

Article for Boca Delray Life "God's Squad" May 2007

The Rev. Andrew D. Hagen, Pastor of Advent Ministries

The anonymous note was scrawled in pencil and placed in the offering basket. It said, "Our worship service today has once again showed that Pastor Hagen has no respect for God's house. He is disgracing the altar of God." Ouch-that hurt! This invective came about 3 months into my current call at Advent Lutheran Church. How had I offended? Let me count the ways. It might have been the playing of a punk rock song during my sermon. It may have been the installation of projector screens in our sanctuary. It could have been my "Fruit of the Spirit" cartoons on those screens with the song "Tequila" in the background. It probably was one of the film clips I used to illustrate a message. It most likely was my references to the television show "Lost" or my children's sermon where I wore a Superman shirt. Any or all of these-take your pick.

I was not surprised. I am a veteran of what we call the "Worship Wars" fought within the mainstream Protestant churches. But the battle rages on. One army, faithful Christian soldiers, understands worship as a time to gather humbly in the presence of God, repeat the time honored liturgy, and eschew new-fangled distractions from the purity of word and water and bread and wine. I love these people. They are my people. They are my parents and grandparents and even some brothers and sisters. They find comfort, security, peace and hope as they worship in much the same way their ancestors did. They love the past but they are not stuck in it either. They can be moved to sing at the top of their lungs as long as it is a favorite old hymn and they can be moved to tears by the simple words of a pastor in the pulpit. They get all askew and look askance at what is happening in those "modern churches."

But there is another army. This is the host of people who grew up within the traditional church, love it, but would like to shake a little dust off the bulletins (or put them down altogether so they can clap!). They also look around at worship in vain to find their own generation that listens to iTunes, owns TiVos, and live online. They wonder, "How can we worship in a way that will reach and teach our friends who don't share our heritage but do share our hunger for spiritual things?" So organs are moved aside for rock and roll bands, historic words are replaced by real life dramas, sermons laden with historic references are now laced with contemporary examples, and, oh yeah, hymnals are projected on big, colorful screens. You know what? It's working. Most of the growing churches are offering some kind of "contemporary worship" experience. They face the heat of the traditionalists and alternate between humility and their own form of self-righteousness.

The war is silly and sad because, as one song writer puts it, "I'm coming back to the heart of worship and its all about You." If, as one catechism states it, "the chief purpose of humans is to worship God," then our only concern should be, "Are we worshipping God or are we fighting about how to worship God?" You say tomato and I say tomahto. But does that mean we should call the whole thing off? We need to understand that just as God has made us all to be unique, God has tuned us all to different ways to worship Him.

I am very happy to say that after many long battles that I see this happening all over Christendom. We are learning to respect these different ways and even seeking to broaden our repertoire of worship skills as well. Postmodern kids are lighting candles and singing old hymns. Seniors are clapping and laughing (in church?) An example of this is that this Sunday our chancel choir and our praise band are putting on a joint concert at two services, I will be chanting the ancient liturgy at one and playing guitar at another, and we have a special video to show at all three. Maybe I'll get a note. Maybe, this time it will be "Thanks for helping me worship God today."