

Learning about Ecumenical Relationships: Personal Reflections after Thirteen Years of Work at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

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The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship (CICW), founded in 1997, is an academic and ministry center located at Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The College and Seminary are educational institutions of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA), a relatively small denomination of 1000 congregations which was originally founded by immigrants from the Dutch Reformed Church. The CRCNA is one of several Reformed and Presbyterian denominations in North America which trace their roots to the 16th-century reforms enacted by Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, and John Knox. The CRCNA is a confessional

denomination, united by adherence to the ecumenical creeds (Nicene, Apostles', Athanasian) and a series of Reformed confessions, including the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism.

The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship is designed to promote mutual learning among Christian traditions, while also providing leadership for Reformed and Presbyterian congregations—a natural mission given that one essential Reformed theological principle is that of the catholicity of the church.

Over the past thirteen years, with support from the Lilly Endowment, the Worship Institute has sponsored an annual January Symposium on Worship that draws 1500 or more participants; hosted annual summer seminars for

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liturgical scholars; awarded over 500 grants through the CICW Worship Renewal Grants program to congregations in a wide spectrum of Christian denominations (including several to readers of *Liturgical Ministry*); developed a publication series with Eerdmans, Alban Institute, GIA, Baker Books, and Faith Alive Publications; developed websites of scholarly and practical resources (hymnary.org; calvin.edu/worship; reformedworship.org); and developed contextualized conferences and workshops in Egypt, Mexico, Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and several cities across North America.

What follows is a series of my personal reflections gleaned over the past number of years as I have encountered, engaged with, and mentored countless congregations both nationally and internationally. It has been a rewarding and interesting journey, and I am delighted to have an opportunity to bring my reflections and experiences together and briefly share them with the readers of *Liturgical Ministry*.

“It’s So Good to Have Another ‘Calvinist’ Around Here.”

These were the first words that greeted me on my first day as a PhD student in liturgical studies at the University of Notre Dame. The fact that they were spoken by a Roman Catholic priest only added to my astonishment. I have come to treasure that greeting as a splendid gesture of ecumenical hospitality. In the moment, all I could think to say was “Who is the other one?” And then, Fr. Regis Duffy, with wry smile, added words that furthered not only my delight, but also my education: “I am.”

Indeed, Fr. Duffy taught from Calvin’s *Institutes* in every sacramental theology class, sandwiching Calvin comfortably between Augustine and Rahner. In so doing Fr. Duffy taught us that John Calvin does not belong only to those of us in the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition—and especially not to those of us who graduated from institutions named after Calvin. In a single two-word sentence, Fr. Duffy taught me that John Calvin belonged to the whole church. That, in turn, gave me permission to approach Aquinas, Francis of Assisi, Hildegard, and Thomas Merton, the whole procession of Catholic saints, not simply as capital “C” (Roman) Catholic figures, but also as small “c” catholic figures, a part of my story.

The Calvinist in me could not help but think of the Heidelberg Catechism’s commentary on the line in the creed, “I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.” As children already, we memorized this commentary: “I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects,

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and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am and always will be a living member”; and “Believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts; each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.” Fr. Duffy and so many of my professors and fellow classmates at Notre Dame offered rich examples of what this mutual sharing of treasures could look like.

In our work at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, we have tried to live up to these lofty words in our work, conference planning, grant making, and publications. Many, perhaps most, days feel like a churchly gift exchange, as emails and phone calls, books and websites, conversations and conferences allow us to build relationships with Christian worshipping communities in a wide variety of settings.

Delight and Discovery

Perhaps that the most overwhelming impression I have of these exchanges over the years is the sheer delight they bring. Many moments of shared delight have been musical. I think of joining with 1000 Roman Catholic musicians singing Luther's mighty "A Mighty Fortress" at an NPM convention, the reverent cadences of psalmody of the monks at St. John's Abbey, the robust energy of a hymn concertato led by a Lutheran college choir, the reverence of 8000 African-American pastors at the Hampton Ministers Conference praying or singing the Lord's Prayer, the impassioned and prophetic voice of the pan-Latino choir *Coro Cantico Nuevo* that meets weekly on Manhattan's upper west side, the sturdy unaccompanied singing of a Mennonite congregation singing the doxology, the exuberance of praise choruses from the Midwest Chinese Bible Conference, the poignancy of a Herbert Howell canticle at Anglican Evensong at St. Thomas Church, the vigor of a Baptist hymn festival led by Don Hustad, the fervor of a gospel anthem led in worship by Grammy-winning recording artist Marvin Sapp, and the haunting beauty of a Native American chant of a biblical psalm text.

Others moments of delight have been grounded in other aspects of worship: experiencing the palpable emphasis on peacemaking at a Mennonite seminary, the intensity and authenticity of extemporaneous prayer at a Vineyard prayer meeting, the irony of a young Coptic Orthodox cantor explaining how he learned the performance style of the ancient chant by listening to recordings on the Internet, the contextual beauty of a newly crafted artistic installation by Catherine Kapikian or Nancy Chinn, the fragrance of freshly baked communion bread at a Methodist congregation whose youth group bakes bread fresh each week, the gripping intensity of a sermon by Tom Long or Marva Dawn or Tim Keller or Frank Thomas and the profound sense of wonder they can elicit for the power of the biblical text to speak to today.

If there ever were a liturgically oriented travel agency, every one of these experiences would be worthy of a special tour. They are the ecumenical equivalents of visiting vineyards in France's wine country or an African safari, offering profound concentrations of unique and unaffected beauty.

At the same time I realize that thousands of people live near these ecumenical destination spots and barely take notice. Their beauty is only revealed to those intent upon "discerning the body" of Christ (I Cor 11:26). It is a beauty that comes from subservience to Jesus as Lord, freedom in Christ's Spirit, and the embrace of the baptismal vocation to live as Christ's servants in each of these unique places.

Most of these ecumenical delights, I notice, are not experienced in hotel ballrooms at ecumenical events where people gather for conversations after having already decided that they agree about most things (though these gatherings have a key role to play, too). They are, in contrast, opportunities to offer or receive hospitality in the real, local homes and churches of people from very different walks of life. This is a good reminder to myself that our ecumenical conferences are no substitute for hosting and being hosted in the regular week-in, week-out events of local congregations. I recall gratefully the testimonies of a grantee in Philadelphia that organized an ecumenical team of people to visit each other's congregations and reflect together on the charisms and challenges of each local congregation. It was a particularly instructive grant because it built ecumenical relationships through (not "around" or "above") the experience of local congregations.

There are so many good gifts to share in the communion of saints. Once we discover some of this kind of Body-of-Christ-kind-of-joy, we may find ourselves buying way too many books and trying to visit way too many congregations on a single Sunday on the road in another city. It is contagious. And it is a necessary antidote to the cynicism and despair that can so easily set in with sustained work in almost any church.

Solidarity and Learning

There is also much to learn from all these exchanges.

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians once took the lead in singing the psalms congregationally. My grandma memorized large portions of the psalms in metrical form when she was a young girl. She could recite them just days before her death at age ninety-three earlier this year. Yet congregational psalm singing has experienced a steady decline for the past sixty or so years, such that, just now when we truly need the full range of psalmic prayer, we do not have these songs in our hearts. How might we stoke the embers of this rich tradition?

It may well be that Roman Catholic responsorial psalmody will point the way. For several decades now the indefatigable Bob Batastini has been planting ecumenical seeds in Hymn Society conventions and other outreach opportunities, sharing with a wider Protestant world the post-Vatican II outpouring of Catholic hymnody and psalmody (and, I know, bringing a lot of Protestant contributions home with him). As a result our CICW hymnal supplement *Sing! A New Creation* has introduced many Protestant congregations to music by Haugen, Haas, and company. That, in turn, has freed our imaginations to make space for contributions by the Iona and

Taizé communities, by jazz improvisers, and by the liturgical music developed for African-American Catholic congregations. When the text of the music is scriptural, the music becomes one of most tangible ecumenical gifts we can share. And today—to the astonishment of some Protestant communities—it is the Roman Catholic community that often leads the way in promoting the singing of a rich diet of scriptural texts.

But the learning does not stop there. Some Reformed Christians have recently learned to say “Thanks be to God” after “The Word of the Lord”—a liturgical gesture that fits our theology of the Scripture beautifully. We have learned to sing portions of our eucharistic prayer, to use more water at baptism, and to insist that Holy Week needs more than one service between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday morning.

I am exceedingly grateful for the ways in which Catholic theologians have enriched our theological vocabulary with words like “anamnesis,” “epiclesis,” and “paschal mystery” (words that one learns in the first year of Catholic seminary or in one’s last year at a Protestant seminary, if ordination candidates are fortunate). All three point to themes and practices near the heart of Reformed theology; yet each one helps us articulate these themes in fresh ways.

I am exceedingly grateful for the pastoral Roman Catholic work on popular religiosity. When many Protestants first hear about Catholic popular religiosity—about Guadalupe Masses and shrines, First Communion rituals, and devotional prayer practices—our well-worn concern for superstition kicks in with intensity. But the loving, patient study of popular religiosity—which bears some resemblance to evangelical theologian Richard Mouw’s concern to listen to ordinary churchgoers—has proved to be enormously illuminating and helpful. For just when we Protestants start feeling a bit smug about these things, we then walk into a Protestant bookstore and see all the WWJD bracelets, all the iconography of the saints (on the front of best-selling worship band albums), and all the accretions to the liturgical calendar as when, for example, a congregation celebrates Valentine’s Day but not Ascension Day, or the Fourth of July but not Epiphany. Together, we have so much to learn about how both popular piety and institutionalized practices, both devotional and liturgical prayer, both spiritual disciplines and extemporaneous expressions weave together in a faithful Christian way of life.

All of this shared learning is possible because—as we repeatedly discover—all of us are facing so many of the same problems. We want to promote intergenerational community in an age of generational segregation. We want to adapt to technological change without weakening the social fabric that unites us. We want to promote a

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hunger for the word of God in an age of decreasing biblical literacy. All these, and many more, are common needs, and we need to harvest insights and wisdom from across the fullness of the Body of Christ to meet them well.

Lamenting

That does not mean that all of this delighting and learning happens without pain.

There are too many gatherings where a shared celebration of the Lord’s Supper simply causes too much discord to make it wise to celebrate. Every possible policy regarding inclusive language will be offensive to some, and a sensitive but deeply principled policy is harder to implement than most people will ever realize. Even deft and subtle references to the atonement can spark hostility, sometimes simultaneously from the theological right and left. Over all these matters, in both parochial and ecumenical contexts, it is very, very rare to find a place where people can disagree constructively, where a disagreement can be sustained over time, and where people find the courage to change their mind without blowing in the wind. These are some of the reasons why we casually quip that some of our events are like “ecumenical chemistry experiments.” When they go well, they can produce lots of energy. But the prospect for a damaging explosion is always near.

Sometimes the delight of ecumenical sharing becomes painful as it exposes the disunity within denominations or traditions. I can think of fifty Reformed congregations

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within fifty miles of Grand Rapids who would never think of attending one of our CICW conferences: we are too conservative, too liberal, too traditional, too innovative, too stodgy, too contemporary, too ecumenical, too Reformed (yes, there are examples in each one of these categories). The very thought of it makes me want to call them up and make some new friends. But given all the anxiety and fear that we carry with us, none of these conversations is easy.

I know we are not alone. Nearly every year we hear from people who have traveled 500 or even 4000 miles to our January Worship Symposium and find themselves talking with people from the very same small town back home—people they have never met before because of the often implicit but firm barriers to genuine ecumenical exchange. Others come to our events and meet people from their own denomination that they never would speak with in other contexts. Some painful issue divides them on their own turf. It takes some open, non-threatening ecumenical space to give them room to learn to talk together again.

Sometimes the delight of ecumenical sharing becomes painful when it becomes clear that so many of the desirable things in another tradition will never take root in one's own. Easter Vigil is too remarkable for words. Yet it is hard to imagine more than five of 1000 Christian Reformed congregations ever adopting it. (May the Holy Spirit prove me wrong!) I have also heard more than one Catholic participant in a Protestant conference express yearning for better preaching and congregational singing back home.

Sometimes the experience of a genuinely ecumenical gathering scares away people who love “purer” expressions. There many people who will attend a conference for Anglican boy choirs, or contemporary praise bands, or Pentecostal prayer leaders, but never come to an event in which multiple expressions are offered side-by-side. Many people really do want a homogenous experience that fits naturally with aesthetic judgments they think are important, and even non-negotiable.

Sometimes the experience of this rich mosaic causes me to lament the lack of genuine ecumenical sharing beyond the most superficial in the average neighborhood. So many of the churchgoers or seekers I meet on the sidelines at soccer games have almost no sense of any one Christian tradition and have no idea what to make of the mélange of entries under “church” in the yellow pages of the telephone book (no wonder it's so hard to find a new church after a move to a new city!). Is there a danger that our ecumenical sharing is rather like that of a group of exotic chefs who visit culinary conventions: it is a remarkable experience, but ultimately is rather esoteric.

Perhaps the largest risk in all this ecumenical sharing is that it might devolve into a “least common denominator experience”—a hyper pluralism in which we simply ignore the points of discontinuity or contradiction between traditions. After a little practice it is far too easy to allow this to erode some basic convictions. I have returned more than once from an ecumenical gathering “parched for a conviction.” For this reason we have been increasingly explicit about how a common affirmation in the Nicene Creed creates a strong foundation upon which to build ecumenical bridges. We have also been increasingly explicit about the countercultural core convictions that undergird our work. Ecumenical hospitality and evangelical conviction are, like mass and force in physics, two interdependent dynamics. Neither is possible, or all that meaningful, without the other.

At the same time I recognize my own conflict-avoidant tendencies and my internal resistance to communicate my own anxieties about practices of my ecumenical friends that trouble me. I can never get the music of the haunting Litany of All Saints at a papal funeral or Holy Week liturgy out of my head. But I long to replace “St. Augustine, pray for us” with “we bless God for the witness of St. Augustine”—hopeless Protestant that I am. For all my deep appreciation for my training and formation at Notre Dame and my regular sharing across the Catholic-Protestant divide, there are still profound differences that haunt me.

Perplexity

While some matters evoke lament, others provoke wonderment. It takes a while for a Calvinist to know when to laugh at jokes at an NPM convention. Or a Wesleyan or Mennonite one. Though quips about guilt (“the gift that keeps on giving”) seem universal, I've never been anyplace that didn't respond to some version of that concern.

Ecumenical events are even more challenging. When someone recently retold the joke about the old Presbyterian graveyard with the tombstone that read “Here lies our former pastor. He died trying to change the order of worship,”

only a third of the crowd laughed. A third of the audience could never imagine anyone with the authority to change the order of worship, and a third of the audience could never imagine having a set order of worship to bother about changing. Perhaps a veteran ecumenist needs to compile a guidebook to local religious humor.

More seriously, perplexity also sets in around discerning the proper limits of tolerance. A cell without a properly functioning cellular wall is cancerous. And so is a religious body that is unable to draw boundaries in a healthy, transparent, and spiritually discerning way. Diversity, inclusivity, and tolerance can all be good things, but all of them will eventually implode when there is no sense of a tradition's "center" or "boundaries"—or the criteria by which those will be discerned. The entire history of Christianity could be told in terms of the history of relative tolerance: an intolerant era gives rise to tolerance, which over time breeds new appreciation for drawing the boundaries tighter. All the while we encounter the relative mix of polemics and irenics ebbs and flows. If there is any one topic that I wish we had more capacity to learn about together, it would be how we, in each tradition, could learn to draw boundaries and to practice tolerance in the healthiest and most faithful way possible.

On a still more serious note, it is very hard to know, at times, how to respond to people who make dramatic conversions from being Lutheran to Catholic, Baptist to Orthodox, or Catholic to Anglican. Their conversion is at once an affirmation and a rejection. While I often find myself deeply empathetic with the journey they have taken, I can't help but feel a twinge of pain or loss for the people they leave behind.

Finally, I have been musing of late about the hopeless complexity of all the various denominations in Protestantism. It takes a graduate education in religious history to make sense of the church listings from so many different denominational groups in any given phone book. I have begun to wonder if it would be instructive to think of the various Protestant denominations rather like Catholic religious orders, each offering distinct, but complementary charisms. This will not work in the end: there are too many contradictory claims made by various Protestant denominations for this analogy to work. Still, it may offer us one way to comprehend the astonishing fullness of the Gospel. The Gospel is simply too large, too capacious, too magnificent for any of us to embody it fully. If each of us truly did try to live out the very best we could learn from Augustine, Benedict, and Francis or Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, we would need several lifetimes to do so. One can't be a Cistercian, Benedictine, and Jesuit all at once. And one can't be a Lutheran, Calvinist, and Methodist all at once, either. Perhaps God calls us to live inside of a single tradition, or a single religious order within that tradition,

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This does not minimize the scandal of church division. But perhaps it allows us to see a bit of grace in the middle of so much brokenness.

Advent Hope

And perhaps this also orients us to the future, to the day in which divisions will be healed and brokenness restored. Every ecumenical exchange, whether an experience of solidarity or of discord, is an opportunity to pray "O come, O come Immanuel: bid our sad divisions cease, and be for us our King of Peace."

What Fr. Duffy was practicing at Notre Dame could be described as a kind of "eschatological imperative." The urgency to reach out for ecumenical engagement, at its best, is not simply a desire for a kind of liturgical tourism. It is a deep yearning to live into a future of genuine communion and fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a longing to participate with God's Spirit in bringing about the answer to Jesus' own prayer that his followers would be one-in-communion (see John 17).

So may we all embrace the particular calling of God we have received and love the particular people whom God has called us to serve. May we also grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ as we visit a worship service in another Christian tradition, and as we receive visitors to our own imperfect offerings. May we discern wisely the forms of ecumenical cooperation that promise to be genuinely sanctifying. In doing so, may we all learn to pray together "Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus."