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SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW: HOW NEW CHURCHES ARE EMBRACING LITURGY

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Abstract

The movement toward ancient church tradition has been well documented; however, there has also been a steady rise of new churches that are embracing church tradition and liturgy. The first part of this article will examine the history behind this movement and the factors that have contributed to its development. Next, it will look at four case studies of new churches that are embracing liturgy, which I refer to as neo-liturgical churches. It will end with an exploration of the promise that this may hold for reaching young adults.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s a growing number of Protestants and evangelicals in the United States are seeking to find spiritual identity in the retrieval of ancient church tradition for contemporary faith and practice. Commenting on this growing trend among evangelicals, D.H. Williams says,

> A nerve within contemporary evangelicalism has been hit, and its effects are ushering in enormous potential change. Discussion of the place and value of the great tradition is taking place among pastors and laity in denominations that have normally regarded

> it as irrelevant or as a hindrance to authentic Christian belief and spirituality. This new openness to hearing the tradition represents an extraordinary work of the Spirit in our time. The last half decade or so has seen a readiness among evangelicals and mainline Protestants to open the door that has been closed to tradition, finding in it potential resources for understanding their own heritage. Likewise, a literature is beginning to develop around the notion of Christian tradition, especially as it concerns the relevance of the legacy of the early church for today's church.[1]

Over the last two decades, there has also been a steady rise of new churches that are embracing church tradition and liturgical practices. By using the term "church tradition," I do not mean tradition with a capital T, as in Roman Catholicism or Lutheranism, but rather I am referring to tradition with a lowercase t, as in what has been common to many Christians in all ages, especially the first five centuries of the church. One way to trace this recovery is with the steady rise of publications that have focused on different aspects of the evangelical retrieval of tradition over the last few decades.[2] The gap in the literature is examining how exactly the recovery of tradition has impacted the formation of new churches.

RECOVERY OF TRADITION

A growing number of evangelicals in the United States are seeking to find identity and spiritual renewal in the retrieval of ancient church tradition for contemporary faith and practice. This recovery is not the result of any one particular factor or person, but the convergence of various significant influences and developments that began around 1960. Prior to

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1 D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 15.

2 The latest wave of publications surrounding this movement include D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church*, Baker Academic, 2005); Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Eerdmans, 2011); Stefana Dan Laing, *Retrieving History: Memory and Identity Formation in the Early Church* (Baker Academic, 2017); Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshipping Community* (IVP, 2006); George Kalantzis and Andrew Tooley, ed. *Evangelicals and the Early Church: Recovery, Reform, Renewal*. (2012); and Kenneth Stewart, *In Search of Ancient Roots: The Christian Past and the Evangelical Identity Crisis* (IVP, 2017).

the 1960s evangelicals were in large part averse to history, especially due to the influence of fundamentalism. According to David Bebbington, around 1961 evangelical scholars began to rediscover their place in history.[3] Prior to 1960, historiography was largely denominational history; a key example is Baptist and Methodist historiography.[4] In the post-Second World War era, evangelical historiography became more advanced when a number of neo-evangelicals entered into academia and began to do scholarly research that led to significant developments in the historiography of the evangelical movement that moved well beyond denominational studies into trying to understand the place of evangelicals in the broader church history.[5] This can be attributed to the rise of evangelicals to the middle class, which Donald W. Dayton refers to as the embourgeoisement of evangelicalism.[6]

The rise in the interest in evangelical historiography is evidenced by the proliferation of books on various subjects related to the history of the church and to the emergence of church history programs at evangelical universities and seminaries across the United States. Bebbington notes the importance of the now-defunct Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College in Illinois.[7] In *Reckoning with the Past*, a collection of essays for the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, editor D.G. Hart says their purpose is to "help evangelicals develop a mature understanding of their own heritage and to inform others about

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3 David Bebbington, "The Evangelical Discovery of History," in Peter D. Clarke and Charolette Methuen, *The Church on Its Past* (Suffolk, UK: Ecclesiastical History Society, 2013). 330-364.

4 Robert F. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Working-Class Movements of England, 1800–1850* (London, 1937); idem, *Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1945); idem, *Methodism and the Struggle of the Working Classes, 1850–1900* (Leicester, 1954); idem, *The Social and Political Influence of Methodism in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1957).

5 For examples of evangelical historiography see the series 'A History of Evangelicalism,' which is the most convenient source for an overview. So far it contains three volumes: Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Leicester, 2004); John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Nottingham, 2006); David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Leicester, 2005).

6 Donald Dayton, "The Embourgeoisement of a Vision: Lament of a Radical Evangelical," *The Other Side* 23 (1987): 19.

7 See Wheaton, IL, Wheaton College, Billy Graham Center, Archives of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals [hereafter: ISAE], 'Proposal for a Planning Grant: An Institute for the Study of American Evangelicalism' (typescript, Wheaton, IL, 1982).

evangelicals' historical significance and contemporary role."[8] Schools like Duke University, Drew University, Asbury Seminary, and Gordon-Conwell Seminary became places of learning where generations of evangelicals were exposed to church history. Scholars like Edith Blumhofer, Joel Carpenter, D. G. Hart, Nathan Hatch, Mark Noll, Grant Wacker, Kenneth Collins, and George Marsden have done significant research and writing in the area of helping evangelicals understand their place in history. A further example of the widespread interest in church history among evangelicals is *Christian History* magazine, which was established by Ken Curtis in 1982 and which was sold to *Christianity Today* in 1989.

Further developments toward a rediscovery of church tradition happened at Wheaton College in the 1970s when forty-five scholars and leaders organized a conference to discuss the need for evangelical Christians to rediscover the Church's historic roots. Robert Webber, Associate Professor of Theology at Wheaton College, was the central figure who called together a planning committee to organize a "National Conference of Evangelicals for Historic Christianity." This group met nine times during 1976 and 1977. The initial planning committee members included significant evangelical scholars and leaders including Peter E. Gillquist, Donald G. Bloesch, Jan P. Dennis, Gerald D. Erickson, Lane T. Dennis, Richard Holt, Thomas Howard, and Victor Oliver. This initial group helped plan the themes of their upcoming conference.

The conference was held from May 1 to 3, 1977, with about forty-five people in attendance. Many of the attenders were affiliated with evangelical academic institutions or with evangelical publishing. The conference issued several documents, which together are known as *The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals*. *The Call* focused on eight key theological themes: A Call to Historic Roots and Continuity; a Call to Biblical Fidelity; a Call to Creedal Identity; a Call to Holistic Salvation; a Call to Sacramental Integrity; a Call to Spirituality; a Call to Church Authority; and a Call to Church Unity. The conference members summarized their proclamation at the beginning of their prologue:

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8 D. G. Hart, ed. *Reckoning with the Past: Historic Essays on American Evangelicalism from the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 20.

> In every age the Holy Spirit calls the church to examine its faithfulness to God's revelation in Scripture. We recognize with gratitude God's blessing through the evangelical resurgence in the church. Yet at such a time of growth we need to be especially sensitive to our weaknesses. We believe that today evangelicals are hindered from achieving full maturity by a reduction of the historic faith. There is, therefore, a pressing need to reflect upon the substance of the biblical and historic faith and to recover the fullness of this heritage. Without presuming to address all our needs, we have identified eight of the themes to which we as evangelical Christians must give careful theological consideration.[9]

The Chicago Call was essentially a call for the spiritual renewal of modern evangelicalism by returning to the doctrine and worship of the early church tradition. In addition to *The Chicago Call*, members of the group published *The Orthodox Evangelicals*, which gave an overview of the conference and featured articles that addressed each of the eight themes.[10] According to the former editor of *Christianity Today*, David Neff, "In both the *Chicago Call* and *Common Roots*, Webber and his friends saw the potential in tradition for the renewal and reorientation of evangelicalism. This was not capital *T* tradition as some fixed authority, but a dynamic history of the Holy Spirit in the church, leading and guiding it (as Jesus had promised) into all truth (John 16:13)."[11] The call represented a call to maturity of the evangelical movement in the United States. Commenting on the need for a fuller understanding of their place in history, Richard Lovelace, who was a professor of church history at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, said that "research into the historic roots of evangelicalism is one of the most fruitful and illuminating methods of resolving the identity crisis of

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9 Robert Webber and Donald Bloesch, *The Orthodox Evangelicals: Who They Are and What They Are Saying* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978). 11-12.

10 As a follow up to the conference, Robert Webber and Donald Bloesch edited a small book to reflect on the significance of the event called *The Orthodox Evangelicals: Who They Are and What They Are Saying* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978).

11 David Neff from the foreword, in Robert Webber, *Common Roots, The Original Call for an Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 7.

the movement."[12] *The Chicago Call* was not initially well received among evangelicals and was not without its critics.[13] It did however, provide the beginning of what would be the foundation of a call for evangelicals to recovery their historic roots.

While *The Chicago Call* wasn't widely received by evangelicals, it was through the writings and teaching of Webber that the initial concepts of *The Chicago Call* began to spread. As the most prominent member of *The Chicago Call* core group, Webber published *Common Roots* (1978) as a personal response to the conference, setting out a theological agenda for the renewal of evangelicalism. In it, Webber identified five key areas of recovery that were needed for renewal: church, worship, theology, mission, and spirituality. Webber argued, "My argument is that the era of the early church (AD 100-500), and particularly the second century, contains insights evangelicals need to recover. . . . Thus, to recover this era of the church is to restore the earliest expressions of Christian theology and church practice that grew out of apostolic teaching."[14] These words were intensely personal for Webber. His own spiritual journey led him from being a fundamentalist Baptist to eventually joining the Episcopal Church.

Over the course of his academic career, Webber went on to write more than forty books including an ancient-future series by Baker Academic Press. Webber coined the term "ancient-future" to describe his vision for the recovery of church tradition among evangelicals in the twenty-first century. He wrote for both academic and popular audiences, but the majority of his writing was focused on reaching the broader evangelical world with renewal through the recovery of worship. Between 1985 and 2007, Webber wrote eight books on worship, developed a seven-volume worship curriculum, and edited an eight-volume Library of Christian Worship, as well as writing numerous articles related to "ancient-future

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12 Cited in Robert Webber and Donald Bloesch *The Orthodox Evangelicals: Who They Are and What They Are Saying* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 45.

13 For criticism see also Elisha Coffman's chapter "The Chicago Call and Responses," in George Kalantzis and Andrew Tooley, ed., *Evangelicals and the Early Church: Recovery, Reform, Renewal* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

14 Robert Webber, *Common Roots,* 32.

worship."

Webber founded the Institute for Worship Studies in 1998 and was its first president. After his death in January 2007, the Board of Trustees unanimously voted to change the name of IWS to the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies in honor of his contributions. The Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship in Florida and the Robert E. Webber Center for an Ancient Evangelical Future, located at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, are both the result of Webber's lasting legacy among evangelicals. His lifelong legacy of helping renew evangelicalism through the recovery of church tradition can be summed in the phrase "the road to the future runs through the past."[15]

A common term for the recovery of tradition among Protestants and evangelicals is "ressourcement," which has been appropriated by evangelical scholars in North America to refer to the theological recovery of early church tradition, especially in the area of patristic studies. Professor of Medieval and Spiritual Theology at Biola University, Greg Peters, notes, "Ressourcement is not just a rediscovery or recovery of the past for past's sake, but it is a rediscovery and recovery of the past in order to give fresh expression to contemporary faith."[16] Over the last decade there has been a steady rise of academic publications among major evangelical publishers that have focused on ressourcement such as InterVarsity, Eerdmans, and Baker Academic.[17] The preface of the Baker Academic Evangelical Ressourcement series says, "The Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church's Future series is designed to address the ways in which Christians may draw upon thought and life of the early church to respond to the challenges facing today's church."[18] Oftentimes, evangelical ressourcement refers to drawing wisdom from the early Christian interpretation of scripture.[19]

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15 Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 35.

16 Greg Peters, *The Story of Monasticism: Retrieving an Ancient Tradition for Contemporary Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

17 See the list of publishers in footnote 2.

18 D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 9.

19 See John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Renfro, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible.* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005).

A key example of this retrieval among Baptists is being led by Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School and a Southern Baptist theologian. George calls this theological recovery of tradition among evangelicals "Retrieval for the Sake of Renewal." He was instrumental in founding the Center for Baptist Renewal, which calls for a recovery of "the classic creeds of the early church and the confessions of the Reformation (including Baptist confessions). They include the enrichment of common worship by lectionary readings, the liturgical calendar, the biblical and historical prayers of the church (especially the Lord's Prayer), corporate confession of sin, and the assurance of pardon. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are described as "signs and seals of God's grace, expressions of individual faith and bonds of the church's covenantal unity in Christ."[20] The retrieval of tradition among evangelicals in the United States is not a rejection of the evangelical heritage, but a spiritual renewal movement that represents a higher synthesis that goes beyond traditional categories of evangelicalism.[21]

NEO-LITURGICAL CHURCHES

There is a significant gap in the literature in examining how new churches are embracing tradition and liturgical practices. Therefore, the next section will consist of four case studies of neo-liturgical churches, new churches from various denominational backgrounds that are embracing historic forms of worship and appropriating them for contemporary contexts.[22] These churches are not just adopting the ancient practices, they are often contextualizing them or changing them in subtle ways to incorporate them within the context of a modern worship experience. I refer to these churches as "neo-liturgical churches" because, as I will document, they

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20 Timothy George, "Retrieval for the Sake of Renewal," in *First Things* (May 2017). This article concerns the Center for Baptist Renewal, whose purpose is "to help Baptists better situate ourselves within the broader body of Christ and the historic Christian tradition." https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/05/retrieval-for-the-sake-of-renewal, accessed March 19, 2020.

21 See Winfield Bevins, *Ever Ancient Ever New: The Allure of Liturgy for a New Generation (*Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

22 There is also the Ancient-Future Faith Network (AFFN), which "is a non-profit, cross-denominational association of like-minded Christian individuals and churches–evangelicals of all kinds with a longing to return to classic Christian orthodoxy and practice, and a deep hunger for renewal in the worship and spirituality of the church." https://www.ancientfuturefaithnetwork.org/, accessed March 19, 2020.

make up a distinct movement of new churches that are experimenting with new forms of liturgical worship, blending old with new. This section will also examine the extent of the influence of the evangelical ressourcement movement on the liturgical practices of neo-liturgical churches through case studies.

The purpose of this section is also to show how the blending of liturgical worship in a modern context is a popular and successful way of meeting the needs of young adults today. These churches do this by connecting history with the present. In the pages that follow, I want to introduce you to several neo-liturgical churches so you can hear from them firsthand and learn how they are recovering ancient practices in the context of a modern service. While there are countless examples to draw from, I selected these churches because they represent a diversity of styles and traditions within this movement.

Imago Dei, Raleigh, North Carolina

Several years ago my family and I travelled to Raleigh, North Carolina, hoping to avoid a hurricane. My friend, Tony Merida, is the pastor of Imago Dei Church and a preaching professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and he had invited us to attend his new church. From the moment we arrived, we realized that Imago Dei was not your typical Baptist church plant. For starters, we noticed that it was buzzing with twenty- and thirty-somethings, many of whom were seminary or university students. As we experienced worship with them, I was surprised to see them reclaiming several elements of historical liturgy. Imago Dei is one of many churches today that represents a growing trend among young adults: joining the ancient with the new.

Imago Dei is also different from other Baptist churches in reciting the historic creeds of the faith. Here is how they describe their worship: "Certain aspects of the service will be consistent every week. One of those aspects is reading Scripture out loud together. At times, we also recite ancient confessions like The Apostle's Creed, and we often conclude by reciting a biblical prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer."[23]

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23 "What to Expect," Imago Dei, https://idcraleigh.com/im-new/#whattoexpect, accessed March 19, 2020.

While this combination of practices is atypical for Baptist churches, Imago Dei is not alone. It's been on a journey with hundreds of other churches from various denominational backgrounds that are reclaiming the historic forms of worship and appropriating them for contemporary contexts. These churches are not just adopting the ancient practices, they are often contextualizing them or changing them in subtle ways to incorporate them within the context of a modern worship experience. I refer to these churches as "neo-liturgical churches," and they make up a distinct movement that is experimenting with new forms of liturgical worship, blending old with new. By utilizing both historic and modern aspects of worship, neo-liturgical churches are resonating deeply with many young adults.

Offerings Community of First UMC, Lexington, KY

In the heart of Lexington, Kentucky, Offerings Community of First United Methodist Church represents a congregation of young adults who embrace what some are calling "convergent" worship. Teddy Ray, lead pastor of Offerings, has seen the value of rooting his church in the historical practices of *Word* and *table* while also maintaining a contemporary aspect to the service. Teddy is a Methodist minister who started Offerings Community as a contemporary youth worship service of First United Methodist Church in Lexington with only a handful of youth and young adults. Over the last few years, they have grown into an intergenerational community of young adults, families, and children. As the church has developed its own distinct identity over the years, it has transitioned into a neo-liturgical fellowship. Through the years, the Offerings team has learned to contextualize the historic practices of the church for today's Christian, including the style, design, and architecture of the worship space. For example, their worship space portrays the images of some ancient icons.

The bridging of the gap between ancient and modern begins with a reorientation of how worship experiences are defined. When I asked whether Offerings conducts a contemporary or traditional worship service, Teddy responded by sharing a paradigm shift they've made. He said he'd like to change the conversation regarding the Offerings style of worship,

so when people ask him that question, he tells them, "We do *Word* and *table* worship." Of course, people aren't used to descriptions of worship formulated around the substance of the service as opposed to the style of music played. Teddy, however, said,

> This is the best description I can give. In fact, it's the only description I can give and know it will remain true. Every week, we hear the Word of God. Week after week it comes to us to guide, rebuke, encourage, or correct. And every week, we come to the Lord's Table to commemorate Christ's sacrificial death, participate in his body and blood, and receive the spiritual strengthening to do his will. *Word* and *table—these* are the essentials of our worship, and nothing else.

This form of worship has created expectations among the worshipers, but these are based upon substance rather than style. What's the takeaway here? For Offerings, worship is not about style. Rather, it is about recovering the content and substance within a liturgical tradition for a postmodern context through the *Word* and *table* structure.

Sojourn Church, Louisville, KY

Yet another example of a fresh expression of liturgical innovation is Sojourn Community Church, located in the heart of Louisville, Kentucky. Sojourn draws a large number of young adults from Southern Seminary, the flagship seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention. Like Imago Dei, highlighted earlier, this is not your typical Baptist church. Mike Cosper, pastor of worship and arts, describes Sojourn's liturgical journey:

> At Sojourn, we came to embrace a loosely liturgical model about seven years ago. The decision came not out of a desire to reform our worship services, but out of a broader desire to root everything we do in the gospel. As we dialogued about worship, we came to see that the historic rhythms of liturgical worship helped to reinforce and remember the rhythms of the gospel.

Sojourn is a good example of what is referred to as "liturgical catechesis."

As we saw earlier, catechesis is a way of teaching using repetition and a question-and-answer format. Liturgical catechesis teaches the faith through the repetition of words, prayers, and songs that are sung each week. At Sojourn, the addition of formal liturgy helped create rhythms that led people to embrace a more gospel-centered worship. Cosper describes the pattern of their liturgy through four general movements: adoration (God is holy), confession and lament (we are sinners), assurance (Jesus saves us from our sin), and sending (the Holy Spirit sends us on mission). In an interview for The Gospel Coalition's website, Cosper said,

> Within these broad categories are weekly practices, including a call to worship, confession of sin, passing the peace, and so on. Each service comes to a climax at the Communion table and ends with a sense of commitment and commission. It's like "gospel practice"—a rehearsal of the rhythms of the gospel that not only mark conversion, but mark the everyday life of Christians.[24]

Sojourn has carefully crafted a theologically robust liturgy, and the leaders help teach the gospel to their members in a way that is memorable and lasting.

Trinity Anglican Mission, Atlanta, GA

Next, we'll look at another type of "blended" church, one that has developed from the charismatic movement, seeking to combine openness to the Holy Spirit with the structures of historic, liturgical worship. In 2005, Kris McDaniel and a few of his closest friends planted a church through the Vineyard Movement to reach their friends in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. Over the course of several years, this church plant became an Anglican church, one that embraces evangelical and liturgical dimensions of the Christian faith, yet also retains an emphasis on the present-day gifts of the Spirit. Today, Trinity Anglican Mission has over one thousand members on two campuses, and a majority of the members are young adults under the age of thirty-five.

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24 John Starke, "TGC Asks: How Do You Use Liturgical Elements in Your Church Worship?" The Gospel Coalition, April 24, 2011, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tgc-asks-how-do-you-use-liturgical-elements-in-your-church-worship, accessed March 19, 2020.

After learning of their story and their embrace of liturgy, I called Kris and spoke with him about their journey from the Vineyard Movement to the Anglican Church. Kris suggested I fly out to Atlanta to see for myself what the Lord was doing at Trinity, so I accepted his offer and booked a plane ticket. Not knowing what I was getting into, I boarded a plane to spend a weekend observing the church and listening to their story.

As I entered the refurbished warehouse space where the congregation meets, I noticed hundreds of young adults, many who looked to be young professionals, all drinking coffee while waiting to enter the sanctuary. As the worship service started, people began filling up the seats—some in prayerful postures, others lifting their hands in worship. The worship music that day was stirring and powerful, and I was moved by the liturgy of the service, which brought together a beautiful blend of old and new spiritual traditions. From the music, to the sermon, to times of prayer, and to the Lord's Table, Trinity Anglican Mission embodied what some call the "three streams" approach to worship, an approach that has come to be known as the Convergence Movement.

At the root of Trinity's three streams expression is their commitment to helping people grow into Christ's image. According to Kris,

> It is our conviction that this approach encourages humility, maturity, and a healthy appreciation for diversity. When we say that we are "evangelical," we mean that we take seriously God's command to speak about and live like Jesus. We preach and teach from the Bible because we believe it is the inspired Word of God, and our desire is for all people to enter into a saving relationship with Jesus. When we say that we are "liturgical," we mean that we value the longevity of historic tradition, the rhythms of the church calendar, the consistency of a lectionary-based teaching plan, and our connection to the global church. When we say that we are "charismatic," we mean that we believe God is present and active among his people. We anticipate the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church for the conviction of sin, the illumination of truth, and the restoration of all things.[25]

Since I began investigating churches like Trinity, I have come across

25 For more information, see the Trinity Anglican website at https://atltrinity.org.

dozens of churches that are embracing the three streams approach to ministry and worship. Three streams churches unite the charismatic, the evangelical, and the liturgical dimensions of the Christian faith into one flowing river of worship. There are churches that come to this from different sides of the aisle. There are traditional, mainline, and liturgical churches that are embracing charismatic elements into their worship, and there are charismatics who are moving to embrace traditional liturgy. Each side is drawing from the other in an unusual confluence of old and new.

Common Themes for Reaching the Next Generation

From my research I have concluded that these neo-liturgical churches are successfully reaching young adults in unusual ways. These examples of churches highlight how the embrace of neo-liturgical worship—an eclectic combination of old and new forms of liturgy—is taking hold in many congregations all across the theological and denominational spectrum. While each church is unique, these congregations share something in common: a creative balance of historic liturgy and contemporary elements of modern worship. Each of these neo-liturgical churches is also attracting many millennials and Gen Xers. Because of this, they offer us additional insight into the reasons why young adults feel drawn to liturgical worship.

What is it about neo-liturgical churches and the way they worship that resonates with young adults?

1. *Ancient and Modern Worship*

For most evangelical Americans, worship is immediately equated with music—with a specific style of music. But as we noted earlier, this understanding of worship is far too limiting. It's not biblical, and it leads to a reduction in our understanding of the rich history and development of worship over the centuries. Worship is singing, but it is more. It is the act of giving all of ourselves back to God by giving him respect, reverence, honor, and glory. God is worthy of our highest praise and worship, and he has called us to live all of life "to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:12). True worship of God begins in our hearts as we give adoration, glory, and praise to God, and it manifests itself outwardly as we lift up our voices to God in prayer, praise, and song. But it's not enough to simply know and mentally

comprehend the definition of worship. We, as living beings, must practice worship, and liturgy offers us a tangible and interactive structure in which worship can freely occur.

For many young adults, the embrace of liturgy leads to greater freedom in worship. Many young adults feel at home in neo-liturgical churches because of the blend of the ancient and modern. Susan, who is in her twenties, told me, "Our worship is both formal and informal, so we can come as we are, yet feel a part of something bigger than us. Through the liturgy, we don't have to worry about what's coming next. The words and prayers of the liturgy that we say each week sink deep into our hearts and allow us to worship from the heart." The ancient-modern vibe meets two longings: a desire to connect with friends in a shared faith experience, and a connection to the past, sort of like a reunion with family members who bring wisdom, maturity, and perspective.

Neo-liturgical worship services often feel very intimate, akin to worshipping in a living room. Some neo-liturgical churches even design their worship space to reflect this aesthetic of intimacy by using candles, icons, tapestries, and congregational seating that is circular rather than linear. Some churches write their own songs and prayers to embody the embrace of both old and new. Written prayers are one way neo-liturgical churches involve the entire church body in worship, by allowing various members to come forward and offer prayer on behalf of the community of faith. Some churches also have prayer stations, crosses, and designated places in the sanctuary where people receive prayer during the service.

2. *Word and Table*

Earlier in this article, Offerings Community used the term "Word and table" to describe their worship. But this way of framing worship is not unique to Offerings. It is a popular way of structuring the liturgy and worship in a neo-liturgical church today and is a model of worship in which the Word refers to the place of Scripture reading, teaching, and preaching of the Word of God in the worship service, while the reference to the table refers to the Lord's Supper, the act of remembering the death of Jesus Christ and anticipating his second coming by partaking of bread

and wine.[26]

Word and table structure isn't a static form of worship; rather, it provides a framework that these churches are building upon. Many of these churches are infusing their liturgical worship with contemporary forms of artistic expression that connect with the hearts and minds of young adults today. Every week, neo-liturgical churches retell the gospel story through the structure of their liturgy while utilizing additional contemporary connection points: modern music styles, paintings, and other art forms in conjunction with the Word and Table.

3.Deep Sense of Community

One of the first things people notice when they step into a neo-liturgical church is the warm environment and strong sense of community among the members. Almost universally you will find a coffee station in the lobby, with young people gathered around drinking lattes and talking about life together. A common joke is that coffee is another sacrament in these churches, one that prepares people for worship. This intentional cultivation of community goes beyond a service or experience of corporate worship, as most of these churches place a strong emphasis on small groups, gathering together throughout the week across the cities to meet in homes, bars, or coffee houses.

Many of the leaders I met were humble about their churches and radiated a strong sense of authenticity. In several cases, it was difficult to differentiate the leaders from the members until people separated from the group to lead worship or preach the sermon. The leaders blend in with the people, as members of the community. A leader in a neo-liturgical church places a strong emphasis on being accessible, "just one of the members of the church." One member told me, "Our pastor is just like one of us. On Sundays, you don't know who the pastor is until he gets up to preach."

CONCLUSION

The late Robert Webber, one of the forerunners of today's ancient-future faith movement, once wrote, "The road to the future runs through

26 Matt. 26:26–27; Mark 14:22–23; Luke 22:17–19; 1 Cor. 11:20–24.

the past." For many of these new churches, embracing liturgy isn't about reliving the past; it's about retrieving it and appropriating it into the context of life in twenty-first century North America. As Martin Smith states, "Faithfulness to tradition does not mean mere perpetuation or copying of ways from the past but a creative recovery of the past as a source of inspiration and guidance in our faithfulness to God's future."[27] A liturgical faith is not about reverting back to "the good ol' days," but is a way for the past, present, and future to come together for a new generation.

As we have seen in this chapter, neo-liturgical churches are not unique to a particular person or church denomination. Many of these churches have come to embrace the richness of the liturgical way of living out the Christian faith after a period of searching, out of a longing for deeper roots and a connection to the past. Young adults are often attracted to these churches because they combine the best of both worlds, providing spiritual formation practices that are rooted in the Christian tradition along with an emphasis on deep community with others.

In closing, while the past provides us with an abundance of wisdom concerning how to make disciples, we must also be actively engaged with our modern context. Contextual theology is theology that is formed in a unique context, and these churches are embracing a contextual liturgy that takes into consideration the local social climate. The stories of these four churches remind us that the future of the church not only lies in the traditions of the past, but in the unique implementation of these concepts in our world today. In the words of Leonard Sweet, "Postmodern Pilgrims must strive to keep the past and the present in perpetual conversation so every generation will find a fresh expression of the Gospel that is anchored solidly to the faith that was once delivered."[28] These churches can teach us that the future of the church will be found on the road where the past and the present meet.

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27 Quoted in Esther de Waal, *Seeking Life: The Baptismal Invitation of the Rule of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 26.

28 Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in the New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 17.

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