice or shared experience of worship to draw on and little consensus about which direction to head.

On the mission side of things, there is also considerable ferment. We have evangelism strategies and encouragements to traditional social ministry as well as more political, even partisan social engagement. We all have mission statements and vision statements and action plans; we consume strategies for congregational renewal and mission. There is increasing awareness of the complex contours of our own society—its racial and ethnic diversity, its cultural and religious pluralism, its wealth and poverty—as well as the global horizon of our lives. We hear calls for the emergence of a missional church in this new age of mission.

That we have become so self-conscious about both matters of worship and matters of mission reflects, first of all, a deep anxiety and lack of clarity about these things, and even more so about the relation of worship to mission and mission to worship. But there is also opportunity in this moment to explore the connection of worship and mission in a way that will deepen our understanding of both. I want to begin such an exploration with you here, and it will unfold in three large moves: 1) a reflection on the words "mass" and "mission," 2) an argument for worship "inside out," and 3) a suggestion that the variety of approaches to worship in today's

liturgical landscape reflects different dimensions of God's mission, which need to be brought into a more fruitful conversation.

Mass and Mission

"Mass" and "mission"—the very sound of these words suggests a relationship between the regular eucharistic gathering of Christian people and the purpose of God for the world. The relationship of these two words becomes even clearer when we examine their Latin roots. *Missa*, from which comes the English word "mass," and *missio*, from which comes the English "mission," are both nouns ultimately derived from the Latin verb *mittere*, which means "to send" or "to dismiss." What shall we make of this, that the most common term for the principle gathering of Christians in the usage of the western liturgical tradition calls it "sending" or "dismissal"? In a survey of the various names for the eucharistic celebration, the renowned liturgical historian Joseph Jungmann expressed his own wonderment about this:

> That the celebration of the Eucharist which Augustine lauded as *signum unitatis* should have taken its name from a *coming together* [as in the word *synaxis*, derived from the Greek] is something we could well understand. But it is puzzling indeed that, as a matter of fact, it has been designated by a *separating*, a *going apart* [in the Latin word *missa*].[1]

The etymological connection between *missa* and *missio*, between "mass" and "mission," is something more than an accident of linguistic history empty of meaning. I want to suggest that it reflects a deep and abiding relationship between the Sunday and festal gathering of Christians and its sending into the purpose of God. There is a connection between the communion in Jesus Christ at the center of the church's assembly and God's mission in the world.

Missa means "dismissal." By the fifth century it had become the common name for the eucharistic assembly in the Latin-speaking world. Prior to that, it designated dismissal from most any service, including the Eucharist. These could involve a significant ritual of departure from the assembly, including prayers for individuals, the laying on of hands, and words and gestures of blessing. In some places, it took some time to dismiss an assembly of any size. There was, of course, a final dismissal

---

[1]Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development*, vol. 1, trans. Francis A. Brunner (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1951), 173.

at the conclusion of the eucharistic assembly, and this *missa* may be the origin of the term by which the whole came to be called. "*Ite missa est*" is the traditional deacon's announcement at the end of Mass—a simple and direct, "Go, it is the dismissal."[2]

In many churches, both East and West, there were also dismissals of certain persons following the sermon and before the prayers of intercession. The fourth-century Syrian church order *The Apostolic Constitutions* has an extensive and elaborate set of dismissals of those who had been present for the reading and sermon but who would not participate in the prayers and Eucharist proper to follow.[3] There are dismissals for the catechumens (those preparing for baptism), for the energumens (those possessed by unclean spirits, that is, persons afflicted by unpredictable and unsafe energies), for the illuminated (those in the final period of preparation for baptism), and finally for the penitents (those set apart for public repentance due to the public offense and consequence of their sin). In each case, the deacon calls the group being dismissed to prayer. They kneel or prostrate themselves in silence. The deacon then calls the assembled faithful to pray for them and offers a series of bids specific to the needs of each group—catechumens, energumens, illuminated, and penitents. After the bids, those being dismissed rise for a long concluding prayer by the bishop, who begs God's help for them. The dismissal culminates with the bishop laying hands on each individual as the group departs from the assembly. Following all the dismissals, those remaining—the faithful—are called to the prayers for the church and world, to a sharing of the peace of God, and to the thanksgiving and communion of the Lord's table before their own dismissal. It may well be that the impression of these departures before the faithful were gathered to the eucharistic table is what caused the entire eucharistic assembly to be called *missa*/mass—dismissal.

This venture into history and etymology has a larger point. The eucharistic assembly in the ancient world was marked by dismissals, and the word "Mass" is one piece of evidence that is left to us. The gathering

---

[2]For the history summarized here and below, see Jungmann, *Mass of the Roman Rite,* 173–175, 474–480; see also chapter 1, "The Place and Function of Liturgical Dismissals," in Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo, 1988), 3–38.

[3]For an English translation of the text of the dismissals, see W. Jardine Grisbrooke, ed. and trans., *The Liturgical Portions of the Apostolic Constitutions: A Text for Students* (Bramcote, England: Grove Books, 1990), 22–27; for a summary description, see Kavanagh, *Confirmation,* 10–12.

to the eucharistic meal was in some places framed by elaborate sendings. The first set of dismissals included those only provisionally gathered to the assembly. They awaited their full and complete gathering—the penitents through absolution, the catechumens and illuminated through baptism, and the energumens through healing in this life, as the prayers implored. These dismissals attest to the strict boundaries that surrounded the eucharistic table; only the baptized faithful, free of serious sin and unclean spirits, remained for the mysteries of the Lord's table. But there is another reading of these dismissals that is not just about who is in and who is out. Within a robust eschatology that sees the larger purpose of God unfolding in relation to the eucharistic assembly, these dismissals point to the provisional nature of the gathering at the table, to its incompleteness. The work of God to gather into Christ, to forgive, and to banish the forces of evil from our lives and our world is not done. The presence of the unbaptized and those in need of forgiveness and healing pointed the whole assembly to the unfinished work of God in the world, to the unfinished work of God in every life, even in the lives of the so-called faithful. These persons—the seekers, the sinners, and the possessed—became icons of God's purpose to gather, to forgive, and to deliver beyond the circle of the faithful. Their presence and their dismissal attest to the incompleteness of the Christian gathering. The symbolic circle of the assembly is broken, and because of that it remains open to the full and complete gathering of God's larger purpose.

These ancient dismissals enact in their peculiar way the mission of God. And when the faithful themselves are dismissed at the conclusion of the eucharistic meal, they are dismissed to join and accompany those previously dismissed and the whole seeking, sinful, and hurting throng of humanity, which is the object of God's life-giving purpose. There it is in the ancient meanings of the Christian assembly—mass and mission. Then, as now, these meanings are obscured when the eschatological horizon of God's large purpose dissolves, and Christians pretend they belong to a closed circle of the saved.[4]

The origins of the word "mission" in the Latin *missio* and its earliest Christian usage are also instructive. *Missio* means "sending off" or "sending away," and its first use as a theological term was to speak about the Trinity. As the esteemed missiologist David Bosch has written, "until the sixteenth century the term ["mission"] was used exclusively with

[4]On the closed circle as a distortion of liturgical meaning, see Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 186–192.

reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, of the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son."[5] Mission described the work of God in the sending of the Son and the sending of the Spirit into the world. In the first place, then, mission is about the relation of God to the world in the sending of the Son and the Spirit. Mission is about the outward movement of God toward the world in creation, in gathering a people Israel, in the reconciling purpose of Jesus Christ, and in the outpouring of the Spirit that gathers the church and signals the reign of God. Current missiological thinking has endeavored to ground the church's mission in the mission of God (*missio Dei*).[6] The church witnesses to and participates in God's life-giving purpose for the world.

One of the ways to characterize this purpose of God is as communion—the communion of people with God and with one another within a restored communion of the whole created order in the life of God. The bibilical image of the kingdom or reign of God as the consummation of all things is about these relationships of communion with God, among people, and within the whole creation. The mission of God is communion, and the church as a place of communion with God within a communion of persons that both witnesses to and participates in the larger purpose of God for communion.

All of this suggests the particular way the eucharistic assembly of the church is about mission. It enacts both the communion with God and the communion of persons that is God's purpose for the world. It is a "foretaste of the feast to come," as we often sing in our gatherings, a foretaste of the communion to come. This communion anticipates the full and final communion that is God's purpose for all and for the whole creation. This communion witnesses to and participates in God's mission. From this perspective, mass and mission are integrally related.

---

[5]David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 1.

[6]See Bosch, *Transforming* Mission, 389–393; also Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 290–304.

Worship Inside Out

This way of understanding the essential relation between worship and mission is what I call "worship inside out."[7] The worship of Christians gathered in local assemblies is itself located within the missional purpose of God. Christian worship is part of God's outward movement toward the world for the purpose of communion. Here, in a local assembly, there is communion with God through word and sacraments, the visible means of the continuing mission of God's Son and Spirit. Here there is a communion of persons that enacts in ritual and symbol God's life-giving purpose for the whole world. The communion enjoyed and enacted here is God's mission, and it witnesses to God's larger purpose of communion for the world.

"Worship inside out" stands in contrast to two other models for thinking about the relation of worship and mission: "worship inside and out" and "worship outside in." Let me explain what I mean.

"Worship inside and out" is the conventional way of thinking about worship and mission. Worship takes place inside the church to nurture faith in individuals. Mission takes place outsides the church as we go out to proclaim the gospel and to serve the needs of the neighbor. In this model, worship inside and mission outside, the integral connection between worship and mission is missing. Mission becomes identified with the activity of the church extending itself in witness and service, rather than with God's activity and purpose in the church and in the world. Worship is enclosed within a sacred precinct and practiced as something unworldly rather than in its deep world-relatedness. That is worship inside and out.

"Worship outside in" characterizes much of what goes by the name of "contemporary worship" as well as worship in the mode of social activism. These contemporary models for worship rightly seek to break down the inside-and-out bifurcation and to bring worship and mission into a more direct relationship. Outside-in models bring the activities of the church's mission, its evangelistic outreach or its social and political concern, directly into worship and reshape the practices of the worshiping community. When this happens, the historic patterns and practices of the Christian assembly are diminished or abandoned. The communion with

[7]Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," in Thomas H. Schattauer, ed., *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 1–21, and the other essays in that volume. For a discussion of this perspective, see Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context,* 361–366.

God and others that these practices enact and establish tends to dissolve along with their witness to the larger purpose of God beyond the assembly. Mission is reduced to saving souls or simply doing good in our world. Mission is understood as an activity of the church rather than the work of God, and this becomes the focus of worship.

In "worship inside out," it is God's mission for communion that we celebrate and in which we participate. The mission of God precedes and surrounds the words and actions of our worship, and it carries us outward into the wide and embracing communion that is God's purpose for the world. When the inside-out approach to worship and mission is fully grasped, there is no longer need for what John Hoffmeyer calls "gap-bridging models" of God's relation to the world, nor for the church in its relation to the world. Hoffmeyer argues that "the divine missions of Word and Spirit are not the bridging of a gap between a divine realm and a creaturely realm, ... not the divine strategies to 'get God into the world,'" but rather the revelation "that God is 'God with us.'"[8] And similarly, the church's mission is not characterized by a gap between God's presence in the church and the lack of such presence in the world:

> If the church's mission is participation in the mission of the triune God, then the church's mission is also not to get God into the world. Unfortunately, the church's thinking about its mission has been shaped by gap-bridging models. We have too often conceived mission as taking the Word of God "out" into the world, as if the Word were not already present in the world. We have too often thought of the world as "out there," and the church as "in here," resorting to a two-realms thinking that inevitably tempts us to regard the church as the home address of God's Spirit.[9]

The church in its mission and in its worship reflects the world-relatedness that is part of God's own being. At the center of our gathering is Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified outside the gates, who stood with and stands with all on the outside. This outsider is at the center of our worship. So we are gathered to one who draws us not into a closed circle but outside with the unwashed, the sinful, and the hurting. In our sending, we go forth to serve the gathering of this world into its full and final communion with God.[10]

The inside-out character of the Christian assembly and the dynamic relation of communion and mission is evident in the patterns and practices

---

[8]John F. Hoffmeyer, "The Missional Trinity," *dialog* 40 (2001): 109.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., 110; see also Lathrop, *Holy Ground*, 192, 196, for his citation and use of Hoffmeyer.

of our worship. Recall the Vigil of Easter, when gathered in the dark of night, we prepare a large candle to be the light of Christ, marking it with a cross—the sign of Christ's death as an outcast, yet the sign of his life-giving reign—shaping the Greek letters Alpha and Omega above and below, and inscribing the numbers of this year in the world's history in the arms of the cross, all the while proclaiming these words:

> Christ, yesterday, and today, the beginning and the ending.
> To Christ belongs all time and all the ages.
> To Christ belongs glory and dominion now and forever. Amen.[11]

That Easter night is certainly about our communion with God in the light of Christ, a communion shared by all who live in that light. But that Easter night is also about God's mission to gather all things, every time and every place, into that same light, Jesus Christ, to whom belongs all the ages. Communion and mission: these are the heartbeat of Christian worship—worship inside out.

Or recall the prayer of the day we prayed last night at our Vigil of Pentecost:

> Almighty and ever-living God, you fulfilled the promise of Easter by sending your Holy Spirit to unite the races and nations on earth and thus to proclaim your glory. Look upon your people gathered in prayer, open to receive your Spirit's flame. May it come to rest in our hearts and heal the divisions of word and tongue that with one voice and with one song we may praise your name in joy and thanksgiving. Amen.[12]

There it is: the purpose of God for the world in the mission of the Holy Spirit "to unite the nations and races of the earth"—to bring about a communion—"and thus to proclaim your glory." The prayer then turns to this local communion in the Spirit that witnesses to that larger purpose of God and participates in it, "that with one voice and one song, we may praise your name." The "one voice" and the "one song" describe the local assembly, its communion, its life in God. They also point to the hope for a larger communion of song and voice, to that final and complete gathering in God's reign. Communion and mission. Worship inside out.

---

[11]*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Pew ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 267.

[12]*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House and Philadelphia, PA: Board of Publications, Lutheran Church in America, 1978), 23.

The Landscape of Worship Today

Now we turn to reflect upon the liturgical landscape of North America and its relation to God's mission. I want to suggest that in all the complexity, confusion, and conflict about worship in our time and place, we can discern a common aim to re-imagine the Christian assembly in relation to God's mission.[13]

Let me begin with a story. I was traveling on an immersion in South Africa in 1998, and on a Saturday afternoon in Capetown a colleague from Wartburg and I decided we would try to find a Lutheran church where we could worship on Sunday. So we took off to look for a place to go to church. We walked by a number of churches, including a couple Lutheran ones. One in particular caught our attention. It was a German national church, a congregation where German Lutherans living in Capetown could worship in their native tongue. On the board outside the church, there was a list of the services for the next day. There was to be a *Frühgottesdienst,* an early service, then the *Hauptgottesdienst*, the principal service of the day, and finally there was a third one on the list. The words announced a type of service I had not seen before. It said "*etwas anderes Gottesdienst*," which means the "something other-" or "something else service." It was their alternative service. We did not end up attending the *etwas anderes Gottesdienst* at the German national church. So I cannot report to you what German alternative worship in South Africa actually looks like. But it struck me then, and it continues to strike me just how deep is the longing, how persistent the search among our worshiping communities for "something else," for something alternative. What is this about? We have to engage that question.

The search for an alternative practice of worship characterizes much of the landscape of worship in North America today. But alternative to what? Most often the answer is: an alternative to traditional worship. It is contemporary versus traditional. Whatever form the contemporary alternative takes, it stands over and against traditional worship.

I want to suggest a different way of understanding the situation, one that moves beyond opposing the contemporary to the traditional and vice versa. The search for "something else" at worship is about the desire and

[13]See Thomas H. Schattauer, "Re-imagining the Christian Assembly: The Search for an Alternative Practice of Worship" in *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy 2005*, ed. Joyce Ann Zimmermann, 3–18 (Notre Dame, IN: North American Academy of Liturgy, Inc., 2005).

the need for an alternative to what I want to call "conventional worship" and "conventional Christianity." This search for an alternative practice of worship is not fundamentally a movement against tradition. Remember, tradition is not a static repository of stuff that we are obligated to reproduce in the present. In its fullest and deepest sense, tradition is the process of transmission of Christian faith and practice from one generation to another. What we see in the current North American liturgical landscape is in fact a variety of alternatives to conventional Christian worship and to conventional Christianity—not tradition.

"Conventional" refers to what is customary or familiar, and what is conventional will vary from place to place. There are, however, some common characteristics of conventional worship—and with it conventional Christianity. Here are three. First, conventional worship has to do with the maintenance of the church as an institution. Second, it has to do with the individual as a recipient of spiritual benefits. Do you see the picture? The church is as institution has things to give people. People receive spiritual benefits from the institutions of churchly life, including its worship. Third, conventional worship tends to support the social and political status quo. These are the common characteristics of conventional worship and conventional Christianity: institutionalism, individualism, and general adherence to the social and political status quo.

In Protestant North America, conventional worship's chief image is the tall-steepled church with a great preacher and a great music program, a place where people come to sit still and to listen to the sermon and music of choir and organ. Churchgoing is part of being a good and upright citizen in the community. In practice, such worship tends to be clergy- and leader-dominated, verbal- and text-driven, and limited in the forms of congregational participation. Conventionality in worship and in Christian life is linked to cultural Christianity, to the whole experience of Christendom in western Christianity.

In the current situation, there are a number of alternatives to conventional worship. Here is my list of five: the liturgical movement, the contemporary worship movement, liberation perspectives, the worship of Pentecostal churches, and worship in the emerging church. It will come as a surprise to some that the liturgical movement is one of the alternative worship movements. Yet in its origins as well as many of its ongoing proposals, the liturgical movement remains a distinct alternative to customary and familiar ways of worship. All of these worship alternatives are ways in which Christians are searching for "something else" and working to move beyond conventional Christianity.

When you imagine an alternative to what is customary and familiar, there has to be something that funds the imagination as well as a direction toward which the alternative moves—a source as well as an aim. Together the source and the aim create the impulse that drives these worship alternatives. Consequently, we can look at each of the alternatives and ask about its principal source and distinctive aim. Each of the alternatives draws on a different source and has a different aim.

Liturgical movement. Here the source for imagining an alternative to conventional worship and conventional Christianity has been the historic patterns and practices of the church. History has been the source for re-imagining Christian worship today. It is as if we found an old box in the attic, dusted it off, and opened it up to discover some treasures of the past: a regular celebration of Holy Communion on Sunday, a robust practice of baptism, and a rich celebration of the church year, especially the Three Days. All of these things are pieces of Christian tradition that we have retrieved from the treasure box of history for purposes in the present. History has been the source for imagining something alternative, something different. The aim of this retrieval has been to renew the church as a distinctive community in Christ for its missional purpose in the world. The impulse at work in the liturgical movement moves from history as its source to the renewal of the church in its communal and missional identity as its aim.

Contemporary worship movement. Here the source funding the imagination of an alternative practice of worship is clearly not the historic patterns and practices of the church. Rather, the principal source is contemporary culture, so the space for worship looks like an auditorium. The leadership of worship looks like what we see on television or in a performance on stage. The music takes on a popular style and format, and the whole approach is oriented to the participants as consumers. The source for all of this is contemporary culture. Cultural patterns and practice shape this worship alternative. The aim is to reach those outside the churches, to make disciples, and to grow the church. In the contemporary worship movement, the impulse driving the alternative practice of worship over and against conventional worship and conventional Christianity moves from the use of cultural materials at its source to the formation of Christian disciples as its principal aim.

Liberation Perspectives. Liberation theology, which first developed in Latin America, has also had an impact in the contemporary search for an alternative practice of worship. Liberation perspectives have been nurtured among the poor, among women, and among diverse racial and

ethnic minorities. Here the source for re-imagining Christian worship is the experience of marginalized people. The distinctive aim in this is to signal the justice and well-being of God's reign for all people and to bring about change in present circumstances. In the liberation perspective, we move from its source in the experience of marginalized people toward God's justice and the fulfillment of God's purpose for all people.

Pentecostal Churches. Although not often considered an alternative worship movement, Pentecostal churches have generated practices of worship that are a distinct alternative to conventional worship and conventional Christianity. Here the source for re-imagining the Christian assembly has to do with the manifestation of the Spirit in acts of praise, healing, and tongues within an assembly energized by the Spirit. The aim is to foster personal healing, holiness, and hope. In the Pentecostal model, the source for re-imagining the practice of worship moves from its source in the free and open manifestation of the Spirit towards personal transformation through healing, holiness, and hope.

Emerging Church. Finally, we come to the emerging church, which you may know about through the media attention it has recently received, if not through your own experience of it. Younger evangelicals and others are fashioning a very different response to conventional worship and conventional Christianity than their baby-boomer elders involved with the contemporary worship movement. In the emerging church, close-knit networks of twenty- and thirty-something participants gather for worship that draws upon contemporary culture (but not so much the popular, consumer, and entertainment variety) as well as historic Christian practices and the arts in a rich, eclectic mix. The principal source in the emerging church for re-imagining Christian worship is a rather fluid, but relational community in a local place. The aim is to bring persons into a network of relationships where they can experience the belonging and wholeness that is God's purpose for all people and explore the Gospel message.

When I step back from this picture of the landscape of worship, what I see is not what I often experience. What I experience is deep conflict and turmoil about worship. The picture that I have proposed, however, shows a landscape of potentially complementary impulses at work among the worship alternatives:

- the recovery of historic practice toward a distinctive community witnessing to God's purpose for the world;
- the use of cultural materials toward a wider embrace of people;
- attention to the experience of the marginalized toward the justice and inclusion of God's reign;

- openness to the movement of God's Spirit toward personal transformation; and
- focus on a relational community toward social belonging and wholeness.

These things are not essentially antithetical. The various sources—historic practice, cultural materials, the experience of the marginalized, the movement of the Spirit, a relational community—are all essential components of worship in the church catholic. The various aims—a distinctive community in the world, a wide embrace of people, social justice, personal transformation, and social belonging—are all different dimensions of God's mission. Could it be that the struggle and ferment surrounding worship alternatives in our time reflects a common desire to re-imagine the Christian assembly in relation to God's mission?

The recognition that different dimensions of God's mission may be driving the various proposals for the practice of worship will not solve all our problems. But it may open the possibility for a more constructive conversation. It may encourage us in a more adequate response to the forces at work in our worshiping assemblies.

Mass and mission—worship inside out—a landscape of worship in North America filled with signs of God's mission. These are some thoughts intended as an encouragement to you and to the efforts, large and small, that you and the worshiping communities you represent are making toward what we so urgently need: a thoroughly missional practice of worship.