

Liturgy: the learning work of the diverse people

(This article is based on excerpts from a longer study which will be published in Spring 2025 as part of a major research project on diversity by the University of Paderborn (D) and my own Faculty for Protestant Theology and Religious studies in Brussels (B). Bibliographical information is available.)

I start by positing two guiding principles,

1. Every individual is diverse, because each of us is an intersection of different identities (e.g. Christian, woman, African, scientist);
2. The contextuality of the liturgy is a Lutheran confessional principle, as per *Augsburg Confession* article 7.

My question is then, **how can we learn about the diversity of individuals in a group event that is the liturgy, which itself teaches a universal message in and from its own context in a certain time and place?**

A contextual liturgy for learning diversity ought to have contextual theologies to academically reflect on it. Claudia Jahnelt writes that,

Contextual theologies are provocative because they cause unambiguities and clear demarcations to tumble and challenge us to bear ambivalences.

Contemporary contextual theologies, I would argue, are increasingly transcultural and intersectional...

There are universal ideals and experiences that the churches can share during corporate worship. However, the wellbeing of the liturgical participants would require that the verbalisation and broader externalisation of this universality needs to be adapted in order to be received by its audience: it needs to be universal and contextual, global and local (glocal). This is especially apt for a denomination like Lutheran Christianity, claiming to be so engaged with and founded on the Word, read (*sola Scriptura*) and preached (*verbum vocale*).

Tensions, then, exist between uniformity vs. diversity, universality vs. contextuality and particularity. **The diversity of the congregants can be decisive for the contextuality of the liturgy.**

When Martin Luther King Jr wrote,

It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, the same hour when many are standing to sing, "In Christ there is no East nor West,"

he was describing a phenomenon known as the '**homophily principle**,' meaning that sameness creates a connectedness ('like-seeks-like'). It is a sociological term coined in the early 1950s, which tries to clarify why people with a similar identities-profile will gravitate towards each other, often at the expense of others.

While King, a Baptist minister and theologian, was referring to his own struggles and that of his African American (church-)community during Segregation and the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-60s in the USA – the same cultural framework in which sociologists started applying the homophily principle – we can broaden this to all minority and marginalised voices in the churches, also in a 21st c. Global North.

The more the homophily principle applies, the less diverse and the more homogenous the congregation; it might help with (dedicated) contextual liturgy, but it mostly undermines its universality.

This differs from the premise of special ministries aimed at ethno/cultural-specific parishes or linguistic ministries, which try to provide a service for a group with a definite need, but not at the expense of other groups. Compare it to a congregation where youth and senior ministries operate side by side: specific but not superior, particular but not exclusionary.

I would like to offer a few suggestions for reflection and discussion, as well as methodologies for approaching this diversity in a liturgical setting. Each individual congregation, of course, is framed by its financial means, human resources, accessibility of the building, location, congregational demographics, etc. Yet, **diversity starts with inter-personal relationships**, and creating a welcoming and affirming space need not necessarily be curtailed by material deficits. These can be small efforts, e.g. invitations and posters stating that the congregation is affirming; participation of diverse identities in a liturgical role; more varied symbolism and imagery; inclusive language; and so on.

* *Didachè* ('teaching') and *kerygma* ('proclaiming'); or **professing, preaching and singing**,

The Creed and sermon are recurring pedagogical rubrics in most liturgies, that are especially universal, but can also be interpreted contextually: the unifying, but also qualifying, function of the Creed; and the different functions of the sermon in the different denominations ('Law and Gospel' in Lutheranism).

For example, does a creed always have to refer to God as 'Father,' or could 'Parent' be an option (*sancta Trinitas* is grammatically feminine)? Could affirming the grammatically feminine or neuter gender of the Holy Spirit in Greek and Hebrew respectively (πνεῦμα, קוּן)

help to counter male-exclusive theology? Could we explore more the options an individual language has to offer in widening the way we describe the divine? And so on.

Likewise, could the topic of diversity be broached thematically in the sermon, within the theological framework of the denomination? Could examples used in the sermon to illustrate the message be more diverse?

Moreover, a congregation's hymnody can proclaim diversity by using inclusive language or imagery that speaks to parishioners from various backgrounds and with different identity-profiles.

* *Oecumenica* or ecumenism; or could ecumenical methodology also be applied to learning about diversity?

One of the methodologies in ecumenical relations is 'unity in (reconciled) diversity,' whereby what is shared is considered more important than what is different: **diversity is not seen as a hindrance for unity**, neither is it taken for granted, but it also serves as a catalysator for more unity. While much is left to be resolved, a conscious effort is made to express unity in word and deed. As Lorelei Fuchs described it,

That is, the unity sought is not achieved despite the diversity in Christianity but through the very diversity that is at the heart of Christian experience. At the same time, since the diversity serves the unity, the diversity is not without limits. Parameters set the limits of an acceptable diversity which safeguard unity.

Another step in ecumenical methodology, is 'partial/full communion,' whereby each partner in the ecumenical dialogue recognises and acknowledges the other as being fully church, accepting their catholicity and apostolicity, mostly resulting in reciprocal pastoral and sacramental hospitality for each other's congregants, sometimes even resulting in full mutual transferability of clergy.

Ecumenical partners recognising each other as a true church serve as an example to **Christians in recognising 'the other' as fully Christian**. Could such a reciprocal ecclesiology and sacramentology, frequently expressed through joint liturgies, perhaps offer an example for a 'reciprocal diversity,' a 'diversity ecumenism'?

I also wish to point to the Lutheran confessional *satis est*-principle, from the same article, CA-7, mentioned above,

For the true unity of the Church it is enough [*satis est*] to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.

Satis est originally described the approach to liturgical and disciplinary uniformity, and why the reformers did not see variety as necessarily church-dividing; in modern ecumenism it is also applied when discussing doctrinal unity and structural organisation of a church-body.

Where people gather around the Gospel of Christ and celebrate the Sacraments in unity, the exact order of service is of secondary importance, as are the particularities of each individual.

Another possible ecumenical catechetical tool is ‘receptive ecumenism,’ developed by Paul D. Murray, a Roman Catholic theologian, and which starts the ecumenical dialogue by asking (I paraphrase), ‘What can my church learn/receive from your church with integrity?’ The question could then also be applied to the learning process, during the liturgy, namely, ‘**What can our congregation learn/receive from you, and what can you learn/receive from our congregation?**’ Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes write,

... it is about a healthy recognition of one’s own need for healing, through discerning from time to time any place within our structures, systems, practices and processes that may be oppressing, obscuring, diminishing or even extinguishing the light of Christ, or blocking people from being drawn closer into Christ and towards one another.

* A *verstehende Prozess*; or an **understanding (empathising) process** of seeing ‘the other,’

Hans-Georg Gadamer theorized a *verstehende Prozess*, an ‘understanding process.’ Dialogue or communicating and working towards mutual understanding is to Gadamer the clearest model of the process of *verstehen*. To paraphrase him, opinions and positions are like the horizon, and when these opinions and positions change, the horizon does not vanish, it shifts.

In the empathising process, whereby mutual understanding is crucial, participants are not required to abandon their horizon, their treasured beliefs and (liturgical) praxis, merely to shift them, to refocus them in relation to the horizon of the other participants, literally, ‘broaden their horizon.’ Horizons might in that case overlap or even merge, and liturgy may become a *verstehende Prozess*.

* Luther’s and Lutheran theology,

We start with the reformer’s view on *vocatio* (**‘calling’**). This is already intersectional, as it describes the various overlapping ‘tasks’ people are called to in life, e.g. parent, spouse, Christian.

Could this be applied to other aspects of intersectional identities, because, as Jason Mahn describes it, “many vocations or callings can be heard ‘simply’ by attending to one’s relationships and commitments – to the people and places in one’s life.” Those “people and places” tend to be diverse.

This interconnects with the universal *missio Dei*, the **mission** of the Church as a whole, with all the denominations, and all its members, of all backgrounds, which is the mission of Christ, called to proclaim the Good News of God's love and grace, and act as God's co-workers in this world.

Another element of the Church's and churches' *vocatio*, is *oratio* or '**prayer**,' and this can be incorporated into the liturgy, in tandem with the Creed, sermon and hymns.

Do we actually pray for each other, for each particularity present? Do we pray for those we are uncomfortable with or disagree with or even dislike? In other words, do we pass on the grace offered to us?

Does our justification actually lead to good works, or does it remain what German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace,' without any ensuing efforts from our side? Just like the homophily principle runs the high risk of making a congregation complacent in its routine and composition, cheap grace makes Christians complacent in their attitude towards the plight of the (diverse) neighbour. Samuel Torvend points out that "the theological claim – Christ's righteousness is offered freely and without condition – holds a **social mandate**."

The intercessions are part of that diaconal work ("social mandate") of the congregation, and this type of diakonia can be done contextually during the worship service: prayer as a social commitment – activism even – and prayer acknowledging diversity as a commitment to diversity.

To round up, it is in its public liturgy that a community has the opportunity, and even – one might argue – the calling and obligation, to welcome a person to participate in the whole of the *ordo*, with their entire identities-profile: nothing is left outside the church-doors, nothing is ignored or obfuscated. While this may be challenging, I have suggested some techniques from other areas of church-life and academic disciplines 'to learn diversity' and expand the inclusion of the congregation.

Here a local faith-community has the opportunity to proclaim and share its universal values, both doctrinal and more practical, as well as offer a space of participation for individuals with all their particularities, set in the community's own context, geographically as well as socio-culturally, perhaps even counter-culturally.

So, the more diverse a congregation is, the more it represents a microcosm of the Church universal; and the more a congregation is aware ('woke') of the particular identities of its members, the more contextual, the more in touch with the present world and times it becomes.

Contextuality is not automatically a guarantee for inclusivity, but it can be a major tool towards it. A liturgy that takes into consideration its surrounding wider context, as well as the potential

particularities of its partakers can broaden its diversity and welcome, and that can be a beneficial learning experience for all involved.

The willingness to learn as a worshipping entity is a moment of self-reflection. This requires an openness towards ‘the other,’ commitment to possible (radical) change, but also courage, as diverse and diversified parishes become potential targets by detractors of diversity.

The affirmation of diversity increases the wellbeing, comfort and feeling of acceptance of its parishioners and others that come into contact with it. This, I posit, is a barometer for the success of diversity, and together with Anscar Chupungco, I point to the “values as hospitality, community spirit, and leadership” as the underlying drive for a congregation, rather than the fearful exclusion of anyone with an identities-profile which is not ‘the standard.’