



Worship as a Model for Faith Formation

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Christian nurture has its foundation in public worship. Other ministries find their inspiration in worship. (Segler and Bradley 78)

At the beginning of a Sunday morning worship service I attended, an elderly layperson invited the congregation into a prayer of preparation that went something like this: *Good morning, God! We thank you for welcoming us here and offering us this time together with you. We come before you with gratitude for who you are and whose we are. We also enter with fervent prayers and weeping hearts for the loss of life and homes by fire in California; for ground-soaking rain heaped upon unresolved devastation in New Orleans. We come with pain deep in our souls for war in the Middle East and rumors of war in other places, and for reminders of starving brothers and sisters around this world we all call our earthly home. We come with heartfelt knowing that sickness, sorrow, and adversity abide among us here. We all stand in need of prayer this morning. And yet, we acknowledge the blessing of being awakened this morning to see the light of day.*

We are blessed with measures of health and strength, food and clothing sufficient to bring us here, and with both love and goods we can share with those in need. We are blessed by love shown to us in the smiles of the ushers and the touch of a neighbor's hand. We are blessed by victories won, and yes, by hope that shines along the sometimes darkened path we call life. We are blessed with the opportunity to offer food and care to someone in need and a visit to some among us who are homebound or in prison. We draw nigh this morning to a present God from whom all blessings come, and to this same God who knows all about our troubles and the needs and cares of the world, and will be with us to the end.

We ask, God, that this morning, you take a personal seat beside each one of us and whisper in our ears renewed words of life. Place in our hands the mustard seed to plant in our gardens of life, and give us a glimpse of how to plant it wisely so that our lives may grow worthy of your calling. Most especially, open our hearts to receive what you have for us during this time of worship that would create in us a never dying faith in you and zeal to serve the present age.

We pray this prayer to you, God, in the name of Jesus our brother, who before us experienced the storms of life; our example of how to keep on keeping on; our guide when we don't know which way to turn; our sustainer who props us up on every leaning side and causes us to shout, "Glory!" when the tears of the night turn to joy in the morning; and our redeemer who, if we but let him, makes of us your servants on behalf of your people. Let us, the people of God say, "Amen!" Amen.

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This prayer of a seasoned worshiper points to a profound insight about the nature of worship and its ritual elements called liturgy, which we understand to be the work of the people. This insight is that worship “teaches” us in a powerful way *whose* we are even as we offer our prayers. In the elder’s prayer, we grasp an experiential knowing of prayer as an intimate conversation with an already present, living, and personal God. We discover a presence before whom the circumstances of life can be laid and through whom we can imagine a sojourn of faithful and hope-filled response to God with the guidance of Jesus. It serves as an essential pathway through which we were nourished and fashioned as a people of God.

Of course, it is not simply prayer that serves as a Christian educational pathway in worship. All of worship “gathers, forms, and feeds the people of God” (Newman, 14). Indeed, worship is a vital educational ministry event, nourishing resource, and significant means by which we come to know God, ourselves, and the nature of the Christian journey more fully. In what follows, fuller attention will be given to meanings of worship as Christian education. In addition, we will consider worship as God-referenced and life-directed education, and key pathways and events through which Christian education takes place in worship, including the role of the pastor. The final section will contain some concluding remarks and an invitation to reflect on the future of worship as a model for Christian education.

I. Meanings of Worship as Christian Education

When Christians say we are going to church to worship, we typically mean that we are going to a service of worship. Worship names the Sabbath gathering of Christians. This worship of the church is the *leitourgia*, or the “action of the people,” which is understood as the service Christians render to God. It is a place where we enter into conscious communion with God and honor God, an experience of celebration and appreciation of what God has done, and a time of making offerings of selves, feelings, attitudes, and gifts to God. It may also be a time of lament to God. It is an adventure in reality in which personal need and desire are placed before God and the self in Christ is sought (Segler and Bradley, 6-11). It is considered, as well, to be “the dangerous act of waking up to God and to the purposes of God in the world, and then living lives

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that actually show it” (Labberton, 3). But one of its purposes is also Christian education.

In the book *Nurturing Faith and Hope*, I make the point that the Christian educational role of worship is not new. Historically, worship served as an important experience through which teaching and learning the Christian story and its meaning for Christian life occurred (Wimberly 2004, xi). As early as the second to the sixth centuries, the Jerusalem church’s liturgy served as a catechizing and deeply formational process. The liturgy formed the catechumens—those preparing for baptism—and the already baptized as they gathered together, processed from holy places while singing hymns, reenacted events of Jesus’ life, lighted candles, heard narrations of the gospels, engaged in varying forms of blessing, and were dismissed after receiving the announcement of the next gathering. Through these worship practices, the catechumens prepared for more formal periods of instruction; but, together with the baptized, they were experientially formed in the gospel by walking the path of discipleship (Astley, 244; Benedict Jr., 64).

The importance of the Christian educational role in current day worship built on the convincing arguments of leaders who emphasized every aspect of the church’s life, including worship, as contributive of the formation of Christians.¹ The Christian educational function of worship also gained momentum from reports of the need for a revitalized sense of educational ministry that could not be satisfied in church school. This view connected with findings of the diminishing effectiveness of intentionally planned Christian education experiences and renewed recognition of this role of worship (Carr, 35; Roehlkepartain, 12).²

Of all the meetings held in the life of the congregation, worship remains the heart of

congregational life and typically involves the largest gathering of people, with more people attending than in church school. Although we know that it must in no way be a substitute for planned systematic forms of education, worship is a primary experience not simply of coming before God, but as a time of disclosing to new and continuing worshipers and ongoing generations understandings of worship, faith, and life. We may understand what this model of worship means in at least three ways. Worship as Christian education may be seen as edification, formation, and nurture.

Edification

Franklin Segler and Randall Bradley highlight edification as a purpose of worship by reminding us that “it is wrong to base the necessity of worship on its usefulness, but it is equally wrong not to keep in mind the usefulness of worship for the individual worshiper.” For them, the key to building up the body of Christ is building up the individual (Segler and Bradley, 78). They go on to say: “Edification means the building up of the individual—the mind through instruction, perception, and discernment; the emotions through the energizing interpersonal relationships; the conscience through the sensitizing power of God’s Spirit; and the will in its motivation to action” (Segler and Bradley, 78).

Marva Dawn emphasizes that for worship to be edifying, it must be thought provoking. Specifically, “it should stir new thoughts about God—new insights into God’s character” (Dawn, 249). The intent is for persons’ character to be transformed. Thought-provoking, edifying worship keeps God as the subject, builds us up spiritually and morally, establishes us in the faith, and roots us in sound doctrine to the end that we form new attitudes, new petitions and intercessions, and new behaviors. Thought-provoking, edifying worship is for the sake of believers’ character formation (Dawn, 248-249).

Formation

Worship is about God’s calling us and forming us to be a community of character after the pattern of Jesus Christ, and transforms us to the end that this character is lived faithfully in the world. God’s forming and transforming activity through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit comes to us through distinctive experiences of worship. Liturgy forms the Christian community by our engagement in liturgical practices. Formation happens through prayers that model conversations with God and shape our own. Worship passes on to us biblical stories, rituals, arts, signs and symbols through which we encounter God,

form understandings of our religious heritage, and shape memories that sustain us in times of crisis. In its repetition, liturgy holds potential for forming in us a new and dynamic appreciation for God’s activity in and beyond worship (Dawn, 139; White, 21-28; Benedict Jr., 25).

Nurture

Christian education through worship that is described as nurturing experience centers on spiritual nourishment that feeds and builds-up worshipers’ seeing and taking into our minds, souls, and spirits the nature of God that prompts our response to God. From this standpoint, nurture that takes place through worship is *evocative*. It is to arouse in us a new or renewed understanding of who God is, who we are in relation to God, and how we should live in response to God. As an evocative nurturing experience, then, worship is to “fill us” with and invite our “digestion” by way of critical reflection on what constitutes the nature of God known in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, a valued identity, and the journey away from sin to salvation. Moreover, it is to stimulate our creation of insights on what these themes mean for our lives (Wimberly 2004, xx).

Nurture is further described as an experience in worship that

draws on and stimulates our thinking selves...[and] is also to arouse our deep feelings in response to what is evoked within us...[It] is to bring forth our passionate embrace of what faith and hope mean to us and a zest for acting on both. Indeed, this arousal of emotion may move us to contemplative homage to God or to the point of clapping, shouting, dancing, or exclaiming “Amen!” “Hallelujah!” or “Say it! That’s the truth!” (Wimberly 2004, xx)

Evocative nurture in worship brings us to God; at the same time, it reminds us of our everyday stories as well as the realities of life. The opening prayer pointed to some of the troubles of our day and the struggles of individuals. Evocative nurture in worship also calls to mind the deep questions of life: “Why and in whom shall we have faith? How can we count on what appears to be an evanescent God who does not appear to be good all the time and who seems to do bad things to good people? What hope is there for life?” The “stuff” and the “messiness” of life and the need and desire for answers have a way of entering with us and arising in the midst of worship and cannot be ignored. Persons seek through worship the connection between their everyday experiences of life and the authentic story of God’s self-communication amidst the realities of life. They seek a weaving of the

human and divine narratives in ways they can discern through life's Christian journey of service to God and its "darkness by faith that 'always sees a star of hope'" (Wimberly 2004, xiii).³

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When this happens, we are enabled to make sense out of our lives and are formed and sustained in a faith that carries us beyond Sunday into the unfolding days of the journey of life. Or, as Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley put it: "[T]he myth of Sunday requires the parable of Monday; the proclamation of the divine story requires its integration with real human stories; and the public display of Sunday services demands attention to the cares of every life if it is to be a transforming ritual moment" (Anderson and Foley, 161). Indeed, they insist that "without weaving the human and the divine narratives into a single web, it is unlikely that any Christian community of faith can survive" (Anderson and Foley, 157).

So, what is the nature of the human narrative persons bring into worship, and how may worship connect the human and divine narrative in ways that equip us to live faithfully and with hope? We will now turn to some responses to the question.

II. God-Referenced and Life-Directed Education

Everyone has a story that is remembered, lived in the present, and anticipated. We do not check this truth of our being at the door of the place of worship. Within and across our ages/stages, we are apt to enter worship with reasons for celebration, cause for concern, or a combination of the two that evolve from the very real stories of our everyday lives. The

themes of our stories are integral parts of the faith formation process and become implicit in the role of edification and nurture in worship. Because we bring our stories into worship, celebrate God's dealing with us and our stories, and seek guidance and answers to questions arising in them, worship becomes both God-referenced and life-directed education. In *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, I describe six interrelated story themes: identity, socio-cultural contexts, interpersonal relationships, life events, life meanings, and our unfolding story plot.

Identity

As we move through our lives and relate to the world around us, we form perceptions about who we are and whether the self we perceive is acceptable, worthy, lovable, and loved by others and God. On this basis, we may bring with us into congregational worship an affirming sense of our identity: a love of self and knowing God's love of us that we connect consciously or unconsciously with our daily experiences. Or, we may come struggling with the question, "Who am I? Am I of any value?" that is shaped by what has happened to us along our life's journey. Especially in this case, we enter worship longing for an experience of God's love. We seek an inner surety of our human value and our knowing deeply God's value of us. This search opens us to a response from God in worship and to education that invites us to review the divine-human relationship, God's purposes for our lives, and ways of carrying out these purposes.

We seek in worship nurture that engages us in reflective activity that challenges self-deprecation that is antithetical to God's view, and that evokes a re-framed view of a valued sense of self with dispositions such as strength and character necessary to carry out God's purposes for our lives (Wimberly 2004, 60-76; Wimberly 2005, 27, 37-38). Moreover, worship as a model for Christian education "places us into the story of God's people and stirs our sense of belonging to a continuing fellowship that stretches throughout time and space" (Dawn, 256).

Socio-Cultural Context

All of us have stories about where we live and the impact of our social location and nature of these places on our sense of comfort or discomfort and on who we perceive ourselves to be. We may experience the context in which we live as a place of status and safety, or a place as home no matter how humble, and the neighborhood as an area of belonging. Or, we may have immense concern and even fear about our

living environment that is compounded by a seeming inability to do something about it. Some may say that our social-cultural contexts have no bearing on what we bring to or expect in worship. But the questions, “Where is God in my home, my community or even the world? or “Where is my help?” or “What does God expect of us in our own localities and in other settings?” are relevant questions in the hearts of those who come with them, and of those who don’t. If answered, the way opens for a faith that stimulates a new view and purposeful action where we are and where we need to be to make a difference in the lives of others (Wimberly 2005, 27, 38).

Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships are the associations and connections we make with other people, including family members, extended family, friends, colleagues in the workplace or school, persons in church and other religious, social, political, or medical institutions. Some of our greatest challenges in our everyday stories occur within this web of relationships. Of course, there are relationships we deem as liberating. But there are others that may be experienced as stifling or even paralyzing. Especially in the midst of difficult relationships, we seek the wisdom of God and wise counsel of others to show us the way. Worship becomes a place where this search is undertaken (Wimberly 2005, 28, 59-60).

Life Events

Our stories are informed by life events taking place in our social world and emerging out of our everyday relationships. They consist of positive and negative incidents. They include crises such as illness, hospitalization, disabling conditions, death, unfair treatment, broken relationships, job loss, and homelessness. But, they also include positive incidences like gratifying memories, mended relationships, life-changing religious experiences, and re-unions. Included as well are incidents that are associated with the ages/stages of our lives such as marriage, childbirth, school graduations, separation, divorce, becoming orphaned or widowed, and entering into or retiring from a chosen vocation (Wimberly 2005, 28, 60-61).

We bring into worship exhilarating feelings that attend positive life events and for which we want to give thanks to God. But, we also bring our concerns, lament, and questions about troubling life events. Questions that are carried within may include: “Why has this happened to me? Where was or is God? What am I to do?” Worship as a model for Christian

education does not evade the deep and honest questions about the very real events of our lives. Christian education as nurture is meant to bring forth our knowing the content of the faith and hope we are to embrace, and to evoke in us an understanding of faith and hope as more than nouns, but rather, as verbs that form within us a consciousness that God has not forsaken us.

Life Meanings

As we go about our everyday lives, we assign meanings—both positive and negative—to what we do, what happens to us, and what is occurring in the world, both near and afar. In meaning-making we think deeply and form opinions about every aspect of our daily lives—our identities, social contexts, interpersonal relationships, and life events; and we ponder and make judgments about the conditions in the world that inform the quality and potential of our own and others present life and future survival. In our meaning-making, we are attempting to bring order and purpose in our lives. It is our way of saying, “At this point in time, this is how I see life and my place in it” (Wimberly 2005, 28, 81-82). At this point, we may say, for example, “OK, life is good, yet not perfect. Nor do I expect it to be perfect. Yet, I am content.” Or, we may say, “I’m really not sure about this thing called life with all its trials and tribulations. I’m having a hard time holding onto happiness and purpose.” We may also say: “This is what I’m going to do about it, or what God has in mind for me to do.” But in meaning-making, the thought may arise: “I don’t know how I am going to make it to tomorrow, or survive until next week. I keep waiting on God, but God appears to be silent.”

When worship engages us in the stories and habits of the faith, it offers faith resources from which to look critically and interpret the lives we live. This role of worship becomes that of “teaching” a way of meaning-making by engaging worshipers, many of whom today did not grow up in Christian homes, the ritual prayers, hearing and reading biblical narratives and passages, confession, words of assurance and hope, communion, baptism, and welcoming fellowship. Through this role, worship creates a necessary and powerful link with God’s story, a way of hearing God’s voice, and discernment of direction on life’s unfolding journey.

Our Unfolding Story Plot

The meanings we assign to our lives inform how we act on life. Likewise, how we choose to act on life contributes to how our lives unfold. This makes up our unfolding story plot. As Christians, we choose to be linked with or set our life direction based on a Christian story plot, which is one patterned after the life of Jesus Christ. This plot is guided by love of God, self, and others, and by our vocation of living our lives in response to God's calling to be Jesus' disciples who serve and contribute to the well-being of others.

There are at least three dominant pathways of Christian education in worship including preaching, prayer, and music. In addition, I identify baptism and Holy Communion or the Eucharist as primary nurturing events. These pathways and events bring us into the presence of God, who is already there.

Of course, the reality is that the embrace of a plot centered on Christian discipleship is not that easy to fulfill in today's individualistic, competitive, and material-oriented society, where the importance of status has created enormous anxiety. Neither is it always deemed easy by those in situations where life's meaning has waned. Rather than saying: "I know that I'm headed in the right direction." Or, "I have some clues about the direction of my life and what God has in mind for me to do," the response is sometimes: "I don't know how I am going to make it to tomorrow, much less survive until next week. The future? I don't see it! I keep waiting on God, but God is absent." When assailed by secularizing culture and trials and tribulations, "there is the temptation to succumb to an approach in life that says, 'Life is a horrid mistake.' Or 'Life is a barrel of lemons out of which no lemonade can possibly be made'" (Wimberly 2005, 82). Yet, even in the bleakest circumstance, those who enter worship and others who are un-churched, have a quest to know how their sojourn may become one of faith and hope. Even those whose sojourn is set in a positive direction desire new and renewed revelation of God's active involvement and assurance that the direction is right.

The worshipers' quest is for what Stephen Carter calls "the serenity of a person who is confident in the knowledge that he or she is living rightly" (Carter 1996, 7). Or stated another way, worshipers are looking for—yes, needing—what can take them beyond the ambiguities and messiness of life and give them integrity and courage to live life based on an unyielding faith in God (Wimberly 2002, 12). It is, in fact, a search for both faith and hope.

III. Key Pathways and Events of Christian Education in Worship

There are at least three dominant pathways of Christian education in worship including preaching, prayer, and music. In addition, I identify baptism and Holy Communion or the Eucharist as primary nurturing events. These pathways and events bring us into the presence of God, who is already there. Or we might say that, because we are participants in these aspects of liturgy, to use the words of Daniel Benedict Jr., "we carry one another into the Presence" (Benedict Jr. 2007, 25). These pathways and events inform us about and form in us a surety of the story of God's relationship with us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. But more than this, they are means of nourishing our faith—our belief or trust—in this relationship and an alive hope—expectation and will—to live life confidently and courageously after the model of Jesus, in times of triumph and trials and through self-sacrificing service in the world. In what follows, brief attention will be given to the pathways of Christian education and to the events of baptism and Eucharist.

Preaching, Prayer, and Music

Worship invites us into preaching, prayer, and music. These pathways are central means of entering into praise of God, the story of God proclaimed in Scripture, and our own stories. These same pathways engage us in and teach about celebrations of the high seasons of Christmas and Easter, and special celebrations and responses to crises. Through these pathways, we hear and participate in the announcement of the good news. But we also enter into these pathways with the questions already posed above, plus other piercing ones: "So what? What does this mean for my life? Is this something new in the telling of this story? What will these experiences of worship tell me that I don't already know? What preexistent or new truths borne out by

personal experience will be corroborated by the experience of worship?" (Stewart, 68).

Through these pathways, worship invites us to address our search for belief. They become avenues not simply of religious expression, but of answers to a quest for religious answers. But, as Chittister reminds us: "When it is at its best, religion offers more than a list of answers designed to resolve the unanswerable; it tenders a way to deal with the questions that plague our lives and puzzle hearts" (Chittister, 2).

Preaching and the Role of the Pastor as Christian Educator

In worship, the pastor becomes a pivotal educator in worship who serves as a key translator of the nature and activity of God, and what God's relationship with us means. The sermon is a pivotal pathway for our discerning what it means to live courageously in the present and move forward with confidence. Indeed, an important function of the sermon is to be an evocative trigger that motivates Christians to live faith-full and hope-filled lives after the model of Jesus Christ.

At the same time, says James Harris, the pastor as educator "is compelled to say something that addresses the needs of the people, directing the message to heart and head" (Harris, 56). For Christian worship to connect with our everyday stories is for the pastor to see him or herself as Christian educator and nurturing presence with a style of communication that is relational, practical, specific, and intended to have evocative power. In *Nurturing Faith and Hope*, I make the point that, in the Black church, this style is carried out through three primary preaching functions: prophetic, priestly, and apostolic.

The *prophetic* function centers on the preacher evoking the worshipers' vision of hope in the midst of the chaotic journey of life. The intent is to bring about a heightened awareness of the meaning of a lived faith in God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and an existence that exemplifies it. This kind of sermon may be called a "homiletic of protest" in that invites the worshipers' critical internal assessment of and attentiveness to attitudes and behaviors that block their abilities to act on behalf of their own and others' well-being. The intent is the worshipers' formation of a faith- and hope-centered prophetic spirituality, by clarifying specific behaviors or action that are needed to address identity devaluating, self-defeating, and life negating circumstances. In short, through this function, the preacher becomes a "teacher prophet" who presents a biblical basis for faith- and hope-centered

prophetic spirituality, invites worshipers into a critique of behavior, and then challenges them to carry out the agenda of God made known in Jesus Christ (Wimberly 2004, 133-130).

The *priestly* function of preaching centers on attention to the worshipers' identity formation, views of life, and coping strategies amid the fray of life. Also called "uplift education," or "a homiletic of emancipatory uplift," this kind of preaching centers on faith in God's activity on behalf of persons' release *from* the things that block their journey forward *to* their envisioning and moving toward a future of promise. The preacher invites worshipers' self-examination, evokes deepening self-understanding, and nurtures their valued identity that is given by God and lived out in community. The intent is to evoke worshipers' view that life need not be purposeless or hopeless, and to engender in the worshipers a vision of Christian vocation and specific life skills that are critical to life in families, communities, and the world even when their "backs are against the wall" (Wimberly 2004, 139-141).

The *apostolic* function of preaching focuses on the pastor's authentic modeling of the faith and hope about which he or she preaches. Central to this authenticity is the requirement that the preacher is a listening presence with others in order to grasp who they are and the nature of their stories, a compassionate responder to the existential conditions of people's lives, and a witness to the gospel that "teaches" through the very life the preacher lives (Wimberly 2004, 141-143).

Prayer as a Christian Educational Pathway

In *Nurturing Faith and Hope*, I draw on Ann and Barry Ulanov's view of prayer to describe it as "'primary speech' or the natural expression of the whole self and the connected community to a faithful God and a God of promise to whom every desire and cry for help may be presented" (Wimberly 2004, 157; Ulanov, 1982, 1). But I add that prayer is activity through which we become aware experientially of a model of conversations with God, practice the vocabulary of prayer, and form our own soul's language with which we enter conversations with God (Wimberly 2004, 157).

Prayer is a vital part of the Christian educational endeavor in worship through the manner in which it serves as validating language of who God is and how God acts. Through the language of prayer in worship, we learn and validate who God is and how God acts. We become aware of and validate the nature and importance of the divine-human relationship. We discover and validate the self-disclosive functions of prayer by hearing and

participating in very real, spontaneous, and autobiographical prayers. These prayers answer the question: "What are we allowed to say about our experiences and innermost thoughts and feelings in our conversations with God?" In addition, our experiences of and participation in prayers in worship not simply "teach us" the nature of but help us to express laments, confessions, intercessions, and commitments to God (Wimberly 2004, 161-162).

Music as a Christian Educational Pathway

Music in worship may be described as an artful teaching and nurturing activity. It

draws the whole congregation into an imaginative, freely expressed style of evoking views, attitudes, and feelings about the beliefs we hold or are forming....In words and emotion beyond ordinary language, songs tell our communities' stories of faith and hope in God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the valued self, and the movement from sin to salvation. Songs challenge us, too, to consider what these themes have to say for our everyday lives as Christians and to decide how we will sojourn as faithful and hope-filled followers of Jesus Christ. (Wimberly 2004, 147)

And, songs serve as teaching and nurturing agents in the liturgical events of baptism and Holy Communion.

There is also a concern that must be raised with regard to music in contemporary worship. That concern regards *choice*. The importance and power of music in worship is so great that the issue of choice requires those who plan worship to ask the question: "How may nurturing faith and hope through music be an inclusive experience?"

Baptism and Holy Communion

The rituals of baptism and Holy Communion (Eucharist) became two central rites of Christian worship during New Testament times, and they continue as such today. Of the two, Christian baptism, which is patterned after the baptism of Jesus and connected to discipleship in the Great Commission, conveys something of "the more" that constitutes Christian faith and life. As one Black worshiper put it:

There is just something that happens at a baptism of an infant or an adult that makes me want to shout. Baptisms remind me that God is still alive and that we are important to God. Baptisms point to the promise there is for us in the difficult world in which we live when we have a relationship with God and the person of Jesus Christ. Really, in baptism,

we become new beings and we are set in a new direction in life to do what we can as Christians to make a better world. That's good news!

We internalize and form meanings of the richness and depth of the communal celebration of baptism based on observation, the ritual language, music and symbols of fount and water, and on manners in which the baptism is done and the community participates. The intention is that, through these means, newly baptized individuals and the community learns that:

- Baptism is God's welcoming action and the linking of the newly baptized with Christ, as well as a renewed uniting of the community with Christ.
- The community's role is to welcome the newly baptized individual. It is not the experience of the baptized individual alone.
- The profession of faith of baptism initiates is not simply their own. They join a communal profession of faith that includes the universal or ever present church.
- Baptism is not a private affair between God and the newly baptized individual! The whole community becomes responsible for the nurture of the newly baptized individual and mutually responsible for one another.
- Baptism is an event and a sojourn undertaken by the baptized individual with God and with companions and mentors who are on the path of Christian discipleship.
- Baptism is a high moment in the Christian formation process and a step in the storied journey of everyday life with all its triumphs and struggles, yet sustained by God's love, guided by Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit even when we seem unsure and unaware of them.
- Repeated communal experiences of the rite stimulate familiarity, understanding, and meaning (Benedict Jr., 94-101; Wimberly 2004, 105-116).

Holy Communion, or the Eucharist (a thanksgiving), is a communal experience of remembering the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. But in a very profound way, it is an experience of *re-membering* community or of the community's being and becoming anew a united people of character after the model of Jesus Christ, and of the expression of Christian character and hospitality in the church and world. Because of the centrality emphasis on hospitality, Holy Communion is called "the welcome table."

We can no longer assume that all participants in our places of worship have grown up in a Christian home. Nor can we assume that those who come will participate in systematic and intentionally planned Christian education programs in spite of our best efforts to make this happen. The worshiping congregation will likely continue to be a primary and fertile context for edification, formation, and nurture.

As in baptism, we gain an interior understanding of the welcome table to which Jesus invites us through what is observed, the ritual language, music, symbols of bread and wine (or grape juice), and manners in which the ritual is done and the community partakes. The intent is for the community to learn that doing it in remembrance of Jesus means recognizing Jesus' relational and sacrificial caring. In this way, we experience it as thanksgiving for the abundance of love and blessing of this care. But we are also to learn that doing it in remembrance of Jesus means recognizing Jesus' willingness to sojourn in spite of disappointment and suffering on behalf of the well-being of others. In this way, we learn that the meal is prepared and served in what Benedict Jr. calls "sorrow's kitchen." In this way, we get in touch with today's realities and the responsibility that is ours in the forward journey from death to life in troubled regions of the world, in the lives of starving people in the global village, in the suffering of the poor and homeless in our cities, in the abuse of children, in the care of the elderly, the sick, and the imprisoned among us (Benedict Jr., 114-115).

It is also the case that we come to understand Holy Communion as the welcome table because it kindles worshippers' recognition and experience of a communal "home" in a society that does not feel like home to them. In this instance, the welcome table personifies a home for people who experience a sense of homelessness in the everyday sojourn of life. And as a nurturing event, it prompts these persons' recognition of Jesus Christ as the host who welcomes homeless sojourners, offering them a shelter in the time of storm and spiritual food—the all-important Bread of Life—for the journey ahead. In this case,

Holy Communion is joyous celebration. Yet it does not cancel the important learning that the responsibility of the Christian disciple is to care for others within and beyond the congregation (Wimberly 2004, 121-122).

IV. Conclusions and Invitation to Reflect

We can no longer assume that all participants in our places of worship have grown up in a Christian home. Nor can we assume that those who come will participate in systematic and intentionally planned Christian education programs in spite of our best efforts to make this happen. The worshiping congregation will likely continue to be a primary and fertile context for edification, formation, and nurture. It will be necessary to see the continuing importance of this role of worship, plan for it, and make it come alive in ways that enrich God-referenced and life-directed worship, Christian character formation, and discipleship. But, how do we do it?

In our post-modern age, attempts are being made to reach new and potential worshippers by reforming the style of worship. Reform has resulted in criticisms of secularized worship, entertainment, self-fulfillment practices, and a community's celebration of itself. The trend has had the effect of creating "wars" between generations, separate worship services that cater to disparate groups, and development of new congregations from fractured communities.

We cannot quibble with worship simply because it is different. What we are called to do is to examine the nature of the story of God revealed in Jesus Christ that forms the center of worship, and that is being taught by what we do. Self-reflection also involves how individual stories and the congregation's story are placed within the story of God. The questions must be asked:

- How do we communicate a story of the gospel of Jesus Christ in worship that addresses the stories of people's lives and forms an interior character of the heart of love of God and neighbor?
- What is it that we do in worship that forms a community of character that translates who and *whose* they come to know themselves to be in external communal practices of worship, care for the needs of those among and beyond them, and study?

- How do we connect with our biblical roots, engage people, and teach the language of prayer, praise, lament, confession, and intercession?
- What does the faith look like that we are forming in worship? What is the story of hope we are shaping?

Endnotes

- ¹ Emphasis on every education in every aspect of the church's life including worship is found in the work of C. Ellis Nelson, *Where Faith Begins* (Richmond, John Knox, 1971); John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith* (New York: Seabury, 1976); and Maria Harris, *Fashion Me A People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989).
- ² The study of Benson and Eklin also reveals findings of diminishing effectiveness of Christian education programs. See: Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Eklin, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations—Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990).
- ³ The words are part of the gospel hymn written by the hymnist and preacher Charles Tindley. The hymn is found in *Songs of Zion*, Supplemental Worship Resources 12 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), no. 10.

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Reflection Guide

Worship as a Model for Faith Formation

Overall Reflection Questions

- How do we communicate a story of the gospel of Jesus Christ in worship that addresses the stories of people's lives and forms an interior character of the heart of love of God and neighbor?
- What is it that we do in worship that forms a community of character that translates who and *whose* they come to know themselves to be in external communal practices of worship, care for the needs of those among and beyond them, and study?
- How do we connect with our biblical roots, engage people, and teach the language of prayer, praise, lament, confession, and intercession?
- What does the faith look like that we are forming in worship? What is the story of hope we are shaping?

Preaching

- What is your awareness of the presence of prophetic, priestly, and apostolic functions of preaching in your congregation?
- Describe your understandings of the prophetic, priestly, and apostolic functions of preaching and the need for them in your congregation.
- What are the messages of faith and hope that are communicated through sermons or homilies in your congregation?

Prayer

- What is the role of prayer in your church?
- Who prays in your congregation?
- In what ways would you say there is need for greater attention to nurturing faith and hope through prayer in your congregation?
- What suggestions would you make about the kinds of opportunities that might be needed in your congregation to help people of all ages deepen their prayer lives?
- How might these opportunities be organized?

Music

- How would you describe the nature and role of music in your worshipping congregation?
- How does music in your congregation respond to the need of every generation for ongoing nurture of faith and hope?
- What needs to happen for the role of music to enlivened as a pathway of nurture across the life span?

Baptism

- What opportunities does your congregation provide to explore the nature and meanings of baptism beyond the worshipping congregation?
- What suggestions would you make about the kinds of opportunities that might be needed in your congregation to help people of all ages explore the nature and meanings of baptism?
- How might these opportunities be organized?

Holy Communion

- What opportunities does your congregation provide to explore the nature and meanings of Eucharist beyond the worshipping congregation?
- What suggestions would you make about the kinds of opportunities that might be needed in your congregation to help people of all ages explore the nature and meanings of baptism?
- How might these opportunities be organized?