



FOLLOWING THE WAY

BY REV. CAROLINE FAIRLESS

I don't often begin an article leaning on writers far more eloquent than I, but I also believe in sharing the wisdom, and there is a lot of it out there, about ritual and liturgy; I am just not sure we're looking in the right places. Harvey Cox (*The Future of the Faith*) has the uncanny ability to say in two sentences what often requires chapters from me, so I'll begin with his definition of ritual. "Rituals are

the young people have vanished "into the culture," it's a safe bet that our churches are not able or willing to speak to the real narratives that are informing and shaping the new generations of the faithful. It's not so much that our children aren't faithful; they are. But their faith is finding its expression in liturgical patterns and ritual enactments *other* than creedal and doctrinal, and – at least in the Western church –

predominantly European hymnody. This is probably not new news, at least at the intuitive level. We just don't want to admit it out loud. That would compel us in the direction of re-imagining our worship practices and habits, and that's the slippery slope.

It is ironic that the very people (usually adults) who continue to insist on putting the word *right* as a descriptor in front of other words, making phrases such as *right* worship, *right* thinking, *right* liturgy, *right* beliefs, can be so utterly misled about *The Way*, or *Following the Way*, as the early followers of Christ named it. Not only that, I would imagine that few of the adults in any given congregation are able to address the question most often raised by young people, "Why are we doing this?"

In an article such as this one, I am not going to be able to do what Harvey Cox did in his book – point us again toward *The Way* by pretty much dismantling the last fifteen hundred years of institutionalized

clericalism. What I can do, though, is offer a pretty simple opportunity – for adults and young people alike – to spend some time together learning about "why we do what we do" and then, keeping the "why" (the purpose) intact, explore what worship might look like in the hands of, say, the teenagers, or the altar guild, or the men's group, or in combinations of the above. What I am suggesting is part education and part worship, both wholly integrated across the generations.

Here's how it works. It requires only three questions:

1. What is the purpose of this particular worship component (Gathering, Word, Prayer, Confession of Faith, etc.)?
2. How has it come to us over the years?
3. What would it look like if the children designed and led a particular piece, or the Outreach Committee, or the teens?

A non-threatening way to do this is to begin by partnering the liturgical seasons of the year with corresponding worship components. Not that what follows is written in stone, but this is the way I have put it together. I partnered the season of Advent with the Gathering for Worship, the theological connection being about beginnings. The remainder of the year fell out like this:

Christmas: Blessing (The blessing of the Christ child)

Epiphany: The Offering at the altar as it connects to the Sending Forth

Lent: Prayer and Confession

Easter: Holy Communion

Pentecost: The Exchange of Peace as it connects to Outreach Ministries

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enactments – in song, story, visual representation, and gesture – of the narratives that inform a people's identity." Add to that the lyrical prose from Terry Tempest Williams (*The Open Space of Democracy*), set against the backdrop of the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge, "Reflection is part of the liturgy of this landscape. Repetition of forms – rock, ice, water, a leaf print that appears as a fossil . . ." It seems to me that these two writers and others are offering churches the opportunity to open infinite windows on what has and continues to be a narrow vision of both liturgy and ritual. I use the words "narrow vision" advisedly, but the demographics of our mainline churches tend to bear that out.

When adults begin to express anxiety about the future hopes of their churches, noticing, finally, that



Imagine that the season of Advent 2011 is almost upon us. (By the time you are reading this, perhaps it won't be too far fetched.) With all kinds of fanfare and promotion, you have made it clear that there will be one focus for the year's education, and for the most part, the class will include a good mix of adult and young people. (You might set it up with opportunity for age-specific break-out groups.) During this season of Advent, you want to explore the practice of *Gathering* as it reflects the disparate group of people who regularly come together to worship. It's during the education hour that you will explore the three questions above; during the worship, you put it to practice.

In a hypothetical account, the Altar Guild volunteers to host the first Sunday of Advent, and they agree to work with a group of the congregation's young people to explore what it means "to gather people into community; to prepare us to hear God's word; to open our hearts for the gift of communion." They might have a lively conversation about making things beautiful, about creating space which breathes welcome. And then, together, they would make

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decisions about creating that beautiful, welcoming space for the first Sunday of Advent. It might involve a trip to a (friendly) florist, encouraging the children to design the Sunday flowers. It might involve an art project – an altar frontal, for example, carrying an Advent theme. It might involve young people choosing candles, making decisions about how the chancel will look.

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, hypothetically, a family of four might volunteer to design the Gathering, making use of the Advent wreath. One parent might light the candle of hope and welcome the congregation with a brief life experience about hope; a child takes the next candle of love and (perhaps) sings a song about love. The older child might light the third candle and offer an expression of joy. And the other parent the fourth candle, offering a prayer for peace throughout the world, or perhaps unfold a peace banner than the family had designed together.

A congregation can walk through the liturgical year in this way, season by season. The blessings are immeasurable. By the end of the year, some significant

percentage of a congregation will have participated in the design of worship that has held its integrity. Those who participate in the educational offerings – young and adult – will come to understand "why we do what we do." They may even have relaxed into a place of surprise and joy as various groups within the congregation design and offer a component of Sunday Worship.

The good news for those who abhor liturgical change altogether is this: they can know with certainty, that during Advent, only the Gathering will change. During Christmas, only the Blessing. During Epiphany only the Offering and Dismissal.

Most important, young people will have had the opportunity to find their proper place within the worshipping community, integral to it. This is not about children's sermons, or children's talking points, or children's moral lessons, or separating the children out from the rest of the congregation. And it is not about asking young people to take on adult roles in a desperate attempt to "keep them in church." It is about the song, story, art, and movement that express the formative narratives of all members of the congregation, not just the adults. For the congregational community as a whole, it will be transformational.

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