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Worship
in an Age of
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Occasional Services: Border Crossings

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THE CONVERGENCE of ecumenical liturgical thinking, particularly since the 1963 promulgation of the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, has come to identify the eucharist as the central action of the church, the fount as well as summit of the church's life.¹ Since 1963, studies have explicitly pointed to the gathering of God's baptized, holy people as the appropriate context for the meal.² Most recently, serious scholarship has focused on the relationship between the eucharistic community and unchurched people,³ and indeed, all of creation.⁴

There is a danger, however, in fixating on the essentials of the eucharistic gathering, for such action can suggest that the church has no official liturgical life apart from the eucharist. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* even warns of such reductionist thinking.⁵ Our focus here is on a diverse constellation of rites called the occasional services, which cluster around the central activities of the church. They are the liturgical events of the church's cradle-to-grave ministry, the day-to-day, seasonal, and life cycle occasions that provide the necessary counterpoint to the church gathered weekly around the word, the holy bath, and Christ's holy meal. Although some of the occasional services may be celebrated during the eucharistic gathering, others occur outside the normal Sunday liturgy in homes, hospitals, schools, and places of business—in short, wherever God's people venture. The occasional services take the church to the very borders of faith, to the places where belief confronts and converses with unbelief, to the places the Bible calls “the ends of the earth.” The occasional services’ ability to embody God’s healing and empowering word even at the borders reveals their missional character.

OCCASIONAL MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH

The church is the gathered community of those called out to be Christ's body active in this world. Christ's body the church, however, is not static; it is constantly in flux, growing and declining, reflecting the cycles of life manifest in community. This growth and decline is reflected in the rites and rituals that comprise the occasional services. The occasional services address various themes, including invitation; God's household and people; nourishment, enabling, and sustaining; affirmation and equipping for the future; and healing, forgiveness, and being commended to God. As the church lives out its calling ecclesially (intentionally as "church") and familiarly (in the day-to-day events of God's people as "family" or within other meaningful associations), some occasions will demand ritual observance. Family systems theory and recent ritual studies recognize the operative communities that affect the lives of people⁶ and also the ritual interactions that establish and deepen relationships as well as frustrate or destroy them.⁷ These events are part of the life cycle and must be ritually acknowledged or celebrated for the health and well-being of both individuals and community.

Communal interrelatedness is the hallmark of these rites, which are shaped not only by Jesus' own formative words to his disciples but the emerging ecclesiologyes apparent in Paul's and other biblical and post-testamental writings.⁸ We are at heart people called, healed, nourished, and sent by God's word. The occasional rites form concentric rings around that formative core of faith—word, bath, meal, and mission. This core constitutes the traditional "marks of the church,"⁹ from which the church's life flows, expressed most succinctly in the Sunday eucharistic gathering but also in daily life. The Pauline corporal and communal imagery of the church as "royal priesthood," "God's stewards and household," "a spiritual temple," and "Christ's own body"¹⁰ suggests the essential unity of purpose in the occasional services, despite their widely divergent content and ordering of details. Some of the occasional services reflect more than one aspect of the core. Some of the services may be encountered during the communion liturgy itself.

It is helpful when talking about the occasional services, such as the various rites in *Occasional Services* (1982),¹¹ to begin with some schema, to develop clusters of rites that share similar characteristics. We could focus primarily on how each relates to the marks of the church—word, baptism, eucharist, and mission. We could also look at the primary purpose of each rite, attending to rites of

invitation, nourishment, healing, and so forth. Given the topic of this volume, liturgy and *mission*, however, we will examine the rites in each of several venues for mission: the faith community itself; the family in its daily life apart from the faith community's eucharistic gathering; and the wider community, beyond the borders of these first two communities. Within each venue, we will notice, some rites are more closely related to the church's ministry of the word and others to baptism, eucharist, or mission.

CARING FOR THE FAITH COMMUNITY

We speak of baptism as a rite of initiation, and it makes sense that many of the occasional services that help us to care for one another as members of a faith community are related to this beginning point, our incorporation into the community. The number of rites associated with baptism has substantially expanded, thanks to widespread revival of the adult catechumenate and baptism in traditions that heretofore primarily baptized infants.¹² The church has had to relearn Paul's missional work "in the marketplace with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17). Thus, rites of welcoming and for the journey of discernment speak to the adult and embrace the longing and searching, crisis and resolution that have always been part of conversion.

Individual and corporate confession are connected theologically to baptism.¹³ It is through confession that the whole church and its individual members are enabled to walk daily in baptism. Rites of confession acknowledge our constant need for God's presence and action to fill us with truth and peace, purity, direct, reform, provide for, and establish the body of Christ in unity.¹⁴ A faith community as a whole is also susceptible to dissension; the ravages of sin are seen in the life of Christ's own body the church. That Luther refers to confession as "the third sacrament" reflects the historical practice of subsuming the cradle-to-grave ministries with individuals under the church's sacramental system. (It is helpful to remember that discussions about occasional services by Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians are likely to be couched in sacramental terms.)

The rites that cluster around the service of Christian burial are explicit extensions of the baptismal rites.¹⁵ The Commendation of the Dying announces baptism as the grounding event for the Christian's entire life; the readings for Comforting of the Bereaved echo this grounding. The funeral rite itself invokes central Pauline imagery about baptism, death, and resurrection, and the Committal

offers prayers "in sure and certain hope of the resurrection . . ." echoing the sixth chapter of Romans.¹⁶ All these rites have great impact on the life of the community, not just for the immediate family. The commendation of a brother or sister in Christ, a "fellow member" and "worker in the kingdom"¹⁷ is part of life's experience and a purpose of the funeral.

Although most of the liturgical action associated with holy communion pertains to the actual celebration of the meal within the context of the gathered community, congregations are recovering the ancient practice of taking the eucharistic elements from the communion liturgy to those who are sick or homebound. Far preferable to the current practice of "private communion"—a woeful contradiction in terms—is the extension of the community's meal to those who are absent but no less members of the faith community, a powerful witness not only to apostolic practice but to vital pastoral care in a culture that isolates individuals one from another. Rites of blessing for those who carry communion to the homebound as well as rites for distribution exist.

Rites for the establishment and blessing of those responsible for proclamation, teaching, and sacramental oversight¹⁸ of the word include ordination, consecration, installation, setting apart, induction, and commissioning, as well as the blessing of lectors.¹⁹ The church is indeed called to steward the ministry of the word, and such stewardship is essential to the church's well-being. Such ministries, however, are "instituted and appointed in order that God's Word may exert its power publically."²⁰ The impact of these word-centered rites, therefore, is seen not only within the faith community but in the wider community as well.

One of the most crucial questions currently facing the church, a question with significant implications for the viability of its mission and ministries, is about the nature of the various offices of ministry—ordered, rostered, and lay. At this time there is no consensus among traditions about ministry. Witness recent, painful debate over ecumenical dialogues among Lutherans, Episcopalians, and various Reformed traditions. Even within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we cannot point to a clear consensus on ministry.²¹ Thus, we should note with care the language and actions employed to communicate what the church believes is happening in the various occasional rites used for ritually setting apart individuals for service.

Some rites help Christian communities recognize the stages in the life cycle of their own institutions. Rites for the opening of a congregation or mission, a school or seminary academic year, or an

assembly or church conference remind us why these institutions exist, what God has called the church to do through these earthen vessels. Ecclesial rites of ending—when a congregation is closing, or a pastor or staff member leaves or retires—bring closure and are important for the life of the church. The same dynamic encountered at the time of death is to some extent present when a congregation or individual ends a particular ministry and is thus reflected in such rites. Usually far less emotional in impact, a rite for the closing of an academic year or assembly nevertheless lifts up both the accomplishments and hopes as well as the disappointments and sorrows of such gatherings. Importantly, God's presence and blessing are invoked not only on what has happened, but for the ongoing faith journey. The same is true for the rite of Farewell and Godspeed.²²

Blessings and dedications of people and things constitute another dimension of occasional services. Whether the purpose of the rite is to recognize the ministry of lectors, youth, or elders (perhaps using the rites provided in the African American resource for worship, *This Far by Faith*²³), or to dedicate a church building, its furnishings, or cemetery, such blessings announce that we stand on holy ground and that God's people are at work.

CARING FOR THE FAMILY

Obviously individuals and families may be deeply affected by the events recognized through the rites of their faith community. When a baptism or funeral is celebrated, someone confesses wrong doing and receives pardon, or a homebound loved one becomes part of the congregation's eucharistic celebration, it is not only the congregation that is affected. Individual members and the families of which they are a part are changed. Paul understands the Christian family²⁴ as a microcosm of the church; what is true of the interrelatedness in Christ of the church in general is true as well for the specific family.²⁵ Therefore, rites that solemnize a family's significant occasions are part of the constellation of occasional services and logical extensions of the church's ministry.

The cluster of events that ritualize marriage, formally and informally, establish new beginnings for the people involved as well as their extended circle of family and friends. A new family is formed, relationships adjust and shift accordingly. Banns may be formally read or posted. Prayers of blessing may accompany the couple. In rites of affirmation and blessing on an anniversary, we remember how God has worked through these people and pray for God's ongoing providence.

A significant development within the family-related rites is the recovery of the house blessing, important for married and single individuals alike in times of transition. Pastoral theology has helped the church articulate the holiness of the dwelling, even a dormitory room, a reality long recognized, for example, by the Jewish community.²⁶ Case studies demonstrate how simple prayers of blessing within the gathering of one's friends aid those who have moved to become settled and established at a time normally marked by crisis and turmoil.²⁷

An extension of the house blessing is the blessing of one's office or workplace, an event that invites the church to be present in the marketplace. Such rites provide strong witness to God's healing and energizing presence. In a culture that often expects people to keep work separate from the discipline of faith, a rite of blessing can begin to break down the artificial barriers.

There are familial rites for closure. The rite Farewell and God-speed, adjusted to bless a child leaving for college, for example, explicitly extends God's constant benediction into the home. The rites associated with death announce God's providential care of and presence for the dead as well as ourselves, even when we confront the "last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26).



CARING FOR THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Baptism and the ministry of the laity is the starting point for the ministry of the church to the wider community. Although ordained ministries have historically received greater attention, the ministry of all the baptized, sometimes called the ministry of the laity, is now the subject of widespread recognition.²⁸ Importantly, newer occasional rites associated with baptism also include rites of blessing for the vocations of all the baptized,²⁹ the ever-present and perennially overlooked compliment to ordained ministry. Such attention to the ministry of the laity is crucial, for it is in the daily encounter of Christians with non-Christians, in life at the border, that significant missional activity occurs.

Living day to day as God's baptized children finds us more often outside the church's building than in the pew. Our lives are punctuated by the events of birth, growth, and dying, of change and transition, of becoming and letting go, of beginnings and endings. These events place us, with Paul, in the marketplace, with the *hoi polloi* who "know not the Lord Jesus."³⁰ For many Christians, a simple roll call of family members will reveal people who

are unchurched, disaffected, searching, or even openly hostile to the church. Whether or not they are members of a faith community, consider themselves freelance Christians, or believe themselves to be spiritual in some fashion, they are nevertheless in relationship with the faithful and will likely be included in family or church functions such as weddings, baptisms, funerals, or even ordinations. Some Christians feel embarrassed or uncomfortable when non-Christians are present for Christian rites, but such occasions are opportunities to embody God's always gracious invitation to draw near.

Just as the rites through which a faith community cares for itself affect the families connected with a congregation, the rites used to nurture both the faith community and the family have implications for the wider community. To some extent, then, all the occasional services could be said to serve the wider community. The occasional ministries of the church extend outward in mission from the church's life-giving engagement with the sacramental and proclaimed Word, Jesus Christ. The church lives out the relationship God has established in Christ through the power of the Spirit by entering into mission and service in the world. The church carries its godly mission into all the world in witness to God's intense and personal involvement in all of the rhythms of life. The occasional services provide a liturgical and pastoral bridge from the proclamatory and sacramental center of the church's life in worship to its borders and beyond.

The church lives from the center with its eyes on the borders, to the places and times when God's presence causes the stranger and unbeliever to stop, turn aside to notice, and ponder life's meaning. Such godly activity at the borders is easily overlooked, particularly by the church itself. The church interprets the world from its proclamatory and sacramental perspective. *Church* conjures up for Christians liturgical scenarios involving altars and pulpits, open hymnals and people singing, a vocabulary of faith, and catechized patterns of action. In these contexts God's people more or less know what to do. Strangers, however, have no experience with the proclamatory and sacramental core of faith. Liturgical celebrations may appear vaguely familiar, although often unintelligible, incidental, and even threatening.³¹ Nevertheless, the church welcomes the stranger into a faith community's attempt to wrestle with life-and-death issues. Whether a crisis is spurred by a birth, marriage, divorce, move, change or loss of occupation, death, or nagging questions about self-worth and life's meaning, strangers embark on a sometimes frantic, sometimes systematic search for answers that

may lead them to the church or its members. It is at these moments, when strangers tread on holy ground, that the church can and ought to speak God's welcome to them.

In the church's ministries and rites, God's Word of life and love for all creation is made incarnate.³² What does the church say and do about the establishment of families, birth and growth, maturity and decline, dying and death? What does the church say and do about the need for human community, for God's presence in that community, and our culture's fixation on individualism? What does the church, itself compromised by internal strife, say and model to a world broken by suspicion and hatred? What does the church say and do in the face of isolation and despair, sickness and suffering? The church is privileged to bear God's invitation to be healed, restored, reconciled, and recreated. It can speak God's welcome clearly, ambiguously, or not at all, depending on how it orders its life and ministry.

The occasional services and ministries bring order to the church's inner life and public witness. Although the eucharistic gathering of the church is the meeting and meal of the baptized, the occasional ministries and their rites intentionally reach out to include those whom Paul addresses as strangers and unbelievers, individuals and groups who live at the church's borders and are not part of the eucharistic community. These people are very likely to be included among the interlocking circles of members' family and friends, associates and colleagues, neighbors and acquaintances who play important roles in Christians' lives. Thus, whenever marriages or funerals, ordinations or commissionings, house blessings and dedications occur, the church invites outsiders to the events, for they too are a part of the lives of the faithful and are affected by what happens among the faithful. The church's intention is not merely to be nice to the outsider, nor should such events be seen as opportunities to "win souls for Christ," to boost the numbers tallied by eager evangelism teams. Rather, the occasional services offer opportunities to embody God's hospitality to the stranger. Within life-cycle celebrations, strangers are invited to become acquainted with the church and its people, thereby seeing how their own family members, relatives, and friends live as a part of the church. Importantly, occasional services and ministries become the opportunities for the church to assure strangers that they, too, are cared about and prayed for.

Christians encounter strangers and unbelievers at every turn in life. Some of these people beyond the border simply never have had the opportunity to hear about or witness God's love for humankind

embodied in community. Others may have been a part of a church at one time but have fallen away through boredom, crisis, or misunderstanding. Some people are distracted by and addicted to societal and cultural lures. Not a few simply have difficulty committing to any relationship in an era that has drifted into isolation and individualism. Still others have been profoundly hurt by the church's misunderstanding of its own mission and calling, alienated by the church's arrogance and hypocrisy, real or imagined. When such is the case, lines are drawn and enemies declared. Depending on the perspective, either the church or the stranger has become the hostile adversary.

The occasional ministries of the church demonstrate that God is not willing to allow creation's hostility to alienate it from God and the church. This divine will drives the church to develop ministries that struggle "to convert the *hostis* into a *hospes*, the enemy into a guest and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood and sisterhood can be formed and fully experienced."³³ It is God's fundamental desire for unity and peace, for health and wholeness³⁴ that impels occasional ministry. This becomes the context and commentary on life from the cradle to the grave, the church's traditional designation for such pastoral care. Whether by establishing a new congregation, setting apart a missionary or consecrating a deaconess, blessing the vocation of all the baptized, or through the rites of healing and forgiveness, the church demonstrates and incarnates God's desire for health and salvation, reconciliation and wholeness, relationship and community. Occasional ministries bring the faithful and any in their company full circle. Life and relationship, occasional ministries remind us, are gifts of God that can be treasured but ultimately never possessed and hoarded. Regardless of the myriad ecclesiastical and ministerial patterns that have been evolving throughout history, the biblical hallmark of authentic ministry is its God-gifted ability to still the world's hostility. The ability to still hostility is possible when the church opens itself to become an instrument of God's reconciling work—sometimes in spite of itself—and discovers itself to be in need of reconciliation, healing, and forgiveness.

God-in-Christ enters "enemy territory," a society of people so immersed in rebellion and delusion that they no longer recognize or acknowledge him. Into such an estranged world, the Holy One can only come as stranger—one unrecognized, unsought, and unloved by most of those to whom he came.³⁵

The missional church is seized by the memory of all that has divided it from the love of God and neighbor, rendering even the

church enemy territory (Eph. 2:13-16). Thus, old hostilities need to be reconciled and walls of sin broken down. A new creation emerges or is more clearly perceived. Through the church's gracious actions, outsiders should be able to hear, see, and respond to God's call of reconciliation and welcome. Moreover, substantive mission is not the result of Christians becoming savvy marketers of religious goods or feelings. Nor does it arise because we change the source and summit of worship, the holy ingathering of God's people who celebrate the life-giving, healing, forgiving, sustaining, merciful, and just community God makes possible. In essence, mission remains the sometimes intentional, often subtle, and seemingly insignificant process of embodying God's incredible work on behalf of creation for those who either do not know this God or have been alienated from or bored by God's people. The church's mission also becomes more credible when God's presence is found to have meaning in the day-to-day experiences of living and dying. This is the stuff of the occasional services.



THE ROLE OF THE RITES IN THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Strangers who cross faith's borders are being drawn near to the center of the church's life: the eucharistic gathering of the baptized. The Spirit blows where it wills, guiding and nudging strangers in surprising and unexpected ways. The paths are many and varied; the trip is slower than card-carrying Christians might think proper, for it entails a reorienting of life itself. Strangers need time to investigate and question, to come to some understanding of the deep yearning they sense.³⁶ At first, the faithful might not notice the stranger's presence—across an office desk, at the gym, in the neighborhood—and openness to the ever-beckoning Spirit dwelling within God's faithful. Certainly the stranger is unlikely to be in the position to assess what is happening, at least in theological terms. Whether because of spiritual hunger, a longing, or mere curiosity, the stranger may choose to draw near, to accept an invitation to a wedding or neighbor's consecration, or simply to show up at the congregation that seems so important to a friend or acquaintance.

The church itself needs to engage in some serious cleansing of the heart, mind, and ears in order to expect strangers in its midst, as well as listen to them. Too quickly the faithful's senses are numbed to their own and others' yearning. Renowned preacher Barbara Brown Taylor observes:

My secret fear about churchgoing is that it works like a vaccine: a couple of drops under the tongue each week and pretty soon we are immune to the whole thing. The God-beseeching language requires no extraordinary effort. The summoning of the Holy Spirit expects no untoward response. Even the sacrament, when it comes, tastes more like breakfast than sacrifice.³⁷

Family systems theory suggests that transitional events in life—and these are what the occasional services ritualize—constitute major upheavals and crises that can threaten destruction for the ones experiencing the events, particularly for individuals or groups who have no structured faith or for whom faith has become a major struggle. On these occasions, questions about ultimate meaning and purposefulness arise. At such critical moments, the stranger and Christian alike, out of fear, anger, despair, or hope, ask where God is in the midst of the turmoil.

Far from being nicely domesticated rituals for the initiated, the occasional services demand to be celebrated for what they are: ministry at the borders, the occasions of life full of glory and gore, joy and suffering, unvarnished and unadorned. Even the "churchy" rites such as ordination and consecration cannot afford to be tamed into pious submission, for Christ promises to send his disciples out "like lambs into the midst of wolves" (Luke 10:3). Thus it is that the church prays for laity committed to serve in the world as well as to have "courage, patience, and vision."³⁸ Ordinands also submit to pointed vows.³⁹ Taylor offers some sage advice:

One good way to get some perspective on this is to leave church more often—not permanently, but regularly—to vacate the holy premises and mingle with people whose lives do not include church. Ask them why not and listen to what they say without trying to convince them they are wrong. Find out what really matters to them, and stay open to the possibility that they too know something about the truth. Then head back to church with them in tow, if only in your heart, and let them nag you while you are doing whatever you do there.⁴⁰

THE SHAPE OF THE RITES

The occasional services display a clear unity of purpose despite the myriad differences of detail and specific, ritual purpose.⁴¹ The table of contents of *Occasional Services* or other similar resources lists rites, prayers, and liturgical resources that at first glance seem to be related to one another only insofar as they are religious observances for a particular tradition. What is not as readily apparent is the

sheer force of the faith community's life required to integrate these various ritual acts.⁴² What holds the occasional services together is an implicit pattern of meaning and movement operative in all such rites. This pattern functions, crudely put, in the same way and for the same purpose as notes posted on the family's refrigerator: the schedules and reminders keep the whole family mindful of individuals' and groups' appointments, obligations, and important events.

The occasional services' implicit patterns all serve to remind individuals and communities that we do not live in isolation. When the family dashes from the dinner table and the church is dismissed into the world to serve, life conspires to isolate and fragment. The professional juggles family and work demands; soccer and PTA compete with family dinner and intimacy; individualism and indifference ravage the faith community into which God calls people. Thus, for the church, the occasional services celebrate and solemnize the occasions in a faith community that bind together God's people throughout all time and ages. The intentional remembering and celebrating of these widely varying events form the rhythm of the church's life together. To ignore, forget, or avoid these occasions in the midst of business-as-usual can inflict pain and suffering. The birthday or anniversary forgotten, the promotion uncelebrated, or the farewell assiduously avoided can haunt and cripple. Ignoring a parishioner's gift to the church, failing to recognize new and veteran Sunday school teachers, or forgetting the pastor's or congregation's significant anniversary all strike at the heart of the faith community's ministry and mission.

Gathering and Invitation

Each occasional service has as its context Christ's body the church, the called-out, baptized, and eucharistic community, whether or not the entire community has gathered for the particular occasion. Even when the rite involves, for example, only a pastor and penitent or family and friends gathered for a house blessing, the church is by definition represented and present. When occasional services do occur within the congregation's Sunday liturgy, the congregation has the opportunity to focus on an individual's or group's specific gifts. God's Spirit gifts people variously (1 Cor. 12:4-11, 27-31). Gathered from the midst of God's people are groups or individuals who will be specifically addressed in the rite, whether they be ordi-nands, confirmands, or seekers who desire closer connection with the church. They will be for a time or forever set apart for the sake of the community. Significant life-cycle events or our discerning God's invitation into varied ministries results in a transformed understanding of a people's future mission.

The occasional services signal relational shifts—radical shifts through marriage or death—both for individuals and the entire parish. The occasional services may even be said to mark crisis moments—those times and events that make it impossible to think and react as one heretofore has. In such cases, perspective alters; one's vision undergoes transformation. Importantly, the gathering for the occasional rites names and situates those specifically involved. The time of gathering may require statements of intent or vows to be spoken that give shape and content to the transitional event. Witnesses or sponsors provide further testimony that the individuals or groups involved are in a position to undertake what the church celebrates.

The Word

Once gathered, appropriate passages of scripture are read that speak of God's fidelity and presence in the events of life, God's desire for all creation to be healed and restored to relationship with God, God's sorrow in moments of tragedy, and God's rejoicing with the church in the joyful events of life and ministry. As the story of God's own unfathomable, limitless love for the cosmos is told, strangers and the faithful alike, no matter what the circumstances, hear their own stories addressed by God's love. Basic gestures such as anointing; imposition of hands; an embrace, holy kiss, or welcoming handshake often are paired in scripture with a description of God's and the church's activity. The occasional services include these ritual embodiments of the word because of their accessibility even to the stranger.⁴³ In some occasional services, objects or symbols are given as reminders of the word's creative power—a ring, a stole, or a book.

Preaching may be a part of the occasional services, particularly for the great life-cycle events for church, family, and individual: marriage, funeral, ordination, or consecration, for example. Here the gospel is made concrete for the particular community. Here the gospel breaks through the fragility of human existence and declares God's radical, saving work on our behalf throughout all our lives, whether or not strangers and unbelievers are yet able to perceive salvation. Preaching can more fully welcome into the life of God's people even strangers who now can only muster curiosity or a dull hunger. Ultimately, God's story proclaimed and preached in its fullness provides the missional alternative, allowing the dependant to "give up, abandon, and renounce other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways."⁴⁴

Theologically, prayer is closely associated with the word.

Prayer, the daily conversation of the faithful living in response to the word,⁴⁵ is the Spirit's gift to humankind and all creation, a yearning and desire for health and wholeness, for relationship with God, even when creation has lost its capacity to pray (Rom. 8:22-25). The prayers of the occasional services articulate the hopes of the faith community about the given occasion. The prayers are not mere texts to be rushed through; they form hearts and minds to what is indeed possible in Christ (James 5:16).

Reintegrating into the Eucharistic Community

The process of reintegrating members and friends of a faith community into that community, moving beyond the occasion and becoming again a part of the whole, is essential if Christian ministry is to serve God's desire for wholeness and health, reconciliation and unity.⁴⁶ Ministry does not end with an incident or occasion such as death, marriage, an anniversary, sickness, or dissension. Always, we need to move beyond that singular event. The occasional services are brief opportunities to step aside and discover that life is changing and the ground is holy. But such journeys are made in order to return to the community with hope restored and to serve God's people. The Spirit moves us inexorably toward community, wholeness, and healing, because life is found in unity; brokenness and death, in disunity and isolation.

The occasional services describe ministry and mission, a moving out and returning, a pattern of living and being that God constantly renews. Vision is transformed and gives rise to a heightened sense of mission in the saving encounter with the word. New possibilities for living are seen and new hopes voiced. The lowly are lifted up and the puffed-up confounded in their self-sufficiency. Those who sat in darkness begin to be bathed in the light of God's presence. Strangers are brought near; masks of anonymity and hostility are dropped. A bath refreshes, restores, recreates; the holy conversation continues. Finally, the table is set and all is prepared. "[W]e had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:32).

The occasional ministries of the church and the associated rites make the gospel concrete in the midst of living and dying, voicing God's cosmic love for a creation still largely ignorant of or hostile to that love. The invitation of this good news must be as good in the marketplace and in the midst of the wilderness as in the liturgy. The gospel is not a carping attack on the world in general, an attack that cuts off strangers before they can draw near. It must be perceived

even by strangers to be "good," a compelling word to "turn around and notice" (the root meaning of *conversion*). Only then can the gospel begin to reveal God's presence in the midst of a stranger's own troubled life. Strangers are invited to draw near—to cross the borders and be welcomed into the midst of God's holy people.



THE RIGHT RITE WHEN THERE IS NO RITE: A CASE STUDY

A careful survey of the present occasional services continually reveals opportunities and occasions in the lives of Christians in the world that sometimes cry out for ritual observance. Cultural taboos and misguided care can silence the church when it should speak and act. The changing and always evolving vagaries of life surface new occasions for ministry. But what is the church to do when it encounters occasions for which there seem to be no appropriate prayers or accepted ways to ritualize the events? All too often individuals plunge in with good intention but remain ill informed.

For example, a perennial issue seminarists and pastors face in hospital obstetrics units is the care of stillborn or miscarried infants. The scenario is a pastoral nightmare: the caregiver encounters distraught and grieving parents, or sometimes only a grieving mother if no father has been named. The parent's thoughts are haunted by what-ifs. Did poor self-care or a traumatic experience precipitate the miscarriage? Did the fetus die as the result of some genetic defect that will reappear if the couple conceives again? Is the mother physically capable of carrying a fetus to term? The caregiver feels impotent to speak of God's desire for life when life itself perhaps never had a chance. Hospital staff members, some superbly trained to minister to people reeling from shock, nevertheless are compelled to bring the event to some sort of closure. Misguided friends and family may try to comfort by suggesting that the couple can always have another child. In effect, the parents are urged to forget that the stillborn or miscarried child ever existed. Someone might suggest, "God had more need of the little angel and called it home." God, by default, becomes the perpetrator of a cruel hoax, particularly if the parents have experienced previous miscarriages.

Frequently, the caregiver, wishing to be "pastoral," accedes to the request or suggests that the stillborn or miscarried infant be baptized, particularly if the caregiver or the parents are members of a tradition that baptizes infants. The desperate logic is clear: the church baptizes babies. A baby is present, albeit miscarried or stillborn. The parents are grieving not only for their child but for their

own dashed hopes; they hunger for God's presence in this time of terrible loneliness. Therefore, the baby shall be baptized, because the church has no other rites specifically for infants. Moreover, the act will be a harmless albeit well-intentioned source of comfort for the parents.

Unfortunately, this scenario is invariably played out in a matter of minutes, allowing no time for serious reflection on the ramifications of any decisions made. It is often in the heat of the moment, when pastoral demands loom large and the caregiver does not have the leisure to work out biblical, theological, and long-term pastoral implications, that knee-jerk ritualizing can play havoc with the church's life and mission embodied as word and sacrament.

Although one in three pregnancies ends in a miscarriage, other painful experiences are not encountered as frequently. No matter how common the event, however, when caregivers, pastors, or church workers sense that uncharted territory has been entered and there are no appropriate rites for the occasion, through conversation and reflection they might consider whether at least a provisional rite should be prepared. First, reflection on their own ministry and conversations with colleagues in the field can help them to ascertain whether they are facing an isolated incident or a common, though perhaps unrecognized, life experience.

In the case of stillborn and miscarried infants, a provisional rite was prepared by Pastor Janet S. Peterman in 1988 to care better for grieving parents as well as to acknowledge the loss of relationship.⁴⁷ Peterman's reflection and research on miscarriage, the absence of any such rite, our societal tendency to be silent about such deaths, the sublimated grief that results, and the discussion and widespread acceptance the rite engendered after publication provide a general pattern for addressing similar situations.

Reflecting on her research and pastoral experience, Peterman concludes that it is possible to identify the "shape" of a rite dealing with stillborn and miscarried infants. Peterman senses the context to be God's providential care and love for all of creation: God calls life into being and receives all who have died into eternal welcome of God's presence. A rite is drawn up that recognizes three "burning bushes": (1) we acknowledge the integrity and identity of the child; (2) we recognize God's knowledge of human grief and that God has already embraced the child in mercy; and (3) we provide closure, so that life may go on for family and friends. Peterman provides a way to respond to grieving parents who assume that baptism is the only possible option for the child. Instead, the church is able to respond

neither with a denial nor by capitulating to grief and compromising the place and meaning of sacraments, but with a positive and solid alternative.

All the occasional services, whether already available or as yet undiscovered, serve as commentary and guidance through the significant and often troublesome events of living and dying. They strengthen the faith community's bonds of relationship, assist the community to welcome the stranger, incorporate individuals within the community, and reiterate at every stage of life God's constant presence and protection.

Occasional services that speak good news can begin to shape the stranger's entrance and participation in the church. These services make the gospel word specific in the midst of life and death. They voice God's cosmic love for a creation still largely ignorant of that love, intentionally inviting strangers to cross the borders into the midst of God's holy people.

NOTES

1. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Second Vatican Council: 4 December 1963), par. 2, 7-10. See also *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), viii, 16:28-31.
2. Gordon W. Lathrop, ed., *What Are the Essentials of Christian Worship?* Open Questions in Worship, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 7. More recently, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 175-90.
3. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988).
4. Frank C. Senn, "The Care of the Earth as a Paradigm for the Treatment of the Eucharistic Elements," *A Stewardship of the Mysteries* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 175-90.
5. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, par. 5.
6. Representative examples are: Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories—Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985); Eyan Imber-Black and Janine Roberts, *Rituals for Our Times: Celebrating, Healing, and Changing Our Lives and Our Relationships* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992).
7. Imber-Black and Roberts, "Holiday Rituals: Celebrating with Merriment, Memory, and Meaning"; "Life Cycle Rituals: Living Life's Changes"; and "Keeping Your Rituals Alive," in *Rituals for Our Times*, 229-306.
8. For example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984); Bonnie Thurston, *Spiritual Life in the Early Church: The Witness of Acts and Ephesians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); as well as numerous studies of the church orders that address the liturgical life of the early church.
9. The Large Catechism preface, 4-27, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions*

- of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 362-64; and Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Marks of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999).
10. Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 3:16f; 4:1-2; 6:19; 10:16f; 12:27; Eph. 2:19, 21; 4:4-13; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 1 Peter 2:5, 9.
 11. *Occasional Services* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1982).
 12. Following the Roman Catholic promulgation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) in 1974, Episcopal, Lutheran, United Methodist, and Reformed rites related to holy baptism for adults and affirmation of baptism have been published.
 13. Martin Dudley and Geoffrey Rowell, eds., *Confession and Absolution* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990), 23-24, as well as *The Large Catechism*, 4:74-75, in *The Book of Concord*, 445.
 14. Petitions, Intercessions, and Thanksgivings, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978), 45.
 15. Geoffrey Rowell, *The Liturgy of Christian Burial: An Introductory Survey of the Historical Development of Christian Burial Rites* (London: Alcum, 1977); and Richard Rutherford, *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals* (Collegeville, Minn.: Pueblo Books, 1990).
 16. *LBW*, 213.
 17. Holy Baptism, *Ibid.*, 125.
 18. The Augsburg Confession 5.1-4, in *The Book of Concord*, 31.
 19. Blessings of Lectors, *This Far by Faith: An African American Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 77.
 20. The Large Catechism 1, 94, in *The Book of Concord*, 378.
 21. *Together for Ministry: Final Report and Recommendations Task Force on The Study of Ministry 1988-1993* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), par. 98-101; "Officially Recognized Ministries" par. 30-31. See also Braaten and Jenson, eds., "Ordination: The Special Ministry of the Ordained," *Marks of the Body of Christ*, 123-36.
 22. *Occasional Services*, 151-52.
 23. Blessings of Lectors, Young People Coming to Adulthood, Blessing of Women and Men, and Blessing of Elders, *This Far by Faith*, 77-79, 104-106, 110-11, 112.
 24. *Family* in this study is understood to include not only multigenerational, related people but also to a large extent unmarried individuals, their immediate relatives, and their closest friends.
 25. Eph. 5:2. Despite what often is skewed to support male dominance in relationships, Paul's referent for relationship, individual and communal, is that of Christ's relationship to humankind (not of male to female!) marked by a mutual forbearance and self-offering for the other, motivated out of a fundamental love and respect of the other's being and well-being.
 26. Hayim H. Donin, *To Be a Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic, 1972), 8-12, 36-38.
 27. Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 13.
 28. For example, David N. Power, *Gifts That Differ: Lay Ministries Established and Unestablished* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1985).
 29. Representative Lutheran and United Methodist rites are: Affirmation of the Vocation of the Baptized in the World, *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechuminate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 59-61; A Service for Affirmation of Ministry in Daily Life, *Come to the Waters* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996), 120-21.
 30. From "A Bidding Prayer (Traditional)" in *Advent Festival of Lessons and Music: The Book of Occasional Services—1994* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1995), 32.
 31. Author Kathleen Norris remembers that she felt "bombarded by the vocabulary of the Christian Church." In her most recent work she explores the "scariest" words of this vocabulary in order to "inhabit it, to claim it" as hers. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 2f.
 32. The familiar passage from John's gospel is blunted in English translation. God's love is described in the Greek to extend to the entire cosmos, not just the "world." See John 3:16, "For God so loved [ἠγάπησεν] the world."
 33. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 46.
 34. This is the basic meaning of *salvation*, rather than a quest for souls or a snatching from the jaws of hell. Werner Foerster, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich and trans. Geoffrey Bromley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 7:990-98.
 35. Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 124.
 36. See, for example, Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) or the various essays in *Welcome to Christ: A Lutheran Introduction to the Catechuminate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).
 37. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Leaving the Church," *The Christian Century* 116, no. 18 (June 16-23, 1999): 655.
 38. Affirmation of the Vocation of Christians in the World, *Occasional Services*, 148.
 39. Ordination, *Occasional Services*, 193-94.
 40. Taylor, "Leaving the Church," 655.
 41. It is not the purpose of this essay to chart the unique development of each rite, to discuss, for example, differences in understanding of ordained ministry within one faith tradition, nor to offer a comparative study of specific rites of several traditions. Rather, the purpose of this study suggests ways that the constellation of occasional services in conjunction with the central things of faith serve together "for building up of the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith...." See Eph. 4:11-16.
 42. Friedmann, "A Family Approach to Life Cycle Ceremonies" 162-90; "The Extended Family: Its Potential for Salvation," *Generation to Generation*, 294-309.
 43. *Missional Church*, 181.
 44. Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 10.
 45. "Sermon at the Dedication of the Castle Church at Torgau: Luke 14:1-11, October 5, 1544," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 51:333.
 46. This is why, for example, Lutheran theology has a difficult time with "absolvent" ordination, that is, ordaining those whose calling is not clearly related to some viable expression of a faith community.
 47. It was subsequently published in *Lutheran Partners* 4, no. 4 (July/August 1988): 21-24.