

Special Supplement to the *AR&LW Newsletter*

Third in a series: Thoughts from our Founders

“Trinitarian and Ecumenical: The Bigger Church of AR&LW Mission” By Gláucia Vasconcelos-Wilkey

FOUNDATIONS

From its birth the *Association for Reformed & Liturgical Worship* (AR&LW) has embraced a specific mission: “To cultivate, practice, and promote worship.” Not only do the members of AR&LW commit to work on that mission, they do so with a specific understanding of “worship.”¹ The group sees certain qualifiers as indispensable for the life of the Sunday meeting: “This worship is trinitarian, ecumenical, incarnational and sacramental . . . universal and global . . . ordered around the central activities of word, bath, and meal.” This is a Sunday meeting that compels the assembly to go out of the liturgy “to serve others, whatever their status or condition.”² These words express more than a mission; they reveal a vision. This vision has been forged on the foundations laid by countless other dreamers: the history and the theological foundations behind the birthing of AR&LW have been described in previous essays in this newsletter and in the Association’s meetings in the words of Harold Daniels, Arlo Duba, David Batchelder, and Fritz West among others.³

This essay seeks to reflect on two central aspects of faithful worship in Reformed communities as understood by members of this newly formed Association: “Trinitarian” as well as “Ecumenical.” These concepts can be understood only in relationship with one another and to other centers identified in AR&LW’s statement, “Incarnational” and “Universal and Global”—each indispensable and complementary to the others, all of them springing from the biblical, theological, and historical foundations of the liturgical gathering.

The writer offers these insights in grateful commitment to the vision and mission of AR&LW and to those who brought it into being. She also offers these words in honor of two colleagues, beloved brothers, “founding fathers” with whom she has “dreamed the dream” and journeyed for many years in various efforts to enable, guide, and entice churches in the Reformed communion of Churches to greater fidelity in its worship life: Harold Daniels and Arlo Duba.

Word, Bath and Table:

Early Patterns for Today’s Reformed Churches.

In Justin’s First Apology written to the Roman emperor (c. 150 C.E.), we find the pattern of our Sunday gatherings that AR&LW sets forth as a

faithful model for the worship life of Christian communities. The pattern of the meeting described by Justin for each gathering was shaped by the Word heard and proclaimed and the Table Meal faithfully celebrated. This model, startling in its simplicity, is enticing in its clarity of purpose:

- First, Christians *gather*. Justin says, “On the day named after the sun, all, whether they live in the city or the countryside, are gathered together in unity.”⁴
- Then, this assembled community *hears the Word* read and proclaimed;
- then they *pray for the world and the community*;
- then comes *the Meal*;
- and then, from the Table of Word and Meal, the community is *sent to serve* those absent and the least of these. Says Justin: “These things are sent by the deacons to those who are not present.”⁵

Juxtaposed to this pattern for the Sunday meetings, Christians enacted Baptism as the way into the community and forged their life primarily out of an understanding of what that event was meant to be. That is to say, Baptism was to early Christians—and is yet today—the source of their identity as a people. In a very thoughtful and recently published book, a theologian in the Christian Reformed Church suggests that

Baptism is the prism through which all the light of God’s grace in Jesus Christ passes... Baptism is also . . . a sacrament of identity. It confers a new identity on us . . . At Jesus’ baptism, the heavens opened, the voice of God spoke, and the Spirit descended. . . And the Spirit descends to renew and empower us.”⁶

One could say with Vander Zee that faithful liturgy in its completeness and with its sacramental and Trinitarian center is such a prism for the light of Christ to the baptized community—gathered only to be sent, to collect the joys and the pains of the world, and to bring them back to God and the community on the next Lord’s Day.

Trinitarian: The Gathering

Indeed the ordered Christian pattern used every time we gather for the Lord’s Day is one lived in Word and Sacrament *in the Trinity*, both in ethos and

in language. It is hoped that this may be true of our churches today. To such end, AR&LW is among us—or so envisioned those who brought this agency into being and so states its mission statement.

Once again in Justin's account, we have a description of the early church's liturgical gathering as a fully Trinitarian and sacramental event: "We bless the creator of all things through God's Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit."⁷ Contemporary United Church of Christ feminist theologian Ruth Duck, whose work's focus has been the matter of language for God and humans in liturgy, says it well: "Christian worship is, by nature, trinitarian. Reflection on the sacraments reveals that they are actions of the triune God...more fundamentally because it is immersion into the life of God in union with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit."⁸ Indeed, with theologian Catherine LaCugna, we can say that in worship, "God draws us into the circle of divine life that we may be sons and daughters of God, and brothers and sisters to each other."⁹

In the preface to *Celebrating God's Presence: A Book of Services of the United Church of Canada*, we read:

Theologically, the Committee sought liturgical resources which would help the church celebrate the presence of God, who is revealed in the biblical story and uniquely in Jesus, the Word made flesh, and who by the Spirit is at work in the church and in the world.¹⁰

Trinity and Hymnody.

At many of our services, in the beginning of our gatherings, we use *Gloria in Excelsis*, the ancient hymn of praise: "Glory to God in the highest . . . For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father."¹¹ This hymn, and all other congregational songs and hymns, are confessional and creedal in nature: they express a community's theological centers and thus forge a way of being in Christ that is uniquely vivid in the portrayal of a community's set of beliefs. Poetry, rhyme, and music combine as powerful vessels for texts that both express and form a congregation's theological mindset. Church musicians who are members of AR&LW have consistently reminded us of these realities.

Much of contemporary hymnody beckons us into the Trinitarian "circle of divine life" named by LaCugna. For example, in the lovely new volume *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, one of the newly composed hymns startles us with this opening:

"Come, Join the Dance of Trinity/Before the worlds begun . . ." The hymn text continues, "The universe of space and time/Did not arise by chance/ But as the Three, in love and hope/Made room within their dance."¹² What a marvelously enticing image and insight! Hymn-writer Brian Wren also sees the "dance of the Trinity": "God is one, unique and holy/Endless dance of love and light . . ."¹³ And have we not held in the deepest places of our souls the wonder of the old treasure we can sing by heart, "Holy, Holy, Holy," set to NICAEA? With its Trinitarian and mystical poetry, given the Church in the 18th century by Reginald Heber, we sing of cherubim and seraphim and of "casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea," even as we affirm and reaffirm the wonder of the "God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity!"¹⁴ Ah, for more hymns of such ilk, theopoeitics of the highest beauty and value!

Trinity: A "Centripetal Force"

To Timothy Wengert, not only the sung Word (hymnody), but the whole of the liturgy, is "a centripetal force, pulling us to the center . . . where we encounter the Trinity, and even more, Christ crucified and risen again for us."¹⁵ Indeed many of the orders for worship for the Lord's Day in resources of Reformed communities manifest that centrality that is the Trinity. For example, in many of our volumes we find the model for greeting the assembly, the Pauline greeting that brings the people into the life of the Trinity: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Ah, if only we in AR&LW would invite our assemblies into the liturgy and into its intercessions with that Christly greeting, instead of using market place language so common in so many of our churches!

Trinity and the Word

One of the greatest contributions of Reformed theology and practice to the wider Church is the understanding of the need to call on the Holy Spirit of God as we prepare to read the Scriptures. Peter Bower correctly suggests that, "Reformed worship, at its heart, is *what one might describe as epicletic*, in that it calls upon the Holy Spirit to animate our worship."¹⁶ One of the historical "Prayers for Illumination" found in our resources for worship is, "LORD, open our hearts and our minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed we may hear with joy what you say to us today."¹⁷ In this prayer as in many others in our books, we note in awe how central the presence of the Trinity is to a Reformed grasp of the role of the Scriptures in worship.

Thanks be to God for the members of the newly formed AR&LW, who are deeply committed to continuing to uphold the centrality of the Scriptures in faithful Christian and Reformed worship. It is also a sign of great hope that some of the leaders in the Association are increasingly speaking of the Word as a *sacramental Word*. Christ is present in the word, Christ is the Word. Calvin makes a connection between the Word, the sacraments, and the sending, both in the *Institutes* and other significant works. For instance, in his comments on Romans 10: 8, “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart,” Calvin says, “Believers, therefore derive notable consolation from this passage... For they may rest in it with as great security as they would in what they saw to be actually present.”¹⁸

For contemporary theologian Professor Dawn DeVries, of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Christology itself “has as its point of departure in the church’s proclamation—in the Christ who is *present* [her emphases] in the Word.” Christ *is the Word*. This is of course, a strong Lutheran and Reformed assertion. God, in Christ the Word in our liturgical gatherings, by the power of the Holy Spirit: a sacramental and Trinitarian understanding indeed!

Trinity and Baptism

It is impossible to think of Baptism and not see the Trinitarian connections it imprints upon a Baptismal assembly. Baptism engages us in renouncing evil, leads us to acclaim and profess our faith in the words of the ancient Apostolic Creed, and startles us into claiming life in and from the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the prayer of thanksgiving over the water at Baptism, we praise God for being present through the Spirit in the water-event stories of the community: the creation, the flood, the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan, and the baptism of Jesus. In this prayer we include words like these found in the *Book of Worship. United Church of Christ*, “We thank you, God, for the gift of creation called forth by your saving Word. Before the world had shape and form, your Spirit moved over the waters.”¹⁹ The Trinity in action is heard anew. We also pray an epiclesis, asking the Spirit of God to make of the water present in that liturgy a source of new life and new beginnings. Then we baptize in the name of the Holy One, Holy Three. One of the hymns for the Baptismal celebrations of our life has assemblies sing:

The Father’s splendor clothes the Son with life,
the Spirit’s power shakes the church of God.
Baptized we live with God the Three in One.
Alleluia!²⁰

No wonder many of us *must* touch that water every time we come into the gathering space, make the ancient sign of the cross, a prayer in gesture, and in our souls hear again the echo of the ancient Baptismal words: “You have been sealed by the Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.”²¹

Trinity and the Eucharist

We also proclaim the Triune nature of our life in Christ at the Table. There, at the Banquet of Love, we meet, hear, smell, touch, taste, and finally fully see, Jesus Christ. Jesus, the Word, has walked with us through the liturgy, just as He walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). Our hearts are warmed by the Spirit in the Word read and proclaimed. But in Bread and Wine shared in the assembly—in the sacramental act indispensable to the Lord’s Day gathering—we at last fully see.²²

The trouble is that too many Reformed churches are not coming to the Table enough, and thus neither tasting nor seeing the fullness of Jesus Christ often enough. In Volume XXI, chapters 14-19 of the *Institutes*, Calvin speaks about the sacraments, as did Luther, as “means of grace.” The following quotes are quite revealing of the theology Calvin claimed and that we, as agents of AR&LW, are committed to entice our Reformed churches to heed:

The Supper was...ordained to be *frequently* used among all Christians in order that they might *frequently* return in memory to Christ’s Passion..., sustain and strengthen their faith, urge themselves to sing thanksgiving to God and to proclaim [God’s] goodness; finally, by it to nourish mutual love, and among themselves give witness to this love, and discern its bond in the unity of Christ’s body.²³

No other statement on the frequency of the celebration of the Eucharist, however, is as succinct and forceful as this: “No meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, the Supper, and almsgiving.”²⁴

The epiclesis we offer as we give thanks in the Great Eucharistic Prayer also enlighten us. After all the words of praise and thanksgiving, the Holy Spirit is called upon (epiclesis). For Reformed Christians, the Spirit is invoked, in the words of the *Book of Common Worship*,

to lift all who share in the Feast to Christ’s presence; to make the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup a participation in the body and blood of Christ;

to make us one with the risen Christ and with all God's people;
to unite us in communion with all the faithful in heaven and earth;
to nourish us with the body of Christ so that we may mature into the fullness of Christ;
to keep us faithful as Christ's body, representing Christ in ministry in the world,
in anticipation of the fulfillment of the kingdom Christ proclaimed.²⁵

With Calvin, we would all rather experience the mystery of grace at the Table than understand it. Indeed! At the Eucharist, Bread and Word mingle with the Meal to form a "Holy Trilogy" or a trinity of places to encounter God, Holy Three, Wholly One. For, as Gordon Lathrop says of the meal,

In the eating and drinking we receive a gift greater than any prayer can proclaim: here, by the power of the Spirit and the word of promise, is the very *encounterable self* of Jesus Christ—his body—and the very *life* of Jesus poured out as the promised new covenant—his blood.²⁶

Trinity and the Sending

At the *Sending*, the last movement of the liturgy, we also invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit.²⁷ In their understanding and practice of the *Sending*, peoples of the Reformation find one of the richest gifts they can share with other Christian ecclesial communities at worship. Some churches have recovered the singing of the Cantic of Simeon, with which the ancient church sent out the people ("Now let your servant go in peace"). After the cantic we hear words that Reformed communities have named the "Charge." The assembly is reminded of what it is and what it has done in the gathering and to what it is sent: the people are told to go and be Water, be Oil, be Bread, be Wine, to be the Presence of God amidst evil and oppression. Says the *Book of Common Worship*: "God sends the church in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel, to engage in works of compassion and reconciliation, to strive for peace and justice in its own life and in the world, to be stewards of creation and of life, caring for creation until the day when God will make all things new."²⁸

So as when we first come in, we go to the Font when we leave, and from the Font remind the assembly of its identity and the liturgy just lived:

Go out into the world in peace; have courage;
hold on to what is good; return no one evil for evil;
strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak, and help the suffering; honor all people;

love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁹

Only then is the assembly dismissed, with the same Trinitarian formula heard in the greeting that began its gathering, this time in the form of a benediction, these words and the Font—source of identity—serving as brackets to the whole service: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." From the Font we go out into the world in the name of Christ, and we go in peace, for Christ himself came into the world before us and, indeed, goes with us. To this Trinitarian life, in and to the people and *through* the people to the world, all respond, "Thanks be to God!"

Ecumenical

Baptism and Theological Identity

When our liturgies are marked by the sense of an intentionally ordered, Trinitarian, and sacramental encounter, we may also at the same time manifest, form, and express a worldview that is distinctively ecumenical, even while faithfully local. Baptism invites us into a far wider sense of God and the meaning of "Church" than our very localized liturgies reveal. Among the hopes this writer holds for the life and practice of the members of AR&LW is that we distinguish ourselves as part of that band of theologians, in local churches and in theological institutions, that sees the richly significant nature of our belonging together with other churches and Christians as "Church." Indeed, in summary form, consider some of the claims we, as peoples of the Reformation, hold about Baptism:

1. Baptism in the name of the Triune God is the source of our common identity.
2. The oneness of the Body of Christ is a gift of God given the Church of Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit.
3. The unity of the Body of Christ mirrors the unity of the Three-in-One.
4. This Baptismal identity and given oneness in Christ is shared equally by all who call upon the name of Christ and who confess him as Lord.
5. Baptism places all of us together in the life, mission, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
6. Whereas each of us is baptized by a specific ecclesial community, i.e., a particular church, all of us are baptized into the One body of Christ, the Church.
7. This belonging to Christ, this Baptismal and Eucharistic identity, has ecclesial, ecumenical, and ethical implications.

8. Living our Baptismal and Eucharistic calling in ways that faithfully, audibly, and visibly manifest our common belonging is far from an alternative or an option. It is a mandate given us, by the grace of God, in Christ, through the Spirit.³⁰

The World Council of Churches at Prayer

In February of 2006, thousands of people gathered for daily prayer under a gigantic and colorful tent in Porto Alegre, Brazil for the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC). We often numbered 6,000 under that big tent. In that tent, songs of praise were raised. In that tent, beseechings and lamentations were uttered. In that tent, confession and forgiveness were ours. In that tent, the Word was heard.

This was no mere cooperative endeavor. Together we knew we belong to Christ, and so to each other in the bonds of Christly affections, the kind of affection, as Calvin said, that will engage us in making sure that nothing that can harm or destroy will befall our sisters and brothers. Great care was taken to see that all prayers and actions would be gifts that all could pray together. A Reformed theologian could not help but remember Calvin's commitment to the ecumenical vision, something largely ignored by today's Reformed churches. Consider this statement from Calvin's commentary on the letter to the Ephesians: "Paul proceeds to show more fully in how complete a manner Christians ought to be united. The union ought to be such that we shall from one body and one soul . . ." But then Calvin laments even as he hopes:

Oh, were this thought deeply impressed upon our minds, that we are subject to a law which no more permits the children of God to differ among themselves than the kingdom of heaven to be divided, how earnestly should we cultivate brotherly [*sic*] kindness! How should we dread every kind of animosity, if we duly reflected that all who separate us from brethren [*sic*] estrange us from the kingdom of God!³¹

In that tent in Brazil, the many languages, colors, churches of origin and peoples were rehearsing, in fact, "cultivating brotherly kindness." But more, we were making visible the unity of the body of Christ. There we were, with Calvin and others in the past and the present, lamenting and praying for the day of our perfect union at the holy table. There were many languages, many colors, many stories, but one people. There was no "we"-language nor "they"-language in that tent. Together we made that tent the

place that manifested our common belonging to Christ.

A very fine document, which took years in the making, was approved by that assembly, *Called to Be the One Church*. Here is one small section of that rich theological statement, one that perhaps could be considered in an AR&LW meeting for the implications it holds for the local assemblies its members represent: "We have much work ahead of us as together we seek to understand the meaning of unity and catholicity, and the significance of baptism.³² . . . Each church is the Church catholic, but not the whole of it³³ . . . Apart from one another we are impoverished."³⁴ Impoverished indeed! Jürgen Moltmann challenges us with this serious consequence, "Once the churches have entered the ecumenical movement, the doctrine of the church can no longer be the slave of the self-understanding of our own particular denomination, and its difference from all others."³⁵ Colleagues in AR&LW: How are we, in our attempt to be faithfully Reformed—which we must be—also guilty of being slaves to difference?

Together Shaping a New Worldview

We often speak of inter-church cooperative efforts as ecumenism. Not so for many of us involved in the ecumenical movement. To ecumenist W.A. Visser 't Hooft, for example, it is shortsighted to see cooperation in regards to the churches' engagement with the social ills of today's world, significant as it may be, as an ecumenical enterprise. In *The Pressure of Our Common Calling* Visser 't Hooft says that, in fact, this could be a distortion of the ecumenical vision: "Cooperation is not unity. A consensus about social action . . . leads easily to the conclusion that the churches have done enough when they have established cooperative relationships."

This is a challenge for those of us also involved in theological education and in such agencies as AR&LW, who may think it is enough to embark in discourses and teaching dialogues with the best of intentions—and manage only to inform rather than to *form* an ecumenical conscience and vision. We may feel that gathering for Baptism a Roman Catholic and a Presbyterian for prayer, for example, constitutes ecumenism. We may suggest that we ourselves are "ecumenical" if we preach in a church other than our own or are enabled by our judicatories to serve as pastor in a communion other than our own. We may be misguided by well meaning partnerships with various ecclesial communities. We may feel a sense of "already there/ness" in terms of the visible unity of the Church.

Leading ecumenist Michael Kinnamon has spoken very forcefully about this limited and limiting vision of the prayer of Jesus Christ, and suggests that such misguided understandings have had a terribly negative impact upon the very commitment many seek to uphold. In *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends*, Kinnamon in fact probes all of us in a deeply challenging chapter, the title of which itself enlightens: “Unity and Diversity: Why Uniting Diversities is Not the Vision.”³⁶

*AR&LW and the Seattle Summer Institute:
Ecumenismo Primo*

Liturgical scholars enjoy making the claim that every time we gather for worship, whether in settings like the WCC, or Seattle’s Institute for Liturgy and Worship, or each of us in our separate churches, we are in fact in our liturgies voicing and shaping primary theology or *theologia prima*. But I will make a further claim: during the years AR&LW met in the heart of the Summer Institute in Seattle, not only *Theologia Prima* (primary theology) was at play in our prayer during the week, but so was *Ecumenismo Primo* (primary ecumenism). There, gathered in Christ’s name, Christ himself was present and we knew that together we all belong to Christ—per force of our common Baptism, per force of the presence of Christ among and within us, in the gathering and in the sending.

For in the very ecumenical services of the Institute not only did we affirm our connectedness, but we prayed, “Gracious God, pour out your Spirit” upon water, bread, wine, and, ah, dear ones, upon us, that together we may be seen as the One Body of Christ in the fractured world and in the fractured church. There in those weeks on that campus, the Spirit acted in Water, Word, Bread, Wine, and assembly, and constituted us again as the one Body of Christ, quite in spite of all our differences. *Ecumenismo Primo*, a unity not of our making, but concrete in and by the presence of the Three-in-One in our midst, in whose name we were all made One in Christ. Significantly, in this day of exacerbated individualism, warmongering, and astonishing arrogant pride of ecclesial place, we were reminded each day of this unity in an intentional and systematic pattern of prayers for all the world’s peoples, churches, and countries, a pattern based upon a Reformed volume, the *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

An Invitation: The Ministry of the Catechumenate

Here is a possible path into this bigger way of being Church: the full recovery among churches of

the Reformation of the ministry of the catechumenate. At least three Presbyterian Churches can be cited as examples of movement in that direction: Genesis Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas, under the guidance of a pastor committed to that ministry, Gail Snodgrass; St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington, under the gentle and prodding ministry of its pastor, Scott Anderson; and West Plano Presbyterian Church in Plano, Texas. These churches are fully invested in “recovering a forgotten way of being church,” as David Batchelder, pastor at West Plano, put it in a recent lecture. West Plano, in fact, has become a leading congregation in this ministry. Batchelder:

We are coming to see that we must reshape sacramental practice for those newly entering our churches as well as reassess our ministry to the already baptized in light of the Gospel claim and our mission in the world Understood more broadly, Baptism includes the period of preparation leading *to the font* as well as the formation *in* Baptismal life that is born *from the font*.³⁷

Baptism invites us to live in common identity, in recognition of our mutual belonging to Christ and the Gospel mandates and that we manifest that unity every time we gather in our own assemblies. This concept is reiterated in the marvelous report produced by the Sacraments Study Group of the Presbyterian Church (USA), *Invitation to Christ: Font and Table, A Guide to Sacramental Practice*. A phrase taken from the section on preparation for Baptism states,

The new realities in which we live place important questions before the church, not only about whom we invite to the Lord’s Table, but also about how we lead people to Baptism. Even more profoundly, they raise questions about the relationship of Baptism to the Lord’s Supper, the relationship of both sacraments to the ministry of the Word, and the relationship of the church’s ministry of Word and Sacrament to the life of Christian discipleship in the world.³⁸

Forging Life Habits

There is a long-accepted understanding of liturgy as the very heart of the church’s life. Liturgy, proclaimed the Second Vatican Council, is the source and summit. The *Book of Common Worship* of the PCUSA says that “All that the church is and does is rooted in worship.”³⁹ That is to say, we are indeed formed in the faith and, in all that we do, we grasp the values of our community. That the LORD is God

we learn as the assembly confesses this God, loves God with all its heart and with all its soul, and with all its might—in *all it does*, as the ancient *Sh'ma* (“Hear, O Israel...”) tells us. Donald Saliers suggests to us that “When worship occurs, people are characterized, given their life and their fundamental location and orientation in the world.”⁴⁰ Patterns for life are formed in liturgy—good, bad, or indifferent.

I do believe, with countless other theologians and church leaders, that the languages, actions, and ethos of corporate liturgy in fact imprint a pattern, “encode” a way of being, deeply ingrain a *habitus* for the spiritual and moral life of worshipers, which is either completely and only local, or both local and global. So it is that in our separate church houses and in our distinct liturgies, we are either intentionally forging a worldview beyond the local or unintentionally creating patterns of exclusivism.

Here is a claim that I have come to make: to put it simply in terms of my own beloved ecclesial community, the question for Presbyterians today is not so much, “How Presbyterian can this assembly be?” but, “How more closely expressive of the whole Body of Christ can any local and *faithfully Presbyterian* assembly be?” That is to say, the hope is that, while gathered in the presence of God, not only are we faithfully manifesting and forging a distinct community that calls itself “Reformed,” but we are also enabling and living a larger vision, a Church beyond our borders, one that manifests the unity of Christ’s beloved in all places and times.

In great part, AR&LW’s very existence came from the hunger that many of its members share—including this writer—to be with others who would join to embark in a labor of love for the visible unity of the Church in liturgy and life. This commitment sees the recovery of the pattern for liturgy of the early church as being of enormous significance for expressing the unity of the Body of Christ. Many of the worship resources published by denominational entities in the last twenty-five years already beckon such fidelity. For example,

- *Book of Common Worship* (PCUSA);
- *Book of Worship* of the United Church of Christ;
- *Chalice Worship*, of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ);
- *Celebrate God’s Presence, A Book of Services* of the United Church of Canada;
- *Directory for Worship and Orders of Worship for the Lord’s Day* of the Reformed Church in America
- and that community’s latest book of worship, *The Worship Sourcebook*.

These volumes share common patterns, common texts, use common language, and invite a common life of prayer that beckons us beyond those patterns in which have gathered heretofore.

Just recently the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA) distributed an “Occasional Paper” lifting up Calvin’s many comments on ecumenism. The paper strongly calls the PCUSA to do all it can to recover Calvin’s sense of the unity of the Church—and thus make the vision of Christ real. Writing in the preface to that paper, Joseph Small asks, “Why, then, is there so little urgent commitment to the visible unity of Christ’s church?”⁴¹ The author of the paper, Lukas Vischer, a respected theologian and ecumenist, invites us to consider Calvin’s theological centers with this most significant disclaimer and challenge:

The churches shaped by his [Calvin’s] legacy live in a different world [from Calvin’s own]. Actual as Calvin remains in many respects, new perspectives have developed that inevitably lead *beyond him*. Indeed, in retrospect, it can be seen that there are actually limits to Calvin’s understanding of the church which have unintentionally and unwittingly fostered the divisions of the Reformed churches. . . . The result has been . . . dogmatism and, all too often, division. The question for us, therefore, is how to handle this aspect of Calvin’s legacy. The underlying intention in all Calvin’s work is beyond doubt to point to the center—God who comes in Jesus Christ. This center takes precedence over all borderlines and demarcations.⁴²

Indeed, we must confess that we find a growing retrenchment into parochialism and strong denominationalism that place emphases on the differences that separate us one from the other. We seem to be satisfied with “The Church Reformed” segment of the line we so dearly prize, and, either intentionally or unintentionally, disdain the “Always Reforming” challenge our ancestors set forth in healthy juxtaposition.

Even as leading theologians of the Reformation are calling us to a wider embrace of, and care for, the whole body of Christ in many hues, many of our leaders are determined to practice worship in ways that fundamentally deny the reach of the prayer of Jesus Christ in John 17, “That they may be one.” Instead such church leaders want to emphasize their distinctiveness quite apart from the unity we find in Baptism. “We do it *this way*,” we say of certain practices in our local congregations. What that “we”

apparently means to say is that this or that part of the liturgy is done in *this manner in contrast to other's practices*. There is certainly a need and place for faithfulness to one's ecclesial commitment, a local congregation's story, theological lenses, and liturgical practices. But, on the other hand, when there is ecumenical consensus around certain texts (the Lord's Prayer, for example), a clearly demonstrable "better way," a way of saying things or doing things that ecumenical bodies—which include Reformed theologians—have come to see as more faithful to the original language texts, then the more we pray "with them" and not just "with us," the closer we are to making visible the unity of Christ's people, a *de facto* unity given us at Baptism.

Even as ecumenists state that unless we are faithful and can act from a local perspective, that is to say, a United Church of Christ person will speak and act informed, yea, shaped by that communion's practices, those very same theologians, like Jürgen Moltmann,⁴³ will urge us to see our particularities within the larger frame of the One Body of Christ. Each of our churches has unique gifts. Life in the ecumenical vision does not forget those gifts, but instead orders them as one among many others. In fact, many theologians are finding it increasingly difficult to speak "parochially," or even denominationally, in terms of worship. AR&LW members are challenged to invite our churches for actions that place us right in the middle of the renewal of the ecumenical vision. Small steps that would invite us to grow to reflect the wideness of God's mercy could, for example, include:

- Awareness that it is not enough to pray for our own leaders, our own missions, and our own needs as individual congregations or churches. We must at least pray for church leaders of other denominations or ecclesial communities, beginning with praying for the leaders and the life in the world of the church down the street from our own.
- Inviting to our local celebrations of Baptism representatives of churches with which we share official relationships, as these churches and communions in the *Formula of Agreement* whose 10th anniversary we are about to celebrate,

Such liturgical acts would be wonderful ways for giving life to the visible unity of the Body of Christ. Such small steps might lead to the development of much larger "patterns of meanings."

It is the hope of this writer, the "Founding Mother" of AR&LW, that, when the Association

gathers for worship, it will model the realities that are the concern of this essay, with

- worship that "holds up the primary symbols of our faith so that they can be seen clearly and can communicate profoundly" the oneness of the Body of Christ;
- worship that manifests the wideness of the mercies of God in the dance of the Trinity;
- worship that is done "in the beauty of holiness:" such is the vision.

Conclusion: A Matter of Conversion

Lutheran theologian Gail Ramshaw asks a profoundly significant question, "Does our ritual fit our faith?"⁴⁴ Far too many of us in the Reformed Church find ourselves unable to give an affirmative response to that question. AR&LW seeks to guide and support its members, who would give a positive answer to Ramshaw's question. But to live a Trinitarian-sacramental and ecumenical life in liturgy as envisioned by the founding AR&LW members and stated in the agency's Mission/Vision Statement asks more of each of its members than perhaps we are truly ready to live. Are we ready to recognize that, in spite of our best intentions, we still need to renounce our part in divisions, and promise, ah, thanks be to God, *relying on God's grace*, to live our common identity more visibly. Are we ready?

To this theologian, named as one of the "parents" or early dreamers and actors for the formation of AR&LW, to live by the Mission and Vision Statements to which we subscribed requires a conversion to a new way of seeing, to a new way of tasting, and to a new way of hearing the gospel in liturgy. It requires conversion to a new and ampler worldview, and an equally ampler understanding, of what we mean when we say "Church." We need to consider a Trinitarian-sacramental, Baptismal-therefore-ecumenical ecclesiology for our churches: as God is community so are we, together with all Christians, community. As the Three Persons of the Trinity live in perfect mutuality of life, so ought we, all Christian churches, live in mutuality of life. Ah, dear ones, we are a far bigger Church than most of our local liturgies manifest! Let us together lament that smallness and seek to widen, enlarge, and enrich the tent of our meetings—and our assemblies. Such commitment calls for humility that leads to lamentation and, from there, to a desire to engage in shared prayer, reflection, support of others, and mutuality of cooperation, shared Baptismal life, shared Eucharistic life, and, finally, common mission in the world.

The AR&LW documents state that the Spirit of God manifested in Christ moves us out of the liturgy into the world. As we go into the world beloved by God, we cannot do less than become the Christ presence, the in-fleshing of God in the world. Having become what we tasted—enabled by the Spirit to be Water, Word, Bread, and Wine in the “liturgy from the liturgy” that our moral life in the world is meant to be, we are sent as assembly to those *dis*-assembled by pain, oppression, and injustice.. And we do so side-by-side with a countless throng of witnesses of the baptized. Let us make their presence in our local life visible and manifest so that all the disunities of the world may find a model for healing within our manifested unity of life in the Trinity.

To the Triune God
who called us together as members of the One
Body of Christ;
who out of abundant mercy and hope formed us
in AR&LW
as a community of hopeful sisters and brothers of
many hues
seeking the renewal of the Church’s life in and
through faithful liturgy;
and for AR&LW itself,
be all thanksgiving, glory and honor
in the Church and in the world. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria, et AR&LW, gratias.

Gláucia Vasconcelos-Wilkey
Assistant Professor
School of Theology and Ministry
Seattle University
gyw@seattleu.edu

¹ A few segments of this paper were published in Gláucia Vasconcelos-Wilkey, “Ordered, Trinitarian, Sacramental: Worship Reformed & Liturgical,” *Liturgy*:21:2(2006)5-14.

² AR&LW, Mission Statement, Seattle 2003, available on the AR&LW website .<arlw.org>.

³ All articles in two issues of the journal *Liturgy* were dedicated to AR&LW themes, *Liturgy* 20:2(2005) and 21:2(2006). See also Harold Daniels, “Association for Reformed & Liturgical Worship: A New Venture in Liturgical Reform and Renewal,” *Call to Worship* 38.4 (2005) 27-34, idem, “In God’s Own Time – The Birthing of AR&LW,” *AR&LW Newsletter* 1:2 (Fall, 2005) Supplement, Arlo Duba, “THE ASSOCIATION FOR REFORMED AND LITURGICAL WORSHIP. Recapturing the Liturgical Essence of the Reformed Tradition.”

39:1(2004) 39-64 and idem “THE BOOK OF COMMON WORSHIP (1993):A Liturgical Triumph and Tragedy - Part One, abridged,” *AR&LW Newsletter* 2:2(Fall, 2006) Supplement. A number of these articles are available on the AR&LW website <arlw.org>.

⁴ This and all subsequent quotes of Justin Martyr are taken from a translation of this passage by Gordon W. Lathrop, to be found in his book *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 45.

⁵ Idem.

⁶ Leonard J. Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*. (Donner’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 200), 102. For further comments on baptism and the recovery of faithful catecheses and baptismal practice in Reformed Churches, see David Batchelder, “Recovering a Forgotten Way of Being Church,” *Liturgy* 21:2(2006) 43-49.

⁷ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 45

⁸ Ruth Duck and Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1999) 2.

⁹ Catherine LaCugna, “Making the Most of Trinity Sunday” in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000) 247.

¹⁰ *Celebrating God’s Presence: A Book of Services of the United Church of Canada* (Etobicoke, Ontario: United Church Publishing House, 2000) xiii.

¹¹ Found in many books of worship in Reformed communities, as for example from the Christian Reformed Church, *The Worship Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources : Baker Book House : Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 2004).

¹² Richard Leach, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

¹³ Brian Wren, “God is One, Unique and Holy” *The Presbyterian Hymnal*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Reginald Heber, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*,

¹⁵ Timothy J. Wengert, *Centripetal Worship: The Evangelical Heart of Lutheran Worship*. [in “Worship Matters: Viewpoints on Renewing Our Worship” Series.] (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007) 11.

¹⁶ *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*. Peter C. Bower, ed. (Louisville, Ky. : Geneva Press : Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 2003) 25. Italics added.

¹⁷ *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 60. Also in *Celebrating God’s Presence*, 44.

¹⁸ *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*. Edited by Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss. 59 vols. *Corpus Reformatorum*, vols. 29-87. Brunswick: C.A. Schwetschke & Son (M. Bruhn), 1862-1900. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society. *Romans 10:8*. CO 49:200.

¹⁹ *Book of Worship*. United Church of Christ. (New York: Office for Church Life and Leadership, 1986) 141.

²⁰ The text of this hymn, "We Know That Christ is Raised and Dies no More," was written by J. B. Geyer in 1969, *Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) 495.

²¹ Among other sources: *Book of Common Worship*, 414.

²² This writer wishes to encourage the leadership of AR&LW to consider dedicating part of its next meeting to the discussion of "Invitation to Christ," the report prepared by the Sacraments Study Group of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

²³ Emphases added.

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ *Book of Common Worship*, 156.

²⁶ Gordon Lathrop, *Central Things* rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005) 52.

²⁷ 76.

²⁸ *Book of Common Worship*, 45.

²⁹ *Celebrating God's Presence*, 72, and *Book of Common Worship*, 82-83.

³⁰ This summary of the theology of Baptism in terms of its ecumenical implications was first presented in a lecture at the AR&LW meeting of 2006 in Seattle and revised for a lecture for the Summer Institute of 2007.

³¹ *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Kunitz, E. Reuss, Braunschweig. 1887, 51, 190-191. Trans. William Pringle, Edinburgh, 1854, 268.

³² *Called to Be the One Church*, available on the web at < <http://www.wcc-assembly.info/en/theme-issues/assembly-documents/1-statements-documents-adopted/christian-unity-and-message-to-the-churches/called-to-be-the-one-church-as-adopted.html>> Section I, Paragraph 2

³³ Idem, Section I, Paragraph 6

³⁴ Idem, Section II, paragraph 7.

³⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 12.

³⁶ Michael Kinnamon, *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by its Friends* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003).

³⁷ David Batchelder, "Baptismal Identity: Recovering a Forgotten Way of Being Church." Unpublished

paper presented as a Theological Reflection for Grace Presbytery in March 3, 2007.

³⁸ *Invitation to Christ: Font and Table, A Guide to Sacramental Practice* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on behalf of the Office of Theology and Worship, 2006) 16.

³⁴ *Book of Common Worship*, 1.

⁴⁰ Donald Saliers, "Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings" in *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God*, B. Anderson and B.T. Morrill, S.J., ed. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 17. Reprinted from *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 7:2(1979) 23-41.

⁴¹ Lukas Vischer, *Pia Conspiratio: Calvin's Commitment to the Unity of Christ's Church*. [Theology and Worship Occasional Paper 20]. (Louisville: Presbyterian Church (USA), 2007).

⁴² Vischer, 52-53, Italics added.

⁴³ See footnote 32.

⁴⁴ "Wholly, Wholly, Wholly: Liturgy in the Trinity." Unpublished Paper presented to the 2004 Summer Institute for Liturgy and Worship of Seattle University.