

CHAPTER 4

The Worship Environment

As a community renews its understanding of baptism, of all having a ministry because of their baptism, and of the Eucharist as the community meal of all the baptised (including infants and children), then such a community usually finds that it needs to reorder the liturgical space which it has inherited.

Baptism is now normally celebrated at appropriate feasts when the regular community meets for worship. This means the font needs to be in a position where it is visible to the whole community. It needs to be large enough to bear the image of being the place in which we die and from which we are born again. As people enter to celebrate the Eucharist its visibility can remind them of their own baptism. In some communities water is constantly in the font so that some can touch the water, or cross themselves with it as a reminder of their baptism.

The centrality of the Eucharist as the regular meal which nourishes the whole community of faith has affected the style and location of the holy table. From 1952 priests in New Zealand once more began to face the congregation across the holy table. The holy table is the altar where we offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving and the table around which we gather for the community meal. In the past in New Zealand parish churches the image of altar has often dominated that of table. There is a growing move to redress this imbalance.

In some church buildings, moving the altar forward some meters from the wall has been the initial step of reordering. There is a growing realisation, however, that, in most worship spaces, this is only a beginning. The altar's dimensions can often give the effect of having moved the sideboard out from the wall and using it as the dinner table. Furthermore, facing the congregation requires a lower altar than previously.

A modern altar is small, closer to square shaped, a shape which suggests the possibility of standing around it. Ideally before the beginning of the Eucharist it has nothing on it. Even candles (and flowers) can be placed near it rather than on it. At the Gathering of the Community, the Gospel book, if used, could be the

only object on the altar (this book need not be returned there after the Gospel is read). After the Preparation of the Gifts ideally one cup and one loaf (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17) are all that is visible on the altar. The texts of *A New Zealand Prayer Book* constantly speak only of "one bread" (page 425) and "the cup" (see pages 469, 471, 472, 489). A flagon on the altar can hold any further wine to be consecrated. Further chalices, and baskets for distributing the broken bread can be brought up at the Invitation. An altar copy of *A New Zealand Prayer Book* can lie flat on the table, or a card with the Great Thanksgiving may be all that is needed. Preparing the holy table after the Peace could involve spreading the white cloth or lighting the candles near it.

A small credence table to one side may hold the communion vessels until needed. The burse and veil are no longer necessary. A pall is only of use if there is a danger of flies after the cup has been filled with wine.

The font and altar form liturgical foci. Another liturgical focus is the lectern. Some communities may decide to follow the principle that most of the time all the Scripture readings are read at the lectern and nothing else is done there. This can give the Word a prominence and priority architecturally. Candles and flowers can be placed by the lectern. As one would not clutter the altar, or use it to hold a portable font, or collection of books of prayers, so a lectern might be treated with similar reverence.

The fourth liturgical focus is the presider's chair. It can often give the appearance of a throne, or, particularly if it is behind the altar, of the presider being like a judge, separated by the barrier of the altar from the rest of the community. It is better if the altar can be in the middle, with the presider's chair and lectern forming a balance on either side. Or the chair might be in the middle, with the altar and lectern to either side. The deacon could be seated beside the presider.

Presiders may preside at the chair for the Ministry of Word and Prayer. Some are returning to the original practice of preaching while seated in the chair. An alternative practice would be to give the Sermon while standing by the chair. The presider could appropriately move to the table for the Great Thanksgiving after the gifts have been prepared by others. After communion, the presider can suitably return to the chair and sit as the whole community shares a moment of

silent prayer. The presider then concludes the Eucharist by standing and praying a Prayer After Communion, and dismissing the community, all from the place of the chair. A small lectern which does not compete in prominence with the lectern (from which the Scriptures are read) may be placed near the presider's chair. Alternatively, someone can bring out a Prayer Book and hold it for the variable prayers. In both alternatives it is important that the presider's hands are free from the book for the gestures of greeting or prayer.

Most worship environments are rectangular, and many churches still have pews. Some of these buildings may work better if the orientation is turned through 90 degrees. The altar, lectern, and presider's chair are then placed in the centre of a "side" wall, with the community around them. An alternative option is to have those in the assembly face each other across the central aisle (in the way of Cathedral choirs). The lectern then could be at one end of the building and the altar at the other. Another possibility is to have the seating around the lectern, with a large open space around the altar. All move to the altar area during or after the Peace, and stand around the altar for the Great Thanksgiving and to receive communion. In some churches where the furniture is movable the space is altered to reflect the particular occasion. For example, such a building can have a different church arrangement in Lent from that of the Easter Season.

Great care needs to be taken in reordering liturgical space. There needs to be a feeling of openness and welcome. There may need to be a place for a music group or choir. The space will be used for a variety of services usually including weddings and funerals. Some features are no longer essential. Altar rails, for example, were originally placed there to protect the altar. People might now stand around the altar to receive communion.

The worship environment is not just defined by the furniture. Banners, candles, colourful coverings of the holy table, flowers, a cross, slides, and so on, can all contribute to the overall experience. The use of incense also is no longer promoting a certain "churchmanship" or theology of the Eucharist. When asked "what is incense for?" the best answer is "for the nose!" It can add a festal element to a particular occasion and need not necessarily be used only in a thurible. It may be burnt in a receptacle at the holy table or lectern.

There is usually a strong emotional attachment by some to the existing

liturgical arrangement. This is healthy and shows the power of liturgy, particularly as we celebrate together rites of passage such as the funeral of a loved one. In discussions about changing the worship space, such feelings need to be owned and valued. Many may find that changes highlight the fact that renewal of worship is not merely about modernising the texts, it is about a revolution and renewal of our whole communally shared spirituality.

Vesture

Vesture conveys messages about ministry, about presiding, and about beauty, art and hence creation. All our ministry has its source in our baptism and an alb or cassock is by no means the preserve of the ordained. If, however, a community requires laity to be vested in special liturgical vesture in order to exercise ministry as laity this may send confused theological messages. Such a community may wish to reflect whether it would be more helpful to have laity who read, lead the Prayers of the People, or administer the Sacrament, do so dressed in ordinary clothing. Those who prepare the holy table (servers) could similarly come up from the congregation, complete their task and return to their place.

Such decisions again need to take account of the community, architecture and size of the building, size of the congregation, and relative importance of the celebration. Some buildings invite processions or several people robed, others do not. Liturgy done dramatically need not become divided between "cast" and "audience." For some the non-verbal *is* the essential. Someone joked about the illiterate young man whose task appeared to be little more than hold a candle at the Eucharist as he tried to "lip-synch" the hymns and prayers. "That is not the lad holding the candle," retorted the Vicar, "that is the candle holding the lad."

The presider's vestments can be simple yet beautiful. Stole and chasuble (like the alb) are conservative garments ordinarily worn at the time of Christ (and still worn in many parts of the world). They are not symbolic (efforts to give them symbolic value are "allegorical"). Wearing them can no longer be construed as promoting a certain "churchmanship" or theology of the Eucharist. They are more akin to a uniform. As such they are undergoing modification. The manipule

is seldom seen now, many are no longer wearing the girdle, and the stole is now often worn over the chasuble.

The colours of the vestments are an example of signs which require some education to appreciate. Any symbols on vestments need to be simple, visible from a distance, and easily understood. (Do many worshippers know what IHS stands for, or XP?) Large vestments which may be required for a spacious worshiping environment, may be completely out of place in a small chapel, home group, or house communion.

Some Questions

The author states "there is usually a strong emotional attachment by some to the existing liturgical arrangement".

Have you experience of this?

Does your present environment encourage a sense of community worship in the different services held there?

Are there any new ideas in this chapter which could be effective in your context?

Do you have any other ideas to add?