

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

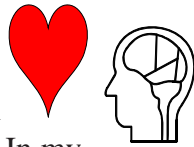
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Welcoming worship for today

I've recently been part of a worship service that was inspiring, thought-provoking, challenging, and heartwarming, all at the same time. In my opinion that's a combination that all of our worship services urgently need. I assume (and hope!) that many other churches around the U.S. have equally exciting services, but because I hear about many that don't, I want to share with you some of what this one included that many others apparently lack.



The service I took part in was at Elk Grove United Methodist Church in Elk Grove, California, which adjoins Sacramento. Many of the good things that happen in that congregation result from the outstanding pastoral leadership of Pastor Kathy LaPoint-Collup. However, lay volunteers who are committed, thinking, and forward-looking also play essential roles in the congregation's effectiveness.

Messages in music

A big part of what made the Elk Grove worship service so compelling for me was the words of some songs that it included, especially those on this page and page 3. They're not the style of music I personally prefer, but they powerfully communicated what I see as essential parts of what Jesus taught. To me that's a very important function of worship music.



I'm not an expert on music or worship, and many other church members' expectations and tastes are quite different from mine. However, I think it's very important for churches to provide for a wide range of tastes and expectations, in the worship services they offer. Doing that through music seems especially important because music plays such a big part in making people aware of the sacred and in hindering their awareness. And the music that hinders or

CHILD OF GOD

Words and music by Tom Walker

I am a child of God,
Nothing can shake my confidence.
I am a child of God,
No one can take my inheritance.
Never alone I'll stand,
Strengthened by God's own hand,
I am a child, I am a child, a child of God.



1. My name is Marie, now I can see
What this relationship's doing to me.
Last night he hit me, I fell on the floor,
Just like he's hit me so often before.
He says he's sorry, he brings me flow'rs,
Things will go fine for a couple of hours.
Then he says I'm nothing, he says I'm scum.
And hits me because that's what he does ...
But I am a child of God ...



2. My name is Manuel, my hands can tell
The story of why you're living so well.
I work all my life but my family is poor
So you can have coffee, bananas, and more.
The land owners say, if I don't mind my way
They can find substitute workers to pay.
They say my soul will only be free
In heaven someday. That's what they say,
But I am a child of God ...



3. My name is Jerome, last week I went home
And tried to be honest about who I am.
But my father walked out, my mother broke down
And asked me just how I can say I'm a man.
They said if I insist that I'm gay
They'll tell the neighbors that I've moved away.
They said I'm sick, they said they're ashamed,
They wished I was dead. That's what they said ...
But I am a child of God ...

4. My name is Elaine, I'm watching the rain,
I'm seven years old and I'm tired of pain.
With drugs and divorce, hunger and war,
Kids these days can't just be kids anymore.
But I dream of dancing. I dream of play,
I dream that wars would all go away.
I dream that families together would stay,
Eating ice cream. That's what I dream ...
For I am a child of God ...



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bores some is the very same music that communicates the sacred to others.



Hearers with different standards

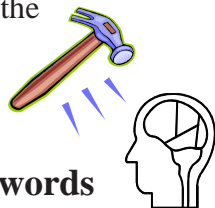
For some worshipers, the mere comfort of hearing and singing familiar music apparently communicates the sacred by creating the community that we all value. The quality of the composition or of its performance therefore may not matter much to these worshipers. They may not even notice what the words say. If the performance shows commitment and effort and is done reasonably well, and especially if it conveys warm feelings to these worshipers, that seems to be enough for them.

For others, however, including me, the style of the music and the quality of its performance matter greatly. Those play huge roles in expressing or failing to express the beauty and excellence that portray God. For us, a less-than-top-quality composition or performance is a major distraction.



Also, it violates what we see as the need to offer only our best to God.

Many of us, too, feel that when words accompany the music, what they say is extremely important. That includes the theology that the words explicitly state, by claiming that belief in Jesus is or isn't essential for salvation, for example, or that the death of Jesus did or didn't atone for believers' sin. But what the words say also includes powerful messages that are merely implied. When the words are in seventeenth-century English, for example, or when they portray God or all human beings as male, they imply misleading and harmful messages. Those leap out at word-oriented worshipers like me, but they affect all hearers. They can have even more effect than the explicit messages, in fact, because they're hammered into hearers' brains without their realizing it.



Jesus's message in today's words

As one who notices worship's words and considers them vitally important, I was especially struck by the words of the songs that were part of the Elk Grove worship service. "Child of God" (quoted on page 1) powerfully portrayed painful experiences and feelings that are widespread in all our commu-

nities yet in many churches are not openly acknowledged. Too many churchgoers ignore or even shun or reject the people this song portrays, yet Jesus's words and actions tell us to welcome them actively and treat them compassionately.



Similarly, "Part of the Family" (page 3), a regular part of Elk Grove UMC's worship, reminds both members and visitors that this congregation is an open, diverse group that welcomes people of all ages, every marital status, and all views, interest levels, and stages in the faith journey. Unfortunately many other congregations communicate the opposite of that message in various ways, even though they claim and presumably intend to be followers of Jesus.



We also sang hymns from *The United Methodist Hymnal* and the UMC's newer *The Faith We Sing*, which contains many songs written more recently than most in the UM hymnal. Many use today's language and express views more consistent with today's best thinking. One of these that we sang at Elk Grove was "Praise the Source of Faith and Learning" (page 4). It acknowledges the importance of loving God with the mind, and also the role of the divine in art, science, and other fields of God-given human learning and creativity. It's set to a familiar tune, so non-music-readers can sing it easily.

Nonverbal messages of welcome

Elk Grove UMC communicates welcome and diversity in other ways besides words and music. The congregation has voted to be known as a Reconciling Congregation, which welcomes people of all sexual orientations, and a lesbian couple and their child played visible roles in the worship service.

Most noticeable, people of all ages participated in many ways. The band members' ages ranged from teens to seventies. In addition, teens were acolytes, scripture readers, and participants in a brief skit that's a regular feature in Elk Grove UMC worship. And in these roles their stage presence and good diction and voice projection showed that these youth had practiced and had been well coached, a welcome contrast to the



yearly “youth Sunday” that in some churches is teenagers’ only time to participate with adult members in a churchwide activity.



The Elk Grove UMC band was interesting for other reasons too. Its leader is Steve Collup, Pastor Kathy’s multi-talented husband, who’s an airplane mechanic professionally. The band rehearses between the two worship services every Sunday morning and plays only at the second, and it also has two longer rehearsals each month. According to one member, “it basically is made up of whoever wants, or under pressure is willing, to play and sing in it.” Consequently it often has an unconventional mixture of instruments. The day I was there it included drums and guitars but also a violin and a recorder. I liked the fact that it wasn’t loud like some other church bands I’ve heard.

“We go to some effort to keep it intergenerational,” a seventy-year-old member told me, “and I so love the kids participating that I would dispense with the instruments before them. When one of our kids was singing the part of Elaine in ‘Child of God,’ I was so touched that I was back there blubbering into the piano. That keeps me turning up every Sunday.”



Hearing personal stories can help

The Elk Grove worship services I took part in were just before Lent, and my part in them was to tell briefly about my spiritual journey, in the spot that the pastor’s sermon usually occupies. I learned, however, that Elk Grove often has some of its own congregation members do this during Lent. This could be a helpful addition to worship services in

PART OF THE FAMILY

Words and music by James K. Manley

Come in, come in and sit down.
You are a part of the family.
We are lost and we are found,
And we are a part of the family.



1. You know the reason why you came
Yet no reason can explain,
So share in the laughter and cry in the pain
For we are a part of the family.



God is with us in this place
Like a mother’s warm embrace,
We’re all forgiven by God’s grace
For we are a part of the family.

2. Children and elders, middlers and teens,
Singles and doubles and in-betweens,
Strong eighty-fivers and street-wise sixteens,
We are a part of the family.

Greeters and shoppers, longtime and new,
Nobody here has a claim on a pew.
And whether we’re many or only a few
We are a part of the family.

3. There’s life to be shared in the bread and the wine,
We are the branches, Christ is the vine,
This is God’s temple, it’s not yours or mine
But we are a part of the family.

There’s rest for the weary, and health for us all,
There’s a yoke that is easy and a burden that’s small,
So come in and worship and answer the call
For we are a part of the family.



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I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

all congregations. Hearing the stories of outsiders could help us, too, especially if their views and experiences differed from those of the majority of our members. It would remind us that there are many ways of experiencing the sacred and living out our faith.



Hearing local members could mean hearing some whose speaking ability wasn't wonderful, of course, but as an Elk Grove member commented, even that can be helpful. "We are on the whole pretty plain people," he explained, "and we get some pretty plain talks this way, but what we see out of this tradition is that nobody among us is ordinary, and that each

personal faith journey is by definition valuable and unordinary." Like seeing his fellow parishioners lined up in the aisle to receive communion, he said, hearing their stories "is like watching humanity itself file past, and I can't help but be impressed at both the mundaneness and the sacredness of all of it, and of all of us."



That's an observation we'd all do well to keep in mind, it seems to me, especially if we're tempted to ignore, to stifle, shun, or oust anyone who lives among us or whom God seems to have called to be part of the church.

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Connections

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Welcoming worship for today

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Praise the source of faith and learning that has sparked and stoked the mind with a passion for discerning how the world has been designed. Let the sense of wonder flowing from the wonders we survey keep our faith forever growing and renew our need to pray.

God of wisdom, we acknowledge that our science and our art and the breadth of human knowledge only partial truth impart. Far beyond our calculation lies a depth we cannot sound where your purpose for creation and the pulse of life are found.

May our faith redeem the blunder of believing that our thought has displaced the grounds for wonder which the ancient prophets taught. May our learning curb the error which unthinking faith can breed, lest we justify some terror with an antiquated creed.

As two currents in a river fight each other's undertow till converging they deliver one coherent steady flow, blend, O God, our faith and learning till they carve a single course, till they join as one, returning praise and thanks to you, their source.



Praise the Source of Faith and Learning

The Faith We Sing, #2004

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