

***Towards a Future Church with an Ancient Faith***  
***“Emerging Worship” at the North American Academy of Liturgy, San Diego***  
***January 6, 2006***

The North American Academy of Liturgy is an ecumenical and inter-religious association of liturgical scholars, theologians, artists, musicians, and persons in related disciplines, who collaborate in research and seek to further liturgical understanding. It comprises more than 400 members. In January 2006 about 250 of them gather for the annual meeting in San Diego. In addition to seminars on specific topics, plenary sessions, and the usual convention fare of feasting, fellowship, and vendor displays, members can attend several services of worship. Typically, each service is presented by a particular group or faith tradition. In 2006, worship offerings include a Jewish Shabbat service, a Lutheran celebration of the Holy Eucharist (held at the Episcopal cathedral on the feast of the Epiphany), morning prayer in the Roman Catholic tradition, and a service billed as “Morning Prayer — Emergent Church,” presented by three representatives of the Church of the Apostles (COTA) in Seattle.

COTA is a three-year-old mission congregation, affiliated with both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church, through the diocese of Olympia. Its leaders consider themselves pioneers in the United States of the “emerging church” movement, which focuses on church planting in a post-Christian, postmodern context. The emerging church movement began gathering steam in the Church of England about fifteen years ago. Its roots are the teaching on church growth often identified with Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, the small-group renewal gatherings and alternative worship promoted by Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, in the diocese of London, the decade of evangelism declared by the Lambeth Conference in 1988, and the book *Building Missionary Congregations* (Church House Publishing, 1995) by Robert Warren, then the evangelism officer of the Church of England. It was Warren who apparently invented the term “emerging church.” Longer term, the movement acknowledges being inspired by the Latin American “base ecclesial communities” which began to be formed in the 1950s.

The movement’s advocates argue that healthy churches plant new churches, and that these church plants, instead of being clones of the parent churches, should be allowed to take shape unpredictably — “emerge” — according to the local culture. An emerging church will value authentic community, spiritual experience, story, experimentation, networks of multiple small Sunday and midweek congregations, and an outward-looking focus. It will not give priority to propositional doctrine, monological teaching, imposed liturgies with technical vocabulary, denominationalism, or clubbishness. Nor will it emulate the mass-marketing model of the mega-church.

COTA’s worship is scheduled for Friday morning, January 6, 2006, at 7:30 AM, in the ballroom of the conference hotel, the Hyatt Regency Islandia, Mission Bay. Worshipers arriving before the service step out of 80-degree sunshine and into a darkened air-conditioned hotel banquet room, where chairs are arranged in rows. A simple leaflet found on each chair lists the liturgical leaders: the pastor of COTA, a “pastor of liturgical arts,” and a director of music.

Quiet soothing synthesizer-type music is broadcast over loudspeakers from a computer. A large projection screen dominates the front of the room. Gazing around, worshipers may notice that projections appear not only on this screen, but also on the ceiling above. The projection onto the ceiling encounters a large chandelier, creating a beautiful but confusing image. Three people are seated at a table in the front of the room but to the side, with laptop computers open before

them. On another table, an inventive and attractive display has been fashioned out of numerous blue water pitchers, among which are set small votive candles. No formal symbol of Christianity may be seen—perhaps one of the limitations of worshiping in a banquet room.

Promptly at 7:30 AM, the projected image and soundtrack shift. The title at the top of the screen reads “Gather,” and below it is this dialogue:

One: Grace and peace to you from Jesus Christ our Lord  
All: Thank you God  
One: Lord, open our lips  
All: And our mouths will praise you  
One: Be with us Lord, for it is morning  
All: And the day has just begun  
One: The earth belongs to God who made it  
All: Come let us adore the God whose strong tenderness lasts forever  
One: In the name of the Great Artist, the Brave Rescuer and our soul’s Companion.  
Amen.

Then follows a song, entitled “Venite.” Although the text is displayed for the congregational refrain, many in the group find it difficult to sing along, as the tune is unfamiliar and is not accentuated by the leaders. Next follows a “Ritual,” in which participants are invited to immerse their hands three times in one of several basins provided at the front of the room, while singing “Come to the Water,” by John Foley, S.J. Most of the group goes forward, although, again, the singing is lackluster.

A psalm is then sung by one of the leaders at the front table, followed by intercessory prayer. For each of several concerns, an excerpt of a news report recorded from *Morning Edition* on National Public Radio is first played. The familiar voice of Carl Kassell reads the news summaries — for example, a report of the plight of the West Virginia coal miners who died earlier in the week. To this and each petition, the congregation responds, “Oh Lord, have mercy on us.”

Next follows a meditation on Christian scriptures. The story of Jesus and the woman at the well (John 4) is told, and participants are encouraged to close their eyes and open their imagination. The meditation is narrated by a woman with an English accent. A brief silence follows, after which all recite the Lord’s Prayer, in the traditional version. The song “Within” by Lacey Brown is then sung—again as a solo, with the opportunity for those gathered to sing along. At 8 AM, this brief liturgy ends, and the members disperse for breakfast and a plenary session in a nearby room.

At its gathering later that day, at least one of the seminar groups uses part of its time to discuss the COTA worship. Recognizing the limitations of replicating an event in a hotel ballroom for a group of participant observers, the group nevertheless reports experiencing a discord between the bright clear sunshine outside and the dark atmosphere inside. Is emerging worship best experienced at night?

The hand-washing, too, invites comment. During the liturgy, individuals washed and dried their own hands, one at a time. Was this the intended format? Perhaps not, since no detailed instructions had been given. Or perhaps it reflected the constraints of time. But the group thinks it odd. Were participants, like Pilate, washing their hands of a dirty business? But can hand-washing be a symbol of cleansing, when 50 or more persons are using the same bowl of water?

Or was the bowl intended to evoke the water of baptism? Then why was the washing done individually? The group feels that this has been a sub-optimal symbol at best.

Seminar members also report having felt during the service that their musical participation was optional. Not only did they have trouble making out the tunes, but also no instructions were given for the singing. Were participants expected to repeat after the song leader? If so, was it to be phrase by phrase or a whole stanza at a time? Or were participants expected to sing at all? Some members of the discussion compare the experience to that of Roman Catholic worship before the Second Vatican Council, when worshipers frequently knelt in silence praying the rosary while mass was going on before them. One seminar member suggests that COTA's worship may be geared to a multitasking generation, for people who want to be free to send and receive text messages during the liturgy. In any event, in this idiom of worship there appears to be no expectation of rousing congregational hymn-singing, since otherwise the hymns would simply be made easier to sing.

A further concern emerges as the group realizes that they have just gathered and prayed not so much with one another as with a projection screen. At no point did the leaders stand or look directly at the congregation. Instead, they remained seated, focused on their computer displays at all times. The liturgy, it seems to the seminar group, was intended to mediate the presence of the divine, without necessarily connecting worshippers with each other—again, very much in the manner of pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism.

Recognizing that their age and firm liturgical backgrounds set them apart from the usual demographic for the emerging church, the members of the seminar group try to put themselves in the place of those for whom it is intended: postmodern people seeking authenticity and genuine interpersonal interaction. But why would such people be expected to respond to disembodied voices and non-present leaders? The prominence of the computerized images, the computers themselves, and the worship leaders seated *behind* the computers, huddled in their directorial tasks, lead some in the seminar to compare this experience of religion to the images of majesty manufactured by the Wizard of Oz from behind a curtain. This group of Liturgical Movement scholars, at least, long for the active engagement of the faithful with those leading the worship.

The COTA web site ([www.apostleschurch.org](http://www.apostleschurch.org)) lists six “elders,” a junior and senior warden, a music director, a curate, an abbess, a missionary, and a pastor — titles representing a variety of faith contexts. Under “affiliations,” the web site proclaims that COTA is “a incarnational, monastic, christian community, affiliated with god, through jesus christ, in the power of the spirit.” (The spelling, punctuation, and grammar here, as on the projections used in worship, reflect the somewhat loose standard that is common in electronic mail and text messaging; this too may prove a stumbling block for older worshippers.) COTA's more specific affiliations within “the larger christian village” are the “anglican and lutheran tribes” and something called “the northwest hothouse.”

An internet link to this latter organization reveals this dictum: “We don't seek to be another time wasting modernist ‘organization’ or a manufactured ‘club-like,’ group. instead, what we pray and hope for, is to nurture the godly community that is already ours in jesus christ, in ways that allows [sic] us to disciple one another, share, learn, discern, re-create and strengthen our labors for the kingdom of god.” If the lack of capitalization is deplorable, the emphasis on mission is certainly laudable.

In his landmark work *Protestant Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989, p. 191), James White asserts that only the “Frontier Tradition” has adapted itself successfully to electronic media. (He is thinking, for example, of “televangelists.”) COTA proves

that his assertion is no longer true. True, COTA has not (yet) ventured into *broadcast* media, but it boldly explores the application of electronic media to the worship and praise of the triune God, seeking to bring those who have never heard the word of salvation to faith in Jesus Christ.

In a recent report, Lawrence Stookey critiques the advent of “seeker services” in Methodism as diminishing biblical content, neglecting consistent sacramental practices, and minimizing congregational participation. Musical participation, he says, is often limited to “the repeated singing of ‘praise choruses’ rather than longer hymn texts that embody doctrinal and mystagogical content (“Worship from the United Methodist [USA] Perspective,” in Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller, *Worship Today: Understanding, Practice, Ecumenical Implications* [Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004], 108). His analysis seems to apply to COTA, as well. He suggests that such services, to the extent that their reductionist forms constitute a substitute for services of word and sacraments, “create perplexing problems and raise serious questions about the integrity of worship.” Yet Stookey admits that this type of worship seems to attract non-church people, and perhaps may prepare them, ever so gradually, to participate in the worship of a “parent” denomination. On its website, COTA identifies itself as a future church with an ancient faith. Its intent is to merge tradition and innovation. But while its particular liturgical expression is certainly fresh, the extent to which it helps or hinders an understanding or appropriation of traditional Christianity remains unclear.

Will COTA recruit new members for the Episcopal Church or the ELCA? This remains to be seen. This purpose is not on its stated agenda. “We’re not concerned about membership,” the church’s pastor has said. “We’re concerned about people’s spiritual search.”

While the idea of church with a “living room tea bar” may grate at the sensibilities of many traditional Anglicans, including a visitor this morning, there seems no doubt that it has a strong appeal among a younger generation of Christians and seekers.

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